

# Sharp tensions erupt across the Taiwan straits

Peter Symonds  
29 July 1999

Sharp tensions have erupted between China and Taiwan following remarks by Taiwanese President Lee Teng Hui earlier in the month describing the relations between the two countries as “state-to-state” and thus implying a discarding of the “one China” policy previously adhered to by both regimes.

Lee's comments to German overseas radio *Deutsche Welle* on July 9 were carefully framed, stopping short of any overt declaration of Taiwan independence and making no reference to any change to the Taiwanese constitution that enshrines the “one China” formula.

Beijing, which maintains that Taiwan is a renegade province and an integral part of China, reacted angrily to Lee's statement. Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Zhang Qiyue warned that this was “an extremely dangerous step to take on the road to independence”. China's chief negotiator with Taiwan, Wang Daohan, who had been expected to visit Taipei for talks in October, said Lee's stance had “wiped out the foundation for contacts”.

More ominously, press reports in China and Hong Kong announced military exercises aimed at putting pressure on Lee to back away from his statements. Reporting “large scale attack military exercises in a certain military region,” the official *Life Times* newspaper commented: “The Taiwan situation has suddenly intensified and China's People's Liberation Army stands in combat readiness to firmly defend the unity of the motherland and territorial integrity.”

In Hong Kong, the Beijing-backed *Wen Wei Po* newspaper published a front-page article on July 18 with a picture of waves of amphibious vessels and vehicles making beach landings. It quoted an anonymous official as saying: “When peaceful reunification is hopeless and ‘Taiwan independence’ forces are splitting the motherland, we will not rule out the use of force to resolve the Taiwan problem.”

Authorities in Taiwan have so far played down the reports as little more than sabre rattling by the Chinese bureaucracy. The military said there had been no unusual troop movements in the Chinese provinces immediately adjacent to Taiwan or any air incursions. Taiwan's military forces have been maintained on normal alert.

But there is undoubtedly the potential for the tensions to rapidly escalate. In 1995-96, following a semi-official visit by Lee to the United States, the confrontation led China to stage major military exercises involving naval forces and the firing of

missiles into the Taiwan Strait near the island's major ports. In response, the US dispatched two aircraft carriers as well as attack submarines to the area.

Taiwan maintains a formidable military with 375,000 in its armed forces and another 1.5 million reserves. With the assistance of the US, it has built up a navy and airforce equipped with the latest technology to block any amphibious operations by China. Taiwan has more than 500 up-to-date combat aircraft, as well as over 36 frigates and destroyers, plus four submarines. The small islands closest to the Chinese mainland have been heavily fortified.

The conflict dates back almost 50 years to the collapse in China of the Kuomintang regime led by Chiang Kai Shek. As the peasant armies of the Chinese Communist Party advanced southward, Chiang and his supporters fled to Taiwan and, with the military and economic support of the US, established a military dictatorship over the island. Both the Kuomintang and the Beijing Stalinists claimed to be the legitimate government of all China including Taiwan. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the US and other countries began to recognise China and downgrade relations with Taiwan, but continued economic and military relations with Taipei. More recently the US has supported reunification through negotiations between Beijing and Taipei.

Lee's remarks are a calculated political move made for both domestic and international reasons. An article in the July 30 issue of *AsiaWeek* magazine points out that Lee has previously made similar comments to foreign journalists aimed at provoking a reaction from Beijing. “He may speak in English, Mandarin or Japanese, with an interpreter briefed precisely on how he should translate his president's remarks. Often, Lee's underlings then scramble to explain that he was misunderstood.”

At home, the Kuomintang is facing a presidential election next March. Lee is unable to run for office again and the party's likely candidate, vice-president Lien Chan, is currently running third in the polls behind independent James Soong Chu Yu and former Taipei mayor Chen Shui Bian, the candidate for the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). By striking a tougher stance towards China, Lee no doubt hopes to undercut support for the DPP, which calls for Taiwanese independence.

A recent survey found that some 73 percent of Taiwanese supported Lee's latest statement, and 79 percent felt that Taipei

should continue to develop its diplomatic ties with other nations. Only a few nations have diplomatic relations with Taiwan, which is not represented in the United Nations or other international bodies. Those that have recognised Taipei are mostly small countries that have done so in return for money. Papua New Guinea's outgoing prime minister agreed on July 7 to a deal involving a reported \$2.3 billion from Taiwan in return for diplomatic recognition—a package that was repudiated last week by the newly-formed PNG government.

On the international stage, Lee's remarks may have been aimed at thwarting US pressure to enter into “substantive negotiations” with China over reunification. According to the June 22 issue of the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, “Most recently, that pressure has come from Stanley Roth, assistant secretary of state for East Asia. Lee's advisors say Roth has shown little sympathy for Taipei's fears that entering into such negotiations could force it into unification talks. Taipei's strategy is to negotiate with Beijing on such ‘functional’ issues as illegal immigration and fighting cross-strait crime, before tackling the larger questions.”

Lee was also possibly seeking to exploit the sharpening tensions between China and the US resulting from the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Beijing, as well as the refusal of the US administration to agree to China's entry into the World Trade Organisation. If that were the case then the tactic appears to have backfired. The Clinton administration, which was given no prior notice, rapidly moved to reassure Beijing that its policy had not changed and that it did not support Lee's statement.

US State Department spokesman James Rubin twice reiterated Washington's “three no's” stance—no Taiwanese independence, no “two Chinas” and no membership for Taipei in international bodies for sovereign states. Clinton personally rang Chinese President Jiang Zemin to emphasise that there was no change in the US “one China” policy. The US has also scrapped a Pentagon delegation, which was due to visit Taiwan.

US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright dispatched two special envoys—one to Beijing and the other to Taipei to urge Lee to moderate his remarks. To date, Lee and other Taiwanese officials have refused to back down from the comments. Albright met with her counterpart Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan last weekend in Singapore during the recent ASEAN summit of foreign ministers to reassure China over the US position.

The speed with which the Clinton administration has moved to try to defuse the tensions reflects concerns in Washington over the deepening social and political crisis within China being produced by an economic slowdown, and mounting levels of unemployment and poverty being produced by market reforms and restructuring. The US administration fears that political instability in Beijing may lead to a military escalation in the Taiwan Strait that goes beyond the confrontation in 1995-96.

China has warned the US against any involvement. At a press conference in Singapore on Sunday, Tang told Albright that the US should understand that Lee was a “troublemaker” and warned Washington against saying anything “to fan the flames” of independence for Taiwan.

Beijing is particularly concerned at the implications of the NATO war in the Balkans, where the treatment of Kosovo Albanians was used as the pretext for military intervention. “The problem now for China and other non-NATO countries is if NATO's scheme to dismember Yugoslavia is realised, then the United States and its allies may further apply this model to the Asia-Pacific and other regions to attack countries that constitute a ‘threat’ to its global control,” wrote commentator Zhang Wenmu in a recent issue of the Chinese magazine *Strategy and Management*.

Both Beijing and Taipei are aware of the deeply divided and, therefore, erratic character of US policy towards China and the north-east Asian region. Sections of big business keen to exploit economic opportunities in China are pressing for Washington to stabilise relations with Beijing and are critical of Clinton's refusal to admit China into the WTO. In Congress, however, right-wing Republicans are demanding a far more aggressive policy towards China including support for an independent Taiwan.

Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Jesse Helms, for instance, accused the Clinton administration of being “paralysed by its own anachronistic policy, better known as appeasement” and praised Lee for “having the courage to state the obvious—that the Republic of China on Taiwan is a de-facto sovereign state”. Seven members of the US House of Representatives have introduced a bill into Congress demanding that China renounce any use of force against Taiwan and extending further US military support for Taipei.

Despite the moves by the Clinton administration to dampen the tensions, Lee's remarks have the potential for inflaming what is already a volatile situation in the region.



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