

Taiwan's Place in the International Community: 35 Years after the Taiwan Relations Act

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Taiwan's problem is always quite complicated. After Obama won the presidential election November 2008, a Bush administration official once commented, half-jokingly perhaps, that if he were to be invited to brief the President-elect about China, he would need two hours to give Obama a more or less complete picture of what China was like. But, he continued, to brief Obama on Taiwan would take about five hours!

Even though Taiwan has been historically, ethnically,

culturally and linguistically Chinese, its political destiny has been determined by three great powers – the US, China and Japan – not by China alone. Hence there has been so much complexity.

Three downsides for Taiwan:

1. It could be abandoned by any one of the three great powers. After China lost the war of 1894, Taiwan was ceded to Japan. After Japan lost the World War II, Taiwan was returned to China.
2. Taiwan's GDP ranked the world's 18th largest at its peak. Now it is the 23rd. But despite its economic power, Taiwan is very isolated in world community.

The number of inter-governmental organizations where Taiwan enjoys membership is smaller than that of Liechtenstein of Europe. If Taiwan's economy ever plunges into a crisis someday similar to the one South Korea experienced in 1997, Taiwan most likely could not turn to IMF for assistance.

3. Strategically, Taiwan's domestic development and external behavior have always been closely watched by the three great powers. Compared with other countries, Taiwan enjoys very small room for maneuver, much less for mistakes.

Three upsides for Taiwan:

1. The unique circumstances spared Taiwan of major casualties in the past. During the WWII, Mainland China probably lost 35 million lives, Japan 5 million, Korea 350,000, the Philippines 1 million, Indonesia 2 million. But Taiwan lost only 30,000, plus those unknown number who suffered from US bombings. To turn Taiwan into a forward base for its aggression into Southeast Asia, Japan even pumped substantial resources into Taiwan to build airfields, irrigation system, roads, and agriculture, etc. US also decided to skip over Taiwan to directly attack Okinawa, causing lots of casualties there.

2. If handled prudently, Taiwan stands to gain most from positive relationships with all three powers. Compared with South Korea likewise situated, Taiwan people may have better command of Chinese, Japanese and English languages.
3. Though strategically sandwiched, Taiwan commands attention, and attention implies influence.

Over the last 65 years, Taiwan has gone through two stages. For about three decades, Taiwan had been almost totally dependent on the US for its security, economic development, and international relations. It was an “underdog,” so to speak. In retrospect, the Taiwan Relations Act became some sort of milestone, because it marked a fundamental change in US-Taiwan relations. Henceforth, Taiwan had to grow out of US protection and find its own future.

And we did. We did it mostly through “innovation.”

Presidents Chiang Ching-Kuo innovated economically and Lee Teng-hui innovated democratically. When Mainland China was still mired in turmoil and poverty, Taiwan's economy took off. When the Mainland began to reform and open to the outside world, Taiwan was experimenting with democratization.

During the recent twenty-some years, Taiwan was transformed from an “underdog” into “a tail wagging two dogs” --- not just one dog, but two. That is, the US and China. Unlike the past practices, Taiwan oftentimes took initiatives that shook Beijing and/or Washington and forced them into reaction, positively or negatively.

Examples abound. Lee Teng-hui designed the SEF/ARATS framework for cross-strait contacts, devised the “one China, different interpretations,” and put out the “special state-to-state relationship.” Chen Shui-bian followed with his “one country on each side,” “plebiscite,” “writing new constitution,” “Taiwan's

name.” And Ma Ying-jeou stated “no unification, no independence, no use of force,” “92 consensus,” “diplomatic truce,” etc.

Some of these strategic innovations were resented by the great powers; and Taiwan was thus called “a trouble-maker.” Others were welcomed, as Taiwan Strait is now the only calm water amid the turbulent maritime East Asia. So Taiwan does have a valuable role to play. Whether it does something or not could make a difference.

But I believe the third and new stage has already dawned upon us. The “dog” now wants to wag the “tail,” not the other way around. So Beijing began to innovate and take initiatives. A good example is this week’s upcoming visit to Taiwan by Mr. Zhang Zhijun, Director of Beijing’s Taiwan Affairs Office.

Three points should be noted about this new stage. First, there are now two diametrically opposed tendencies. Subjectively inside Taiwan the tendency is increasingly against reunification and in favor of Taiwan independence. But objectively in terms of balance of power, the tendency is increasingly against Taiwan independence and in favor of reunification. Right now I don't see any possibility of these two tendencies being slowed down or reversed in the near future. So the tension and contradiction between them would only grow. And the next President, elected 2016, would be facing greater challenges than the incumbent ever did.

Secondly, although the Blue, Green and Red are finally talking with one another, there are only three sets of bilateral consensus. That is to say, "both Blue and Green desire to protect Taiwan; both Blue and Red oppose Taiwan independence; both Green and Red desire to get rid of the Republic of China." But there is no trilateral

consensus whatsoever. Hence the small triangle (Blue, Green and Red) is still highly unstable; and its instability would continue to haunt the large triangle (US, China, and Taiwan).

Thirdly, the Blue/Green gridlock is now worse than ever. Blue and Green leaderships don't talk to each other. The President and Speaker are at loggerheads. Executive and Legislative branches are not cooperating. NO major bills are being passed. No major plans are being executed. A house so divided, Taiwan could neither fight nor make peace with China. As the Greens are now sabotaging everything the Blues do, the Blues surely will pay back once the Greens return to the helms. All parties in Taiwan are now saying: the future of Taiwan should be decided by Taiwan alone. I don't see how this could be the case if Taiwan continues to be divided as such.

This is why former Chairman Shih Ming-te and six other

gentlemen, including myself, decided to propose the idea of “Greater One-China Framework.” We believe, first of all, Taiwan has to innovate to stay ahead of the changing circumstances. If we don’t, we’d be dragged along by the events beyond our control. Second, the gist of “Five Principles” is Blue/Green reconciliation, followed by Blue/Green/Red dialogues.

As for the contents of the Five Principles, I am sure the Blues, Greens, or anyone could easily see some things they like and others they don’t. If we only focus on those we don’t like, these Principles or any other ideas would never work. But if we are willing to start from the points we like, perhaps we’ll see that possibilities do exist for all three sides to sit down and discuss their problems.

What seven of us put forward was merely an invitation to discuss, a humble attempt to draw out better ideas from the concerned public.

Reactions from all quarters so far are neutral, open and moderate, as far as I could tell. This is what we had hoped for in the beginning. Naturally it would be better if all the Blue, Green, and Red sides would instantly endorse our proposal. But that is clearly impossible. If one side endorsed it, the other one or even two would most likely grow suspicious. If all three said no, the proposal would probably fall dead. So, considering other possibilities, neutral, open and moderate reactions are really the best we could hope for.

To conclude, I think Taiwan has valuable contributions to make to the world. Its democratization is also most unusual. However, I happen to think that our democracy now is ill. It suffers from “over liberalization, under-governance.” Taiwan’s average annual GDP growth in the last 12 years falls behind every country in East Asia, except Japan. Therefore, we should not continue to pat ourselves on the back. Instead, we should

strive to overcome our drawbacks through more innovation. This is the only way we could get ahead once again.

Thank you!