

Beijing's goal is reunification with Taiwan—Why can't it get there?

Richard C. Bush Monday, January 7, 2019

When Beijing crafted its “one country, two systems” formula (1C2S) for Taiwan unification in the early 1980s, it thought the moment was ideal to secure the capitulation of Taiwan's leaders. Taipei had suffered a serious psychological blow after the United States had switched diplomatic relations from Taipei to Beijing on New Year's Day 1979. China's leaders knew that their Taiwan counterparts, leaders of the Nationalist/Kuomintang party (KMT) were Chinese nationalists who had moved to the island in 1949 and that they favored ultimate unification (but on their own terms). Maybe, Beijing hoped, Taiwan's leaders would see 1C2S as a face-saving way out of a dire situation.

There was another reason Beijing might have believed that KMT leaders would find 1C2S attractive. That was, the formula would allow them to maintain the authoritarian rule they had imposed in the late 1940s. The KMT would have to give up its belief in the Republic of China, which it had controlled since 1928, and become a part of the People's Republic of China, its enemy since 1949. But at least they could stay in power. The losers in this arrangement would be the 80 percent of the island's population whose families had been in Taiwan for generations who had little or no control over Taiwan's future. But giving the people a say in either China or Taiwan was not at all a priority for Chinese leaders.

KMT leaders rejected Beijing's offer and soon changed the game. They started a transition to democracy that was completed in the mid-1990s. This fostered a very public discussion of what Taiwan was, where it had been, and how it fit with its Chinese neighbor. Democratization essentially gave the Taiwan public a seat at the table any time Beijing and Taipei governments tried to resolve their differences through negotiations. Among other things,

- Taiwan's democratization created a strong popular identification with Taiwan itself. Some people see themselves as Taiwanese only. Others regard themselves as both Taiwanese and Chinese, without defining what they mean. Consistently, these two groups constitute 90 percent of Taiwan opinion. Less than 10 percent regard themselves as Chinese only.
- The share of Taiwan people who want unification with China right away or sometime in the future has been stuck between 10 and 15 percent for some time. Most Taiwan people want a continuation of the status quo.
- The KMT's three decades of harsh authoritarian rule conditioned many Taiwan people to be wary of any new group of authoritarian leaders from China.

Most Taiwan people understand that Taiwan's economy is tied to China's (40 percent of Taiwan exports go there). They don't like instability, whatever the cause. They don't want a military conflict. They do want a genuine say over their destiny, and for now 1C2S has no market on Taiwan as a basis for resolving differences with China.

What has happened in Hong Kong over the last five years only reinforces Taiwan skepticism. Originally, 1C2S in Hong Kong provided for the rule of law and protection of civil and political rights, but the electoral system was geared so that any political force or political leader that Beijing feared could never gain legislative or executive power. There was hope beginning in 2013 for a reform of the electoral system that ultimately would result in popular elections for all senior leaders, but through a tragic train of events that did not happen. Now political freedoms are being abridged as well.

Xi Jinping's January speech ignores the impact on the quest for unification of popular feelings in democratic Taiwan. His statement that "there is national identification between the people on the two sides of the [Taiwan] Strait" ignores what polls show about the weakness of Chinese identity on the island. Those same polls belie his apparent confidence that unification on Beijing's terms is inevitable. He does not seem aware that Taiwan citizens don't want to risk their democratic system, which they value despite its flaws, for a 1C2S structure that is partially democratic at best.



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