

PRESSURING TAIWAN, APPEASING BEIJING

“We’ve apologized, we’ve expressed our regret, we’ve offered compensation, we’re talking about compensation, we’ve provided a report”—so said State Department spokesman Jamie Rubin last week describing the U.S. response to the accidental bombing of China’s embassy in Belgrade. But his plaintive words just about sum up the Clinton administration’s current policy toward China. The official posture of prostration before Beijing—the China hands call it “engagement”—would be merely pitiful, perhaps even amusing, were it not so dangerous. But the Clinton administration is now applying its strategy of appeasement to the brewing crisis over Taiwan, and the result may be to hasten the military conflict the administration is trying to avoid.

Two weeks ago, Taiwan’s president Lee Teng-hui had the temerity to declare the obvious: that Taiwan should negotiate with China as one state to another. The Chinese government, which wants Taiwan to accede to its demand for reunification under Beijing’s rule, and sooner rather than later, threatened armed retaliation. Given Beijing’s record—which includes firing ballistic missiles off Taiwan’s coast in the spring of 1996—this threat is hardly an idle one. The Clinton administration, in a desperate effort to avoid further deterioration in its wonderful “strategic partnership,” did what the Clinton administration does best. It took Beijing’s side.

Last week, the administration cancelled a long-planned visit of an American technical team to Taiwan to discuss security matters, including missile defenses for the island. Officials also intimated that planned U.S. arms sales to Taiwan would be postponed. The Clinton administration’s message is clear: If Lee doesn’t back away from his statements, he shouldn’t count on American military support in the event of a conflict with the mainland. Meanwhile, top adminis-

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tration officials were dispatched to Beijing, no doubt to “apologize,” to “express our regret,” to “offer compensation,” etc. So, in the midst of a growing conflict between a longtime American friend and a potential American adversary, the Clinton administration threatens the friend and cajoles the potential adversary.

This approach is morally repugnant, given that Taiwan is a democracy and China is a dictatorship that needs to repress a “cult” of middle-aged ladies who like to meditate and do breathing exercises. It’s also dangerous. President Lee has not backed down under Clinton’s intimidation, nor should he. But the Chinese government now has good reason to believe that if it waves around more ballistic missiles later this year or takes other belligerent actions, like a partial blockade or the seizure of some small Taiwanese islands off the coast of the mainland, then the

United States might just stand back and do nothing. After all, the Clinton administration has made it clear that it shares China’s view of Lee’s actions as unacceptable. If Lee fails to buckle under American threats, it’s only reasonable for the leaders in Beijing to assume that they are entitled to increase the pressure on Taiwan. Sure, the Clinton administration has called for a “peaceful” resolution of the problem, but it has also made clear that it holds Lee responsible for the confrontation. The Chinese—who don’t feel they need American permission before they act in any case—may well believe they now have an amber light to use tactics of military intimidation. That may be a miscalculation, but it is precisely through such miscalculations that wars start.

The best way to avert a crisis now is for the United States to make absolutely clear that it will respond to any military action by Beijing aimed at intimidating Taiwan. The Clinton administration should dispatch

an aircraft carrier or two to the region as a sign that its commitment to a “peaceful” resolution is more than just diplomatic mumbo jumbo. In addition, the administration should drop its efforts to intimidate Taiwan, go forward with the security talks, and put the arms sales back on track. Whether or not the administration wants to cling to the outdated fiction of “one China,” these are essential steps to prevent a serious miscalculation by the Chinese leadership.

Unfortunately, we don’t expect the Clinton administration to do this, let alone what is really necessary, which is to abandon “one China” and agree that the unification of Taiwan and the mainland will be possible only when the mainland has a democratic government. But the good news is that leading Republicans in Congress are rising to challenge Clinton’s anti-Taiwan policies.

House International Relations Committee chairman Benjamin Gilman has demanded that the Clinton administration restore the arms sales to Taiwan. Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman Jesse Helms has proposed a Taiwan Security Enhancement Act to strengthen U.S. security ties to Taiwan and provide much-needed defensive weapons systems to the Taiwanese. And last week, Senate majority leader

Trent Lott drafted a letter calling on President Clinton to reverse an anti-Taiwan course that will only “increase the chances of Beijing precipitating a military crisis.” Senator Lott wants the president to make clear to Beijing that the United States will “fully support democratically elected President Lee and the people of Taiwan in their search for greater international status.” This is precisely the kind of sound strategic thinking and bold political leadership that Republicans need to provide right now.

What about the Republican presidential candidates? The leading candidate, George W. Bush, has declared that he considers China a “strategic competitor,” not a “strategic partner,” and that he wants to “refocus America’s policy in Asia on friends and allies.” So far so good. But on the burning topic of Taiwan, Bush has yet to separate himself from the policies of the Clinton administration, which, it is only fair to point out, are little more than a continuation of the policies of the previous Bush administration. George W. has the opportunity now to make clear what he means when he talks about “redefining” the relationship between the United States and China. He should seize it.

—William Kristol and Robert Kagan, for the Editors



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