

Sino-American War?

Possibilities and Prospects

By Frank Lin

Although the war between the US and China seems almost inconceivable, the combination of the historico-political Chinese claim to rightful the possession of Taiwan in conjunction with the current succession crisis could possibly lead to hostilities with the People Republic of China (PRC). While the threat of nuclear conflict is not heightened, there is a distinct possibility of conventional confrontation. Such specialized and technology dependent warfare, inconceivable under the rubric of "People's War" which dominated Chinese military thinking through the mid-1980's, has recently become possible as the result of China's ongoing drive to modernize and prepare its armed forces for quick strike action in the South China Sea. With the removal of US bases in the Southern Pacific, Taiwan is strategically (although certainly not politically) as vulnerable to Chinese invasion as it has ever been. This situation is exacerbated yet further by the heightened influence within the US policy making apparatus of conservative business interests, which are pressing for UN membership for Taiwan and a harder line against Beijing. This, in turn, could facilitate a quick swing to the right within the emerging Chinese leadership and reinforce the power grab of strongly anti-American, anti-democratic forces. Spiraling domestic politics and US-Chinese confrontation could quickly devolve to armed conflict over Taiwan.

THE ERA OF HUMILIATION AND THE 'RIGHTFUL' SIZE OF CHINA

The modern Chinese world view, particularly among the current senior leadership, is dictated by a combination of important historical experiences, foremost of which is the "Era of Humiliation," the century beginning in the 1830's in which the Chinese empire was slowly invaded and dismembered by Western imperial powers and

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forced to accept a series of unequal and humiliating treaties. The nationalism and quest for sovereignty that grew up in reaction to the Era of Humiliation played a central role in both the appeal of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its eventual success. The conception of a united China, including lands from northern Manchuria to the western reaches of Tibet, from the northern borders of Outer Mongolia to Taiwan and into the South China Sea, has always been understood as central to the re-establishment of "historical" and "honor-

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able" Chinese sovereignty. This 'map' of China is based on the mid-18th century Qing Empire, by far the largest that ever ruled over the Chinese people, which created a strong legacy of expansive and unified government. Further exacerbating the historically-based claim, a central component of the Chinese world view is a deeply rooted conception of 'us' versus 'them'. The Taiwanese, suffice it to say, are very much included as part of the historical Chinese 'we.' However, while the Qing held power for almost 400 years, it was only in the mid-18th century that much of "historical" China was included under Chinese rule; the vast majority of Chinese history is marked by anarchy and division. Contemporary claims to 'rightful' possession of large areas outside of China are based on an intentional and advantageous historical blindness. Nonetheless, Chinese perception of the past has not changed under the pressure of modern historical review. The majority of Chinese believe that it is the land controlled during the Qing Empire that is the rightful and historically legitimate size of modern China, and this historical claim includes Taiwan. Deng Xiaoping and the Chinese leadership have often blatantly stated their plans to invade the Republic of China (ROC) on precisely those historical grounds. Regaining Taiwan is deeply

involved with the issue of Chinese national pride and the sense of humiliation at Western hands. A reactionary faction within the Chinese leadership, therefore, would be particularly sensitive to (and vocal about) any US attempts to maintain or defend Taiwanese sovereignty.

US POLICY TOWARD CHINA AND TAIWAN

For 20 years US policy on the Taiwan Issue has been confused and contradictory. While the Shanghai communique of 1972, the Normalization agreement signed by Carter in 1979, and the August communique of 1982 all play important roles in US policy construction, the only piece of legislation on the issue was passed by a Republican-dominated Congress in response to Carter's 1979 executive Normalization order. The legislation, incidentally, is already being utilized by the new Congress to reorient US policy toward Taiwan. The Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) effectively makes the US an unofficial ally of the Republic of China, responsible for the defense of the island in the case of Chinese invasion or blockading. The US is further obligated to keep troops permanently stationed in Southeast Asia, heightening Chinese perceptions of the invasion of sovereignty. The TRA would play a central role in any American response to the aggressions of the PRC. The passage of the TRA outraged the leaderships of both the PRC and ROC: it neither recognized the Kuomintang (KMT: the Nationalist government of Taiwan) as the legitimate government of Taiwan nor the PRC's right to its repossession. It reflected a bifurcation within US domestic politics which has created an almost incomprehensible policy toward Taiwan, variously dubbed a "Two-China" or "One-China/One-Taiwan" policy. Naturally, the ROC has pushed vigorously for the reinforcement and strengthening of the TRA while the PRC has attempted to downplay the Act in order to further undermine the legitimacy of the Taiwanese government. The TRA is central in that 1) its enforcement by the US Congress would serve to further alienate the PRC from the US and facilitate the ascension of anti-Western voices within the Chinese leadership, and 2) in the case of a Communist quick-strike invasion of Taiwan, the TRA will certainly be used as the basis for justification of US military defense of the island.

THE IMPACT OF SUCCESSION CRISIS DYNAMICS

As seen in the post-Mao crisis and as is now evident, the domestic politics of succession can paralyze foreign policy. In a succession crisis none of the contenders for succession can afford to be perceived as weak or conciliatory in their relations with the US. Furthermore, during a crisis, the clarion of Chinese nationalism has a special appeal, for even a mere allegation of selling out Chinese interests to the West is tantamount to a conviction of treason. Morgenthau's well-known description of "nationalistic universalism" as the primary impediment to the reduction of the likelihood of war is acutely applicable in Chinese politics in general and in succession crises in particular. As the crises following both Stalin's death in 1954 and Mao's in 1976 show, international politics play a central role in the manipulation of domestic politics and political maneuvering, and the individuals and interests which can best balance political and domestic intrigue and rally enough support to politically overwhelm their opposition have free reign to later return and revise or utterly retract statements and promises made during the crisis. Succession politics are democratic electoral politics taken to the ultimate extreme; they result not in electoral win or loss, but either in the death or purging or ultimate control of the CCP.

The hostile nature of the response from the Chinese leadership to US allegations of intellectual property copyright violation reflects how the current succession crisis can influence foreign policy formulation. None of the leaders contending to

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fill Deng's place of Emperor of the Party can afford to be perceived as conciliatory to US demands; thus, there has been little

response to the US demands that the Chinese government clamp down on copyright violation; what response there has been from Beijing is reminiscent of the shrill rhetoric from the height of the Cold War. The Chinese government, although clearly guilty of international legal violations and in desperate need of US and Western support for economic reform and expansion, has responded to American threats of tariffs with threats of a trade war. Similarly, between Mao's death in 1976 and Deng's clear ascension in 1978, the PRC made few decisive or important moves in the international diplomatic arena. Chinese foreign politics were silent as the domestic struggle (a muddle to the death) raged on beneath the veneer of placid Chinese communist existence. It was only after the struggle had been resolved and Deng's power base firmly established that progressive reform began to be implemented.

As Deng Xiaoping had to combat and overcome rightist forces in the 76-78 crisis, there are again forces of the right which exist today, criticizing Deng's reforms as steps toward "bourgeois capitalism" and threatening to seize power within the divided Communist leadership. Deng Liqun, a powerful voice in the government, is but one example, although a telling one, of the kind of shift in ideological commitment of which ambitious Chinese leaders are capable. Although it was Deng who wrote the Party manifesto declaiming the purges of the Maoist era, which Mao's widow called the "guidebook for the restoration of bourgeois capitalism in China," the younger Deng, calling for a general return to the purity and austerity of Mao's communism, is now a central leader in the rightist campaign against economic and political reforms. Such dramatic swings in allegiance and ideological posturing only typify high-level Chinese politics. The potential for a reactionary leader to utilize the Taiwan Issue to his political advantage is a central element in the consideration of the likelihood of PRC aggressions against Taiwan, and it is clear that "military action against Taiwan would most likely stem from a factional struggle in Beijing."

IMPACT OF CURRENT CHANGING US DOMESTIC POLITICAL SITUATION

PRC perception of strengthened Congressional economic and political support of Taiwan could possibly lend support to hard-line forces in

the PRC crisis of succession; as described above, the politics of the Chinese succession era are cutthroat and use bastardized ideology as rationalization; of aggressive ambitions. Any action can be construed as selling out the national interest. In a succession crisis, only Chinese sovereignty and national interest

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reign supreme and only actions clearly taken to further them are safe from attack. Therefore, leaders will be fighting over each other in the rush to the reactionary right, both in order to defend themselves against charges of selling out and to broaden the popular appeal of nationalism. Strong US intimations of aggression will only make available an option to political ascendancy that would not exist were the US to follow a policy of semi-appeasement or utter neutrality.

Of course, the volatility of the contemporary succession crisis is yet to be seen. It is possible that the crisis will be eventless and rather smooth and that the Western-educated technocrats who today control the top-levels of the Chinese government will face no such challenge from the reactionary right. Nonetheless, the impact of a tough US policy on such issues as intellectual property and stringent support by the US Congress for Taiwanese UN membership will be interpreted as a potentially threatening move, and the likelihood of a right-wing power-grab will be similarly increased.

THE STRATEGIC PICTURE

Since the mid-80's, fueled by revenue from increasing foreign arms sales, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has been modernizing and strengthening its armed forces, expanding in particular its capacity for quick strike action throughout the South China Sea. Although the Taiwanese retain a large and mobile army, specifically trained for

invasion repulsion and blockade breaking, the vastly larger PLA could, if the political prerogative became strong enough, probably mount a successful invasion of the island by focusing on the immediate destruction of large industries and public works.

The strategic consideration is exacerbated by the US expulsion from its base at Subic Bay in the Philippines and the recent refusal by the Malaysian government to allow for the anchoring of a US "floating base" off the Malaysian coast. The US, despite strong political support for Taiwan, would not have the immediate strategic capability to defend the island against an attack from the mainland. However, as John Copper argues, any PLA plan to invade the ROC would likely become known through US and Taiwanese intelligence channels and the US would thus have sufficient time to impose the nuclear-armed 7th Fleet before such invasion took place. Therefore, the strategic vulnerability of the ROC is not centrally relevant in the overall consideration of the likelihood of Sino-American war.

ECONOMIC CONSIDERATIONS AS DETERRENCE

The strongest deterrent to a Chinese invasion of the ROC is the current economic benefit of Taiwanese, Southeast Asian and Western trade. Taiwan is one of the PRC's largest trading partners and the only one without substantial tariff restrictions. When the Chinese declared Taiwanese trade domestic commerce and removed all import tariffs, Taiwanese imports increased by a factor of 26 times. PRC invasion of Taiwan would result in the mass exodus of the majority of Taiwanese skill, experience, education and capital. The US and Southeast Asia form the vast majority of China's trade. Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong and the smaller nations of the rapidly developing Pacific Rim, although motivated by economic interests to weaken or shorten their embargoes, would likely be sufficiently influenced by Western pressure to fall in line with the US.

On the other hand, Deng has admitted that in clamping down on the student demonstrators in Tiananmen Square in 1989, he knew that the US and Western powers would respond with shrill rhetoric and impose strict trade embargoes, but that the reward for containing the domestic dissent was sufficiently

high to balance the cost in international economic and political relations. He was aware that the embargoes would be lifted in a few years, as they were, and that China would be able to ride them out without too much difficulty. In light of this recent history, the efficacy of unilateral US threat of sanction is doubtful. Furthermore, the new strength of China in the international market gives it an economic independence it has never before had. Chinese markets have been growing at phenomenal rates and it is projected that in little more than 5 years, the PRC will have as large a consumer

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basis for small goods as the US does today. A market of that size will be all but irresistible to economically expansionist nations controlled by business interested elites. Despite this new Chinese autonomy, it is clear that the loss of Taiwan as a trading partner coupled with US, Western European and Southeast Asian embargoes form an extremely powerful deterrence to Chinese aggression. Furthermore, it is evident that were Beijing to issue orders to invade Taiwan, Western embargoes would not be lifted quickly - the sovereignty (and business) of Taiwan is of far more ideological value and political importance than domestic human rights violations - and Sino-Western diplomatic and economic relations would be effectively destroyed for an untold number of years. The US and Western Europe would likely be able to marshal world economic organizations to isolate China in the international market, leading to the destruction of the PRC's new exported growth and the effective end of economic reform. However, if a neo-Maoist began to gamer wide domestic political support and was successful in advocating a return to the ideological purity of the policy of 'self-sufficiency' which underpinned the Cultural Revolution, the efficacy of the threat of embargoes and the loss of Taiwanese trade would be dramatically weakened.

A NEW REAGANISM? LUCKY BY DEFAULT

While the success of the Republican party in November and the focus and aggression with which the new majority is shaping policy are certainly having a profound effect on US Chinese policy, the conservative hard-line against China would also serve to deter possible Chinese aggression against the ROC. Since the passing of the TRA, Congressional conservatives, in conjunction with Taipei have pressed hard for its implementation and expansion, a fact of which the PRC is well aware. Clearly, perception of the Republican majority as vigorously pro-Taiwan and unequivocally willing to deploy US troops in Taiwan's defense would be a further deterrence to any Chinese consideration of aggression.

CONCLUSION: 'ONE COUNTRY, TWO SYSTEMS' AND GRADUAL UNIFICATION

A recent survey showed that 99.9% of the Taiwanese people prefer Taiwanese independence to unification with the PRC. Moreover, the Chinese leadership, while flatly stating that it had plans to invade Taiwan, claimed that it was not its intention to destroy the island and that it would prefer that Taiwan remain independent of PRC control than be destroyed. Combining these two factors, it is evident that a successful total invasion and occupation of Taiwan, though still possible, is highly unlikely. Furthermore, the knowledge of US Congressional support for Taiwan would necessarily mean that provocation of hostilities with Taiwan would embroil the PRC in a massive war with the US which a fragmented leadership would not be capable of fighting.

What is likely to occur, especially in the short term, is the maintenance of the status quo in Beijing-Taipei relations. On the other hand, the Taiwanese have for many years advocated a slow, gradual unification, and in the long-run there is not really anything to prevent such a reuniting of Taiwan with the Mainland. Since the delineation of the "One Country, Two Systems" doctrine, many Chinese provinces have begun rapid conversions to a limited-market under the rubric of Special Economic Zones (SEZ). If these reforms survive the current succession crisis and the Chinese leadership continues to institute democratizing and

liberalizing reform, the Chinese and Taiwanese positions will soon grow much closer together and provisional unification, perhaps with Taiwan as a special SEZ, is not unthinkable. Although this growing together will include a substantially further departure from current ideology on the part of the Chinese than on that of the Taiwanese, those reforms are already underway. Should a representative of the Western-educated technocracy that now forms the underpinnings of the Beijing leadership succeed Deng, these reforms are sure to continue and even accelerate. In the current climate of silent struggle within Beijing, the best policy the US can pursue is to be as understanding and conciliatory as US prerogatives will allow. Forcing the Chinese leadership to assume an anti-American, isolationist stance is not a viable option. H

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