**Wanted: A Referendum on Taiwan’s Unification with China**

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A vast majority of the people of Taiwan wants to decide the future of their home island for themselves. If Taiwan were someday to be unified with China, it should only be a result of the people’s choice. Conversely, if it were to become an independent republic, that, too, should be the result of the people’s choice. Yet, under the so-called “1992 consensus” concocted by Beijing and the Ma Ying-jeou government, the Taiwanese are in danger of losing their precious right of self-determination.

Under the scheme, both Beijing and the Ma government agree that there is only one China, and that Taiwan belongs to China. Beijing allows the Ma government to claim, for now, that Taiwan is the Republic of China. In exchange for “peace and security in the Taiwan Straits,” Ma would lead the Taiwanese people away from independence and guide them toward unification. Ma is well aware, however, that there cannot be two governments in “One China”. Soon, he would have to negotiate with Beijing the demise of the ROC government and the transfer of Taiwan to the PRC.[[2]](#footnote-2) He has already started laying the groundwork for the future political negotiation by implementing in Taiwan an array of programs designed to foster closer ties with China and eventual unification. For Beijing and the Ma Government, it does not matter what the Taiwanese want. The two Chinese governments want to dictate the future of Taiwan between them.

In January next year Taiwan will have the presidential election. It is expected that after the election China will increase pressure on Taiwan to begin political negotiations for unification.[[3]](#footnote-3) The re-election of Ma Ying-jeou would raise the expectation of China for speedy unification. Very likely, Beijing would demand the Ma government to accept unification in name and begin the process of actual transfer of Taiwan in stages. In the negotiation, to be sure, the best interest of Taiwan would not be the concern of Ma and the KMT hierarchy, only their own future and the rewards they are hoping to get.

Should Tsai Ying-wen, the chairperson and the presidential candidate of the Democratic Progress Party, triumph, Taiwan should expect the pressure to come from both China and the United States. China would demand that the Tsai government accept one China (inclusive of Taiwan) as the basis for the negotiation, coupled with the threat of retaliation, should she refuse to comply. Simultaneously, Beijing would demand Washington to pressure Taiwan to “cooperate” with China “in the name of peace and security in the Taiwan Straits.” How the U.S. would respond to China’s pressure is unpredictable. Taiwan, however, must be prepared for the worst scenario.

In this brief essay I offer a simple plan to counter China’s bully tactics and safeguard Taiwan’s sovereignty through a peaceful means.

Referendum on Unification

The Taiwan government should hold a referendum, preferably in advance of the expected political negotiation with China, allowing the people to decide YES or NO on Taiwan’s unification with China. Tsai Ing-wen’s victory in the election would make the task of holding such a referendum easier. If, on the other hand, Ma Ying-jeou is re-elected, he could refuse to hold a referendum, fearing that the people might reject unification. Should that happen, the people would have no choice but to organize massive demonstrations to pressure the Ma government. In the past, Ma has repeatedly promised the people of Taiwan that his cross-strait policy is “no independence, NO UNIFICATION, and no war.” He also has made a solemn pledge that the future of Taiwan should be made with the consent of its people. Ma is obligated to hold a referendum to allow the people to express their choices.

The truth is, there are far more people who are opposed to unification than those who favor it. Even among the supporters of the KMT, especially at the grassroots level, many are opposed to unification and would want to have an opportunity to make known their wish. Those who favor *status quo*, currently comprising the majority of the population, would also feel encouraged to vote and reject unification in the secrecy of referendum. Thus, the referendum would galvanize people into a large anti-unification group and a much smaller pro-unification group – rather than Green and Blue or ethnic Taiwanese and Chinese mainlanders. The opposition to unification, therefore, would serve as the focal point of Taiwanese unity - the Taiwan Consensus.

The advocates of the referendum should explain to the people that the referendum is not about independence. By not advocating independence but merely asking the people to register their choices peacefully, the referendum will not provide China with any pretext for military intervention. Yet, the resultant rejection of unification would effectively demolish the Chinese claim that Taiwan is a part of China. It would be the affirmation by the Taiwanese people of what was so strongly implied in the San Francisco Peace Treaty more than half a century ago, i.e., Taiwan’s status has remained undecided.[[4]](#footnote-4) By rejecting unification the Taiwanese would put Beijing on notice that it should seek consent of the Taiwanese in order to reach the final settlement for the island’s future.

For the result of the referendum to be legally binding upon the government, at least one half of all eligible voters must take part in balloting, a very high hurdle. However, the stakes are also high. It’s about the future of Taiwan, the annexation of which by China would severely (most likely negatively) affect the life of every Taiwanese. While Taiwan cannot possibly match the overwhelming military might of China, the loud and clear voice of NO to unification, expressed by its citizens in a peaceful manner, would make it more difficult for China to resort to force and hence to achieve its ambition. By projecting China as a bully imperialist bent on devouring the land of the people whose only wish is to live a free and democratic existence, the voice of NO to unification should stir up a much-needed international support and sympathy for Taiwan, especially among the American people.

For the first time in history, Taiwanese would be able to help shape the destiny of their homeland. All eligible voters, green or blue, old or young, rich or poor, should exercise their right to self-determination.

China and Referendum

China should be reminded that the Taiwan question is not just about a piece of territory. It is also about the future of 23 million people.

In 1895 the Emperor of China (then called Qing) decided to cede Taiwan to Japan over the vociferous objection of the island’s inhabitants. In Beijing the Taiwanese representatives made tearful plea to the Emperor to carry on the war by transferring the capital to an inland city – to no avail. It was the decision of the Chinese Emperor to sacrifice Taiwan to save Beijing that triggered the long separation of Taiwan from China. It is the logic turned upside down that China today should call those Taiwanese who reject unification “separatists” or “spilitists.” Do not the Chinese leaders today feel any moral obligation to ask Taiwanese whether they are willing to return to the fold of their one-time “motherland”?

When the Japanese took over the control of Taiwan, there were nearly three million inhabitants, most of them ethnic Chinese having emigrated from China’s Fuchien province across the Taiwan Straits. Based on the Treaty of Shimonoseki, which legalized the transfer of Taiwan, the Japanese colonial government allowed the Taiwanese to have a choice: take everything they can and return to their homeland (transportation provided) within two years or stay and be regarded as Japanese nationals. Only 4,000 opted to leave Taiwan. Thus was drawn a clear distinction between Taiwanese and Chinese. Some 85% of today’s Taiwanese are descendants of those who chose to stay on Taiwan in 1895. Can China be equally magnanimous as Japan in giving Taiwan a choice between unification with China and freedom from China?

Thenceforth, the two peoples have gone on with their separate ways, living under different political and economic systems, experiencing different cultures and histories, and dreaming about different futures. For example, the Chinese witnessed the Boxer Rebellion, the Xin Hai Revolution, and the Japanese invasion of Manchuria and North China in the 50 years after China ceded Taiwan to Japan. Significant as their contribution was to the rise of intense Chinese nationalism, these events had little or no impact on the life and thinking of the average Taiwanese across the Taiwan Straits. Instead, at this time, Taiwanese were more interested in organizing political movements designed to win racial equality, preserve native culture, establish a Taiwan Assembly, and implement popular elections – all designed to reduce the pain of living under the Japanese colonial rule. While they scored only a very limited success, the Taiwanese had demonstrated, at such an early stage of the history, their knowledge and skills in using democracy as an instrument to carry out the anti-Japanese resistance.

In the following 60 plus years, the Chinese nationalism further intensified, fueled by the establishment of the People’s Republic, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. After 1978, the nationalism was channeled into economic development, resulting in a break-neck expansion in both economy and military build-up. Today China is world’s No. 2 economic power, holding in excess of three trillion dollars of sovereign wealth. Yet the per capita income for the people is only slightly over $7,500 (based on PPP).[[5]](#footnote-5) The large GDP ($5.9 Trillion in 2010) has enabled China to build a huge arsenal of nuclear weapons, thousands of missiles, stealth jets, nuclear-powered submarines, and even an aircraft carrier. It is in the position to intimidate its neighbors almost at will. The people celebrate the spectacular rise of their country and yearn that one day in not-so-distant a future China would replace the United States to be the richest and most powerful nation in the world.

Politically, however, China is a one-party dictatorship, which does not permit its people to have freedom of speech, press or religions. The government can violate human rights at will. The winner of the Nobel Peace Prize is still under house arrest; thousands of dissidents seeking political reforms have either disappeared or ended up in labor camps. Christians are not allowed to worship at churches of their choice; Falun Gong is totally banned.

In sharp contrast, Taiwan is a vibrant democracy. Laws protect basic liberties and human rights. The people elect the president, members of the legislature, and mayors all the way down to county heads. There are several competing political parties. Lively, often contentious, debates are carried out in the legislature regularly. People who disagree with the government policies are allowed to hold rallies and demonstrate on streets. Generally police are restrained. On major policy issues, such as unification, the people have the right to request the government to implement a referendum after meeting certain pre-requirements.

Democracy, however, came to Taiwan at a huge cost in human life. After the abominable 2-28 Incident, in which some 20,000 Taiwanese were massacred by Chiang Kai-shek’s troops, the KMT government clamped down on the people with marshal law, which lasted until 1987. During those 40 years, known as the Era of White Terror, hundreds of Taiwanese who sought political reforms were executed and thousands more served long prison terms, falsely accused of being Communist sympathizers. The strong pressure from Washington and the overthrow of the dictatorial governments in the neighboring countries of South Korea and the Philippines around this time finally convinced Chiang Chin-kuo to lift the marshal law and permit the formation of Taiwan’s first opposition party, the DPP. The election of Lee Teng-hui in 1996 as the first native Taiwanese president accelerated the pace of democratization in the form of Taiwanization, eliminating from the KMT government all features not compatible with the fact that the government no longer controlled China. The image of the “Outsider Regime” gradually faded and the “Republic of China” became slowly naturalized.

Economically Taiwanese are far better off than their counterparts in China. Per capita income (PPP) of nearly $32,000 in 2009[[6]](#footnote-6) was more than four times that of the Chinese. Taiwan is today the world’s fourth largest holder of foreign reserves. Taiwan’s prosperity today has its dark past, however. During the last half of the 1940’s and 50’s, its economy suffered near total collapse at the hands of the KMT government, desperately in need of money and resources to finance the losing civil war in China. There was a widespread shortage of rice for the first time in its modern history. Sudden influx of nearly two million refugees from China caused acute shortage of employment and rampant inflation. The land reform, while necessary, in retrospect, for the industrialization of the island, caused deep resentment among the Taiwanese elites, as they perceived the land reform as a scheme carried out by the outsider government to take away lands from the native landlords.

In a large measure it was the U.S. economic aids that helped stabilize the situation. In the 1960’s, and 70’s, Taiwan gradually transformed itself from an agricultural to an industrial island and from a recipient to a donor of foreign economic aids. Trade, especially export, made this possible. By the 1980’s, the island’s economy moved into advanced electronics. With the opening of the China market, the Taiwanese merchants began investments in China, which in turn spurred the cross-strait trade in the 1990’s, reducing the island’s dependency on the U.S. market. The conclusion of the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement in May 2010 almost ensured the continued deepening of the island’s dependence on China, raising a very serious political question on how long Taiwan can preserve its de facto independence.

Given all the differences – histories, political and economic systems and the moods of the peoples - that divide Taiwan from China, unification is impossible at this time. China, still in transition, must be willing to undergo fundamental changes in its political and economic systems. Taiwan is unwilling to go backward to the time of one-party dictatorship and the centralized economy that it had just gotten rid of. If China invades Taiwan to try to achieve unification forcibly, the Taiwanese will fight to protect their homeland to the best of their ability.

The United States and Referendum

The Taiwan-China political negotiation on unification is most likely to begin next year under pressure from China. The U.S. can help Taiwan in three very important ways.

First, the Taiwan government will initiate a referendum to seek a mandate as to whether the people favor or reject being a part of the PRC. Beijing, sensing that the referendum would result in an overwhelming majority rejecting unification, would oppose Taiwan’s holding of the referendum. It might turn to the U.S. to pressure Taiwan to stop it. Washington would do a great favor for Taiwan, if it would stand firm, insisting that referendum is a fundamental human right of all citizens of all democratic countries, and that the U.S. will not interfere in the working of the democratic process.

Secondly, armed with the powerful mandate to reject unification, Taiwan would propose to start negotiation on all possible options regarding Taiwan’s future that are acceptable to the people of Taiwan, including not only unification but also independence. Taiwan would promise China the continuation of cross-strait commercial intercourse, tourism, cultural and educational exchanges, and all other peaceful and lawful means that China could use to convince the Taiwanese of all benefits that may derive from being a part of China. Threat of force would only harden the people’s resolve to resist unification. In return, Taiwan would demand China to renounce use of force, and allow the Taiwan government to pursue any goal that it deems in the best interest of its people. Herein, Taiwan could again enlist the U.S. assistance in the form of an open declaration: Washington expects the negotiations to be conducted peacefully, would oppose either side resorting to threat of force, and would respect whatever result reached by two sides. Such a declaration would be a huge moral support for Taiwanese and would encourage America’s democratic allies to issue similar declarations.

That the two countries compete peacefully to win hearts and minds of people is not a new idea. Way back in 1954 in Bandung, Indonesia, China’s late Premier Zhou Enlai once proposed “the peaceful liberation of Taiwan.” If China is willing to accept peaceful competition, Taiwan is willing to consider holding a second referendum at an appropriate future time to gauge public sentiment on the issue of unification.

Thirdly, Taiwan cannot depend entirely on China’s good will to conduct peaceful negotiations. In fact, Beijing seems to have convinced itself that the quickest way to settle territorial disputes with its neighbors is by threatening to use military force, as so vividly demonstrated in its dispute with Japan over the Senkaku Islands (or Diaoyudao) last year. The extremely belligerent statements from Beijing in recent months regarding the disputed islands of Paracel and Spratley were clearly aimed at intimidating the governments of Vietnam and the Philippines. Taiwan must be prepared. It needs weapons with which not only to defend but also to deliver retaliatory strikes on China’s missile bases. For the supply of the needed weapons Taiwan must depend on the U.S.

1. \* Edward I. Chen is Professor Emeritus of History, Bowling Green State University, OH. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This intricate and sinister arrangement is best exemplified by the conclusion of the Economic Cooperation and Framework Agreement (ECFA) in May 2010. By the rule of WTO, of which both Taiwan and China are members, the ECFA should be registered at the world trade organization. Yet China refused, contending that it is not an international agreement between two states but a domestic agreement between Beijing and one of its local units. By also opting not to register, the Ma government has, in essence, acquiesced to Beijing’s stance that the government in Taiwan is a local government of the PRC. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. According to a U.S. diplomatic cable released by WikiLeaks, Ma Ing-jeou plans to open political talks with China if he is elected to a second term. See *the Taipei Times*, Sept. 26, 2011, p.3 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In the San Francisco Peace Treaty Japan renounced all right, title, and claim to her former territories and the lands she seized during World War II. While the Treaty named the successors to some of the renounced territories, it declined to name a successor to Taiwan (as well as the Paracel Islands and the Spratley Islands) because of the conflicting claims between Taipei and Beijing. It was the intention of the Treaty’s drafter to leave the legal status of Taiwan in abeyance, leaving the final resolution of the island’s status to a future international arrangement that would reflect the wish of the island’s inhabitants.

   In 1952 Japan concluded a separate peace treaty with the ROC (the Taipei Treaty) but refused to acknowledge ROC’s sovereignty over Taiwan. Twenty years later when Tokyo switched the diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing, Tokyo abrogated the Taipei Treaty. In 1972, in the joint communiqué with Beijing, Tokyo refused to go beyond what was stipulated in the San Francisco Peace Treaty. It merely stated that “Japan understands and respects” China’s claim for Taiwan as a part of the PRC. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In 2010 China’s per capita income is listed as $7, 544 and is ranked #94 according to the International Monetary Fund. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. According to *Wikipedia, the Free Encychropedia*, Taiwan’s Per capita income (PPP) was $31,776 in 2009 was ranked 19th in the world, as compared with China’s 94th. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)