

January 12, 2012

Why Taiwan's Future Matters

By SU CHI

FOR most of its history, Taiwan's destiny was determined by three great powers — China, Japan and America. Now, as the 18th-largest economy in the world and a thoroughly democratized nation, Taiwan is still perceived by some in Washington as a potential bargaining chip in crafting a new relationship with China. This is a mistake.

It is true that Taiwan's status is the only dispute today that is likely to drag America and China into war. Similarly, a democratic Taiwan worries "realist" strategic thinkers who fear the consequences if it declares independence. But since 2008, when Taiwan began to stabilize its once volatile relations with China, it has become an even greater asset for the United States — and an inspiration for democratizing forces in mainland China.

After years of saber-rattling in Beijing and Taipei's drive for independence, President Ma Ying-jeou's May 2008 declaration of "no unification, no independence, and no use of force" calmed all sides.

Taiwan and China have since engaged in numerous de facto government-to-government talks and greatly expanded people-to-people exchanges. With \$130 billion worth of trade and seven million visits annually across the Taiwan Strait, the impact on both societies could be enormous.

Indeed, as China and Taiwan have grown ever more economically integrated, Taiwan has also become a model for China's future. No longer perceived as a menace to China's national unity, Taiwan's value as an example for China began to emerge, particularly when it came to market reforms, popular culture and press freedom. And this new model arrived at a fortuitous juncture.

After 1949, Communist China's first 30 years were engulfed in revolutionary fervor, internal power struggles and poverty. Its second 30 years witnessed rapid economic growth, which catapulted the country to the second largest economy in the world. The third stage, which may well last another 30 years, given China's huge size, is most likely to be marked by a race between popular demands for participation in the political process and the Communist Party's response to these demands.

This is a bumpy path Taiwan has trod. In the past three decades, Taiwan has discarded authoritarianism and moved from martial law to the rule of law, experiencing impressive economic growth and political liberalization. Authoritarian China now finds itself uncomfortably strained as inland provinces are struggling for economic growth while urban areas are boldly stretching out to explore the boundaries of political control, forcing the Communist Party to experiment with limited reforms.

Herein lies Taiwan's new value. While China's economic influence on Taiwan is growing, many in China find Taiwan's experience with democratization, warts and all, instructive. Long resentful of prevalent corruption at home, they have watched Taiwan tackle corruption within its government, even at the highest levels. They have seen how successfully Taiwan combined modernity with Chinese traditions. And they have observed how Taiwan's people freely express their will through noisy public discussion and regular elections. Last month, debates among Taiwan's presidential candidates were even carried by social media inside China.

Taiwan will of course need to resolve its internal political disagreements.

After all, some in Taiwan are not yet convinced that a push for independence would be misguided. However, such a move would court disaster, incur disfavor with the international community, and seriously undermine Taiwan's newfound attraction to many Chinese people as a democratic model.

The winner of Taiwan's presidential election on Jan. 14 should therefore strive to forge a new domestic consensus between opposing camps on the island's political relationship with China while ensuring Taiwan a more dignified place in world politics commensurate with the contributions it can make.

Long locked in indignant isolation but enormously proud of their democratic achievements, Taiwan's people must now accept that democracy endows them with greater responsibility for regional stability.

They could start by playing a more constructive role in the evolving American-Chinese relationship by becoming an interlocutor on issues that affect all three parties, like disputes over the South China Sea.

All of this will require innovative thinking and skillful management. If either side or the United States mishandles the relationship by attempting a diplomatic or even military shortcut, it could spell disaster for all parties. But if China and Taiwan establish a sufficient degree of mutual trust, Taiwan can remain an indispensable ally for the United States and a model for China's future.

Su Chi, the chairman of the Taipei Forum, served as secretary general of Taiwan's National Security Council from 2008 to 2010.