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Why China's Taiwan Policy Initiatives?

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CHINA's Taiwan policy has been quite dramatic lately.

In March, the legislature, the National People's Congress, passed an anti-secession law, which authorises the Chinese military to employ force to attack Taiwan if it declares formal independence. This act proved to be immensely unpopular and triggered the march of hundreds of thousands of people in Taiwan to protest China's heavy-handed approach toward the island.

About a month later, however, threat was replaced by significantly conciliatory gestures: Lien Chan, the leader of Taiwan's major opposition party Kuomintang (KMT), visited Beijing. This was shortly followed by the visit of James Soong, the head of the other major Taiwan opposition party, the People First Party (PFP). These visits turned out to be immediately popular in Taiwan, as reflected in the rising approval ratings of Lien and Soong, and the declining popularity of President Chen Sui-bian and his ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in public opinion polls. For fear of being marginalised, Chen appears inclined toward similar conciliatory moves.

It seems that Beijing has been gaining the initiative in handling its relations with Taiwan. What can explain the evolving dynamics in China's Taiwan policy?

Some argue that China's Taiwan policy has been sensitive and reactive to external events, especially major developments in Taiwan. For instance, when the then Taiwanese President Li Denghui visited the US in 1995, he enraged Beijing so much that it had to launch missiles and conduct military exercises to show its resolve against the so-called movement toward Taiwan independence. But such an explanation has difficulty in accounting for the passage of the anti-secession law, mainly because external developments had not been so harsh and adverse to Beijing.

The pro-independence DPP, for instance, failed to win the majority in Taiwan's legislative elections held last December. More or less because of this, the authorities on both sides of the Taiwan Straits were able to reach an agreement to allow direct flights over the Straits during the Spring Festival, the first time since 1949. Beijing was also able to send high-ranking officials to attend the funeral of Koo Chen-fu, the head of the semi-official Straits Exchange Foundation in Taiwan. Moreover, the European Union (EU) was just about to lift the arms embargo on China, which was imposed following the military crackdown of student demonstrations in Tiananmen in 1989.

It is therefore beyond reasonable comprehension that China was willing to squander the goodwill of Taiwan and the chance of getting access to the EU's arms -- which could be central to accelerating China's military modernisation, a top priority for Beijing -- by endorsing the highly alienating anti-secession law.

Others suggest that the high level of economic interdependence between Taiwan and mainland China should raise the cost of tension and conflict and therefore may moderate Beijing's policy behaviour. Such a premise, however, has clearly failed to explain Beijing's willingness to adopt the highly controversial anti-secession law, in spite of the facts that the Taiwanese business community has invested more than \$100 billion in mainland China, that more than a million people from Taiwan live and work regularly in mainland China, and that cross-Straits annual trade volume had reached \$78.3 billion by 2004.

Another explanation is that China has been actively involved in multilateral institutions for many years. Such involvement should socialise China into the norms of cooperation such as equality, resolution of conflicts through peaceful means, and the non-use of force. Such norms should moderate China's policy behaviour. But this explanation runs into difficulty mainly because China regards Taiwan as an internal issue. As a result, Taiwan has not been treated as an equal and the use of force has never been renounced.

Furthermore, China's application of cooperative norms has been selective. China can sign a code of conduct over the South China Sea and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation with ASEAN. But such a code and treaty seem absent in China's relations with Japan. This shows that strategic reasons rather than genuine socialisation of universal norms may underlie China's policy behaviour.

Some may argue that benign external developments, economic interdependence and socialisation may be incapable of accounting for the passage of the anti-secession law. But they can explain the conciliatory gestures that led to the visits of Lien and Soong. But these invitations followed too closely the anti-secession law. As a result, they can be understood either as damage control over the negative implications of the anti-secession law or as an extension of the strategies associated with the law. But they are not a deliberate reaction toward the long-term, structural changes as reflected in the three explanations.

If external dynamics are not adequate in accounting for China's Taiwan policy behaviour, domestic politics may be explored for explanations. Two major types of such explanations are plausible.

One is the "civilian control" explanation. According to this scenario, the military-dominated hardliners had pushed for the anti-secession law by highlighting the stark nature of cross-Straits relations at the expense of benign development and economic cost, mainly because the law justifies larger budgets and better technologies for the military. Chinese President Hu Jintao, being new and an average technocrat with weak credentials, had to yield to the hardliners by promoting the anti-secession law in order to consolidate power. But the law has produced bad repercussions. As a result, Hu decided to rein in the military. The shift towards conciliatory gestures that led to the visit of Lien and Soong may be understood as Hu's effort to recapture the civilian dominance over China's Taiwan policy.

This also means that diplomacy and economics will replace coercive means as the primary policy instruments. One weakness of this explanation, however, is that the invitations may be

an effort to operationalise Hu’s “four points,” which stress conciliatory gestures to win the hearts and minds of the people in Taiwan. Because the “four points” were released simultaneously with the anti-secession law, but not long after the passage of the law, such initiatives may not be interpreted as ad hoc measures hastily adopted to control the damage of the anti-secession law.

The other is the “warfare” explanation. According to this explanation, China’s Taiwan policy has largely been based on a comprehensive political-military strategy designed by the military. The steady pursuit of an ambitious military modernisation intends to enhance the credibility of deterrence against Taiwan independence. But political, psychological, and economic warfare is also necessary for the deterrence to succeed.

The passage of the anti-secession law, for instance, may produce significant psychological pressure on the leaders and people in Taiwan by delineating clearly the legal bounds of sanctions. It also preempts Taiwan’s constitutional changes that may move Taiwan further toward independence. The heightened sense of vulnerability and uncertainty generated by the law among the leaders and people in Taiwan can be further exploited through a united front strategy. Such a strategy targets the forces and leaders who are not committed to independence by offering political incentives such as invited visits, and economic incentives such as opening further the Chinese markets to Taiwanese products and produce. In this way, the neutral forces and leaders may be won over, and the pro-independence forces may be further isolated and diminished. The momentum, once initiated, may perpetuate itself.

Such a strategy may be designed by the military mainly because the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) is probably the only Chinese organisation that possesses a substantial and comprehensive system that specialises in political and psychological warfare: the General Political Department (GPD) and its subordinate subsidiaries. The two authors who wrote *Unrestricted Warfare*, which advocates similar strategies, for instance, are political officers, the products of this system.

Wang Zaixi, a leading official of China’s Taiwan Affairs Office, is a major-general from the GPD. It is particularly important but also ironic to note that the PLA’s victory over the KMT forces during the Civil War can be attributed as much to correct military strategies and tactics as to political and propaganda warfare. If the “warfare” explanation has merit, we may expect the lines of battle shifting from the Taiwan Straits to inside Taiwan politics, and the battle plan expanding from “military struggle” to political, legal, psychological, and economic warfare.

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