

FREE TAIWAN

Taiwan's President Li Teng-hui sent the American foreign policy establishment into a nervous frenzy last week when he declared that Taiwan would henceforth negotiate with China as one state to another. China experts are working overtime on their op-eds chastising Taiwan for its provocative action. And the Clinton administration has already made known its displeasure with Li's statements, denouncing them as unhelpful and reiterating the administration's own agreement with Beijing's one-China policy. Meanwhile, Beijing went nuclear, literally. In a document charmingly entitled "Facts Speak Louder Than Words and Lies Will Collapse on Themselves," Beijing informed the world of what the Cox committee and other investigations had already revealed: that it has a neutron bomb, just perfect for dropping on a nearby island that China would like to occupy. This threat will no doubt cause even more anxiety among American China hands, who will blame President Li for increasing the danger of another crisis in the Taiwan Straits.

Everyone should calm down. By carefully stripping away the absurd fictions of the "one-China" policy, President Li is actually doing all concerned a big favor. After all, it is true that "facts speak louder than words." The fact is that Taiwan is and has been a sovereign state for decades, with its own government, its own army, its own flag, its own flourishing economy, and full possession of its territory. Since the early 1990s, moreover, Taiwan has been a democracy, and nothing could be clearer than that the Taiwanese people want to remain separate from mainland China as long as that territory is ruled by a dictatorship. Until there can be one *democratic* China, they insist, there must be two Chinas.

These facts are, of course, inconvenient for the Clinton administration, which has adhered slavishly to the fiction of "one China" embodied in over a quarter-century's worth of Sino-American agreements. Beginning with the Shanghai Communique of

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1972, the United States declared its understanding that both sides of the China-Taiwan dispute agreed that there was but one China. At the time of the Shanghai Communique, this was true in an odd sort of way. Both the Communist government of Beijing and the authoritarian government of Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang agreed that there was one China, and they both insisted it was theirs. The United States used this cute "one-China" formulation as a way of avoiding the issue. Anyway, the Cold War was on, and U.S. officials believed they needed China's help in containing the Soviet Union. If the price was a certain ambiguity and even some deception on the subject of Taiwan, so be it.

Twenty-seven years later, however, the world is a very different place. The people of Taiwan, now able to express their will electorally, have declared that they do not want to rule the mainland, and they do not want the mainland to rule them. There are two Chinas, not one. This puts an end to the smoke-and-mirrors game of the Shanghai Communique. The Clinton administration's spokesmen can say "one China" till they're blue in the face, but, to quote the Chinese government again, "lies will collapse on themselves."

And then, of course, there is that other small difference between now and 1972: The Cold War is over. The Soviet Union is gone, and the biggest challenge to American interests in the world today comes from Beijing, not Moscow. With that rather large shift in global strategic realities, the need for ambiguity on Taiwan has disappeared.

Indeed, ambiguity under the present circumstances has become dangerous. The fact is, now and in the years to come, the United States will have to answer one simple question on Taiwan. If the people of Taiwan want to be treated as a sovereign state and refuse to be reunited with the dictatorship on the mainland, as they do, and if China insists that Taiwan must be reunited with the mainland, by force if nec-

essary, as it does, the question is this: Will the United States come to Taiwan's defense if and when these conflicting desires lead to military confrontation?

Until now, the United States has tried to avoid giving a clear answer to this question. The U.S. government has repeatedly expressed its opposition to any effort to settle the Taiwan matter by force. State Department spokesman Jamie Rubin made a strong statement along these lines last week. But we have also left open the possibility that if war starts as a result of provocative statements by Taiwanese leaders, then we might just stand by and do nothing. That was the not-so-subtle warning delivered in person to the Taiwanese by former secretary of defense William Perry, visiting Taiwan at the behest of the president a year and a half ago. The name for this policy of studied equivocation has been "strategic ambiguity," and the logic behind it is that any promise by the United States to come to Taiwan's aid will only encourage the Taiwanese to declare independence.

But if history is any guide, it is precisely this kind of ambiguity that leads to miscalculation and war. American words and American security commitments now need to conform to reality. And the reality is that if the people of Taiwan choose to remain a separate state, and if China responds with force or the threat of force, no American president would refuse to come to Taiwan's defense. Principle would demand that we act, and by the way, so would America's strategic interests. The incorporation of Taiwan by the present Chinese government—even if accomplished peacefully—would be a disaster for the United States and its East Asian allies. Imagine what our allies in the region would think about American staying power in the Pacific if we accepted such a crushing strategic setback without lifting a finger.

This simple reality should become the basis of American policy toward Taiwan. The Shanghai Communiqué is in fact no more relevant to our present strategic circumstances than that other great agreement of 1972—the ABM treaty. The time has come for the United States to do away with a dangerous ambiguity and make clear that it will come to Taiwan's defense if China uses force or even threatens to use force.

Such a test may well come over the next few months. It would hardly be surprising if China were to respond to President Li's statement with another show of force. In 1996, it fired ballistic missiles into the sea near Taiwan's main harbors. This time, China may threaten a blockade of the entire island or take some other action to frighten the Taiwanese into backing off from their recent statements. If China does take such action, the United States should not hesitate to send the Seventh Fleet to Taiwan's waters,

just as it did in 1996. In fact, the administration ought to send some ships there now, as a clear warning to the Chinese that they should not even consider any threatening military action. China hands will complain that this raises tensions. In fact, deterring the Chinese now is the best way to avoid a bigger crisis later. The less ambiguous U.S. actions are, the less chance there is that the Chinese will make a dangerous miscalculation.

There are also important steps Congress can take to clarify matters. Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman Jesse Helms, joined by Democratic senator Robert Torricelli, has proposed important legislation—the Taiwan Security Enhancement Act—aimed at strengthening security ties between the United States and Taiwan and increasing Taiwan's own ability to deter hostile action by the Chinese. The Helms bill calls for lifting restrictions on arms sales to Taiwan, ending the ban on high-level military exchanges between the United States and Taiwan, and providing Taiwan with key weapons systems, including theater missile defenses, that would make it much harder for the Chinese military to use or even threaten force against Taiwan. Republicans—especially those who claim to be concerned about the increasing threat China poses to American interests—should take the lead in passing this legislation.

There is also a presidential campaign underway. The next president will inevitably be confronted by the Taiwan problem. His ability to deal effectively with any crisis will be affected by decisions taken now. Yet so far we have heard little from the leading Republican candidates about the brewing cross-straits crisis. Senator John McCain rightly stood up for the people of Kosovo under attack by the brutal dictatorship in Belgrade. Does he have a similar concern for the well-being of the democratic people of Taiwan? George W. Bush recently pointed out, correctly, that China is a strategic competitor of the United States, not a strategic partner, and he declared, also correctly, that American policy in Asia should first and foremost aim at protecting our friends and allies. Well, Taiwan is one of those friends. Do Bush and McCain and the other presidential candidates support the right of the Taiwanese people to determine their own future? Do they oppose the Clinton administration's outdated "one-China" policy? And do they support passage of the Taiwan Security Enhancement Act? These are important questions. Those who want to lead the United States and the world in the next century need to give some answers.

—William Kristol and Robert Kagan, for the Editors