

Full Recognition of Taiwan: Dismantling the Fallacy of the "One-China" Policy

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35 years after the Shanghai Communiqué was signed, maintaining the “status quo” on both sides of the Taiwan Strait has become impossible to uphold. “Status quo” means things stay exactly the same. It is wishful thinking to believe that with the challenges and changes that have occurred over time, the “status quo” still exists.

Taiwan, the model of democracy and economic prosperity, has outgrown the unjust confinement and aspires to attain its full rights as an independent political entity. China, which still dreams about controlling Taiwan, has engaged in an all out effort to intimidate and isolate the island nation. As China and Taiwan continue to evolve, the original U.S. policy framework on Taiwan has become increasingly irrelevant.

Existing U.S. Policy

The existing U.S. policy is the biggest obstacle for diplomatic recognition of Taiwan and is completely out of step with the American emphasis on global democratization.

The “one-China” policy itself originally was based on the U.S. acknowledgment that Chinese governments on both sides of the Strait held that there is but “one-China” and that Taiwan is part of it. The wishes of the Taiwanese people were not taken into consideration.

Washington’s “one-China” policy is different from the “one-China” principle that Beijing imposes on the rest of the world; Washington has not expressed a statement regarding whether it believes Taiwan is a part of China. Instead, Washington states that they understand China's claims to Taiwan. Nevertheless, the wording of this agreement was deliberately confusing.

China and Taiwan are, in fact, two viable, independent nations. The pretense that there is only one country is just that -- a self-willed convenient delusion.

Truth About Taiwan

Today’s government on Taiwan represents 23 million people and is a multi-party democracy, with freedoms of press, speech, religion, enterprise, and so on. Most importantly, Taiwan has never been a part of the political entity known as the People's Republic of China.

Over centuries of colonial and internal transformation, the people of Taiwan have developed their own distinct and unmistakable identity and nationality. Survey after survey shows that a majority of all age groups in Taiwan consider themselves to be Taiwanese, not Chinese, and more than 60% vow they will fight to preserve their identity.

The Taiwanese people want to be constructive members of the global village but so far they have been unfairly excluded. They have much to contribute to the world their expertise in democratic politics, economic development, international commerce, social reforms, environmental protection and health care to any corner of the world, but they are not allowed to do so under the name of Taiwan.

It is understandable that Taiwan would want to be officially acknowledged as an independent state and enjoy full international recognition. There are much smaller nations with representation in the U.N., who house official embassies from world powers such as France, Germany, the United States, and others. Why not Taiwan?

Factors Inside China

While the U.S. has repeatedly stressed that both sides maintain the “status quo”, China has embarked on a path of radical change to both its military strategy and capabilities in preparation for a take-over of Taiwan. Since 1995 China has made numerous threatening gestures. In the months prior to Taiwan’s first fully democratic presidential election, the Chinese military conducted large-scale maneuvers in the Taiwan Strait—including highly provocative missile tests. Beijing repeated those tactics during Taiwan’s 2000 presidential campaign in a vain effort to discourage voters from electing Chen Shui-bian. In the most provocative breach of the “status quo”, Beijing adopted an anti-secession law in 2005. This “anti-secession law” was enacted to threaten the Taiwanese people and as diplomatic leverage against the United States.

China suffered humiliating defeats at the hands of the western powers in the 19th century, shattering the thousand-year old self-proclamation as the center and supreme power of the universe. The Korean and Vietnamese Wars further added to their wounds and resentment. The Chinese have since been trying to work themselves back into the ranks of international power. In the process they have employed some highly controversial and aggressive behaviors such as using a ground-based missile to hit and destroy one of its satellites as an open display of their military precision and might. In the era of globalization and by fast becoming the “factory of the world,” China has learned to effectively use its economic prowess to control global economy and manipulate other countries’ foreign policy.

I want to dispel the false notion that we can wait and wish that in time China will democratize and become a free and normal country. Too much is at stake to count on such a highly improbable, if not impossible, outcome. Equally erroneous is the notion that a China disintegrating into pieces will solve the current problems that we face. Quite the contrary, I believe a broken China will create even more serious problems for its neighbors.

Make no mistake. China fully intends to continue its aggressive drive to expand its sphere of influence and interests, regardless of the damaging effects this drive could have on its neighbors, the environment, or international peace.

Deeper Trends

For years now, the larger foreign policy establishment has regarded the mounting friction between China and Taiwan as the result of ill temper on one side, and loose talk about formal independence on the other. This diagnosis is overly simplistic and erroneous.

The roots of conflict lie, first and foremost, in Taiwan’s remarkable institutionalization of democracy, which poses two challenges to China. First, it makes highly unlikely a unification agreement cut by governments without the consent of the Taiwanese people. Second, it makes clear to the Chinese people that there are alternatives to the corrupt communist system. China is right to fear Taiwan’s transformation; the U.S. would be wrong to yield to that fear.

China will not step away from its claim over Taiwan because Taiwan is an effective tool to divert attention from its internal problems. Further, abandoning claims to Taiwan will make the communist regime appear weak and could perhaps lead to their downfall.

A successful Chinese invasion of Taiwan would spell disaster for the U.S. and other allied countries. First, the United States national interests will diminish. Second, Washington's credibility will suffer as its shining example of democracy, Taiwan, will no longer exist. Third, American strategic interests and military superiority will be challenged in the South China Sea and Pacific Ocean. Fourth, the Chinese communist regime would be emboldened to further legitimize their rule, crushing any hope for democratization of China.

The obvious conclusion is that China will not back down, and the challenges that it represents to the rest of the world will likely continue to increase. If nothing is done to curb China's aggressive aspirations, China will have, in the future, the economic and military might to threaten both the countries in the region and the West. The first to suffer is Taiwan. It is imperative that we resolve the Taiwan issue as soon as possible - while we still can.

American Visions and Missions

As the leader of the free world the United States should take a long term view of the Asia Pacific region of which it is an integral part, to safeguard their regional interests and security.

The most important action that the United States can take in this regard is to declare their strong support for democratic Taiwan. Part of the first step would be for the U.S. to start acting as the facilitator to bring Taiwan and China together for direct and meaningful dialogue whereby differences can be discussed, consensus reached, and hopefully a mutually equal status treaty can be produced.

Should this approach fail to lead to mutual accommodation, then it's time to fully recognize Taiwan, allow it to take its rightful place in the world, and put an end to China's nationalistic claim to the island nation. The U.S. did de-recognize Taiwan. The U.S. can also re-recognize Taiwan. The United States has the right to make internal policy changes without the consent of the Chinese government. This change in American policy could not be seen as an act by Taiwan to provoke China and to warrant Chinese interference.

Would China pursue military action under such circumstances? It is unlikely that the Chinese at this time would want to challenge the United States' military supremacy. And any economic embargo on the part of the Chinese would end up hurting China even more than the U.S.

Full Recognition of Taiwan

By establishing a "Full Recognition" policy that grants complete diplomatic relations with both China and Taiwan, the United States would be acting in its own best interest while ceasing to penalize Taiwan. The U.S. can also restore confidence to its allies and potential allies by demonstrating that it is determined to support countries that share the values of democracy, free market and human rights.

The United States can count on support from China's neighbors. The recent sentiment in Japan to amend its pacifist constitution is a clear indication that allies in the region are very wary of China's aggressive maneuvering, and will back the U.S. in its effort to defuse and prevent any future conflict.

A "Full Recognition" policy towards Taiwan would eliminate the current ambiguities and inconsistencies. Most importantly, U.S. interests in the Asia Pacific region would be preserved, and stability and security restored.