

Taiwan's UN bid increases friction with China

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Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian has again raised the political temperature across the Taiwan Strait with China by launching a provocative campaign for a seat in the United Nations. His ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) held a rally of 100,000 people on Sunday in its southern stronghold of Kaohsiung to support the demand.

Chen told the rally: "China says Taiwan is part of it but I believe we definitely cannot agree with that. Taiwan is an independent sovereign country ... UN for Taiwan!" The aim of Chen's campaign is to bolster the DPP's chances in the presidential election due next March. Confronting widespread hostility to his market reforms and corruption scandals involving his family, Chen has turned to the DPP's stock-in-trade: demagogic appeals to Taiwanese nationalism and the establishment of a recognised, independent state.

Chen first unveiled the UN campaign in May. In July, he sent a letter to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon applying for a UN seat under the title "Taiwan" but the application was immediately rejected. With Beijing adamantly opposed and holding a veto in the UN Security Council, Taipei's campaign failed again at the UN General Assembly session yesterday, as have the previous 14 attempts since 1991. As the DPP is well aware, however, the campaign itself is enough to provoke an angry reaction from Beijing.

China has regarded Taiwan as a renegade province ever since the former Kuomintang (KMT) regime on the mainland was ousted in the 1949 revolution and fled to the island. During the Cold War, the US backed Chiang Kai-shek's dictatorship on Taiwan as the government of all China and refused to recognise the new Stalinist regime in Beijing. After US President Richard Nixon reached a rapprochement with Mao Zedong in 1971, however, Beijing took over China's seat in the UN Security Council from Taipei.

The US adopted a policy termed "strategic ambiguity" on Taiwan. On the one hand, the US and other major powers accepted the so-called "one China" principle, which recognised Beijing as the sole legal government of all China, including Taiwan. On the other hand, the US opposed any

forcible takeover of Taiwan. In 1979, the US passed the Taiwan Relations Act, committing it to defending the island from Chinese attack and permitting the sale of weapons to Taiwan.

Beijing has never accepted the permanent separation of Taiwan from China and has repeatedly threatened to invade should Taipei declare formal independence. In 2005, China passed an "anti-secession law" to formally authorise the use of military force against Taiwan. Beijing fears the establishment of an independent Taiwan would only encourage separatist movements in other parts of the country. Moreover, a heavily armed and hostile rival just off the mainland is a constant threat to China's sea lanes and burgeoning trade. The reunification of Taiwan has become a key component of Chinese nationalist rhetoric exploited by Beijing to prop up its rule and justify its military expansion.

Not surprisingly, Beijing again denounced Chen as a "national traitor". Last week, an official statement published by the official Xinhua news agency declared China had undertaken the "necessary preparations for a serious situation" over Taiwan. "We absolutely will not permit any person to separate Taiwan from the motherland by any means," it declared. To underscore the military threat, Shanghai held its largest air raid drill since 1949 to coincide with Chen's rally last Sunday.

None of China's threats has deterred Chen. Significant sections of the ruling class support the establishment of an independent Taiwan as the means for furthering their economic interests. Taiwan is the world's 18th largest economy and 16th largest trading nation. The lack of formal international recognition necessarily impedes those sections of Taiwanese capital most closely involved with the global economy. At the same time, the DPP's opponents, including the KMT, have stressed the dangers of war and the need for Taiwan to integrate more closely with the booming Chinese economy. Taiwanese corporations have invested tens of billions of dollars in China.

Chen's renewed push for a UN seat is a further setback for Beijing's efforts to contain the "secessionist" activities in

Taiwan. In recent years, China has been wooing the opposition KMT as a counterweight to the DPP. Top KMT officials have been feted in Beijing. But China's proposal for the reunification of Taiwan on the basis of "one country, two systems" along the lines of Hong Kong has little popular appeal. Beijing's heavy-handed imposition of a chief executive in Hong Kong and the lack of genuine elections there have compelled the KMT to state that any reunification would only be carried out after "democratic reform".

Despite large protests against Chen last year, the KMT has been unable to capitalise on widespread anti-government sentiment because it shares the same regressive economic policies and continues to be identified with corruption and repressive rule. Last Sunday, the KMT sought to adapt to Chen's campaign by holding its own rally calling for a referendum to "rejoin" the UN as the "Republic of China" as the party had attempted on previous occasions in 1990s.

KMT presidential candidate Ma Ying-jeou sought a careful balance, however. While attempting to woo DPP voters, he confined his proposal within the framework of the "one China" principle that is acceptable to Beijing. The KMT would seek limited UN representation and then only through negotiation with China. Ma was also flexible on the name, suggesting "Chinese Taipei"—the name of Taiwan's delegation to Olympic Games—as an alternative. Even so, the proposal alienated the KMT's close ally, the pro-China People's First Party (PFP), which rejected an application to join the UN.

As in the past, sharpening tensions between China and Taiwan threaten to undermine Washington's "strategic ambiguity". On the one hand, the US is seeking to rein in Chen and the DPP. Thomas Christensen, US deputy assistant secretary of state, bluntly told a US-Taiwan defence industry conference on September 11: "We feel it is our obligation to warn that the content of this particular referendum [on a UN seat] is ill-conceived and potentially quite harmful. Bad public policy initiatives are made no better for being wrapped in the flag of 'democracy.'"

At the same time, the Bush administration is continuing to arm Taiwan. Last week, the Pentagon unveiled plans to sell Taiwan 12 P-3C anti-submarine aircraft and 144 SM-2 anti-aircraft missiles, which will strengthen Taiwan's capacity to counter any Chinese military threat. Beijing bitterly protested against the arms sales as wanton interference in its "internal affairs" and accused the US of sending a "wrong signal" that would bolster Chen.

The official *People's Daily* warned on September 11 of the danger of war with the US. It said the US was playing the "Taiwan card" in order to "contain or restrict China". It added: "This indicates that once the situation across the

Taiwan Strait is out of control, military clashes would likely phase in and the possible clashes between China and the US cannot be ruled out entirely." It noted most Chinese analysts were convinced that, "under the pretext of Taiwan crisis, the US might conduct a military intervention against China with multinational 'coalition forces', which is the main military threat to our country."

Far from drawing back from such a confrontation, the most militarist elements in Washington and Taipei are spoiling for a fight. In a video conference with the pro-Taiwan lobby in New York on September 14, Chen demagogically appealed for full US backing. "As a leader in the community of democracies, why can't the US say no to China?" he said, adding: "I am convinced that the United States would rather improve its relations with North Korea than Taiwan. The US also believes Kosovo will be independent eventually. If you support Kosovo, why can't you support or least care about Taiwan? Are we that unworthy?"

Among the platform in the US was John Bolton, the former US ambassador to the UN, who, since resigning his post, has functioned as the de facto public spokesman for Vice President Dick Cheney and the most right-wing elements of the White House. Calling for a sharp shift in US policy, Bolton said: "I've felt the US should extend full diplomatic relations to Taiwan.... I think ultimately removing the ambiguity on the status of Taiwan would benefit the United States and make it clear that the US will not tolerate the use of force, or the threat of use of force, by China against Taiwan."

As Bolton is well aware, such a step would inevitably lead to a confrontation between the US and China.



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