

## . China's Evolving Taiwan Policy: The Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis?

Ro Manabe

### Introduction

Along with the Korean peninsula, the Taiwan Strait has been regarded as one of the East Asia's flash points. In fact, exchanges of fire did occur in the First Taiwan Strait Crisis (1954) and the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis (1958). Tensions rose quite high in the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis (1995-96), but it has been in a state of temporary lull from that point on. Today things are changing in several ways, however, and the possibility of a new crisis seems to be emerging. In this article, I would like to focus on this possibility.

### Current status of Cross-Strait relations

China's policy toward Taiwan has been consistently targeting at reunification with Taiwan. As to its method to achieve the aim, however, the initial armed liberation policy is said to have evolved into a peaceful reunification one at the time of announcement of the fifth "Message to Compatriots in Taiwan" (1979). It seems unlikely that use of force was ever abandoned throughout these periods. In the current administration, an important speech by President Xi Jinping (January 2019) once again revealed this point. He said, while the goal of realization of peaceful reunification was to be maintained, "we make no promise to renounce the use of force and reserve the option of taking all necessary means."

For Taiwan, the Chinese mainland was originally an object to be recaptured as its own lost but legitimate territory. For this reason, at the beginning, it had taken an offensive strategy against China under the "counterattack the mainland" credo. Triggered by the US Guam Doctrine (1969), however, Taiwan switched to the integrated offensive and defensive strategy with an emphasis on Taiwan island defense. Furthermore, it is believed that the defensive strategy has been adopted under the Lee Teng-hui administration. While the current Tsai Ing-wen administration follows this strategy, it casts its vigilant eyes on China's penetration

into Taiwan's politics and society. It does so by not allowing Taiwanese local governments to start their own Cross-Strait dialogs and, at the same time, by checking the Taiwanese public opinion and movements for independence from going too far. In addition, Taiwan is making efforts to modernize its defense force in preparation for possible Chinese attacks against Taiwan.

Reflecting the basic strategies of the two sides in the Cross-Strait relations, there is a tendency in recent years for China to be pro-active and for Taiwan to be reactive.

On the diplomatic front, with China's active efforts backed by its economic power, the number of countries that have diplomatic relations with Taiwan has gradually decreased. The decline started at the time of "Albanian Resolution" of the UN General Assembly that approved China's representation (1971) and today there are only 17 such countries (2018). Even since the inauguration of Tsai Ing-wen administration, four countries have severed diplomatic relations with Taiwan and established those with China. China has also carried on diplomatic campaigns that impede Taiwan's international presence by rejecting Taiwanese observers' attendance at international organizations meetings.

On the economic front, since the later years of Chen Shui-bian administration, Taiwan has taken a policy to expand its economic relations with China. China's actions in response to this has resulted in the expansion of the Cross-Strait relations. On the flip side of this was increased dependence of Taiwan's economy on China's, and the Tsai Ing-wen administration has come to seek to avoid such dependence.

On the military front, highly significant changes have occurred. In terms of defense spending, China has surpassed Taiwan in the early 1990s, and the gap has now so widened that China's military spending is 15 times larger than Taiwan's. Because of the financial gap, the gap in real military hardware has also expanded. For example, the numbers of new model surface ships and 4th and 5th generation fighters were reversed between China and Taiwan in the 2000s. Today China's numbers are more than double those of Taiwan. Along with the buildup and modernization of Chinese military, its military exercises around Taiwan have expanded geographically while their frequency has increased.

As a result, the military balance of China and Taiwan has shifted to China's great advantage. Even Taiwan defense authorities admitted in their own analysis and evaluation that China had a plan to achieve full-scale invasion capabilities against Taiwan by 2020 (Taiwan 2015 version

of "National Defense report").

China's efforts to modernize its military have not focused solely on the military balance with Taiwan. During the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis, China put political and military pressure on Taiwan by launching short-range missiles around Taiwan. The United States in response dispatched two aircraft carrier strike groups to the Taiwan Strait to silence the Chinese military. This bitter experience taught the Chinese military that it would be imperative to prevent the intervention by the US aircraft carrier force when "armed liberation" of Taiwan is required. This is why the Chinese military has been making continuous efforts to build a capability called today as "Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD)".

As described above, China has continued to take a hard and soft line in its move toward the reunification with Taiwan, but it is hard to say that it has been successful.

As for Taiwan's public opinion, the movement for independence has reached a plateau while there is a growing tendency to maintain the status quo. And it is hard to observe a general trend for reunification with China gaining traction. Reflecting such public opinion, the Tsai-Ing Wen administration has pursued its basic policy of maintaining the status-quo in Cross-Strait relations, showing no signs of decreasing its vigilance against China.

In addition, the fact that the United States has not changed its position as a sort of guardian of Taiwan continues to be an obstacle to achieving China's goal. Taiwan seems to place the maintenance of its alliance-like relationship with the United States as the top priority in order to counter China's diplomatic and military pressures. The United States under the current Trump administration has repeated its actions that aims at restraining China. These include the enactments of "Asia Reassurance Initiative Act" and the "Taiwan Travel Act" as well as two deals of arms sales under the "Taiwan Relations Act" and series of US warships passing through the Taiwan Strait.

The current state of Xi Jinping regime

Since he took office as the Chinese Communist Party General Secretary (2012), President Xi Jinping has continued to purge the party, using the anti-corruption as a banner. He has grasped an almost complete control of the three branches of power in China; the party, the military and the government. In 2017, he placed those close to him in important positions of the party, the military and the government, and was re-elected as the General Secretary, and



in 2018, amended the constitution and enabled himself to serve indefinitely as President of the state. As a result, the collective leadership system that continued under Jian Zemin and Hu Jintao administrations has come to an end. Xi Jinping's dictatorship is almost established. At the same time, Xi Jinping administration, by tightening up the domestic mass media and Internet regulations, has restrained the "freedom" of the people, which had been expanding since Jiang Zemin administration. The current administration also has tried to strengthen the control over economy through the reform of state-owned enterprises and the capital regulations. Some experts have pointed out a similarity with the Mao Zedong era based on these series of changes.

On diplomatic front, backed by rapid economic growth, Xi Jinping administration has come around to define the "Chinese dream" as realization of "great revival of Chinese nation". It has thus openly oriented its diplomacy toward great power politics, in place of "Cover light and nurture in the dark" dictum of the Deng Xiaoping era. Similarly, in the field of military modernization, it has gone far beyond the construction of armed forces that would achieve the liberation of Taiwan by use of force, its main goal. Instead, China is now constructing power projection capabilities such as aircraft carrier units on the assumption that they would be deployed to protect overseas interests.

Such Xi Jinping's policy orientations have met almost a complete success in terms of domestic politics. It is hard to say, however, that it has gone well in the other areas such as diplomacy.

In particular, rising tensions with the United States, its largest competitor, should be seen as a matter of grave importance.

By the later years of Obama administration, the United States has come to realize that it is difficult to democratize China. It has also concluded that China has been pursuing its own hegemony (or an international order of its own) regionally as well as globally. So, it has initiated its efforts to deter such China's moves on economic, military and diplomatic fronts. In the Trump administration, these efforts have become more sharpened. In particular, it has launched a "trade war" such as a unilateral increase in tariffs. Its aim is to deny the use of the global free economic system that China has taken advantage of to improve its national power. Although the result of the trade war is unclear at present, it can be said that US determination to deny China further pursuit of its own supremacy is a serious challenge to China's further development.

On the military front, the United States has put an emphasis on the placement of its military forces in the Indo-Pacific region by deploying 60% of its naval vessels. It continues to restrain China's power expansion into the South China Sea by actively deploying and operating its military forces including implementation of the Freedom of Navigation Operations.

China's "One Belt, One Road" initiative, an eye-catching policy of Xi Jinping diplomacy, now encounters difficulties in many parts of the world. It aims at making the best use of its surplus domestic production capacity as well as expanding its external influence at the same time, thus killing two birds with one stone. It was initially welcomed without reserve in the areas covered by this grand idea from China via Central Asia and the Indian Ocean to Europe. It was welcomed because it was thought as a chance to go through infrastructure developments on a very large scale with China's economic assistance. The initiative is now seen with considerable distrust due to relative lack of progress in specific programs, important concessions often demanded in return for Chinese aids, and suspicion about political intent of China.

On the military front, China's rapid buildup and modernization of its military forces has more or less drawn vigilance from countries in the region. Coupled with Chinese unilateral creation of fait accomplis in the disputed area in the South China Sea, it has led regional nations to accelerate their own defense efforts in response.

Slowdown in its domestic economy, too, is a major concern for the Xi Jinping administration. China's economic growth rate, peaking in 2010 when it exceeded 10%, has continued to decline and has recently remained at around 6%. While there are various theories about its causes, the fact that the deceleration period overlaps with Xi Jinping's tenure would be an embarrassing "inconvenient truth" for his administration. The possibility that the "trade war" with the United States, including technology transfer restrictions, has the potential to slow the Chinese economy further down would be another major concern.

#### Policy Options towards Taiwan

The reunification with Taiwan is the greatest national undertaking left undone for China and it is an important issue which could either bolster or undermine legitimacy of a Chinese administration. The successive administrations from Mao Zedong through Hu Jintao have tried to achieve this with various approaches from "armed liberation" to "peaceful reunification." They all failed. If Xi Jinping administration achieves this, its prestige would



surpass all past administrations, and its power footing would be on a rock-solid foundation.

On the other hand, although he has established almost a dictatorial position in the domestic politics as described above, President Xi Jinping faces a number of challenges. These include increasing competition with the United States, the deceleration of the economy and friction with neighboring countries. It seems difficult to find an effective policy leading to a breakthrough for any of these challenges. Could he achieve visible results on an issue that is of the greatest importance for China such as Taiwan, however, any failure on other issues would not probably be acknowledged as one. In this sense, the possibility that the Taiwan issue would be once again considered as a top priority in Xi Jinping administration cannot be denied.

In that case, the first of logical options would be pursuit of best possible concrete outcome under the current peaceful reunification policy. The presidential election of Taiwan is scheduled next January. It would be a significant achievement if China can manufacture a birth of a pro-China President in place of President Tsai Ing-wen of the Democratic Party. It would be considered then as a realistic option to strengthen Taiwan's economic dependence further on China and to intensify China's influence on Taiwan's society by promoting people exchanges.

However, as mentioned above, Taiwan's public opinion has shown no signs of turning to reunification despite the decades of efforts by successive Chinese administrations toward peaceful reunification. If this is taken into consideration, it is never certain that China could make additional achievements aside from birth of a pro-China President.

The second logical option is, of course, reunification by force. Backed by rapid economic growth, the Chinese armed forces have been quickly strengthening and modernizing its power. So, it has a fair chance today, quite unlike 1950's, to eliminate the resistance of the Taiwanese army and achieve its objective. The biggest problem for China is the attitude of the United States. The United States would not limit itself to giving military assistance to Taiwan in case of a full-scale armed conflict across the Strait. It is almost certain that it will intervene with its military forces on Taiwan's side as far as one can judge from Trump administration's current policies toward Taiwan,

It is true that the Chinese military has focused its effort on developing A2/AD capabilities with the US military intervention in mind. It is certain that the conflict situation would play

out quite differently from 1996. It cannot be denied, however, that considerable uncertainty would remain as to the results of a conflict that involves the intervention of the US military. Failure in this option could lead to the collapse of Xi Jinping administration. It could even lead to the collapse of Communist Party rule. With all things considered, this option would remain something which cannot be adopted easily.

The first option is unclear and ineffectual, and the second option has a very large risk. Then a third option may come up for discussion and it may be capture of Quemoy island by use of force.

Quemoy is a small island ruled by Taiwan, located at a distance of about 2 km from Fujian Province, China (about 200 km from the main island of Taiwan.) In 1958 it became the stage of the Quemoy artillery duels. The strength of Taiwan garrison, which used to be 100,000, is now reduced to around 3,000. Under such geographical and military conditions, it is possible that Chinese forces could concentrate their troops, control nearby sea and air and neutralize Taiwan's garrison in a short time. China's surprise attack could create a *fait accompli* without giving an opportunity of reinforcements from the Taiwan island.

Of course, Taiwan would try to seek a United States support and to retake the island. But a landing on an occupied island would meet considerable geographical and military difficulties, and it could lead to an all-out armed conflict with China. From these facts, it seems unlikely that the United States would send in its own military forces to support an operation to retake the island occupied by Chinese troops.

The short-term military victory does not necessarily mean permanent occupation, as evidenced by the recent example of US occupation of Iraq. In the case of Quemoy island, however, it is too small (population about 130 thousand people on an area about 150 km<sup>2</sup>) to do any anti-occupation activities involving use of force. It is difficult to ensure supply from the outside. Moreover, the island is a part of the economic zone of Fujian Province. The islanders have a strong sense of closeness with Fujian Province historically and a weak sense of identity with Taiwan. Due to these facts, no enduring and effective anti-occupation activities would be considered likely to occur.

Needless to say, severance of Cross Strait economic relations would be inevitable. So would be backlash from the United States and the rest of the international community which would impose, one would expect, economic sanctions against China. Since the UN Security Council

could not do anything due to China's veto power, however, the sanctions would be limited to those imposed by the United States and other volunteer countries. Considering that the United States has already taken measures such as raising tariffs, an additional impact of the economic burden due to the sanctions might not be particularly significant.

With Quemoy island annexed to Chinese mainland, President Xi Jinping's administration would have an historic fame in China. It would be accolated as an administration that has made remarkable progress, once in several decades, toward "liberation of Taiwan." What if such an attractive choice is estimated to have a little diplomatic, military and economic risk or damage if any? At least it cannot be denied that Xi Jinping administration might regard it as a promising option under the current difficult circumstances it faces today.

#### Current outlook

At least, until the Taiwan presidential election of January next year, China would continue the peaceful reunification policy. It would work on Taiwan diplomatically, economically, and politically to realize the birth of a pro-China President. The Taiwan Government will try to counter such Chinese interference. If a pro-China president is elected, it is highly likely that China will continue its peaceful reunification policy, counting on him or her doing what should be done. On the other hand, if an anti-China president is elected, it is possible that China could have the opportunity to reconsider and revise its policy toward Taiwan. In any case, closer attention and preparedness toward Cross-Strait relations will be necessary in the near future.



Dear Proofreader;

Thank you very much for taking time to check my translation of Mr. Ro Manabe's paper. Your comments were truly useful, especially your comments about sentence length, which has opened my eyes for the first time on this issue (I found in my web search, which your comment prompted me to do, that UK Government would not allow sentences longer than 25(!) words in their official papers) Your advice about ambiguous word/phrase and grammar, too, are appreciated. I amended them all. (Except "vigilant on" in your second piece of advice. I couldn't find "on" as a preposition after "vigilant" or "vigilance" in my Oxford Collocation Dictionary and other dictionaries except "cast vigilant eye on something".)

I will explain the apparent inconsistency on 'liberation' vs 'reunification' vs 'recapture'. These words are translated from Mr. Manabe's original Japanese word "解放(kaiho)" "統一(touitsu)" "奪還(dakkan)", respectively. Mr. Manabe uses these words precisely. For example, "recapture" is used for Chian Kai-shek's futile attempts in 1950's to regain his rule over the mainland. As for the rest of the words, "liberation" is used only by China and has some military connotation at least in Chinese modern history (Remember "People's Liberation Army"? ) while "reunification" is more neutral and used by everyone like "peaceful reunification" or "reunification by force" etc. So, I kept the original translation of 'liberation' vs 'reunification' vs 'recapture', though I thank you to focusing my attention to these words in translation. I also use "toward" consistently in my new translation, by the way.

As for the use of idioms which may offend or be misinterpreted for some readers, you outlined "killing two birds with one stone." I translated from "一石二鳥(Isseki nicho)" in the original text and my English dictionaries gave me its English equivalent. So, I'm puzzled. Or, is there some hidden meaning which is not fit to be printed in dictionaries? Also, I retain "rock-solid" but changed the sentence from "its power base would be rock-solid." to "its power footing would be on a rock-solid foundation."

I end this note by thanking you again for your time and precious advice.

Masatoshi Shimbo