

China's "anti-secession law" adds to tension in North East Asia

John Chan
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At the final session of China's National Peoples Congress (NPC) on Monday, the handpicked delegates assembled in the Great Hall of the People passed an "anti-secession law" that outlaws any declaration of independence by Taiwan. The legislation formalises China's longstanding threat to use military force in the event of any Taiwanese breakaway.

The law calls for the building of a "peaceful" framework across Taiwan Strait, including through negotiation, to end the current military standoff and give Taiwan an "appropriate" status. But it also provides for the Chinese government to use "non-peaceful" means to prevent a "split" by Taiwan from China in "any form". Clause No. 8 authorises the launching of war without prior consultation with the NPC.

Despite Beijing's denials, the law will compound tensions in North East Asia. Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian immediately denounced the law and called for a rally of one million on March 26 to oppose it. While Chen has backed away from promises to hold a referendum on the status of the island, his Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) is based on the demand for full independence for Taiwan.

Playing down the threat of war, the Chinese government declared the law was not an "order of war mobilisation" and stressed that the use of force is the "last resort" when peaceful means are "completely exhausted." The legislation is nevertheless a real threat not only against Taiwan, but a warning to other Chinese regions where there are separatist movements.

President Hu Jintao, who took over China's top military post at the NPC, told a gathering of army representatives: "We shall step up preparations for possible military struggle and enhance our capabilities to cope with crises, safeguard peace, prevent wars and

win the wars if any". In their comments to the media, delegates from the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) bluntly declared strong support for such a law to "crush" Taiwan's "secession".

These warnings have been made before. China, which regards Taiwan as a renegade province, calls for its integration with the mainland along the lines of Hong Kong—on the basis of "one country, two systems". Taiwan became the refuge for defeated Kuomintang (KMT) forces after the 1949 revolution. Its military regime lost international recognition after Washington's rapprochement with Beijing in 1972.

Taiwan's present international status is ambiguous: the US, along with other major powers, accepts that the island is part of "One China", but under the Taiwan Relations Act it is committed to defending Taiwan against external attack. Sharp divisions exist in Taipei over the direction Taiwan is to follow: sections of the ruling elite favour a push for full independence despite the threat of Chinese attack; their opponents seek an accommodation with Beijing.

While the international media has focussed on the potential for conflict between China and Taiwan, little has been said about why Beijing passed a specific law against Taiwanese independence. The existing National Defence Law already authorises the use of the military against any secessionist movement in China.

As far as the state-controlled media was concerned, the "anti-secession law" was simply "the will of people". *China Daily*, for example, rhetorically declared: "[W]hat is surprising if a law on a Chinese issue is to be made by the Chinese? Who might be better suited for the job? Taiwan is part of China and Chinese lawmakers are making a law for it. Nothing less and nothing more."

Behind this nationalist bombast lies a more

fundamental reason. In the aftermath of the 1949 revolution, Beijing did not consider it necessary to legislate for military action against the KMT dictatorship on Taiwan. It regarded “the liberation of Taiwan” as a continuation of Chinese revolution that had overthrown the KMT’s corrupt capitalist regime on the mainland.

The Stalinist bureaucracy in Beijing, which was based on the seizure of power by peasant-based armies, was never socialist or communist. From the outset, Mao Zedong sought an accommodation with sections of the bourgeoisie—a process that culminated in the opening up of China and the pro-market policies of Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s.

Deng’s embrace of capitalism was summed up in the policy he elaborated towards Taiwan, as well as Hong Kong and Macao. Under his formula “one country, two systems”, the capitalist economy and the existing state apparatus would remain in place, as long as these areas became part of China and the local ruling elites transferred their political allegiance to Beijing.

Even as he was implementing market restructuring, Deng cynically argued that the mainland’s “socialist system” would eventually prove superior and be embraced in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao. Two decades on, Beijing’s capitalist trajectory has undermined any claim to be building socialism in China and thus any justification for a “revolutionary war” to reunite Taiwan with China.

Beijing no longer even speaks of “liberating” Taiwan. Just as “the crime of counterrevolution” has become “subversion”, so the “liberation of Taiwan” has been replaced with a law based on Chinese nationalism against “secession”.

The terminological shift underscores the ideological dependence of Beijing on nationalism to shore up a base of support. Its economic policies have had a devastating impact on broad layers of workers and the peasantry. Unable to offer social policies to even ameliorate widespread unemployment and poverty, the regime relies on whipping up Chinese nationalism, particularly among layers of the new middle class, as a means of diverting growing social tensions. The unification of Taiwan is a key element of this campaign.

Beijing is obviously concerned that military conflict with Taiwan would immediately involve the US. At the

same time, however, it cannot afford to allow Taiwan to make an open break for fear of triggering a chain reaction of secessionist movements elsewhere in China. Beijing’s heavy-handed methods continue to fuel separatist sentiment in Tibet and the western oil-rich province of Xinjiang, and opposition in Hong Kong.

While critical of the new “anti-secession” law, Washington’s response to the NPC vote on Monday was rather muted. White House spokesman Scott McClellan described the adoption of the legislation as “unfortunate”, saying that it ran “counter to recent progress in cross-strait relations.” He said the US opposed “any attempt to unilaterally change the status quo”—a veiled message to Taipei not to take any steps toward declaring independence.

Bush campaigned in the 2000 election for a more aggressive US policy towards China, branding it as a “strategic competitor”. Once in office, the Bush administration toned down its rhetoric—in part in response to sections of the US corporate elite that have billions of dollars invested in China. After September 11, 2001, Washington has been preoccupied with first the invasion of Afghanistan and then of Iraq. For its part, Beijing has seized on the “global war on terrorism” to head off any confrontation with the US by accommodating to the Bush administration.

Any heightening of tension over Taiwan, however, would lead to a cooling of relations between Beijing and Washington and a return to the confrontationist stance enunciated in 2000.



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