

Taiwanese president adopts provocative pro-independence stance toward China

John Chan

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Emboldened by the Bush administration's stated commitment to using all necessary military means to prevent China forcibly reunifying Taiwan with the mainland, the Republic of China (ROC) government in Taipei has stepped up its agitation for the US to recognise the ROC as a separate nation-state.

On October 5, Taiwan's vice-defence minister, Kang Ning-hsiang, paid an unprecedented "private visit" to Washington for talks with US deputy defence secretary Paul Wolfowitz and US defence officials. Kang's tour of the Pentagon was the highest profile visit by a senior Taiwanese government official in the 23 years since Washington broke diplomatic relations with the ROC and opened them with the Peoples Republic in Beijing. At the top of the agenda was a US plan to supply the Taiwanese navy with conventional submarines and new destroyers that are capable of offensive operations against Chinese vessels.

Kang's visit came after a 10-day September tour of Washington, New York and Los Angeles by Wu Shu-chen, the wife of the ROC's president, Chen Shui-bian. Wu's visit is the first by a ROC first lady to the US since the 1943 tour of Soong Mayling, the wife of the Kuomintang (Nationalist) party dictator Chiang Kai-shek. While her trip was also described as "private", Wu Shu-chen was feted by administration and congressional leaders and granted a reception on Capitol Hill. The theme of her visit was a call for the Bush administration to support the ROC's readmission to the UN, from which it was expelled in 1979 in order to admit mainland China.

Both Kang's and Wu's "private" diplomacy were denounced by China as being inconsistent with Washington's claim to accept Beijing's "One China" policy—that Taiwan is a province of China and must be reunified with the mainland. The Chinese Stalinist regime has repeatedly stated that it reserves the right to use military means to achieve reunification if other methods fail.

While the Bush administration declared neither visit represented any change in US policy toward Taiwan, Beijing is unlikely to be reassured. The trips went ahead despite an open repudiation of the "One China" policy by president Chen Shui-bian in August.

On August 3, Chen declared: "Taiwan is not a part of another country, not a local government or province of another country. In other words, Taiwan and China are countries on either side [of the Taiwan Strait]." The speech marked a clear shift by Chen away from the reassurances he gave during the 2000 presidential elections that he would not seek to implement the pro-Taiwan independence platform of his Democratic Progressive Party (DPP).

Chen further upped the ante in a speech on September 10. He labelled Beijing's threat to use military force to unify Taiwan with the mainland as "by its nature very similar to terrorist attacks". Appealing to the US to embrace this definition, he declared: "While Taiwan is actively involved in the international camp of anti-terrorism, there is no reason to let 23 million people live constantly under the shadow of military threats. The fears brought forth by the [Chinese] missiles on the Taiwan people have already exceeded the limit of terrorist attacks."

Chen's attempts to portray a half-century of tensions between China and Taiwan as analogous to the September 11 attacks on the US are absurd. The military standoff across the Taiwan Strait had its origins in the 1940s Chinese civil war, which ended with the 1949 overthrow of the Kuomintang by the Stalinist Communist Party, and continued throughout the Cold War.

The very survival of the Kuomintang's ROC government after it fled to Taiwan can largely be put down to the presence of the US navy in the Taiwan Strait. Chiang Kai-shek's regime had even less popular support among the Taiwanese population than among mainland Chinese workers and peasants. In order to maintain its rule, the Kuomintang (KMT) subjected Taiwan to decades of ruthless military dictatorship. From the safety of its Taiwanese base and with US political, military and financial support, the KMT claimed to be the legitimate Chinese government and threatened to invade the mainland to reclaim power.

Washington exploited Taiwan as a convenient pawn during the Cold War. In 1971, the Nixon administration, confronting a debacle in Vietnam, moved to develop an anti-Soviet alliance with the Beijing Stalinists. One of the concessions demanded by China was that the US cut its ties with Taipei and recognise Beijing as the legitimate government of all China, including Taiwan. In 1979, Washington complied and broke diplomatic relations with the ROC.

The US did not completely abandon the KMT, however. In the same year, the US Congress passed the Taiwan Relations Act, committing all future American administrations to ensuring Taiwan had sufficient military power to resist a "forcible" reunification. As a safeguard against the KMT provoking war with Beijing by openly rejecting the "One China" policy, the Act contained what was described as "strategic ambiguity". While specifying the arming of Taiwan, the legislation did not commit the US unconditionally to the military defence of Taiwan in the event of a Chinese invasion.

For over two decades, the relations between China and the US have unfolded within this framework. The US formally recognises Beijing's sovereignty over Taiwan but arms Taipei to the teeth. For its part, China denounces pro-independence Taiwanese politicians but gives favourable conditions for Taiwanese capitalists to set up export operations on the mainland. The state of affairs has divided the island's elite, with a layer seeing the declaration of the island as a separate nation from China as the only means of ending its diplomatic isolation and avoiding a Hong-Kong style incorporation into the Peoples Republic. These divisions have been expressed in the 1990s in a series of splits in the KMT and the rise to power in March 2000 of Chen Shui-bian's DPP—a "native" Taiwanese, anti-China and anti-KMT party.

Chen's willingness to openly challenge the "One China" policy stems from the Bush administration's shift in stance concerning China and Taiwan. In the course of the 2000 US elections, Bush declared Beijing a "strategic competitor" of the US. Since then major Pentagon documents have effectively repudiated the previous "strategic ambiguity" and stated the US will militarily intervene to prevent Taiwan's forcible integration into a unified Chinese state. The White House's January 2002 Nuclear Posture Review explicitly threatened China with a US nuclear strike if Taiwan is attacked.

While there is still no overt US support for independence, no previous government in Taipei since 1979 has had such a military guarantee from Washington to fall back upon. Even the last KMT president Lee Teng-hui, who provoked China's fury by campaigning as a Taiwanese nationalist in the 1996 presidential elections, ultimately backed away from a confrontation with Beijing. While the US deployed aircraft carriers in the Taiwan Strait in response to Chinese sabre-rattling, the Clinton administration gave no undertaking it would go to war on Taiwan's behalf.

Opposition in the Taiwanese establishment to what was perceived as Lee's reckless provocation of China led to a serious rupture in the KMT. James Soong, a leading KMT powerbroker, ran as an independent candidate in the 2000 elections on an anti-Lee platform, with the backing of major Taiwanese investors in China. The resulting split in the KMT vote between the official candidate and Soong enabled the DPP's Chen to win the poll with just 39 percent of the vote.

With such a narrow base of support, Chen proceeded cautiously. While refusing to declare his adherence to the "One China" policy, he promised not to carry out the DPP's program of holding a referendum on Taiwan's status. In 2001, adapting to the demands of the Taiwanese business establishment, he began lifting decades-old restrictions on direct trade and investment with China. Since Bush was installed as US president and particularly following September 11, these careful compromises and regard for public opinion have given way to a more open promotion of Taiwanese nationalism.

As far as Washington is concerned, Taiwan remains a pawn in its broader strategic calculations. As former US national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski bluntly commented in his 1996 book, *The Grand Chessboard*: "Even if for the foreseeable future China

is likely to lack the means to effectively coerce Taiwan, Beijing must understand—and be credibly convinced—that American acquiescence in an attempt at the forcible reintegration, sought by the use of military power, would be so devastating to America's position in the Far East that America simply could not afford to remain military passive if Taiwan were unable to protect itself....

"In other words, America would have to intervene not for the sake of a separate Taiwan but for the sake of America's geopolitical interests in the Asia-Pacific area. This is an important distinction. The United States does not have, *per se*, any special interests in a separate Taiwan."

At present, the Bush administration is seeking to consolidate its presence in Afghanistan and Central Asia and preparing to invade Iraq and occupy its oilfields. In both cases, it has temporarily required and received the collaboration of China, in exchange for assurances that Beijing's own interests in Central Asia and the Middle East will not be damaged, and that China-US investment and trade will not be disrupted. On the surface, relations appear calm. Beijing's responses to Chen's statements have been markedly low-key, so as not to upset the current *status quo*.

In Washington, Beijing and Taipei however, there is a recognition that a collision of interests is inevitable. The ambitions of the new capitalist elite in China to function as a regional Asian power are being thwarted at every turn by the US determination to exert an untrammelled dominance over the world's major markets and resources. Already, American deployments over the past year in Central Asia and South East Asia, combined with its encouragement of Japanese remilitarisation, have produced a virtual military encirclement of China and a siege-mentality in the Chinese military hierarchy.

Encouraged by the Bush administration, Chen Shui-bian's pro-independence agitation is introducing a dangerous new element into an already tense situation in North East Asia. If accepted by Washington, his appeals to include Chinese threats against Taiwan in the US "global war on terrorism" would set the stage for a potentially catastrophic military confrontation.



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