

US-China tensions loom over Taiwan

John Chan**5 December 2003**

Despite official statements from both sides that relations are the best in 30 years, tensions between the US and China are escalating following renewed controversy over the status of Taiwan.

In recent weeks, China has repeatedly warned that “the use of force may be unavoidable” if Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian and his pro-independence allies hold a referendum to declare the island a separate nation-state. Under the internationally accepted “One China” policy, Taiwan is formally considered a province of China and excluded from the United Nations and diplomatic recognition.

China’s threats come in response to Chen’s pledges, in the lead-up to next year’s presidential election, to change Taiwan’s constitution. It still defines the island as part of the Republic of China (ROC), which was overthrown on the mainland by Mao Zedong’s forces in 1949.

Chen Shui-bian told a visiting US delegation on November 10 that if re-elected he would hold a referendum on a new constitution to define Taiwan as a distinct nation-state on December 10, 2006 and implement it on May 20, 2008. In early November, Taiwan’s deputy defence minister Chen Chao-min declared the government would be prepared to fight “a war to create a new nation”.

The Singapore-based *Strait Times* reported claims on November 21 that the Chinese military was on the verge of entering a “pre-mobilisation phase”, including the deployment of two cruise missile brigades capable of attacking any US aircraft carrier battle groups that attempted to intervene in a war between China and Taiwan. During tensions between China and Taiwan in 1996, the Clinton administration deployed two aircraft carriers into the Taiwan Strait.

Although the Bush administration has officially stated that it will “not support” Taiwan’s independence, China sees the prospect of US backing for the Taiwanese nationalists as a serious threat. In an interview with the *Washington Post* on November 22, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao urged Washington not to “send any wrong signals”

to Chen Shui-bian. “The US side must be crystal clear in opposing the use of a referendum or writing a constitution or all the other tactics used by the leader of the Taiwan authorities to pursue his separatist agenda,” he said.

The November 27 issue of the state-controlled *China Daily* criticised US policy toward Taiwan as being ambiguous and declared that it “serves to encourage the island’s separatists and jeopardise the one-China policy as well as the political foundation of Sino-US relations”.

China’s rhetoric toned down somewhat after November 29, when a bill to allow the holding of referenda in Taiwan was heavily amended by the two pro-China unification parties in the parliament, the Nationalist Party or Kuomintang (KMT), and the People’s First Party (PFP). The amendments prohibited holding a referendum to alter Taiwan’s name from the Republic of China, or to change its flag, territory or national anthem. A “defensive referendum” on such issues would only be possible if Taiwan is facing an external threat or war.

Chen Shui-bian has nevertheless made clear his intention to aggressively push his agenda and run the risk of a confrontation. On November 30, he declared that China’s possession of hundreds of missiles that can hit Taiwan was justification in itself for holding a referendum that redefined the island’s status.

Addressing a rally of his Democratic Progressive Party, Chen declared: “On March 20 next year, we can hold a referendum to safeguard national sovereignty, to defend national security.... Facing an external threat is present tense for Taiwan, the country’s sovereignty may [therefore] be altered any time.... If we wait until the Communists attack, it will be too late. There will be no need to hold a referendum.”

Chen’s statements reflect his administration’s short-term electoral calculations. Trailing in the polls behind the pro-unification parties, he is sending out clear indications he intends to provoke Beijing and win support on the basis of defying Chinese military threats. He and other Taiwanese nationalists are calculating that the Bush administration will come to Taiwan’s assistance in the

event of any military conflict.

Bush came to power in 2001 after identifying China during his campaign as a “strategic competitor” of the US in the Asia-Pacific. In April 2001, relations between Washington and Beijing plummeted following the collision of a Chinese jet fighter and a US spy plane violating Chinese airspace. Amid the controversy, the White House announced unprecedented arms sales to Taiwan and Bush declared in a television interview that the US would do “whatever it took to help Taiwan defend herself” against a Chinese attack.

Relations improved after the September 11 terror attacks. Economically dependent upon access to American markets and investment, Beijing saw supporting the US “war on terror” as an opportunity to lessen the tensions and ingratiate itself, however temporarily, with Washington.

The *Asia Times* commented on November 18: “China’s full cooperation with the US on issues of anti-terrorism and the North Korean nuclear crisis has helped the country win lots of benefits in regional security, bilateral trade, suppression of Taiwan separatism, stabilising Xinjiang [the resource-rich western Muslim-populated province of China] and the like. As to divergences such as revaluing its currency or dealing with its trade surplus, China regards them as economic issues only, instead of extending them to politics, which could easily provoke domestic anti-US sentiments.”

The global eruption of US militarism, however, and China’s own efforts to develop its diplomatic weight on the world arena, has sown the seeds of conflict.

During his visit to Australia in October, which coincided with a trip by Chinese President Hu Jintao, Bush declared that the US expected Australia, Japan, and other Southeast Asian countries to help “keep peace in the Taiwan Strait”. Pointedly, he did not mention China. The exclusion was interpreted in Beijing and elsewhere as suggesting that China was the threat to the peace.

Bush made his remarks in Canberra after Hu Jintao signed a “strategic partnership” with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Bangkok, expanding China’s trade and political relations in the region. As China becomes the biggest export market for the region’s economies, concern is burgeoning in Washington over Beijing’s competition for influence in East Asia.

A comment in the November issue of the New York-based *Foreign Affairs* magazine warned that Beijing’s new foreign policy of “engagement” was not necessarily

compatible with US world dominance.

“Americans should always remember, however, that even as China becomes more engaged, it is also growing more adept at using its foreign policy and foreign relations to serve Chinese interests. Today’s China is certainly more sophisticated—but not necessarily kinder or gentler. Beijing’s new skills may at times frustrate Washington’s objectives, as China is becoming better positioned to undermine, and potentially challenge, the policies of the United States and its allies....

“While Beijing currently seems prepared to work within international rules and norms to pursue its interests, China is dissatisfied with some aspects of this system, such as US preponderance and especially the status of Taiwan.”

The fragility of US-China relations have been underscored by the US imposition of trade sanctions against China’s exports in November. Under pressure from American manufacturers and union officials, Bush imposed harsher quotas on Chinese textiles on November 18, followed six days later by a 46 percent tariff on Chinese colour televisions. Beijing retaliated by cancelling plans to buy wheat and other grains from the US.

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao is scheduled to visit the US next week. Alongside talks on the trade disputes, it is expected that China will seek a guarantee that the Bush administration will not intervene if tensions escalate with Taiwan. It is unlikely, however, that Bush will provide such assurances.

As a result, the next three months leading up to the Taiwanese presidential election are shaping up as a volatile and unpredictable period in East Asia.



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