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Cross-strait Relations and Saving Beijing's Face

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In Chinese society and therefore politics, having “face” or *mianzi* translates to being able to hold one’s head high.
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SYNOPSIS

Cross-strait relations remain the sharpest point of contention between the United States and China, and any conflict will have devastating consequences for all parties involved. For China, Taiwan is not just a matter of geopolitics, but an issue of face.

COMMENTARY

The more that things change, the more they stay the same. This seems to be happening following the Xi-Biden summit on 16 November. While few expected the summit to result in substantial improvement in Sino-American relations, policymakers from both Beijing and Washington upped the ante for one another. A few days later, several American lawmakers visited Taipei, like in previous years, following which

President Biden invited Taiwan to participate in a Summit for Democracy on 9–10 December. To compound problems, the United States, together with its closest Western allies (UK, Australia and Canada) confirmed that they would diplomatically boycott the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, thereby incurring Beijing's further ire. Unsurprisingly, China's foreign ministry lashed out in anger and promised to punish these countries in due course.

Cross-strait Relations and the Problem of the Chinese “Face”

How do we make sense of the events of the past month, and why is China particularly provoked by American (and Western) actions? In our view, the issue of Taiwan cuts to the heart of the legitimacy of the Communist Party of China (CPC), and intimately involves the “face” (or *mianzi*) of the Chinese government in the eyes of both the domestic and international communities. Washington's invitation of Taiwan to the Summit for Democracy was viewed as interfering in China's domestic affairs, and thus not giving China face in the eyes of its own people (since Taiwan is regarded by Beijing as an internal matter). By boycotting the Olympics, the United States and its closest allies were perceived to be ungrateful guests who have deliberately “uninvited themselves” from a party that China has expended considerable effort to prepare for — an ostensible loss of face for Beijing globally.

Indeed, this issue of face is something that policymakers — particularly those in Asia — are careful to pay attention to, in their relations with Beijing. Broadly defined, “face” is the respect, pride and dignity of an individual (or a group) as a consequence of their social achievement or standing. Studies in cross-cultural exchange have shown that people in Asia pay more careful attention to face than is commonly assumed by Western observers.

In this respect, the issue of Taiwan is more than just a core national interest (relating to territory), but involves the “face” of the CPC, and consequently, is linked to the respect, pride and dignity that is accorded to the Party. Consequently, this need for face means that China will be careful *not* to take actions that would portray itself as being reckless and desperate, and that it will necessarily want to have the moral high ground — both in the eyes of its citizens and the international community — should conflict ensue. As such, Beijing's reactions are highly dependent on how the opposite sides (Taiwan, US) act, and it will prefer peaceful reunification in the long run instead of forceful takeover. This can be seen in the following ways.

Using Military Actions Only as a Deterrent

Militarily, China has increased its presence around the Cross-Strait. On 27 November, the People's Liberation Army Eastern Theater Command (which is responsible for Taiwan and the East China Sea) conducted “combat readiness patrols” in the Taiwan Strait as a US congressional delegation visited Taipei, organising naval and air forces including eight military aircraft. An earlier visit by American Congress personnel on 9 November also saw Chinese military being activated to fly around Taiwan as an expression of Beijing's displeasure.

In our view, these actions should not be viewed as a precursor to war, but rather as a strong deterrence and response to what Beijing sees as America's violation of the

One-China policy, taken to compel Washington to maintain its “strategic ambiguity” over its support for Taiwan so as not to encourage pro-independence elements in Taipei. Seen this way, we must not be alarmed at President Xi’s words that China would “be compelled to take resolute measures” if the separatist forces of Taiwan were to cross the redline. While Beijing will continue to attempt to isolate Taiwan globally, the decision to start a war with Taiwan will not be a decision entirely of Beijing’s own. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Chinese citizens — notwithstanding Xi’s bravado — are ill-prepared for a war. On 2 November, many Chinese people rushed to supermarkets in panic after they misunderstood the Ministry of Commerce’s instructions to store daily supplies as a sign that war against Taiwan was imminent. This lack of readiness means that any attempt by Beijing to prosecute war would require it to isolate a bulk of its citizens from the devastating consequences, and that it might not — in the long run — count on the support of the Chinese people.

Internationally, Beijing would lack justifiable excuses especially if Taiwan does not seek de jure independence. Its long-term credibility (including its self-proclaimed “peaceful development”) and image in the global arena will take a massive battering. Should Beijing seek reunification through the use of force, the United States would inevitably get involved and Beijing would face strong military resistance, as well as suffer economic sanctions and international isolation.

Isolating Taiwan on the International Stage

What will remain unchanged is the isolation of Taiwan on the international stage. Beijing will try to ensure that countries, organisations, institutions and individuals around the world adhere to the One-China policy and undermine Taiwan’s attempts to express its identity. Taiwan only has full diplomatic relations with 14 United Nations member states in the world, all of which are small states with limited geopolitical influence. This is intimately tied to Beijing’s pursuit of face: diplomatic recognition of Taipei is an affront to the Chinese face as this is essentially a zero-sum game. The idea that “you are either with us or against us” reflects Beijing’s uncompromising approach to Taipei. Indeed, Taipei’s perceived growing relationship with countries in the European Union has generated considerable displeasure in Beijing.

Hence, the United States’ decision to invite Taiwan to its democracy summit was seen as disrespectful towards Beijing, and not giving China face. This is because it has always been in the American interest to be intentionally ambiguous about the One-China policy as this allows Washington to benefit from its simultaneous engagement with Beijing and Taipei. More importantly, it facilitates the ability of the US to maintain an overwatch on Beijing’s ambitions while keeping itself sufficiently inoculated against the messy realities of cross-strait relations. As the thinking in China goes, the US naturally wants to keep it that way so long as it keeps Beijing having to second-guess Washington’s intentions, as well as making it difficult for Chinese policymakers to execute any sudden moves that would alter the status quo.

The allowing of Taiwan of a place alongside other nations during the democracy summit may have made Chinese policymakers feel threatened that the status quo on Taiwan would soon be altered. The Chinese may also have perceived that the United States viewed it to be to America’s advantage to risk Chinese unhappiness in order to

make a larger political point — that democracy is inherently superior to authoritarianism, and that the days of authoritarianism are numbered.

The Future of Cross-strait Relations

Undoubtedly, cross-strait relations remain the sharpest point of contention between the United States and China, and any conflict will have devastating consequences for all parties involved. To this end, it might be worthwhile to consider elements and gestures of “face-saving” so as to lower the heat of geopolitical tensions bubbling at the surface.

While giving face may not be the ultimate decisive factor in preventing conflict (should it appear imminent), it allows leaders and policymakers to not look bad in the eyes of their domestic constituents and international audience. While this may be viewed as an unhappy compromise by those who hold a dogmatic view of how national interests should be pursued, those with more moderate dispositions will at least find in these face-saving gestures, opportunities to thwart the worst-case scenarios and arrive at least-worst outcomes that may be agreeable to all.

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