

Provoking China Over Taiwan Is No-Win Tactic

Should Taiwan be an independent country? And should the U.S. support Taiwan in its quest for independence?

There are a lot of people in Washington, Southern California and elsewhere who would answer “yes” to both of those questions, and they are actively pursuing the objective of nationhood for Taiwan. If they are successful in their efforts, they will almost certainly put this country on a collision course with the mainland China – the People’s Republic.

Is Taiwanese independence worth a confrontation with the largest, most populous nation in the world? As a native of the Taiwan and an American investment banker doing business in both China and Taiwan, I say absolutely not, for several reasons.

In the first place, China has insisted repeatedly over the years it is adamantly opposed to independence for Taiwan. Just a few years ago, Chinese President Jiang Zemin reiterated this stand, telling the *New York Times* his country is determined to “achieve complete reunification” with Taiwan. In the same breath he warned “China can never renounce the use of force” against those who “try to separate Taiwan away from the rest of China.”

But advocates of independence pay no heed to this firm resolve, and blithely promote actions that almost certainly would provoke China.

Example: Early in August, Rep. Bob Scahaffer of Colorado introduced a resolution in Congress calling for admission of Taiwan into the United Nations. That of course, would be tantamount to recognizing Taiwan as an independent nation, something the People’s Republic would never stand for.

The same day, another congressman introduced legislation that would have the U.S. seek to have Taiwan invited as an observer at the World Health Summit next May. That would certainly give Taiwan much more status than China thinks it deserves, and

would further irritate the rulers of the People’s Republic.

Drumbeat Of Demands

Then there is the steady drumbeat of demands that the U.S. provide more weaponry and military assistance to Taiwan. Sen. Jesse Helms has long been in the forefront of this drive, and he has many supporters inside and outside of government. Former Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger recently wrote in *Forbes* magazine that “Taiwan urgently needs the [high-tech] Aegis destroyer, as well as modern torpedoes and missiles to deal with the ever-increasing threat from China.”

So far, the U.S. has done a delicate balancing act in providing some arms to Taiwan but denying others – “Facing Down China Without Riling It Up,” as one headline writer recently put it.

But the People’s Republic has made it clear there is a line that is not to be crossed. As much as China wants good trade relations with the West, I don’t believe it would hesitate to go to war if it feels the U.S. has gone too far in providing weapons and military support to Taiwan.

Another reason not to support independence of Taiwan is the growing reform movement within China’s government. The reformists are eager to improve relations with the West, and their hand was substantially strengthened by the recent admission of China to the World Trade Organization and the selection of Beijing as the site for the 2008 Olympics.

A related development of even greater significance went virtually unnoticed outside China. In July, President Zemin proposed that the Communist Party do something it had never done in the five-plus decades it has been in power – open its ranks to business owners, high-tech entrepreneurs and other capitalist

Still another argument against agitation for Taiwanese independence is that Taiwanese businessmen and industrialists have made huge investments on the mainland – somewhere between \$40 billion and \$100

billion, creating an estimated 3 million jobs in the process. These owners and investors certainly want to be a part of the system on the mainland.

Reflecting this interest, a high-level economic advisory council in Taiwan recommended a broad further easing of restrictions on trade and investment on the mainland.

Notably missing from the group’s recommendation, though, was any statement about reunification with China. And it’s not likely Taiwan’s political leadership will willingly give up the degree of political independence it now has.

Mainland Fortunes

One more argument against pressing for Taiwanese independence: Taiwanese residents are flocking to the mainland to seek their fortunes. According to one recent estimate, 800,000 of Taiwan’s 22 million people now live on the mainland and aren’t worried about being used as political pawns by the People’s Republic.

“Eight or nine years ago, it was definitely a concern,” a member of the Taiwan business association in Shanghai told a reporter. Now, he said, “it is almost a non-issue.”

To me, it all comes down to this: The U.S. has nothing to gain and a lot to lose by supporting independence for Taiwan.

I seriously doubt that People’s Republic would impose communistic rule on Taiwan and interfere with its highly productive economic system. If the U.S. will ignore the saber rattlers and provocateurs, independence for Taiwan ultimately will become a non-issue.

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