

## ASIA-PACIFIC SECURITY AND CROSS-STRAIT RELATIONS

## The Taiwanese Perspective

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With the end of the Cold War, security issues have remained crucial for the survival and development of the Asia-Pacific region. Some structural changes in the security environment, such as globalization, military build-up, and the rise of China, are threatening regional peace and stability. Moreover, crises such as global terrorism, the North Korean nuclear standoff, and the SARS epidemic have seriously reshaped and further complicated regional stability and Taiwan-China relations.

This paper attempts to chart Taiwan's response to the unfolding events and how the country balances national security with changing political developments in the region. First, the paper briefly takes up Taiwan's security policy in the post-Cold War era and how it is dealing with cross-strait security issues and regional security challenges. Second, the paper discusses the Taiwanese perspective and efforts on some recent security crises and issues, including international terrorism, the North Korean nuclear crisis, and the impact of SARS. Third, the paper addresses the relationship between regional peace and stability and cross-strait relations.

**Taiwan's Security Policy**

Taiwan's security policies, understandably, are mostly framed in the context of cross-strait confrontation, specifically the military threat from China and the volatility of the relationship. Maintaining Taiwan's security is a comprehensive task, involving non-military security strategies, tactics, behaviors, as well as military guarantees to protect the island. Some major approaches to Taiwan's security can be summarized as follows:

First, Taiwan seeks to maintain a balance of military power and qualitative advantage by enhancing self-defense capabilities and arms purchase from other countries, especially the United States. While China continues to modernize its arsenal, it also possesses the so-called "asymmetric" military advantage, capable of targeting Taiwan with some 400 ballistic missiles deployed across the Taiwan Strait. Therefore, maintaining military balance, vis-à-vis China, is vital for Taiwan's national security policy.

Second, Taiwan is eager to ensure that the U.S. plays the role of balancer and stabilizer, both in military linkage and strategic assurance. The security of Taiwan is a key part

of the United States' overall security strategy in the region. Moreover, the possibility of U.S. military intervention has an important deterrent effect on China. But the Taiwan Relations Act was not intended to be an alliance treaty. It only points out that Taiwan's security and stability are "grave concerns" of the United States. Therefore, how to maintain U.S. engagement in cross-strait relations and Taiwan security issues are two major challenges for Taipei.

Third, through increasing functional cooperative interactions with China, Taiwan has cultivated informal economic and social ties that alleviate cross-strait military tension. The ROC government has changed the policy of "no haste, be patient" to the "mini-three-links," direct transportation, trade and postal linkages, between the two offshore islands of Kinmen and Matsu and mainland China, which can be seen as a concrete step toward the relaxation of "three links."

Fourth, Taiwan hopes to participate in cooperative organizations and regional summits to promote common and comprehensive security interests with its Asian neighbors. However, Taiwan cannot participate in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and can only send individual participants to the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) working group meetings. The limited involvement and participation of Taiwan in the Asia-Pacific security dialogue process expose limitations and pose problems for multilateral security cooperation.

**Regional Security Issues: The Taiwanese Perspective**

Taiwanese people indeed are overly preoccupied with the military threat from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and, as a result, pay less attention to international and regional security issues. However, global terrorism and other regional crises have seriously impacted Taiwan's security and economic development. Recently, two regional issues, the North Korean nuclear standoff and the SARS epidemic, have dominated the government's agenda.

**Terrorism**

It is true that no corner of the world has been unaffected by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The events have repercussions for the security and development of the whole world, including the peace and stability of the Asia-Pacific region. Most students of Chinese and



East Asian security agree that the 9/11 created an immediate and real danger for the United States, replacing China with terrorism as the major enemy.

We have witnessed some heated rhetoric in the early months of the Bush administration and increased arms sales to Taiwan for self-defense purposes, indicating a revision of U.S.-China strategic relationship. However, even though the impact of 9/11 on international and East Asian security continues, 9/11 has not fundamentally altered the structure of Sino-U.S. strategic relationship. Major differences and disagreements still remain unresolved, even after the end of the war on Iraq.

Eager to participate in international activities, Taiwan gave its support and cooperation to the international anti-terrorism campaign. The government and many NGOs have offered substantial humanitarian aid to innocent victims of terrorism and war, from New Yorkers to Afghan refugees.

The government has pledged substantive support for the U.S. effort to eradicate terrorism, expanded international investigative cooperation, cooperated in intelligence exchange to thwart sabotage, and adopted measures to prevent money laundering. Private organizations, such as the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation, which is renowned for its charity work worldwide, immediately mobilized its members to assist with rescue and relief work in New York. Funds were raised in Taiwan and overseas Chinese communities in the U.S. for the families of the 9/11 victims.

Meanwhile, President Chen Shui-bian has framed China's threats against Taiwan as a form of terrorism, since China has never renounced the use of force as a means to resolve cross-strait issues. Facing the threat from increased deployment of hundreds of ballistic missiles across the Taiwan Strait, President Chen called on China to withdraw those missiles and asked international community to be cognizant of the pressure faced by Taiwanese people from Beijing. "The terror and threat posed to Taiwan's people has virtually exceeded those brought by any terrorist attacks," President Chen said.

### North Korea and Nuclear Proliferation

The North Korean nuclear standoff is currently the most important crisis management case in Asia-Pacific region. Pyongyang's alleged nuclear weapons program has generated tensions in Northeast Asia. The United States is worried that if its nuclear program is not stopped, North Korean could very soon be able to develop nuclear weapons and export weapons-grade material to other countries or even terrorist groups. This would bring the

risk nuclear proliferation to other countries in the region, which have amassed the skills to produce nuclear weapons in a relatively short period. Such proliferation would lead to a fundamental change in the balance of power in East Asia.

Military conflict on the Korean Peninsula is a frightening scenario to consider. Countries in the region, including Taiwan, are repeatedly by Pyongyang's reckless behavior, such as withdrawal from the Non-Proliferation Treaty. In response, Northeast Asian countries will likely explore more diplomatic and military means to enhance their national security. Japan's launch of a spy-satellite to monitor North Korea's missile programs is one such example.

For China, North Korea's closest ally, a nuclear North Korea does not serve its strategic interest, and may pose a risk to its own security. But neither does Beijing want to see the collapse of the North Korean government. That could flood China with refugees and bring U.S. troops stationed in South Korea closer to its border. Also, China will not be pleased to see Japan rearming again, especially if it has medium- or long-range ballistic missiles or even nuclear weapons. Therefore, it is in China's interest to prevent Pyongyang from escalating tensions in the Korean Peninsula. But remains Beijing's prerogative to determine what role it wants to play in this very complicated regional security crisis.

Although Taiwan has no significant role to play in this crisis, the Taiwanese people have great interests in supporting a diplomatic solution to the North Korean crisis, provided the result will not sacrifice Taiwan's security. Meanwhile, Taipei also notes with pleasure that Beijing's efforts and assertiveness in bringing the United States and North Korea together demonstrated its willingness and ability to chart a course to resolve regional disputes in a peaceful manner.

Taiwan does not have any nuclear program or any medium-range surface-to-surface missiles. In fact, the government has just approved a draft bill that would ban the development of nuclear weapons, gradually phase out the use of nuclear power, and develop renewable energy to meet future needs. The bill calls on for the government to realize six goals: no development of nuclear weapons; a gradual end to the use of nuclear power; consequent adjustment of the overall energy policy; development and promotion of sources of renewable energy; safe use of nuclear power; and the selection of a permanent depository of radioactive waste. Nonetheless, it remains to be seen whether banning nuclear power is a feasible solution in Taiwan.

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### SARS Crisis

Soon after hitting the news headlines, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) became a global health crisis and caused tremendous economic damage to China, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan. The Asian Development Bank estimated that SARS could end up costing US\$16 billion in Asia. This estimate seems conservative. While it is true that the economic impact of this epidemic was reduced by effectively bringing the virus under control, the overall economic fallout for the worst affected Asian countries could prove to be significant.

In Taiwan, the damage caused by SARS has ignited a new wave of doubts about further cross-strait economic exchange. While Taiwan business people and tourists are returning to China now that the epidemic is under control, the psychological barrier may remain. This will further complicate the current relationship, which already suffers

from a lack of mutual trust. Furthermore, the SARS crisis will inevitably become a top issue of debate in the upcoming 2004 presidential election.

On the other hand, the SARS outbreak highlights Taiwan's deep frustrations over being blocked from membership in the World Health Organization (WHO) and demonstrates that this exclusion is also a blind spot in the global defense network against contagious diseases. The Republic of China was an original member of the WHO, but its seat was given to Beijing in 1972. Taiwan began seeking observer status in 1998 after a serious enterovirus outbreak that killed 80 children. Taiwan health officials asked for information on that strain of flu but the WHO refused to help.

Unfortunately, Taiwan's struggle to be an observer at the WHO this year was viewed as just another political issue between Beijing and Taipei. But the spread of SARS to Taiwan shows the folly of relegating 23 million Taiwanese



outside the world health community simply due to Taiwan's lack of membership status. The main reason why Taiwan has been unable to become a member or observer of the WHO has been the boycott, obstruction, and opposition of Beijing. While the WHO remains vigilant against SARS, it should also strive for universal healthcare by admitting Taiwan.

### Asia-Pacific Security Environment and Taiwan Security

In the current U.S.-led Asia-Pacific security environment, "peace" and "self-defense" are the two basic principles of cross-strait relations and Taiwan's security. Key to the idea of "peace" is peace of the status quo. Thus, "peaceful resolution" is nothing more than a policy of expectation. Nevertheless, maintaining the peace and security of the status quo is still important. Meanwhile, "self-defense" is a secondary principle in response to China's continual threat to use military force to resolve the so-called Taiwan problem. On one hand, by providing sufficient weaponry to Taiwan and, on the other hand, without ruling out the possibility that the United States might send troops to defend the island. The fundamental goal is to provide a deterrent measure against military threat from China.

From a certain angle, Taiwan can be seen as a special type of non-status quo country, based on its continued dissatisfaction with the existing limits placed on it by the international community and countries in the Asia Pacific region. A truly sovereign, independent, democratic, and economically vibrant country, the Republic of China on Taiwan is nevertheless not recognized by a single country in the region. Yet as Taiwan's identity and democratization continue to grow stronger, the government is stepping up efforts to enlarge its international breathing space and increase its participation in international organizations.

Naturally, there are significant differences in degree and nature of demands made by Taiwan and the other non-status quo countries; yet countries in the region should understand that appropriate engagement of Taiwan and gradual integration are also necessary. Allowing ROC participation in regional security dialogues and discussions will be useful in integrating Taiwanese perspective into regional security concerns. Regional accommodation and engagement can thus be seen as confidence-building measures to reduce cross-strait tensions.

Strictly speaking, the distinction traditionally made in security dilemma theory between offensive and defensive weapons (i.e. the concept that only an increase in offensive weapons will cause other countries to feel threatened, and that the possession of defensive weapons should not cause a security dilemma) cannot be applied to relations between Taiwan and China. First, Beijing feels that even the possession of purely defensive weapons will give Taiwan increased self-confidence and encourage it to move towards *de jure* independence. Second, with the development of military technology, there are both strategic and technical difficulties to discern defensive weapons from offensive

weapons. However, the current Taiwanese military strategy seeks only to maintain military parity with China and strengthen Taiwan's defensive capabilities in response to the threat from China.

All countries in the region have an interest to reduce the risk of conflict in the Taiwan Strait. So far, however, no form of preventive diplomacy or confidence-building measures has been instituted across the Taiwan Strait. This raises the question of crisis management in the region. Bilateral cross-strait military confidence-building measures (CBMs) so far are still blocked by cross-strait political stalemate and distrust. However, since the mid-1980s, informal cross-strait links have developed rapidly. These understandings and consultative mechanisms on related issues, restraint and notification of military exercises, and the development of wider economic and social ties can contribute to the management of a peaceful cross-strait environment.

Governments on both sides of the Taiwan Strait gradually come to the realization that cross-strait interaction is not a zero-sum game. The gain of one side is not necessarily the loss of another. This is the same for other countries in the region—enhancing relation with one side across the straits does not necessarily mean that relation with the other side will be downgraded. Regional concern about China's potential power for destabilization enhances Beijing's leverage. But Taiwan's role is to keep China in check and other countries need to contribute to the maintenance of peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region. Therefore, how to maintain a balanced relationship with both Beijing and Taipei has become one of the major, but inescapable, challenges for countries in the region.

### Conclusion

The Taiwan security issue is not merely a cross-strait issue, but one of the most important foreign policy problems in the Asia-Pacific region. It has a real potential to draw involved countries into military conflicts. Also, cross-strait military conflict will disrupt regional trade and development, and may force other countries in the region to side with or against China, altering the security environment and structure in the Asia-Pacific region.

In the new era of interdependence and globalization, security cannot be obtained unilaterally because the world is confronted with common threats such as terrorism and nuclear proliferation. Taiwan has taken extensive measures to cope with these problems and also contributed humanitarian assistance to the international community to promote regional and international security. In the process, it is clear that cross-strait relations and Taiwan's security cannot be isolated from other regional issues. Other countries cannot ignore the impact of what transpires in Taiwan and across the Taiwan Strait.

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