

An Ominous Silence Toward Taiwan

China, Says Ellen Bork, Wants Reunification To Feel Inevitable

‘Only Taiwan’s 23 million people can determine Taiwan’s future.’ These unprecedented words by the president of Taiwan, Chen Shui-bian, have been met with an ominous silence.

Beijing’s leaders are said to be more concerned with the upcoming passage of power to a new generation at a Communist Party conclave this Fall than with Mr. Chen’s call for legislation governing a referendum on independence. The cadres have confined their most belligerent reactions to English-language propaganda organs. Across the strait, officials in Taiwan are downplaying their president’s remarks, leaking word that he acted without consulting top advisers and dismissing his words as electioneering aimed at the pro-independence base of his Democratic Progressive Party. So everything’s fine, right?

Wrong. The main reason Beijing’s cadres are not exercised is that they are quite satisfied with the way things are going in their drive to take Taiwan.

They have reason to be. Over the past several years, China has launched a massive military build-up aimed at developing the capacity to take Taiwan without an invasion, perhaps through a barrage of missile strikes, or a blockade of the island. “China’s war-fighting strategies increasingly favor coercive over annihilative approaches,” the Pentagon told Congress in a report last month. Even the threat of force might be enough, according to the report. “Beijing is pursuing the ability to force Taiwan to negotiate on Beijing’s terms regarding unification with the mainland.”

To help this strategy along, Beijing is employing classic “united front” tactics, co-opting Taiwanese media and businesses and encouraging investment

in the mainland. Taiwan’s economic problems have led it to abandon important restrictions on investment, raising in turn the threat of economic dependence on the mainland. “Our economy is our best weapon. We won’t attack them. We will buy them,” a Chinese official told the Washington Post. Chinese

leaders hope that to make Taiwan’s leaders conclude that reunification is inevitable.

Of course, Beijing hopes that America will also begin to feel Taiwan’s return to the mainland is unavoidable. So far, it hasn’t, but there are worrying clouds on the horizon. In May, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz stated that America is “opposed to Taiwan independence,” backtracking from the usual formulation in which America does not support independence. Mr. Wolfowitz later denied there had been a change in policy. “Frankly,” he told another interviewer, “any peaceful settlement is fine with the United States.”

Any peaceful settlement? Let’s hope not. Denying Taiwan self-determination and insisting on peaceful resolution of the dispute between China and Taiwan have been the cornerstones of American policy for decades. They were formulated, however, at a time when the mainland was seen as incapable of compelling Taiwan to reunify by force and Taiwan was still in the grips of a dictatorship that harbored fantasies of retaking the mainland.

In the meantime, things have changed, even if American policy hasn’t. The mainland has declared that Taiwan’s refusal to engage in talks about reunification constitutes grounds for attack. Taiwan, meanwhile, has become a democracy, and its people, fewer and fewer of whom have direct ties to the mainland, are less and less likely to hold even an emotional attachment to the idea of reunification.

This situation is reminiscent of 1978, when President Carter abruptly broke diplomatic and military ties with Taiwan. Beijing hoped that the end of American support “would arouse a sufficient sense of vulnerability within the Nationalist government to make it more susceptible to overtures from the mainland,” as journalist Robert Cottrell put it in his book, “The End of Hong Kong.” Deng Xiaoping offered Taiwan a “one country, two systems” arrangement, purportedly offering autonomy in exchange for sovereignty. Taiwan was not interested, but it was Congress that made the difference by committing America to Taiwan’s defense in the Taiwan Relations Act. Beijing backed off and turned its attention to the acquisition of Hong Kong.

History threatens to repeat itself. China is accumulating enormous leverage to use against Taiwan. Under the circumstances, American acceptance of “any peaceful solution” to the conflict in the Taiwan strait carries dangerous implications. Perhaps Mr. Chen’s remarks weren’t intended so much to woo his party faithful as to tell Washington that the situation has changed. Beijing has clearly grasped that. It’s time for Washington to face facts as well by bringing American policy up to date with the momentous developments in the Taiwan strait.

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