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Taiwan

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Of all the threats to security and US interests in Asia, the confrontation across the Taiwan Strait is surely the most perilous over the long run and has the greatest potential for erupting into a war between the United States and China. As Kurt Campbell and Derek Mitchell of the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington wrote in the summer of 2001, “Perhaps nowhere else on the globe is the situation so seemingly intractable and the prospect of a major war involving the United States so real.”¹

Today, that outlook is even more dire as China, Taiwan, and the United States have hardened their positions, even if the rhetoric has been less harsh for the most part recently. China has new leaders who cannot afford to be less than adamant on the Taiwan question. Taiwanese leaders have been pushing their island further away from the mainland, drawing Chinese warnings that military force would be employed if Taiwan goes too far. The United States, under President Bush, has demanded that any settlement of the Taiwan question be peaceful and in accord with the wishes of the people of Taiwan. Beyond that, the Administration has repeatedly reminded the Chinese of US obligations under the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 to help Taiwan defend itself.

All of this has reduced diplomatic maneuvering room and made for a situation in which a miscalculation could cause an eruption. Admiral Thomas B. Fargo, Commander of US Pacific Command, told a gathering last summer at the East-West Center, a research organization in Hawaii, that among the issues concerning him was “a miscalculation between strategic rivals, and I’m talking about China and Taiwan and India and Pakistan here.”² Earlier, the Admiral told Congress that among the “fundamental challenges” he would confront was “the potential for accelerated military competition or, worse, gross miscalculation between India and Pakistan, China and Taiwan, or some other strategic rivals.”³ His predecessors, Admirals Dennis Blair and Joseph Prueher, are known to have been concerned about the same possibilities.⁴

This emphasis on Taiwan is not to play down the risk of hostilities elsewhere in Asia. In North Korea, the regime of the late Kim Il Sung and his son, Kim Jong Il, has a long history of duplicity that has earned Pyongyang a place in President Bush's "axis of evil." The North Koreans have broken at least four agreements on not producing nuclear arms and have moved ahead on a clandestine program to add those weapons to their arsenal of chemical and biological weapons. Their massed forces, replete with artillery, along the 4,000-meter-wide demilitarized zone dividing the peninsula have put the South Korean capital of Seoul in harm's way. Compounding the threat from North Korea is rising anti-Americanism in Seoul that jeopardizes the US alliance with South Korea. Deterrence on the Korean peninsula has worked, for the most part, for 50 years, but if it should fail, nearly every military observer in Asia agrees that the North Koreans would be roundly defeated, their capital overrun, and their regime consigned to the ash bin of history. The casualties might be dreadful, but the combined power of the Republic of Korea and the United States would prevail.

In the South China Sea, through which passes half of the world's shipping—more than through the Panama and Suez canals combined—piracy in several straits, territorial disputes, and a Chinese claim to sovereignty over most of that sea are hazards to seaborne trade. Around the littoral of the sea, terror has spread to the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, and Thailand. US officials have said, however, there is no Afghanistan to give the terrorists haven. Moreover, several Southeast Asian governments have moved against the terrorists, and US forces in the southern Philippines have helped Filipino troops fight Muslim extremists. Clearly, the US Navy could keep those sea lanes open, but at a heavy cost in forces, time, and money.

In South Asia, the United States will not enter a war, nuclear or otherwise, between India and Pakistan over the disputed province of Kashmir. If hostilities would erupt, however, the United States most likely will be tasked with helping to clean up a horrendous mess. Hundreds of thousands of wounded would overwhelm medical facilities, the destruction of transport and power grids would leave vast areas crippled, and hordes of refugees might wander the land seeking

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food, water, and shelter. The humanitarian disaster would tax the US armed forces and nongovernmental relief agencies to the limit.

With all this, the quarrel over Taiwan rises to the top of the list because it could turn into a clash of empire. That would determine whether the United States retained its security posture in the Western Pacific or would be forced to withdraw so that China could exert the hegemony it wielded as the Middle Kingdom in the days of yore. Beijing's long-term goal would be to exert such political, economic, and military power that no decision of importance could be made in any capital in Asia without China's approval.

Moreover, the dispute over Taiwan is dynamic and volatile, the focal point of maneuvering between Taipei, Beijing, and Washington. It is in constant danger of igniting, as evidenced by the strains after the US accidental bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in May 1999 and the collision of a Chinese fighter with a US Navy EP-3 over the South China Sea in April 2001. Each incident brought tensions to a boil. The year 2002, culminating in the summit meeting between President Bush and President Jiang Zemin of the People's Republic of China (PRC) was relatively quiet, the Chinese perhaps having concluded that the United States is not the paper tiger that the revolutionary leader Mao Zedong once thought.

The underlying conflict has not gone away, however. Subtle evidence surfaced in the press briefing after Presidents Bush and Jiang met at the Bush ranch in Crawford, Texas, in October 2002. Despite the smiles and polite rhetoric, President Bush noted, "It is inevitable that nations the size of the United States and China will have differences." President Jiang agreed: "It is only natural for China and the United States to disagree from time to time."

During their summit, President Bush broached the subject of Taiwan after discussing China's spotty record on human rights, suppressing minorities, and silencing dissent. He told Jiang that his China policy was based on the Taiwan Relations Act and the Three Communiqués of 1972, 1979, and 1982 between the United States and China, all of which call for a peaceful settlement of the dispute. "We intend to make sure that the issue is resolved peacefully," he said.

President Jiang meanwhile put Taiwan high on his list of priorities, saying, "We have had a frank exchange of views on the Taiwan question, which is of concern to the Chinese side." He asserted, "China has never engaged in expansion nor sought hegemony," which even the most cursory reading of Chinese history will show is not so.

The disagreement came out in stark relief in President Bush's *National Security Strategy*, which attracted little attention when it was published in September 2002, and in President Jiang's report to the 16th Communist Party Congress just before he stepped down as party Chairman in November 2002. The Bush document, while saying the United States "seeks a constructive relationship" with China, notes "profound disagreements." One such is "our commit-

ment to the self-defense of Taiwan under the Taiwan Relations Act.”⁵ Jiang, who kept his post as head of the Central Military Commission, clothed an iron fist in a velvet glove, praising the people of Taiwan for their “glorious patriotic tradition” but warning, “The Taiwan question must not be allowed to drag on indefinitely.”⁶

The potential Sino-US confrontation arises from Beijing’s obsession with the island off its southeastern coast that was long a backwater of the Chinese empire with a distinctive language and culture. Taiwan was ceded to Japan in the Treaty of Shimonoseki after Japan defeated China in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95 and was part of the Japanese Empire until 1945, when World War II ended with the surrender of Japan. Japan relinquished sovereignty over Taiwan in the San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1951 but never said to whom sovereignty passed.

Meantime, the Nationalist Chinese forces of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek were run off the mainland by Mao Zedong’s Communists and took refuge on Taiwan in 1949. Chiang’s regime claimed to be the sole and legitimate government of all China and vowed to retake the mainland. After his death in 1975, that dream faded. Successive governments in Taipei gradually turned to democracy and economic development, making Taiwan an “Asian tiger” along with South Korea, Hong Kong, and Singapore.

The communist government in Beijing wants possession of Taiwan for several reasons:

- *Surging nationalism.* National pride is perhaps the prime motive for capturing Taiwan. Chinese leaders see Taiwan as the last vestige of the humiliation by Japan and the West during the colonial period when imperial powers carved China into spheres of influence. China reclaimed Hong Kong, the British colony, in 1997, and Macau, the Portuguese colony, in 1999. Taking Taiwan would complete that trilogy and end the civil war with the Nationalists.

- *Political embarrassment.* Taiwan has become a democracy, even if a fragile one, over the last decade. Despite the internal controls exerted by the Beijing regime, it cannot shield the Chinese people from the example of democratic progress in Taiwan, which the Communist Party fears could jeopardize its grip on power. David Zweig of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology has written that the Chinese people are not so politically apathetic as some argue.⁷

- *Subversive freedom.* Political observers in Taipei have noted that visitors from China have been impressed with the freedom the Taiwanese experience. “They are surprised by the freedom we have to work where we want, to change jobs, to live where we want, to read different views in the newspapers, and things like that,” said a Taiwanese scholar. Beijing is unhappy when those visitors return to China with what the authorities consider to be subversive views.⁸

- *Spreading separatism.* An editor of a trade journal sat in a coffee shop in Shanghai several years ago and explained her personal dilemma over Taiwan. “I think Taiwan should be part of China,” she said, “but I don’t think it’s worth fighting over. On the other hand, if we give up Taiwan, the Tibetans will

push harder to separate from China and so will the Uighurs in Xinjiang.” She lamented, “What will become of my country?”⁹

- *Strategic geography.* Chinese leaders see Taiwan as a critical link in a chain of containment that begins with US forces in Korea and Japan and runs south through Taiwan to the Philippines, Thailand, and Australia, nations with which the United States has security treaties. The United States is committed through the Taiwan Relations Act to provide Taiwan with sufficient arms to defend itself. Beijing seeks to break that chain and to project power into the Pacific. Moreover, Taiwan sits astride the two northern channels into the South China Sea, most of which China claims as internal waters.¹⁰

- *Economic capacity.* Absorbing Taiwan’s vibrant economy and technological prowess, especially in electronics, would be a plus for the troubled Chinese economy. China has already benefited from Taiwanese investment and trade. The government in Taiwan, however, has sought to discourage investment on the mainland so that Taiwan does not become too closely integrated with China economically; it seeks to steer investment toward Southeast Asia.

- *Diverting attention.* Some China hands believe that Chinese leaders play up the Taiwan issue to divert attention from China’s political struggles and economic difficulties. China is passing through a tense transition from the Third Generation to the Fourth Generation of leaders at the same time corruption is rampant, the banking system is riddled with bad loans, industrial productivity lags (especially in state-owned enterprises), and 125 million people—equal to the population of Japan—are unemployed.

In sum, China’s leaders see bringing Taiwan into the PRC as a crucial step in establishing Chinese influence over East Asia and in driving the United States from the Western Pacific. That explains the relentless drumbeat emanating from Beijing. Taiwan is the central question in every meeting between Chinese and American officials, in every academic gathering that includes Chinese scholars, and in many private conversations with Chinese visitors to the United States.

The Chinese pound the issue to the point of tedium. Hu Jintao, who has succeeded Jiang as Chairman of the Communist Party, told Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage in August: “The separatist activities of ‘Taiwan independence forces’ pose the gravest threat to peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait, and [are] an element of sabotage to peace and stability in the Asian-Pacific region.” Quoted in the *People’s Daily*, Hu said: “We will never allow the independence of Taiwan nor tolerate the harm caused by separatist forces in Taiwan to China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.”¹¹

Bonnie S. Glaser, a respected China watcher, has written that mainland officials harbor “no illusions” about Taiwan and have called for increased pressure on Washington to rein in Taiwan’s pro-independence leanings. China has accelerated the development of credible military options intended to deter formal separatism and to prepare for the use of force should China’s leaders deem that necessary.¹²

Therein lies the danger of miscalculation. Chinese political leaders and senior officers of the People's Liberation Army have said repeatedly that China will attack Taiwan if the government in Taipei declares independence. That has been coupled with Chinese contentions that the United States will not fight for Taiwan because few Americans see Taiwan as important. More than one Chinese has asked, "Why should Americans care about what happens to Taiwan?"¹³

American military leaders have cautioned the Chinese that they would be mistaken in thinking the United States will back down if confronted by a Chinese military threat to Taiwan. Leaders of the Pacific Command have told the Chinese directly that their command stands ready "to respond to any potential crisis, including the use of force against Taiwan by China."¹⁴

Some American specialists on China believe the US response to the terrorist assaults in New York and Washington on 11 September 2001 has given the Chinese pause, especially after the swift projection of ground and air power into Afghanistan. Others contend, however, that the Chinese think the American fervor for the war against terror will recede and will not return if China attacks Taiwan.

In Taiwan itself, people have become increasingly intent on remaining detached from the mainland, even if they are not ready to declare independence for fear of provoking the PRC. There is a growing sense of Taiwanese identity and a desire for self-determination. Democracy has taken hold, even if its roots are still in shallow ground, and that has reinforced the Taiwanese quest to retain charge of their own future.

Over the past 50 years, native-born Taiwanese first gained control of the economy from mainland Chinese who came to Taiwan in 1949. They have gradually taken over the government bureaucracy, the universities, the press, the armed forces, and, most recently, the nation's politics. The first President born in Taiwan, Lee Teng-hui of the Nationalist Party, was elected in 1996 in the nation's first direct presidential election. The second, Chen Shui-bian of the Democratic Progressive Party, came to office in May 2000. His inauguration featured Taiwanese music and dancers and an address replete with references to Taiwan's identity. "Taiwan stands up," Chen declared several times.¹⁵

In Taipei, a Western diplomat summed up the mood: "You must understand," he said, "that the Taiwanese today have the chance to determine their own destiny for the first time ever." To underscore his point, he repeated, "for the first time ever."¹⁶ He referred to the long domination by Chinese dynasties, the occupation by Japan, and the harsh rule of the Nationalists, perhaps better known by the Chinese name of Kuomintang, or KMT, from 1949 until the death of Chiang Kai-shek in 1975. His son, Chiang Ching-kuo succeeded him, eased the rigid rule of the KMT, and chose Lee Teng-hui to be Vice President, opening the way for a Taiwanese to accede to the top job.

Zweig pointed to a billowing sense of identity in Taiwan. Nearly 88 percent of those polled in a Taiwan Social Change Survey in 2000 responded that

“The dispute over Taiwan is dynamic and volatile, the focal point of maneuvering between Taipei, Beijing, and Washington. It is in constant danger of igniting.”

they considered themselves Taiwanese or Taiwanese-and-Chinese, up from 75 percent only five years before. Just eight percent saw themselves as only Chinese, down from 19 percent in 1995.¹⁷

That new sense of identity has been coupled with a drive toward democracy. Zweig found that “ethnic identity, and the fact that the Taiwanese felt like an oppressed ethnic group on their own soil, encouraged the emergence of democracy.” His research showed that only 23 percent of those polled agreed that “the government should decide which type of opinion should be allowed to spread in society” while 39 percent said, “too many political parties lead to political chaos.”

Perhaps most revealing, Taiwanese have been voting with their feet, with 77 to 83 percent of the eligible voters having turned out in the last three national elections. (In the United States, barely half the voters have gone to the ballot box in recent elections.) “Finally,” Zweig writes, “Taiwan’s effort to position itself in a positive light in contrast with the continuing authoritarian regime on the mainland further propelled it to adopt democratic structures.”¹⁸

A critical figure is Chen Shui-bian, the intense, shrewd, and energetic 52-year old President of the Republic of China on Taiwan. Since taking office, Chen has sought to expand what the Taiwanese call their “international space,” which means keeping their distance from the PRC while seeking greater recognition abroad. Chen, combining domestic politics, diplomacy, economic policy, and military acquisition, has put Beijing on the defensive again and again by proposing talks intended to lower tensions. Beijing, however, has said it would talk only if Chen accepted their version of the “One China” principle, which means acknowledging Chinese sovereignty over Taiwan. Chen has countered by offering talks with no conditions set. A standoff has been the result.

Chen was an early member of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), made up largely of native Taiwanese who opposed the ruling KMT. Self-determination and independence were among the mainstays of their position, with Chen advocating moderation to give the party flexibility. In 1991, some members of the DPP sought to make the establishment of Taiwan as a nation a goal of the party. To make the proposal less threatening to China, Chen suggested the policy

be stated: “Based on the principle that sovereignty belongs to the people, the issue should be decided by all the residents of Taiwan through a plebiscite.”

Chen was elected mayor of Taipei in 1994. Toward the end of his term, when he was mentioned as a presidential candidate, Chen said in an interview that Taiwan need not declare formal independence because, as President Lee Teng-hui had argued, the Republic of China had been a sovereign and independent government since the revolution of 1912 led by Sun Yat-sen. Asked whether he would seek a referendum as President, Chen said that would not be necessary so long as “certain big powers,” which he did not name, did not abandon Taiwan. If they did, he said, he would seek a referendum on a declaration of independence, and asserted “we will win.”

During his presidential inaugural address, Chen said again he would not seek a referendum. In August 2002, however, Chen caused considerable consternation in Beijing and Washington by suggesting that the national legislature adopt a law making a referendum possible. This came right after he suggested that Taiwan be prepared to “take its own path.” Beijing called the proposal “a brazen provocation” and threatened military action. A senior official in Washington said Chen’s remarks were “unfortunate,” especially after his government had given Washington no notice that he intended to make them.¹⁹

Americans with contacts in Taiwan and strategic thinkers in Taipei speculated that Chen had changed his mind after two years of being rebuffed by Chinese leaders and sought to force Beijing to respond. Moreover, the Chinese Communist Party was in the midst of the struggle over who would succeed Jiang. And Chen may have been trying to divert the attention of voters because he had not yet cleaned up scandals in Taiwanese politics.²⁰

Beyond that, Chen has proposed that democratic nations in Asia form an “Asian democratic alliance” to help persuade authoritarian nations such as China to become democratic. “For Taiwan, as a prime example of the global third wave of democratization, we are willing to cooperate with like-minded countries to contribute to the consolidation of Asian democracy and to promote democracy throughout the continent, notably in China,” he told the Asia-Pacific Democratic Cooperation Forum in Taipei.²¹

Similarly, Chen has sought to strengthen Taiwan’s ties to several nations by proposing free trade agreements with the United States, Japan, Singapore, Panama, and New Zealand by the end of 2005.²² Taiwan joined the World Trade Organization at the same time as the PRC in 2002. Taiwan runs an annual trade surplus with the United States, but seeks to keep it in hand so as not to arouse US protectionists.

In other foreign policy moves, Taipei has supported the US campaign against terror and claims to have spent \$100 million on counterterrorism, with much of that going to aid projects in Afghanistan.²³ The government has sought American advice on how to set up a peacekeeping force. Taiwan’s diplomats continue to knock on the door of the World Health Organization and other interna-

tional agencies. Taiwan has sought, with little chance of success, to regain the seat it abandoned in the United Nations General Assembly in 1971.

In short, President Chen has led a concerted effort to gain international recognition and to move closer to formal independence. Therein lies the danger of miscalculation. If Chen misjudges where the brink might be and either treads too close or steps over the line, that would almost certainly provoke a vigorous Chinese response, including the use of military force.

This is the situation in which the United States finds itself, largely by President Bush's choice. By any measure, he has shown the strongest support for Taiwan of any American President since Richard Nixon traveled to Beijing 30 years ago. President Jimmy Carter shifted US diplomatic relations from Taipei to Beijing in 1979. President Ronald Reagan was more concerned with the Soviet Union than with Asia. President George H. W. Bush allowed F-16 fighters to be sold to Taiwan, but more to score political points during a US election campaign than to defend Taiwan. President Bill Clinton hit a hard left rudder, coming close to acknowledging Beijing's claim to sovereignty over Taiwan.

The current Bush Administration wasted little time in setting out its policy on Taiwan. The most forceful statement came from Secretary of State Colin Powell in testimony before Congress in January 2001: "Let all who doubt, from whatever perspective, be assured of one solid truth: We expect and demand a peaceful settlement, one acceptable to people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait."²⁴ The demand that decisions about their homeland have the assent of the people of Taiwan had crept into US rhetoric during the Clinton era, but has been made part of policy by Bush.

Secretary Powell reinforced that pledge in June 2002 in a speech before the Asia Society in New York:

America's position is clear and it will not change. We will uphold our "One China" policy and we continue to insist that the mainland solve its differences with Taiwan peacefully. Indeed, a peaceful resolution is the foundation on which the breakthrough Sino-American communiqués were built, and the United States takes our responsibilities under the Taiwan Relations Act very, very seriously. People tend to refer to Taiwan as "The Taiwan Problem." I call Taiwan not a problem, but a success story. Taiwan has become a resilient economy, a vibrant democracy, and a generous contributor to the international community.²⁵

Bush's pledge that the United States would do "whatever it takes" to help Taiwan defend itself is well known. So is his Administration's permit for Taiwan to buy modern weapons for \$4 billion. Defense Minister Tang Yao-ming's journey to Florida in March to meet with Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly, and representatives of America's defense contractors was the most high-level meeting between US and Taiwanese defense leaders in decades. Later, Taiwan's Vice Minister of Defense,

Kang Ning-hsiang, met with Deputy Secretary of Defense Wolfowitz in Washington, thus becoming the most senior Taiwanese defense official to come to Washington since 1979.²⁶

Less well known has been a thorough revision of US war plans to help Taiwan repel an unprovoked attack by the PRC. Under Admiral Blair, who retired as Commander of the Pacific Command in May 2002, those plans were updated to account for the Chinese acquisition of modern Russian warplanes and warships and addressed weaknesses in Taiwan's defenses. "That was laborious stuff," said one officer. "It took thousands of man-hours. Some of the staff had to work so hard they started calling it the 'Blair Witch Project,'" referring to a popular horror movie.

At the same time, Blair told Chinese leaders that US forces were prepared to fight on behalf of Taiwan if a political decision was made to do so and that the defense of Taiwan would be worth risking American lives.²⁷ Whether Chinese leaders believed him is open to question, as they have asserted that the United States would not take that risk.

Admiral Blair's relief, Admiral Fargo, who took command in May 2002, indicated Taiwan's defensive flaws in response to questions from Congress. He ticked off a list that included command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance. Fargo said the United States should help in "improving their integrated sea and air defense capability and assisting them in the integration of their components into an effective joint defense."²⁸

In Washington, a Pentagon official explained that "helping Taiwan needs to go beyond hardware. There has been a growing realization here that arms sales are only half of the equation. They need to learn more about operating the equipment, about strategy, about joint operations."

Inviting military officers and defense officials from Taiwan to the Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies (APCSS) in Hawaii fell into this category. In November 2001, the Defense Department, which funds the APCSS, instructed the center to invite Taiwanese alternately with officers from the PRC. The first three Taiwanese came for the APCSS course that ran from May to August 2002. American officers may observe Taiwanese military maneuvers in the spring of 2003.

Admiral Blair said the APCSS's mission "builds confidence, bridges cultural differences, and helps eliminate potentially dangerous military misunderstandings." He continued:

It only makes sense for APCSS to include Chinese perspectives on key issues for the benefit and understanding of APCSS participants. APCSS also desires and includes Taiwan's participation. Taiwan provides a vivid example of social, political, and economic transformation. As a showpiece of free-market ideals and democratic government, Taiwan's perspective is also valuable to all of our participants—including China.²⁹

The expansion of American military ties with Taiwan has been accompanied by a fading of the “strategic ambiguity” that previously marked American policy. That ambiguity was intended to keep Beijing and Taipei guessing about how the United States would respond to hostilities across the Taiwan Strait. Beijing was not to know if the Americans would charge across the sea, nor was Taiwan to have any assurance that the cavalry would ride to the rescue. The intent was to deter both sides from rash action.

As strategic ambiguity has ebbed, positions have hardened all around. Bush officials have emphasized the Taiwan Relations Act, or TRA, which says that an assault on Taiwan would be “of grave concern to the United States.” The TRA was passed by Congress over President Carter’s objections after he switched diplomatic ties to Beijing from Taipei, and President Bush has been more forceful than his predecessors in emphasizing the TRA. It is the law of the land and takes precedence over the Three Communiqués, a point the Chinese choose not to acknowledge.

Bush officials also have revived what are known as the “Six Assurances.” Adopted by President Reagan in 1982, they commit the United States to continued armed sales to Taiwan, to preclude getting Beijing’s okay for those sales, and to avoid mediating between Beijing and Taipei. Reagan pledged to uphold the TRA, to assert that sovereignty over Taiwan had not been decided, and not to press Taiwan to negotiate with China.

For their part, the Chinese contend that the Three Communiqués of 1972, 1979, and 1982 are evidence that the United States agrees that Taiwan is part of China. Not quite. Powell, in carefully crafted language during his confirmation hearing, said:

The United States has long acknowledged the view that there is only one China. In that respect, Taiwan is part of China. How the People’s Republic of China and Taiwan resolve the differences and interpretation of that view is up to them, so long as military force is not one of the methods used. In the meantime, we will stand by Taiwan, and we will provide for the defense needs of Taiwan in accordance with the Taiwan Relations Act.

Note that Powell “acknowledged the view,” which is not the same as saying “agrees with the view.”³⁰ Moreover, the Chinese ignore the provisions in the Three Communiqués on peaceful settlement and have insisted that China retains the right to use force to resolve the dispute. Some Chinese argue that the communiqués have the standing of a treaty. In neither international nor US law is that so.

Even those who earlier espoused strategic ambiguity have started to question it. Kurt Campbell, who was a senior official in President Clinton’s Pentagon, wrote in *Foreign Affairs*: “This policy of ambiguity has become difficult to explain and perhaps even more difficult to implement in recent years.” Campbell noted a growing debate over whether the United States “should move toward a pol-

icy of more explicit deterrence to prevent both provocative [Republic of China] political actions and coercive PRC military steps.”³¹

Admiral Blair drew a distinction between political and military ambiguity: “You have to understand that it’s only political ambiguity, it’s not military ambiguity. There’s no question as to what the military facts are in China and Taiwan.”³²

“Strategic ambiguity,” however, has not been replaced by “strategic clarity.” Although the Bush Administration started down that path, it has been sidetracked by the campaign against terror since 11 September 2001, the confrontation with Iraq, and another confrontation with North Korea.

A lack of consensus among American decisionmakers has been even more of an obstacle. They can be divided into at least four schools:

- Panda huggers, a derisive term for those on the ideological left who assert that America must accommodate China’s emerging power, even at the expense of Taiwan’s freedom.

- Business executives and entrepreneurs, who pursue the age-old dream of selling toothbrushes to 1.2 billion Chinese. Most care little about what happens to Taiwan—unless they do business there.

- Balancers, including many American military officers, who say the United States should engage and deter China at the same time. Taiwan’s fate is to be determined by the Taiwanese.

- Demonizers, a derisive label for right-wingers who demand that China be confronted at every turn, although not contained as was the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

President Bush’s stance on Taiwan, which appears to be balanced, has several motivations. Perhaps most far-reaching, the world has changed since President Nixon and his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, crafted the Shanghai Communiqué of 1972 with Mao Zedong and Prime Minister Zhou Enlai. The primary purpose then was to enlist China in the Cold War against the Soviet Union; the fate of Taiwan was subordinated to that. Today, the Soviet Union is no more and the Russian confederation is not considered dangerous, even though China and Russia have patched up their differences and Russia is helping China to strengthen its armed forces.

Besides its strategic location, Taiwan’s future is linked to America’s credibility. Cutting through diplomatic verbiage, the United States must help defend Taiwan—or see its alliances with South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Thailand, and Australia crumble. A failure to aid Taiwan would be seen all over Asia as a lack of American resolve and would damage, and possibly destroy, the United States as a power in the Western Pacific.

Then there is domestic politics. The Bush Administration is driven by the slogan ABC—anything but Clinton. The distaste for the policies of President Clinton, including what they see as his soft posture on China, is palpable. Hard-line conservatives, critical of any US move that would appear to accommodate China, press Bush from his right.

More long range is American public opinion. The US view of Taiwan has become more favorable as Taiwan has held elections and fashioned a free-market economy. A recent Gallup poll showed that 62 percent of Americans had a favorable image of Taiwan, while 22 percent had an unfavorable view and 16 percent had no opinion. Two years ago, only 47 percent had a favorable view of Taiwan.

As David Zweig concluded: “Taiwan’s democratic transition places enormous pressure on the US government to maintain its support for the Taiwanese regime.”³³ Americans, who preach democracy and respect for human rights, cannot abandon a democracy and still retain moral credibility. This is a question of the destiny of 23 million people who want little more than to be left alone to determine their own future as a democracy and market economy. In the maneuvering of heavyweights, the fate of small nations—and their people—should not be overlooked.

NOTES

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27. Background interviews with author.
28. Written testimony, 26 April 2002.
29. E-mail response to author’s query, through PACOM Public Affairs Office, 18 April 2002.
30. Confirmation hearing, 17 January 2001.
31. Campbell and Mitchell, p. 22.
32. Interview with author, 29 March 2002.
33. Zweig, p. 30.