Andrew Peterson

Dangerous Games across the Taiwan Strait

A political debate unthinkable just a few years ago has emerged in Taiwan. Calls for referenda, a new constitution, and independence have replaced pressure to resume talks with the People's Republic of China (PRC). China reacted coolly in 2000 to the election of Chen Shui-bian, whom they considered a pro-independence candidate, as Taiwan's president. Chen was elected with only 39 percent of the vote, and since then, China has ignored Chen's government and his supporters in the hopes that their success was an anomaly. It was not. Rather, Chen's election was a reflection of a much larger trend: the people of Taiwan increasingly see that their political future is not reunification with China, but independence.

For anyone to dismiss pro-independence forces in Taiwan as a passing trend or to consider the March 2000 presidential election the apex of their power risks a fundamental miscalculation. The independence movement in Taiwan has grown consistently during the last 15 years and shows no signs of stalling. Pro-independence forces have conclusively defeated pro-reunification forces; the only political battle remaining is independence versus the status quo, where Taiwan is functionally independent but politically outcast by the PRC's "one China" policy, and independence is gaining.

Yet, independence is hardly inevitable. Although the pro-independence movement in Taiwan is growing stronger, Beijing's resolve to ensure reunification at any cost has not wavered. Although the March 2004 presidential election in Taiwan provides an opportunity to organize and mobilize pro-independence activists, Beijing's growing economy and increasing ability to purchase and develop more modern military forces does not bode well for

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Taiwan's ability to actualize independence. Even though sentiment is building in Taiwan, the window of opportunity to mount a successful independence campaign is both exigent and shrinking.

With Beijing scheduled to host the 2008 Summer Olympic games, the world will be attentively watching China for the next four years, significantly limiting its ability to react to nationalism and support for independence in Taiwan without attracting international attention. Those involved in the independence movement recognize this possibility, and they will exploit it.

The situation in the strait is already beginning to change. Taiwan will soon elect a new president, and the campaign has already begun to affect the cross-strait policies of Taiwan and China as well as the United States. Last December, following provocative campaign gestures by Chen, President George W. Bush was forced to adjust U.S. cross-strait policy. During Chinese premier Wen Jiabao's December 2003 visit to the United States, Bush stated that the United States opposes "any unilateral decision, by either Taiwan or China, to change the status quo."[1] Although it sparked a brief fervor on both sides of the strait, Bush's statement will do little to quell the long-term dangers that are mounting.

No matter who wins Taiwan's election, changes in cross-strait relations over the next four years will force the United States to question the very core of U.S. policy toward China and Taiwan, from the value of a democratic Taiwan to the strategic necessity of a cooperative China. If U.S. policy does not begin to confront these realities now, the United States may quickly find itself embroiled in one of history's most dangerous confrontations in cross-strait relations.

Let the Games Begin

Although still more than four years away, the variegated rings of the Olympic Games blanket everything in China—from Beijing to Hong Kong, from seat cushions to billboards. More than a million Beijing citizens have already come together to improve their English and prepare transportation as well as guest services for the expected influx of tourists. Chinese Olympic officials are already promising an event with "Beijing characteristics" that will be "the best-ever Olympics."[2] For the PRC, the 2008 Olympic Games are a chance to showcase "socialism with Chinese characteristics," with the preceding years providing Beijing an opportunity to advertise China to the world through a mad rush of preparations and propaganda.

With the global spotlight on China and reporters from around the world streaming into Beijing to report on the country's economic development and preparations for Beijing 2008, the PRC will be forced to tread lightly. In

1996 the United States demonstrated little tolerance for heavy-handed missile diplomacy; when China tested missiles over Taiwan during the run-up to its 1996 presidential election, a U.S. aircraft carrier group steamed through the Taiwan Strait. Similar, heavy-handed Chinese policymaking will be even less tolerated by the world community, especially as nations prepare to send their athletes to compete in the Games.

Those seeking independence for Taiwan are well aware of Beijing's vested interest in presenting China's new, modern face to the world and will likely exploit it to Taiwan's advantage. Taiwan's former president, Lee Teng-hui, the influential politician and spiritual leader of the pro-independence Taiwan Solidarity Union, has already stated that Taiwan needs a plan for independence by 2008, arguing that post-Olympics Chinese nationalism would overwhelm any attempt at separate statehood and Taiwan's "separate voices will be submerged."[3]

Pro-independence forces have conclusively defeated pro-reunification forces in Taiwan.

Apart from limiting Beijing's potential reaction, the Olympics will further fuel Taiwan's nationalism itself. Vice President Annette Lu has already acknowledged that "Beijing's hosting of the 2008 Olympic Games will greatly challenge the ethnic and national identification of the Taiwan people."[4] Many in Taiwan view themselves as a distinct people, and the international media's fawning over Beijing will likely fuel Taiwan's feelings of alienation. Since 1978, Taiwan has lived in the shadow of the mainland, enduring Beijing-enforced international isolation, a constant source of anger and resentment. The treatment of Taiwan by the World Health Organization (WHO) during the 2003 SARS outbreak, when the WHO acceded to Beijing's demand to secure Beijing's permission before going to Taipei, is but one example of such isolation. Chen's response to Wen's December visit exemplifies Taiwan's response.

Almost immediately after Bush rebuked "the leader in Taiwan" while standing next to the Chinese premier, Chen announced that Taiwan would go forward with its previously announced referendum, to be discussed shortly. As the last two presidential elections show, Taiwan prides itself on standing up to pressure from the mainland; as Chinese pride swells with Olympic zeal, an equal level of resentment will be fermenting in Taiwan. Should China impose conditions for Taiwan's participation in the Games, such as limits on the name under which Taiwan must compete or the flag it may use, Taiwanese independence proponents will have additional opportunities to capitalize on this burgeoning resentment prior to 2008.

The opportunities that the Olympics present to Taiwan are not entirely lost on China either. In late January 2003, a Chinese official warned Taiwan not to declare independence before 2008, stating that "the Olympics is not one of [China's] three major tasks [which the party leadership describes as modernization, reunification, and common development]; reunification is."[5] Yan Xuetong, director of the Institute for International Studies at Qinghua University, has argued that Chen could ride Taiwan nationalism in 2007 to create "trouble" for Beijing.[6] In addition, when asked if there would be a crisis before 2008, Yang Jieman of the Shanghai International Affairs Institute replied, "People of goodwill hope no crisis would happen before the Olympics nor afterwards, but we have to take measures, other than merely goodwill, to guarantee normal relations between the two sides."[7] After Chen's referendum decision, a parade of military officials published comments reiterating Beijing's central point: losing Taiwan is not an option, even if the cost of reunification is that China loses the Olympics Games.[8]

The 2008 Olympics will further fuel Taiwan's nationalism itself.

Current events have reinforced this sense of urgency for pro-independence supporters. Just prior to Wen's visit to the United States, Taiwan passed a law that legalized national referenda on certain policy issues. The December 2003 version of the law only allows the legislature or the people to call a referendum, unless it is an issue of national security, known as a "defensive referendum," which may be called by the president. Immediately after its passage, Chen announced that he would hold such a referendum concurrent with Taiwan's presidential election.

U.S. disapproval has done little to deter Taiwan's independence movement. At a press conference with Wen, Bush responded to Chen's announcement by saying that the Taiwanese president's comments and actions indicated that he was willing to make a unilateral change in the cross-strait situation, which the United States opposed.[9] This statement caused much satisfaction in China and an initial uproar in Taiwan, but Chen quickly announced that no country could prevent Taiwan from holding referenda and that the March referendum would cover Chinese missiles pointed at Taiwan. Although it might seem that a U.S. rebuke would hurt Chen, he has actually used it to rally pro-independence supporters further, showing that he is willing to stand up for Taiwan, not only to China but also to the United States.[10]

Independence is an attractive goal and not just to fervent pro-independence supporters. Although Taiwan maintains strong economic autonomy, politically it is an international pariah. Beijing refuses to allow Taiwan to en-

ter any organization in which statehood is a prerequisite, including the WHO, which has limited Taipei's influence and its ability to receive international assistance. Independence would also allow Taiwan fully to assert itself democratically. China does not recognize Taiwan's leaders; the PRC never refers to Chen as "president" but usually just as one of the faceless "Taiwan authorities." Whether Taiwan can actually realize the benefits of international autonomy, however, will depend not just on achieving independence but also on the path it takes toward that end.

A strong, rapid drive in Taiwan for independence will create an equally strong drive in the PRC for reunification. The fallout from such action would threaten the very security and stability that has allowed pro-independence sentiment to grow. A military response from the mainland would undercut domestic Taiwanese support for independence by confirming the people's worst fears and would create a wave of Chinese nationalism that could set back democratic reform in the mainland as well as encourage a harder-line policy toward Taiwan. If Taiwan wants to reap the benefits of independence, Beijing's reactions cannot be ignored.

Each side of the strait has its own unique vision for the future of cross-strait relations, but these visions will not be the only driving forces. Here, Taiwan's independence proponents face some cold, hard realities. Taiwan is slowly losing the cross-strait arms race. Despite increased military sales by the United States, Taiwan's sagging economy cannot fund military spending to keep pace with Beijing's. Although U.S. military power and assurances still maintain deterrence across the strait, this is not much comfort to the pro-independence movement. As Wen's visit showed, U.S. support is not always constant. Pro-independence activists cannot risk U.S. abandonment of Taiwan by overtly disregarding U.S. policy, yet ideally, they do not want to be beholden to Washington either.

Independence activists also know that time is not necessarily on their side. Beijing has been tolerant with Taiwan, but that patience may be wearing thin. In October 1975, in the midst of secret negotiations concerning the shift of U.S. diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing, Deng Xiaoping once told U.S. policymakers that China could wait 100 years for reunification,[11] but recent Chinese leaders have shown less patience. In his November 2002 report to the Chinese Sixteenth Party Congress, then-President Jiang Zemin repeated a line that has become a principle of China's Taiwan policy: "The Taiwan question must not be allowed to drag on indefinitely."[12] After Chen's referendum announcement, China's Taiwan Affairs Office issued a statement saying that they "must make necessary preparations to resolutely crush any Taiwan independence-splittist plots."[13] This attitude, coupled with China's refusal to repudiate the use of military force for reuni-

fication, is seen as an explicit warning to Taiwan: Taiwan can delay reunification talks for now, but not forever.

In the years prior to the Beijing Olympics, all these forces will combine to create powerful incentives for Taiwan's pro-independence politicians to see how far they can push independence before Beijing reacts. In fact, the advocacy of a referendum law and Chen's decision to call a missile referendum show that the independence movement is already pushing. By calling attention to the PRC's military threats and mobilizing Taiwan's people against Beijing, this referendum serves as a first step, warning China that threats and military force will not win over the people of Taiwan. Future policies, and even future referenda, may well go even further.

Mere caution in Beijing will not fix the problem. Even if Beijing concludes that international scrutiny before the Olympics does limit its options until 2008, Beijing may decide simply to wait. If Taiwan continues to make moves toward independence (perhaps even encouraged by Chinese restraint), Beijing may determine that a political solution is impossible. Once the 2008 Olympics have passed, Beijing, resolute that there are no other options, could respond to Taiwan's efforts with military force. The critical issue, for both sides, will be what precise steps Taiwan takes in the next four years.

Can Taiwan Rally around Independence?

Prior to Chen's election in 2000, many thought that a strong shift toward independence in Taiwan was impossible. The Kuomintang (KMT), Taiwan's ruling party since World War II, won most elections comfortably, and polls showed that a vast majority of people in Taiwan supported neither independence nor reunification; they supported the status quo. Even in the face of the recent rise in sentiment for Taiwan independence, U.S. policymakers may be content to rely optimistically on this majority of status-quo supporters and, consequently, discount the possibility of major change in Taiwan. History may prove them correct, but not adjusting U.S. policy now to the increasing pressures on China and Taiwan risks undermining the U.S. ability to respond to them in the future.

As new generations of people with no ties to the mainland rise to power, Taiwan is growing further and further from China. The ethnic ties that once bound the futures of the two sides are aging, while the political divide continues to grow between them. Independence is no longer just the dream of anti-mainland ethnic Taiwanese; many now see it as a natural outcome of Taiwan's democratic growth. With the comfortable majority in support of the status quo now shrinking, ignoring these developments is neither pru-

dent nor wise, and adjusting to them will require more than minor changes in U.S. policy. Taiwan's next generation does not see its future in China.

Although there has been a pro-independence core in Taiwan for centuries, never before have independence supporters been as mainstream and popular as they are now. The formation of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in 1986 marked the independence activists' first assertion of their political muscle. Contrary to popular opinion outside Taiwan, the DPP was not formed as solely a pro-independence party but as an amalgamation of many different forces left out of the political system because of the martial law imposed in 1949 by the KMT.[14]

By the 1990s, however, the DPP was known domestically and internationally as a pro-independence party. Much of this reputation derived from opposition forces seeking to discredit the DPP as an extremist fringe player in Taiwan's politics. The KMT, for example, constantly attempted to use the pro-independence plank of the DPP's platform to its own advantage, arguing that the DPP threatened Taiwan's security. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, fear of China's response to the DPP's pro-independence platform was a major weapon used by the KMT to argue that the DPP would risk the safety and security of Taiwan in a futile push for the impossible. Beijing also reinforced the DPP's pro-independence image (and the KMT's warnings about its implications). For example, following a strong DPP showing nationwide in local elections in 1997, Beijing issued a statement that maintained that "[o]pposing the independence of Taiwan is the wish of all Chinese people on both sides of the Taiwan [S]trait. It is a historical tide which cannot be reversed."[15] If Taiwan's election results are a measure of that tide, however, Beijing's prediction may be wrong.

The critical issue will be what precise steps Taiwan takes in the next four years.

The DPP and pro-independence factions have had increasing electoral success throughout the 1990s. The party saw small gains in the early part of the 1990s, winning some seats in city and county governments and sending a number of members to the Legislative Yuan. In 1997 the party beat the KMT soundly in county- and city-level elections and thereby gained control of areas containing more than 71 percent of Taiwan's population.[16] By 2001 the DPP held the presidency as well as a plurality of seats among the parties in the legislative assembly and had tripled its membership. The DPP now controls 89 of 225 seats in the legislature; moreover, a new, strongly pro-independence party—the Taiwan Solidarity Union—holds 13 seats.

This rise of new pro-independence support is occurring at the same time as support for reunification is declining among Taiwan's residents and pro-

reunification political organizations are struggling. Support for independence now consistently outpolls support for reunification.[17] The New Party, the most pro-Beijing of all Taiwan's political parties, has seen its support slip; in the most recent elections, it was reduced to a single legislative seat.

Although a plurality (and often a majority) of Taiwanese supported the status quo over either reunification or independence throughout the 1990s and this plurality still holds, its dominance is slipping. Independent polls conducted in the mid-1990s often showed support for independence barely reaching double digits,[18] but the Mainland Affairs Council found that, by 2003, support for independence had already topped 20 percent.[19] Support for reunification has fallen, and the number of people who support the status quo indefinitely has fallen below the number of those who support independence (the vast majority of those that support the status quo do not do so indefinitely; rather, they say that Taiwan should decide on independence or unification later).[20]

> If Chen wins, independence will not come as quickly as some predict.

This trend will more likely accelerate than subside, as the next generation in Taiwan is being raised with little cultural or political connection to the mainland[21] in the midst of a "de-Sinicization" campaign to increase Taiwan's sense of nationalism and identity.[22] That support for reunification is waning is especially evident in the current electoral campaign, in which no candidate is a strong proponent of reunification and Chen is dominating the terms of the debate with increasingly pro-independence policies. Other candidates have been playing catch-up, differentiating their positions on cross-strait relations in terms of style rather than substance. They criticize Chen's combative attitude and argue he is risking Taiwan's future for a campaign ploy but present no actual steps Taiwan's leadership should take to move the island closer to Beijing. Chen's primary challenger, Lien Chan, advocates a more cooperative approach toward China. At a recent news conference, however, even Lien refused to endorse the KMT's long-standing policy of calling for reunification talks.[23]

Independence after March 2004

The results of the March 2004 presidential election will be hailed both inside and outside of Taiwan as either a huge setback or, if Chen wins, a huge victory for the independence movement. Yet, the independence movement does not live or die by Chen's success. Chen's independence campaign is a populist one, and his mobilization of grassroots independence support will not end if he loses in March.

To rally his base of pro-independence supporters, Chen has rolled out numerous inflammatory campaign statements in hopes of turning the campaign's focus away from Taiwan's present sluggish economic performance and toward Taiwan's future. He has advocated writing a new constitution and succeeded in passing the referendum law—a major DPP agenda item that was also a critical issue for Beijing, which fears that any referendum law may be an enabling mechanism for a future vote on Taiwan independence. Although the KMT watered down Chen's proposals and strictly limited his ability to call a referendum, Chen's announced missile referendum will help ensure that voters at polling booths have national security, not just his economic record, on their mind. This approach seems to be working as, just recently, 100,000 people marched in support of referenda and a new constitution.[24] If Chen's strategy succeeds in maintaining Taiwanese nationalism as a campaign issue, many will come to see the March election itself as a referendum on the future of Taiwan's political status. This assumption, however, is mistaken.

Should Chen lose, the independence movement will not disappear.

If Chen wins, independence will not come as quickly as some predict. Although inflammatory, Chen's campaign promises are merely promises; Chen has proven much better at making populist promises than he has at implementing them. During the last election, the DPP promised that they would abandon the construction of Taiwan's fourth nuclear power plant—a promise yet unfulfilled, whose fallout included the resignation of Chen's first premier, Tang Fei, and almost led to a vote of no confidence in Chen's cabinet.[25] In fact, a primary motivation behind the DPP's support of public referenda has been Chen's inability to implement major elements of his last campaign platform. Many DPP strategists had hoped to introduce a referendum on the fourth nuclear power plant—an idea that has been limited by the KMT-introduced legislative restrictions on president-sponsored referenda and subsumed by the furor surrounding Chen's missile referendum.

The KMT/People First Party (PFP) faction that controls the Legislative Yuan has a strong interest not only in denying Chen the ability to fulfill promises he made during his last campaign but also in being obstructionist during his next term if he wins in March. If an electoral victory by Chen does not turn into a legislative majority for the pro-independence faction—Taiwan's electoral history shows that this is a distinct possibility—the gridlock between the executive and legislative branches in Taiwan will continue. Taiwan's political structure limits the ability of the executive branch

to implement policy directly. Although Chen has been able to establish the agenda of political debates in Taiwan, he has found actualizing his goals severely restricted by the KMT/PFP-controlled Legislative Yuan. Chen forced the legislature to pass the referendum law, but the law they passed vested almost all power to call referenda in the legislature. Chen tried to ban the fourth nuclear power plant soon after March 2000; but he saw the legislature block his plans, and construction continues. If the legislature remains under KMT/PFP control, it has little incentive to give Chen any significant victories regarding the constitution or independence.

Beijing has yet to craft a policy that gives Taiwan a reason to support reunification.

Referenda directly on independence or other issues central to Taiwanese identity or sovereignty are also rife with risks for Chen. Even though a public vote on such issues would be enormously appealing to the president's pro-independence base, such a vote could threaten the pro-independence party leadership. If pro-independence leaders overestimate their own support, hold a dangerous vote, and lose, a referendum would be a major setback, not a victory.

Moreover, should Chen lose the election in March, the independence movement will not disappear. The movement's power is not rooted in its figurehead but in its popular appeal. Whether president or not, Chen, along with his fellow pro-independence leaders, will continue to mobilize the Taiwanese people and to exert public pressure, just as Lee Teng-hui has done since he stepped down in 2000. The DPP recognizes that the new referendum law will allow it to exert populist pressure even if the party loses the presidency. If Chen and the DPP can continue to focus Taiwan's voters on issues of nationalism and cross-strait relations, the next president of Taiwan would not be able to ignore these issues. Although a victory by Chen would give independence supporters easier access to the halls of power, the independence movement has shown that it is willing to push through its agenda with or without such access.

Beyond the issue of the referendum law, the DPP's populist politics are scoring major successes in Taiwan. The opposition in the legislature has already passed a referendum law, and soon after Chen announced his proposal for a new constitution, rival candidate Lien Chan announced that he had a constitutional reform plan of his own.[26] Politicians see constitutional reform as a necessary step to continue Taiwan's democratic development, and the nature of any reform could largely determine the future of cross-strait relations and Taiwan independence. On this issue as well as others, Chen's ri-

vals have been forced to play catch-up. According to a political analyst specializing in Taiwan, "There's no countervision being provided by Lien … they have no new policies. … They talk about the status quo with China, but that status quo is changing too fast."[27] Regardless of who wins in March, the terms of the debate surrounding independence have already been formed. In contrast, reunification is nowhere near the political agenda.

The value of the March 2004 election is not that it will determine Taiwan's future but that it will show the relative strength of Chen's vision of independence. Although Chen's combative approach to Beijing has bolstered him in the polls, it has yet to be seen whether he can attract a majority of voters. In the 2000 election, Chen had to assuage the public with assurances that he would not declare independence, while he is banking his 2004 campaign on precisely the opposite approach. His efforts will undoubtedly mobilize independence supporters and test the appeal of the status quo as a political vision. Chen has not made the March election a referendum on Taiwan independence, but rather a decision about how Taiwan wants to approach changing the status quo.

The campaign is also organizing the independence movement around specific goals: Chen wants a new constitution to be voted on by public referendum in 2006 and implemented on May 20, 2008—the day of Taiwan's subsequent presidential election, the closing of Chen's final term as president (if he is reelected), and roughly two-and-a-half months before the Beijing Olympics.[28] Even if Chen loses, the DPP will continue to push for change; Taiwan's March election has already crystallized the issues that will be fought for the next four years. Constitutional change, public referenda, and the Olympic Games are new variables in cross-strait relations, but they are neither minor nor short-term influences. How the United States and Beijing deal with these changes will determine the nature of cross-strait relations for years to come.

Beijing's Policy Options

Beijing's hard-line approach to reunification has been a failure. In 1996, China tested missiles over Taiwan prior to its presidential election. Then-President Lee stood up to China and won a majority of the vote. In 2000, Premier Zhu Rongji implicitly threatened military action against Taiwan if they elected Chen, and the reaction to his statements helped carry Chen to victory. Because of those failures, China shifted to a more nuanced Taiwan policy. Rather than threaten Taiwan, China sought to strengthen economic ties between the two sides while steadily increasing China's military capabilities.[29] Meanwhile, China has made repeated overtures to Taiwan to re-

sume negotiations by attempting to enlist public support for negotiation with the PRC. It has tried to do this without changing its "one China" prerequisite, which prevents acknowledgement of any Taiwan sovereignty, or its "one country, two systems" approach (a reunification model, used in Hong Kong, that would maintain some semblance of local autonomy in Taiwan while ceding ultimate authority to Beijing). By blaming Taiwan for the stalemate and giving the island an economic stake in the mainland, the PRC hopes to counter pro-independence factions. Without more specific assurances, however, this policy cannot succeed.

Independence supporters fear their window of opportunity is closing.

The Taiwanese public has heard both "one China" and "one country, two systems" before. Rather than these approaches resonating with the people, opposition to them has provided Chen with a rallying cry for building his own pro-independence support. To buttress their argument, anti-reunification forces are increasingly pointing to what has become of Hong Kong, particularly its sliding economy and the hundreds of thousands of the city's residents demonstrating against Beijing-supported security laws.[30]

As Beijing dangles the carrot of increased economic integration, it is also building up a military stick. Previous military threats have been explicit and direct, including missile tests, massive military exercises, and direct intimidation, but China now seeks to use its military prowess implicitly, mitigating the potential rallying effect that explicit military efforts provided pro-independence forces in 1996 and 2000. Taiwan's public, especially the pro-independence movement, recognizes that the military balance between Beijing and Taipei will begin to tip in China's favor over the coming decade. Beijing seeks to combine this policy of de facto economic integration with its implicit military threat to deter pro-independence forces and convince the majority of Taiwanese people that reunification, whether achieved peacefully or not, is inevitable.

These two policies, when combined, show the failure of Beijing's leaders to understand the depth of anti-Chinese feelings in Taiwan or the ability of its leaders to mobilize pro-independence sentiment. Reunification is neither a historical mandate nor a cultural imperative for the Taiwanese, and although Beijing has ceased actively angering the people of Taiwan, it has yet to craft a policy that gives Taiwan a reason to support reunification. Chen's campaign has already begun highlighting the dangers of Beijing's policies for Taiwan's people, particularly by explicitly focusing the first referendum in Taiwan's history on China's military buildup.

Even if Beijing continues with its more nuanced approach, this policy provides an incentive that is precisely the opposite of the one intended. If pro-independence activists mobilize now, Taiwan will still have its military edge. Beijing's policy is instilling a sense of desperation in Taiwan's pro-independence movement, as independence supporters fear their window of opportunity is closing—evident in Chen's decision to call a referendum immediately and his short time frame for constitutional reform. Combined with potential external constraints on Beijing, such as the 2008 Olympic Games, the parameters shaping Taiwan's independence movement become clear.

Questions for U.S. Policy

The stalemate between Beijing and Taipei has consequences not just for cross-strait relations but for Sino-U.S. relations as well. When Beijing accepts the fact that it cannot influence Taiwan alone, Beijing will increasingly look to those who can. U.S. support for Taiwan will be criticized, and the United States may be blamed for Taiwan's indifference to reunification. If present trends continue, the failure of China and Taiwan to progress toward peaceful reunification may all too quickly become a crisis for Sino-U.S. relations.

Since the United States recognized the PRC in 1979, U.S. policymakers have never had to face a credible move in Taiwan for independence. More often, the United States has needed to reassure Taipei that Taiwan's interests, not in independence but simply in survival, were not being forgotten. In 1982, after the release of the third of three Sino-U.S. Joint Communiqués that formed the basis of Sino-U.S. relations, the U.S. government felt the need to reassure Taiwan that Washington was not abandoning Taipei. Three years earlier, U.S. diplomatic recognition had unexpectedly shifted from Taiwan to Beijing. During 1979–1982, Taiwan had rightfully become increasingly nervous about the extent of its political support in Washington. To counter such sentiment, then-President Ronald Reagan issued the "Six Assurances"—statements that reinforced that the United States had no interest in forcing Taiwan back to China and that it had not agreed to pressure Taiwan, directly or indirectly, into any type of reunification process.

These statements were tempered by President Bill Clinton's "Three No's." Clinton stated in 1998 that the United States did not support independence for Taiwan, two Chinas, or one Taiwan/one China.[31] The Six Assurances and Three No's reflect the competing interests whose fluctuations have guided U.S. policy toward Taiwan and China during the past 30 years. The United States wants to encourage neither Taiwan independence nor

Chinese belligerence. It is not certain, however, that the United States will be able to continue this delicate balancing act indefinitely.

Whether the United States encourages it or not, the movement for Taiwan independence is growing. Should Taiwan stop creeping and start accelerating toward independence in the next few years, this shift will strike at the heart of 30 years of Sino-U.S. relations. Before that happens, the United States must reevaluate many of the difficult issues that form the basis of U.S. policy in the Taiwan Strait.

Can the United States Maintain the Status Quo?

Since diplomatic recognition shifted from Taipei to Beijing in 1979, U.S. policy toward China has sought to maintain good relations with Beijing while supporting Taiwan's efforts to defend itself militarily. Outlined in the three communiqués, the bedrock of this policy was a U.S. requirement for "peaceful resolution" of the conflict; this required the United States to alternate between deterring China and occasionally restraining Taiwan. The last five U.S. presidential administrations have worked to protect the status quo, but as political and strategic realities begin to influence both China and Taiwan, the ability of the United States to maintain calm on both sides of the strait will be called into question.

The United States may continue to attempt to maintain this path, demonstrated by Bush's statement that the United States opposes efforts to change the status quo unilaterally, but can this approach still be effective? Should Washington fail to consider this now, it risks realizing its limits much too late. Domestic political forces in Taiwan may change the status quo, either directly or by forcing Beijing to react. If so, the United States would be forced to pick sides in an escalating game of brinksmanship, but whether it intervenes on behalf of Taiwan or refuses to support a pro-independence government, the consequences for cross-strait relations and the stability of the Taiwan Strait will be enormous.

Is Reunification or Taiwan's Independence in U.S. Interests?

This is the most fundamental question for any U.S. policymaker on China. The strategic ambiguity that the United States has maintained for years out of fear of pushing the situation too far in either direction could soon prove impossible. Bush's declaration that the United States did not support any unilateral changes in the status quo was widely perceived to mean that the United States did not support a declaration of Taiwanese independence, but still left ambiguous the extent to which the United States would tolerate

pro-independence activity. Since Chen announced Chinese missiles as the subject of the March referendum, the United States has said little.

Independence for Taiwan will not likely come as an abrupt declaration but rather will be the culmination of a series of steps taken by pro-independence activists. U.S. policymakers must consider the risks and consequences of such small steps now so that Washington can determine what pro-independence activity the United States can support or tolerate. What referenda topics are off-limits? What constitutes a unilateral change in the status quo? What if a unilateral change is mandated by a vast majority of Taiwan's voters? Taiwan and China may embark on courses that make U.S. requests for peaceful reunification impossible or at least unattainable without the active involvement of the United States on one side or the other. Although these questions are beginning to get the public debate they deserve,[32] the U.S. government should determine its interests beyond simply peaceful resolution and decide whether, and what, it may need to do if sides must be taken in the next few years.

To What Extent Will the United States Commit to Protect Taiwan's Democracy?

An increasingly assertive Taiwan could land two major U.S. foreign policies in contradiction with each other. Specifically, should Taiwan choose independence or continue to elect independence-leaning candidates, the United States' recent reassertion of its commitment to promoting democracy aggressively in the aftermath of military operations in Iraq will directly conflict with its "one China" policy.

Taiwan's leaders, including Lee while he was president, sometimes state publicly that reunification is possible with one major condition: the PRC must be fully democratic. Yet, any such reform (as they well know) is years, and most likely decades, away. If Taiwan decides it will not wait and seeks independence, China will fight to prevent it. Is maintaining consistency in U.S. democracy-promotion policy worth tainting U.S. relations with China? Is China's economic and diplomatic relationship with the United States as well as its cooperation in the war on terrorism and against North Korea worth sacrificing Taiwan's democratic government?

U.S. cross-strait policy, from Reagan's Six Assurances to Bush's recent statements in December, has always sought to balance the forces on each side of the strait through gentle pressure or incentives. These policies are based, however, on an assumption that independence would be a politically led decision rather than a popular one. U.S. pressure has always aimed to make independence unattractive to Taiwan's leaders, but it has neglected

the fact that an indefinite extension of the status quo is not particularly attractive to Taiwan's people. Domestic pressure for change is increasing, and an unanticipated pro-independence shift by Taiwan's leadership may not be the only path to independence.

If Taiwan votes for a referendum on independence, the United States will have to choose between ignoring the democratic will of a people who are functionally sovereign or risking an escalating conflict with China. Ignoring Taiwan's democracy would undermine the basic goals of U.S. foreign policy. This position would clearly contradict the stated goal of "actively work[ing] to bring the hope of democracy … to every corner of the free world,"[33] as Taiwan is an open democracy and one of the most salient counterexamples to the charges by authoritarian Asian governments that democracy is a Western system.

Stability is a necessary condition for Taiwan's democracy to flourish.

In addition, such a policy would highlight the tenuous and opportunistic relationship between the United States and China. Forged in the height of the Cold War, the relationship between fervently Communist China and the passionately democratic United States is a historical anachronism. It has always been an uneasy partnership held together by strategic necessity. Moreover, Taiwan was neither free nor a democracy during much of its relationship with the United States, but after its first truly free election in 1996, it moved in this direction. Should the United States turn its back on Taiwan now, it would not only severely damage the image of the United States as a promoter of global democracy but also highlight the entirely strategic nature of the U.S. alliance with China. Although ignoring Taiwan's democracy would deal a significant blow to U.S. foreign policy goals both in Asia and around the world, the risks of conflict with China would also be astronomical.

A conflict with China would have ripple effects across the globe. Even short of the 1995 threat that the United States might lose Los Angeles if it chose to intervene in a conflict between Taiwan and China,[34] a U.S. confrontation with China would require a huge military commitment—hardly one that the United States is in the position to make while it remains committed to operations in Iraq and to maintaining global pressure on international terrorist organizations. China is cooperating with the war on terrorism, is not opposing U.S. actions in the Middle East, and is becoming more active in opposing North Korea's nuclear weapons program. A world in which China ceased to cooperate with or actively opposed U.S. interna-

tional actions would make U.S. foreign policy much more difficult and dangerous to implement regionally and globally.

What's Next?

A passive Sino-U.S. policy prior to the Beijing Olympics risks turning the relative stability and calm in the Taiwan Strait of recent years into an uncontrollable political powder keg. Missteps now may entangle the United States in a spiral of events that could undermine stability in the Asia-Pacific region for years to come. For Washington policymakers effectively to steer the three players away from confrontation, they will need to begin addressing the hard questions that challenge the foundations of U.S. policy toward the PRC and Taiwan. The danger of this period is not necessarily found in overt confrontation, as Beijing's actions may be muted by the Olympic Games; instead, the danger posed by Beijing post-2008 is that escalating tensions between China and Taiwan, submerged by Olympic goodwill, may then erupt so rapidly that the United States will have little time to adapt.

Although the United States ideally would like to support Taiwan in whatever direction its democratic political system takes it, the reality is that stability is a necessary condition for that democracy to flourish. The current pro-independence movement in Taiwan threatens the stability in which any political solution must be grounded. Taiwan's public is increasingly disinterested in the status quo, and the independence movement is seeking to exploit that discontent while Beijing's responses are most limited. If the United States sets democracy in Taiwan as a priority over stability in the Taiwan Strait, Washington may find that it is unable to maintain either one. If the United States can prevent, through deterrence and incentives, a sprint for independence before 2008, then Washington can avoid finding itself in the dangerous position of having to choose sides between Taipei and Beijing.

Time to prevent future conflicts and evaluate U.S. responses still remains, but that window of opportunity is growing smaller. The issue is not whether Taiwan's value to the United States or the U.S. ability to maintain relationships with Beijing and Taipei will be called into question; they will. The issue is whether or not the United States has the foresight to come up with the right answers. The countdown to Beijing 2008 has already begun.

Notes

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11. "China Political Document Summaries," www.csis.org/isp/taiwan/china/political.pdf (accessed December 28, 2003).
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