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Taiwan: Autonomy with Chinese Characteristics?

One policy problem facing Chinese leaders concerns the status of Taiwan. While the issue has largely remained “on hold” for several decades, China’s rising power, both economically and militarily, make it likely that the issue of Taiwan will be brought to the forefront at some point. For China, reunification of Taiwan is not a matter of if, but when (Xi 2013:21). On the Taiwanese side, the election of an independence-minded president and ruling party means a deviation from the 1992 Consensus, which presents a problem for the Chinese leaders. I identify three choices available to the Chinese leadership: 1) no action, 2) push for a solution akin to “one country, two systems”, or 3) attempt to reunify Taiwan with the mainland by force, first with diplomatic and economic pressure, and then militarily. I conclude that the first option is unlikely due to China’s rising power and balance in the East Asia region shifting in their favor. While China has enacted diplomatic strategies, such as convincing other states to revoke their recognition of Taiwan, it seems unlikely they will take military action to reunify Taiwan with the mainland. Although China would be capable, the costs of launching an attack on an unwilling population would be too high to justify. The most likely choice for the Chinese leadership is to push for a “one country, two systems” solution, similar to Hong Kong. This leaves Taiwan with a high degree of autonomy, while legally recognizing it as a part of the PRC.

The policy problem in question concerns the status of Taiwan in the long-term. In the short-term, the status-quo of Taiwan having de facto independence is likely to prevail. Underlying the status-quo is the 1992 Consensus, in which both sides agreed on a “One China” policy, but with distinct interpretations on what “One China” stands for (Tan 2017). It allowed both sides to acknowledge that long-standing political problems existed, but with the promise that constructive dialogue would continue on other cross-Strait issues. While the 1992 Consensus once served as a way to decrease mistrust and overt hostility, the situation has changed with the election of Taiwan’s new president Tsai Ing-wen. She hails from the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) , a pro-independence party. In addition, the new president has not stated support for the 1992 Consensus, and China has refused to continue dialogue without it as a backdrop. What was once considered a breakthrough has now led to an impasse in cross-strait relations (Tan 2017).

**Choices for Chinese Leaders**

I identify three broad choices that the Chinese leadership has at its disposal: do nothing, push for a solution akin to Hong Kong’s “one country, two systems”, or take aggressive action to reunify Taiwan with mainland China.

Taking no action is not a likely choice for a rising China with a growing economy and military. It is a matter of Chinese national pride for Taiwan to be reunified with the mainland. Allowing the issue to go unchecked could pave the way for a more robust pro-independence movement on the island, which elected a pro-independence candidate in 2016. Already, a seventy percent of the population under 40 see themselves as exclusively Taiwanese (Chen et al. 2017). Additionally, more than seventy percent of Taiwanese see Taiwan as an independent country, the Republic of China (ROC) (Chen et al. 2017). No response by Chinese leaders could allow the pro-independence movement to grow more robust.

Another choice available to Chinese leaders would be to use coercion or force, either diplomatically, economically, or militarily, to reunify Taiwan with the mainland. If we follow the logic of offensive realism, China’s superior capabilities are more than enough to compel Taiwan to China’s will (Mearsheimer 2014). After all, as the famous line in the Melian Dialogue goes, “The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must”. Already, China’s opening of new air routes near Taiwan has led to a significant cooling in the relationship between the two. The opening of the air routes was done without Taiwan’s approval, and Taiwan’s Mainland Affairs Council has said this dispute will shape future ties with China (Yu 2018). This is further evidence of a deteriorating relationship since the pro-independence candidate Tsai Ing-wen and her party, the DPP, took office in 2016. China has put diplomatic pressure on Taiwan by convincing states that recognize Taiwan as an independent country to revoke their stance. In December 2016, Sao Tome and Principe revoked recognition of Taiwan, and in March 2017, Gambia followed suit (Blanchard 2017).

Despite this, more substantial force, such as military action, is unlikely due to the high costs of invading Taiwan. Despite the rhetoric, China-Taiwan relations have been relatively stable since 1971, when the PRC became the recognized government of China by the majority of states and the United Nations. Military action would be a drastic departure from the status quo. In addition to the costs of invading an unwilling population, China is unlikely to make the choice of military action when the United States shares an alliance with Taiwan. The strength of this alliance can be debated, but China will not want to invite a great power struggle to their region.

A third option available to Chinese leaders is to push for “one country, two systems”, which would have Taiwan be a special administrative region, much like Hong Kong and Macau (Bush 2013). While there is little support for this solution in Taiwan, this option is preferable to a more aggressive alternative. For China, this would allow them to claim Taiwan as part of the PRC, while leaving most of Taiwan’s democratic institutions intact, at least at first. In his speech to the 19th Party Congress, Chinese President Xi Jinping gave comments regarding Taiwan. They centered around China’s actions toward Taiwan and returning to the 1992 Consensus (Paal 2017). While China has increased pressure on Taiwan, it has done so to return to the previous status-quo, and not in a bid to reunify. According to Xi, “We have responded as appropriate to the political developments in Taiwan, resolutely opposed and deterred separatist elements advocating ‘Taiwan independence’, and vigorously safeguarded peace and stability in the Taiwan Straits” (Xi 2013:5).

**Conclusion: What is likely to happen?**

In the short term, little is likely to change. China wants to return to the 1992 Consensus as a backdrop and status-quo. In the long-term, Chinese leadership has choices to make regarding the issue of Taiwan. The most likely choice is for China to push for “one country, two systems” for Taiwan. It would allow for a high degree of autonomy, while legally recognizing Taiwan as a part of China. This choice benefits China, but does not carry the same costs of trying to reunify Taiwan by force.

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