

Should Taiwan stick to the status quo and rely on and trust the US? In the long run, Taiwan could seek real independence with the support of the US if the geopolitical situation and political climate offer that opportunity. Do not forget that by the time readers receive this issue, the leadership of the PRC will have recently changed with the autumn 2012 critical meetings of the National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, which has the potential to change PRC policy toward the ROC. In the Taiwan Strait and the Asia Pacific region, there is more at stake than control of a big part of the Pacific and acquisition of resources like oil and gas. Democracy and freedom are also at stake because Taiwan is a free country, and the PRC retains a one-party authoritarian system.

Taiwan and China are both Chinese, but they have developed differently, and as of 2012, they have significantly contrasting societies. It is in the interest of the US to guarantee and to defend a free and democratic Tai-

wan—for political and geopolitical reasons. It is a very tricky situation, and despite present calm, the new negative relations between Taiwan and the PRC could easily develop. The new tensions arising now in the Taiwan Strait and the China Sea do not only affect Taiwan and China but also Japan, Việt Nam, the Philippines, other Asian countries, and the US as an ally of Japan and Taiwan. President Obama and his administration face another huge challenge in the Asia Pacific region. ■

NOTE

1. Shih Hsiu-chuan, *Taipei Times*, April 19, 2012, quote from Wallace Gregson, April 18, 2012, “US Strategy in Asia and Taiwan’s Future” forum hosted by Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), accessed October 4, 2012, <http://bit.ly/UholkJ>.

China, Don't Be Stupid

By Andrej Matišák



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An anonymous diplomat from Taiwan said: *Personally, I think we Taiwanese should not depend on this kind of wishful thinking that America will help us. We should get prepared and more globalized, so that it is such an important link in the world that China will think twice before taking any stupid actions.* (May 2012)

This anonymous diplomat was referring to the possibility that China will attack his country when I asked him whether, in his opinion, the US would react militarily. Currently, any attack on Taiwan seems unlikely, but an analysis of a potential conflict is another matter. The future direction of Beijing is largely a crystal ball prediction.

The world is, of course, somewhat obsessed with the People’s Republic of China (PRC). After the fall of the Iron Curtain and Francis Fukuyama’s 1992 book *The End of History and the Last Man*, many had anticipated that the world had entered a time of perpetual victories for liberal democracy. The West won the Cold War, but Beijing found some good reasons to celebrate. The PRC was offering cheap labor and was able to win access to global markets. Furthermore, economic development in mainland China elevated millions of people out of poverty, regardless of the ideology of Chinese rulers.

The PRC’s success made many of us think that perhaps this strange mixture of Communist-Capitalist ideas is the actual end of history, or at least one of its possible ends. The West faces economic problems. The concept of *laissez-faire* is not a solution anymore. Is the Chinese iron fist the solution? Globally, the speeches of many politicians are full of words about

new rules and regulations. Of course, it is probably impossible to deny that we need to put some restrictions on financial markets and banks.

How far can we go with our Chinese obsession? In 2010, *Forbes Magazine* included an article that asserted that President Hu Jiantao was the most powerful person in the world.¹ Why? It was suggested that Hu did not need to follow democratic rules. Unlike Western counterparts, Hu could divert rivers, build cities, jail dissidents, and censor the Internet without meddling from bureaucrats or courts.

Forbes Magazine’s article notwithstanding, neither Hu Jintao nor any other Chinese leader has absolute power. The Chinese leadership is more of a collective one, with party elites holding various views. But, depending upon circumstances, PRC leaders might very well think that starting a war with Taiwan could be a good idea.

War was a part of the rise of every great power in history. Why would Beijing like to start a war with Taipei? Perhaps just to confirm its superpower status. The war might not be a necessity for the PRC, but a situation might occur where Beijing would like to exert its power in Northeast Asia. Of course, such an approach would mean a condemnation from the international community, but it is not completely beyond imagination that the PRC would actually be in a position where the regime would be able to afford a war.

There is also at least a second scenario where Beijing may think about starting a conflict. The PRC might use a war against Taiwan to divert attention from rising domestic unrest. In authoritarian regimes, the arrival of new rulers to power is often accompanied by visible uncertainty. Even such a little thing as the September 2012 short public disappearances of now President Xi Jinping quickly become a problem as the speculation about Xi flooded the Internet faster than any Chinese bullet train. But it is really nothing new. Every authoritarian regime has instability deep in its DNA and is, in fact, quite fragile.

What would the world do if the PRC invaded Taiwan? Or perhaps more germane to many readers of this journal, what would or should the US do? Washington versus Beijing would be a huge quarrel between two nuclear powers connected via vast business interests. With the possible exception of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis—if historical events are indicators—the US never directly confronted the nuclear Soviet Union. Certainly, this was not the case in the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. This attempt of Hungarians to get rid of rulers from Moscow was brutally crushed by the Soviet Army. History repeated itself a little over a decade later when the Warsaw Pact invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968.

It is true that US relations with Taiwan are completely different than relations with Soviet bloc countries, and it is problematic and perhaps impossible to compare them with Hungary or Czechoslovakia during the Cold War. It is possible that a PRC attack against the small, democratic Taiwan would send Americans to the streets, and they would demand a crack-down on Beijing. However, what would be more likely, if the PRC attacked Taiwan, is that the US would first try to create a kind of a coalition similar to the one formed before the first Gulf War in 1991.

But then, the UN Security Council condemned the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Of course, China is one of the permanent members of the UNSC. What would Russia—another permanent UNSC member—do? Would Moscow be willing to support the anti-Chinese resolution and support the possibility of military attack on the PRC?

According to the RAND Corporation's study *Conflict with China: Prospects, Consequences and Strategies for Deterrence*, "a direct defense of Taiwan has already become a challenge and is likely to become increasingly difficult in coming years."² The US might perceive Taiwan as its important partner, or even as a shining beacon of democracy that needs to be protected, and yes, the Taiwan Strait is also an important strategic maritime route. But are those good reasons to fight China militarily? In my opinion, these reasons are most unlikely to provoke a US-PRC war.

Washington is not obligated to defend Taiwan. History teaches that usually, major powers tend to agree, though they must sacrifice some smaller allies sometimes. The most probable response of the US, in my

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opinion, in the case of an armed conflict between Beijing and Taiwan, would be economic sanctions but not military actions. I also question whether Taiwan would really fight against a Chinese invasion. If a rapid invasion occurred, Taipei would probably choose only some symbolic resistance, and the US certainly wouldn't try to expel the occupiers.

So, in the final analysis, it is probably really about the signal many other countries need to send to the PRC. Don't do anything stupid. ■

NOTES

1. Gady Epstein, "Is Hu Jintao Really the Most Powerful Person in the World?" *Forbes Magazine*, November 4, 2010, <http://onforb.es/QTZEaP>.
2. James Dobbins, David C. Gompert, David A. Shlapak, and Andrew Scobell, *Conflict with China: Prospects, Consequences and Strategies for Deterrence*, Occasional Paper prepared for the US Department of the Army, Rand Arroyo Center, 2011, accessed October 4, 2012, <http://bit.ly/UHs99A>.

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