

Taiwan's New Risk: Four Seas + Four Independences

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The recent behavior of the Tsai administration toward Hong Kong's turmoil seems to indicate that it cares more about winning the January 2020 election than the new strategic risk for Taiwan.

Taiwan is an island located at the center of East Asia and at the crossroads of transportation routes of all the neighboring countries. Hence Taiwan is sensitive, even vulnerable to the vicissitudes of its environment. Over the past 40 years when East Asia was focused on economic development, Taiwan has benefitted from its geographic location. For example, Taiwan was a factory in the US military supply chain during the Vietnam War; Taiwan's economic growth was propelled by Japan's "Flying Geese Paradigm;" Taiwan gained enormously from China's "reform and opening-up." Taiwan's soft power, such as its open and benevolent character, ample flexibility and innovation, fluent Chinese, English and Japanese proficiency, easily found a niche and thrived under this favorable environment.

Unfortunately, the good times are over. The main focus of East Asia has recently shifted from economy to military, turning cooperation to confrontation, and stability to instability. Examples abound. The US and China have changed their relationship from "engagement" to "competition," resulting in trade war and technology war. The US recently withdrew from *the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty* in order to deploy mid-range missiles to counterbalance China's rise. North Korea has repeatedly test-fired their ballistic missiles. Japan and South Korea have quarreled over history, economic, even military issues. The Chinese and Russian fighters jointly entered the air defense identification zones of Japan and South Korea. The turmoil of Hong Kong has continued for months with no end in sight. The PLA has deployed anti-aircraft and anti-ship missiles with ranges reaching nearly the entire South China Sea, and is currently building an overseas base in Cambodia. The conflict between India and Pakistan over Kashmir has intensified in recent months. The PLA aircrafts and naval ships circled near Taiwan frequently, even crossing over the median line of the Taiwan

Strait and stayed there a rather long time. Quite a few foreign military aircrafts and naval ship have passed through the Taiwan Strait in recent years.

Consequently Taiwan's role is viewed differently. Formerly seen as the center of the whole region, Taiwan now is treated more as the midpoint of a line or a wall. The wall is what has been commonly called "the first island chain" stretching from the Korean Peninsula, Japanese Archipelago, Ryukyu Islands (Okinawa), Taiwan to the Philippines. Those inside the wall don't want outsiders to come in, while those outside don't want the insiders to go out. Taiwan, due to its central location, has thus become a contested ground for the strategists on both sides. Among all the contestants, Beijing seems to value Taiwan more than Washington does. The US is after all a global power with commitments worldwide, and suffers from "tyranny of geography" vis-à-vis Taiwan. Yet to Beijing, Taiwan is not only strategically vital due to geographic proximity, but also carries deep historical and sentimental values, thus a highly sensitive component in the domestic politics inside China - which is not the case in the US.

Most importantly, Taiwan happens to be located at the intersection of the so-called "Four Seas" and "Four Independences." Four Seas are, from north to south, the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea, the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea. All four are hotly contested by the US and China. Four Independences refer to the four "soft bellies" of Beijing: Taiwan Independence, Hong Kong Independence, Tibetan Independence, and Uyghur Independence.

All of the Four Seas have undergone some turbulence in the past 70 years, but never all at once. Hence it was relatively easy for major powers to manage them. Most unusually from 1975, the end of the Vietnam War, to 2000 when Taiwan Strait again became choppy, Four Seas had managed to maintain peace and stability for a quarter of a century, allowing all the countries in the region to step up their economic development.

Unfortunately, all the Four Seas have been roaring since 2016. Some have been seeing strong winds, heavy rains and giant waves, others with dark clouds, foretelling the looming storm. At this critical juncture, the US and China have ceased their decades-long "strategic dialogue" due to recent trade war. The communication between the Tsai administration and Beijing was also suspended. Consequently, the disputes of the Four Seas are left drifting when proper management is needed most.

At this moment, it behooves Taiwan to look after itself while weathering the storm. Taiwan would be extremely lucky if she could calm the waters in the dire Strait, steer itself away from becoming a bargaining chip between the two competing powers, and avoid being dragged into the storm of the other three Seas. It is beyond comprehension that the Tsai administration dare take upon itself the Four Independences which fall exclusively within Beijing's domain.

The interference of the DPP (Democratic Progressive Party) and its affiliated organizations in Hong Kong has been an open secret for some time. On the day of the July 1st protest marches, DPP Secretary General Lou Wen-jia held a video conference with Secretary General Joshua Wong of Demosistō of Hong Kong. In March 2019 Taiwan Foundation for Democracy held "A Civil Society Dialogue on Securing Religious Freedom in the Indo-Pacific Region" in Taipei with many executives of the Tibetan and Uyghur overseas organizations attending. In July this year Lou Wen-jia went to India to meet with the Dalai Lama and invited His Holiness to visit Taiwan. Lou also announced that a bilateral direct channel of communication was established.

These kinds of behavior show that President Tsai Ing-wen, in an attempt to get re-elected, has changed Taiwan's cross-strait policy from a defensive "maintaining-the-status-quo" approach to an offensive "changing-the-status-quo" approach. She even dare go straight toward the soft bellies of Beijing. One need not be too surprised if the hardliners in Beijing would demand for an early and once-and-for-all solution to their "Taiwan problem."

The environment is volatile enough for Taiwan. It is in the best interest of Taiwan now to heed the old adages: "to pursue good fortune and avoid impending calamity" and "be wise and stay prudent to save one's own skin." Taiwan should not stir up the Four Independences further when the Four Seas are still tempestuous. It is imprudent to play with fire, and the DPP better stop before it's too late.

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