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Washington's Disquiet: A Perspective on Current U.S.-Taiwan Relations

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When the current Bush administration took office in 2001, there were expectations for a blossoming of relations between Washington and Taipei. Given the strong support for Taiwan in both the legislative and executive branches of government, there was much enthusiasm for increasing “semi-formal” exchanges with Taipei at various levels. Indeed, from defence cooperation to intelligence sharing as well as political and diplomatic contacts, observers note that the extent and level of exchanges between the two sides are at a level not seen since the breaking of official diplomatic relations between the United States of America and the Republic of China on Taiwan in 1979.

Recent exchanges include meetings between a current Taiwanese defence minister and a sitting U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defence, establishment of a Taiwan Congressional Caucus, as well as a reported meeting between the Speaker of Taiwan's Legislative Yuan and the U.S. Vice-President. Overhanging these developments is President George W. Bush's declaration that he would do “whatever it takes” to help defend Taiwan during his election campaign. Against this seemingly buoyant atmosphere, the increasing sense of frustration towards Taiwan among many policymakers in Washington seems somewhat surprising.

Defence Reform Doldrums

One object of the apparent irritation with Taiwan is the seeming inability of the island's defence establishment to reform itself. According to the recently passed National Defence Organisation and National Defence Laws, Taiwan's defence establishment has an obligation to restructure itself by consolidating civilian leadership and establishing greater oversight over the military. Under current plans for reform, there are also calls for the military to restructure command and control as well as enhance joint operations in order to upgrade extended defence and homeland defence capabilities. As the most recent National Defence Reports documents, Taiwan's Defence Ministry appears to have embraced these concepts.

Given the potential that these changes can make Taiwan a more effective partner in a Taiwan Strait contingency, there is significant support for Taipei's proposals for defence reform in the U.S. government, particularly the Pentagon. Defence experts in Washington, however, observe that there is little actual movement on defence reform other than acquisition of expensive new hardware. Reportedly, some American visitors to Taiwan found the lack of progress in areas of command and control, communications, passive defence, and infrastructure protection highly disturbing.

Apparent Taiwanese inaction despite strong U.S. support, and even pressure, is becoming cause for concern even among some of Taiwan's staunchest friends in Washington. Much of the unhappiness over Taiwan's approach to defence reform comes from the fact that the lack of movement on defence reform is casting doubt on Taiwan's ability to be an effective partner-in-arms in the event of hostilities across the Taiwan Strait. At a time when U.S. defence planners appear to be seriously considering the practical aspects of military cooperation with Taiwan, there is a growing feeling in some Washington circles that Taipei is happy to "free ride" on the United States for its security. This is making some American officials to ask, "if Taiwan does not want to work on defending itself, why should the United States?"

The Impact of Impasse

Washington observers are also concerned about the infighting and lack of leadership that plagues Taiwan's politics. Those holding this position see political deadlock and bureaucratic foot-dragging as the main culprits for the lack of progress on defence reform as well as efforts to revive the island's economy. There is a growing feeling that Taiwan is only paying lip service to promises about substantive changes. In fact, there is a belief by many that leaders in Taipei have a greater interest in political grandstanding than genuinely attempting to rectify the island's faltering economy and ensure its long-term survival.

Some U.S. critics even argue that the half-hearted proposals for economic reform are just public relations gestures by a leadership set on winning elections and popularity contests rather than real solutions. They wonder about the seriousness of Taipei's attitude towards its own future. Such sentiments are eroding goodwill toward Taipei in some quarters of Washington, some are even beginning to characterise political leaders in Taipei as "childish" and "immature". Reportedly, Taiwan's inability and apparent unwillingness to advance dialogue on trade issues already caused Washington to suspend contact between economic officials above the Deputy Assistant Secretary level.

Other U.S. officials also find Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian's attempts to garner support highly unsettling due to their potential to upset Beijing and destabilise cross-strait relations. These include his "one country on each side" declaration in August 2002 and the recent proposal to introduce a referendum law that may allow for an eventual vote on Taiwan's independence. Those in Washington who feel that the U.S. needs minimum distractions from its "War on Terrorism" also do not appreciate such moves by Taipei. In fact, Washington's public expression of concern over the referendum issue was an apparent rebuke of the Chen government by the Bush administration.

Watchers of the situation in Washington also think that by frustrating friends and supporters the Taipei government may be squandering an unprecedented opportunity to consolidate and expand the quasi-official U.S.-Taiwan relationship. A former U.S. official with long experience working with Taiwan commented that the current environment presents Taipei with an unprecedented opportunity to firm up its links with the U.S. government. By formalising the access and expanding the relations it currently enjoys in the executive branch, Taipei can use the traditional support it enjoys in Congress to make these linkages resistant to erosion by future U.S. administrations. In effect, Taiwan has the chance to help prevent sudden shifts in policy as seen during the Carter presidency. By not seizing the moment, Taiwan may be shutting this window of opportunity on itself.

The View from Beijing

Curiously, the simmering tension between Taipei and Washington may pave the way for more stable relations across the Taiwan Strait. Although initially alarmed by the Bush administration's seemingly open support for Taiwan and the pro-independence leanings of President Chen Shui-bian many in Beijing appear to be taking comfort from current differences between Taipei and Washington. Some officials in Beijing believe that facing internal problems and flagging support from Washington, Taipei will be unable to get either internal or external support for independence.

There even seems to be a new confidence in Beijing over the Taiwan issue. A senior Chinese diplomat opined that, "if things remain in this trajectory, give Taiwan a few decades and they will come running for reunification." Hyperbole aside, this statement reflects the logic behind some current thinking in Beijing. Subscribers of this view believe that with the widening gap in power across the Taiwan Strait, all China has to do is to not agitate the situation, and wait a more advantageous time to solve its "Taiwan problem". Indeed, Chinese leaders seem remarkably unruffled by President Chen's calls for a referendum law; quite a departure from previous reactions to moves with pro-independence overtones.

Incidentally, the growing gulf between Taipei and Washington may also spell calmer Sino-U.S. relations. Chinese officials repeatedly state that the Taiwan issue is the greatest obstacle to improving U.S.-China relations. Another one of Beijing's great apprehensions is that strong American support for Taiwan will provide Taipei the political space to move towards independence. Although unease over the possibility of such a scenario was particularly acute at the beginning of the Bush administration, it seems to be diminishing with the developing differences between Taipei and Washington. With the Taiwan issue on the backburner, observers in Beijing feel that China and the United States can focus on cooperation in areas ranging from trade to counter-terrorism and problems regarding North Korea.

Gains from Tension?

Though annoying to many in Taiwan and the United States the ongoing tension between Taipei and Washington may not be entirely negative. This is may be especially true in terms of regional security. A Beijing that is less volatile on issues relating to Taiwan and a Taipei less able to provoke China can reduce the potential for conflict across the Taiwan Strait. A Sino-U.S. relationship that is less acrimonious and more cooperative can also mean a more stable Asia-Pacific, which is likely to be conducive to economic development. Ultimately, Washington's present irritation with Taipei may actually have a positive influence on the region, and ironically, even Taiwan's own security, albeit at the possible expense of the long-term U.S.-Taiwan relationship.

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