

Defining Political Sovereignty: the Perspective of Taiwan

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Abstract

The governing party of the United States and the ruling party in Taiwan has historically influenced the direction of independence that Taiwan seeks from China. As the Chinese communist party (CCP) continues to hone its military, economic, and political influence over the South China Sea, Taiwan is in the difficult position, both geographically and intellectually, to address the predicaments that would change the course of the Taiwanese way of life. The United States (US) has always believed in supporting Taiwan to become a sovereign nation by relying on the assumption that Taiwan seeks political sovereignty over unification with China. However, the measures taken to de-escalate growing tensions between Taiwan and China may be futile if the US does not fully address the concerns and views of the Taiwanese people. Taiwan may believe in political sovereignty, but only to a certain degree that the United States has yet to address. Additionally, political power shifts in Taiwan between the Chinese Nationalist Party Kuomintang (KMT) and Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) have great influence over how much aid the United States can provide when supporting an independent Taiwan.

Introduction

Since the end of the Chinese Civil War and the beginning of modern Taiwan in 1949, the country has struggled with ruling parties that disagree on the extent of autonomy to which Taiwan is entitled.³ Over the years, the two main political parties, the DPP and the historically dominant KMT vied for the power to fulfill each party's individual "100 year vision".³ Constant changeover in the ruling party, coupled with changes in the United States administrations has led

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to a stagnant, but consistent, support for Taiwan's complete autonomy from China. Taiwan has shown the world that it can support a self-sustaining economy with robust innovation and ingenuity.⁵ However, Taiwan lacks in a strategic military advantage, especially ally support from a superpower such as the United States.⁷ The United States acknowledges China's aggression toward Taiwan and China's belief that Taiwan is an asset to its military prowess and One China ideology. Though, the United States maintains a carefully spoken promise of "support" vs. "ally" to describe Taiwan relations to avoid conflict with China.⁷ Therefore, in the current state of affairs, Taiwan is left exactly where it has stood for the past six decades: in the middle of China and the United States, but nowhere closer to unification, democracy, or what the people of Taiwan want for themselves.

The struggle: Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT)

The Chinese Civil War from 1927-1949 set the stage for the current conflict between China and Taiwan. During the revolution, the CCP party fought for one governing body under one nation, which would later be known as the One China policy.⁷ Meanwhile, the KMT party fought for democracy and separation of state under two independent governments. The bloody revolution eventually led to the KMT party escaping to Taiwan and starting a governance as the Republic of China (ROC). China, known as the People's Republic of China (PRC), continued to claim ROC as part of the One China ideology, and did not recognize Taiwan as a legitimate government.⁵ Since the founding of KMT in 1919, the party maintained unopposed governance from 1949 to 1987 due to martial law, which prohibited any new creation of unauthorized political entities that may pose threats to the PRC.⁶ During this time generations of Taiwanese-

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born KMT supporters taught the principle of expanding China under ROC for the purpose of unification under the PRC.⁷ Through generational influence after the dissolution of the martial law, small political parties formed and dissolved, leaving an unopposed governing body to influence the One China propaganda to grade school students.² It was not until 1986, when the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) was created, that the people of Taiwan would begin to put a greater emphasis on the political climate of the state. The DPP would soon challenge the political climate by rallying supporters to push for political sovereignty for Taiwan rather than assimilation into the CCP governance.

In 2000 the DPP finally made waves in the political stance by winning the presidential election for the first time in history.⁹ Up until this point, the liberally viewed DPP had long been passive towards the KMT party because of the fear of losing voters.⁷ The DPP believed in weaponizing Taiwan as a defense strategy towards China, building economic ties to China and other trade partners, strengthening relations with the United States, and fulfilling the ideology of liberating Taiwan politics from China.⁸ To complicate matters, in 2005, then President Hu Jintao of China passed the Anti-Secession Law, which openly directed Taiwan to not pursue military and economic independence unless all other stages of reunification were exhausted.¹ Only under duress, to the extent of zero chance of unification, would Taiwan seek “non peaceful” means defend itself from China, though the decision ultimately lies with the people and president of Taiwan.¹

United States enters the arena

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The Anti-Secession Law was met with huge criticism from DPP and the Taiwanese people¹, whom 74% at the time favored Taiwan's sovereignty over unification with China.⁴ The Taiwanese people believed the law to be an infringement on their cultural and economic liberties and criticized then-Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian for failing to pass a bill that would lessen the obligations that Taiwan would have to China.⁴ To this day, the law is still in effect, which vaguely expresses the directive that Taiwan is not to declare itself a sovereign state, nor should it become allies with the US in a China-Taiwan scenario.³ Rather, the law is suggestive of Taiwan being an "equal" to China and that two countries may work together under one country's policy for the greater good.⁴

The US has taken steps internationally to ensure support for Taiwan in the event of a war between China and Taiwan. The Six Assurances from the 1982 Reagan administration provide a direct affirmation, and reaffirmation to date, that the US shares Taiwan's view on democracy, a free market, and human rights.⁷ Several treaties, including the ANZUS treaty in 1951 between the US, New Zealand, and Australia, have created a non-binding agreement to maintain peace in the Pacific Rim, specifically targeting communist aggression in the area.¹⁰ Though regardless of these agreements created to protect the interests of the Taiwan Strait, the US efforts to support a democratic Taiwan remains under-impressionable to the Taiwan people.¹⁰ With increased aggression by the CCP to reunite Taiwan, the current DPP ruling party remains bound by previous constraints of the Anti-Secession Law, among other agreements with China.⁷ The only caveat to the law is through Article Eight, which gives Taiwan the ultimate authority to declare true sovereignty on its own terms.⁷ Whether or not Taiwan dissents working unilaterally under as one country under China will determine what Taiwan deems "unreconcilable reunification efforts". Current President Tsai Ing-wen and the citizens of Taiwan will need to seriously

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consider Article Eight of the law if they truly intend on proactively seek aid from foreign countries such as the United States to help them seek independence. Otherwise, Taiwan will eventually be forced to integrate with China through all means of strategic advancement.

An Idealistic Future for Taiwan

Regardless of the gratitude that Taiwan expresses to the United States about providing military, economic, and moral support to improve the state's sovereignty, the Chinese aggression in response to the support has spun the political climate in the state.⁸ There would need to be multilateral recognition on different levels of political negotiations, such as the US passing the 2018 Taiwan Travel Act, which allows diplomats at all levels to engage in government visits to Taiwan.⁶ Doing so would allow the US to view the needs and desires of the Taiwanese people through their perspective.⁶ Otherwise, it would be a great disservice to Taiwan if the US defended the nation in possible wartime, only to find that Taiwan never sought sovereignty but simply a peaceful way of life.

It would be ideal for Taiwan to act and proactively ask for foreign aid to deter Chinese aggression, assuming that China would stall military coercion in Taiwan at most means in order to avoid international backlash.⁹ The phases that China is taking to reincorporate Taiwan into its country are plateauing because of the military component of territorial overhaul.⁸ China would need more allies in the Pacific Rim to successfully flex its military force. Therefore, there is current opportunity for Taiwan to officially ask for, welcome, and accept foreign aid from the United States. Should Taiwan decide to accept foreign aid, the United States could remarkably

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help Taiwan deter aggression through official, partnered negotiations with political and cultural understanding of what Taiwan defines as being a democratic nation.

Conclusion

The political climate of Taiwan has long been under addressed on the international scale. The United States and other alliances have always considered Taiwan a state that has sought sovereignty from China since the Chinese Civil War.⁸ However, the countries have failed to address the desires of the Taiwanese people and their governing powers, which may have, in part, contributed to the decades long debate on Taiwan's independence with lack of resolution. China's aggression towards Taiwan is more prominent now than ever.⁴ Therefore, it is time for the United States to consider how the people of Taiwan define sovereignty, for that could potentiate a multitude of second and third order effects of war that can be foreseen and avoided. Sending diplomats at all levels is a strong step toward understanding the needs of the Taiwanese people.⁶ However, to garner political sentiment from the ruling parties of Taiwan, the US must employ other means to show the Taiwanese people that the political liberties and cultural freedoms that exist in our country can also be attained for Taiwan. Only then will the US be able to build a greater joint force with Taiwan and other countries who seek peace and sovereignty for Taiwan.

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