

## IS THERE A SOLUTION TO THE CHINA-TAIWAN QUARREL?

Jean-Pierre Cabestan

(Publié dans *Perspectives chinoises*, n° 63, janvier-février 2001, pp. 4-6)

While official dialogue between China and Taiwan remains suspended and direct sea and air links across the Taiwan Strait are really still in the planning stage, a growing number of decision-makers and political analysts have offered their suggestions as to how to break the present deadlock and find a permanent—or at any rate lasting—settlement to the persistent and dangerous dispute between Peking and Taipei.

It is clear that finding a solution is a matter of urgency. The threats coming from the People's Liberation Army, aimed at persuading Taipei that it is necessary (if not in its best interests) for it to be reunified with the "motherland", are becoming more real. The accompanying rhetoric is backed and made more credible by the rapid modernisation of China's defence forces and its continuing deployment of new armament systems against Taiwan—in particular the more than 300 missiles that are now targeted on the "rebel island". Since March of last year, the Republic of China (ROC) has had a president, Chen Shui-bian, backed by a Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) that, while it no longer campaigns for complete independence, remains opposed to any unification with the People's Republic of China (PRC); accordingly, Peking suspects the party of "separatism" (*fenliezhuyi*) despite Chen's recent conversion to the idea of integration with the Chinese mainland, economic at first and then, in the long term, political (*zhengzhi tonghe*). Furthermore, since January this year, a new US administration has taken power in Washington, one perceived as more favourable to Taiwan and, above all, more mistrustful of the foreign and defence policies developed over nearly a decade by the PRC. On the one hand, this US administration is set on putting an end to President Clinton's drift towards unilateral "friendship" with a country that is forever protesting against US action wherever it may occur in the world. On the other, it intends to strengthen its relations with its allies, in particular those in the Asia Pacific region, and unashamedly to pursue its anti-missile defence project at national and regional level. These are objectives that can only serve Taipei's interests and are obviously in opposition to Peking's. The bilateral crisis triggered on April 1, 2001 by the aggressive

interception and collision of a US surveillance plane by a Chinese fighter near Hainan but outside of the PRC's airspace have confirmed both the growing rivalry between Peking and Washington and its close link with the security of Taiwan.

Yet, the combination of these factors is likely either to “set fire to the plain”—as Mao Zedong might have said—i.e. to draw the protagonists ineluctably into total war, or to push them towards prudence and to a search for new solutions.

In fact, since this new mix of political ingredients has come together—rather like unknown chemical elements being tested for the first time—the signs of moderation still prevail, as much in Peking as in Taipei or Washington. Thus, ever since he took office, in May last year, Chen Shui-bian has shown exemplary restraint, in the process evincing good will towards both the US and the PRC. Moreover, he has progressively aligned his mainland policy with the declared strategy and objectives of the Kuomintang (KMT) from 1991 onwards<sup>1</sup>. He was opposed in this by his own party, the DPP, and by significant groups within his government, among them Tsai Ying-wen, Chairwoman of the Mainland Affairs Council—hence his hesitations and repeated backtracking. Even so, on December 31st, he went so far as to adopt the definition of One China proposed by the cross-party group led by Lee Yuan-tse, the President of the *Academia Sinica*, and to concede the notion of political integration, a concept probably more significant in our Western languages than in the idiom of Gao Xingjian.

The PRC has also softened its stance. It endeavoured to isolate Chen while trying to win over Taiwan's opposition: a classic encirclement manoeuvre known as “united front strategy”. At the same time, it sought, by not striking too hostile an attitude, to avoid alienating the US administration. Last July, some Chinese Communist Party leaders, including Qian Qichen, at the risk of angering the Conservatives, revived the idea that One China did not necessarily mean the PRC: in other words, that if Taiwan were in the future to become part of China, it would not have to adopt the status of Special Administrative Region, like Hong Kong and Macao, but would become part of a larger entity whose name and institutions would be still to be defined once Taipei had “sincerely” accepted the sacrosanct principle of One China<sup>2</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> Szu-yin Ho, “Politique et rhétorique dans les relations entre la Chine et Taiwan”, *Politique Étrangère*, 1/2001, pp. 58-59.

<sup>2</sup> What is today being called Qian's “three new phrases” (*xinsanju*): 1) “In the world, there is only one China”; 2) “The mainland and Taiwan are both part of China”; and 3) “The sovereignty and the territorial integrity of China cannot in any circumstances be divided”. *Mingbao*, July 14th 2000, p. B17, and February 21st 2001, p. B15.

Lastly, the new US President, George W. Bush, has for the time being rather sought to show the Peking leadership that his China policy was not basically opposed to that of his predecessor. Thus, in spite of the US spy plane crisis and the greater “clarity” he has shown in his support of Taiwan’s security, he is unlikely to yield to his party’s extremists who would wish to challenge the One China policy. Similarly, despite the predictable activism of some politicians, he will probably do nothing to delay China’s entry to the World Trade Organisation when the time comes. His plans for National Missile Defence and Theatre Missile Defence seem already more modest and less urgent—this year’s defence budget offered no extra credit for the purpose—than was feared by countries hoping to remain in a position to threaten, just a little, the United States. Furthermore, as to the question of what assistance the People’s Liberation Army may have given to the radar installations of the Iraqi army, which came to light in March 2001, Bush Jr. has for the moment opted to give Peking, at least publicly, the benefit of the doubt. And while arms sales to Taiwan have substantially increased, by reason of the new threats the island must face, they have undoubtedly be restricted to manageable proportions—as seen politically from Washington and Peking... and militarily from Taiwan.

From now on, however, the United States will attempt to induce the PRC to withdraw from the arms race that it launched in the Taiwan Strait exactly ten years ago with its first purchase of Soviet Sukhoi fighter planes (24 Su-27s)<sup>3</sup>. The prospects for achieving a dialogue on security between Peking and Taipei and for adopting bilateral confidence-building measures seem non-existent as long as cross-Strait talks remain suspended. But the US government knows how it can help such a dialogue to begin, indirectly at first, by acting as go-between; later, little by little—rather like the present maritime relations between the two sides of the Strait—the dialogue could become “semi-direct”; and, eventually, it might be direct<sup>4</sup>. One should not play down this dimension to the Sino-Taiwanese problem, in particular in view of the impact the fresh Sino-US crisis may have on the defence posture of both Peking and Washington. The military and strategic situation in the Strait, however it may develop, will govern the effectiveness of the proposed solutions, as outlined in the following articles.

In the first of them, He Baogang, himself originally from the PRC, puts forward a suggestion that will infuriate many in Zhongnanhai, even in some capitals close to Peking:

---

<sup>3</sup> *Far Eastern Economic Review*, March 15th 2001, pp. 16-21; Cf. also the proposals by the Sinologist Kenneth Lieberthal, Clinton’s former adviser on Asian Affairs, “US Policy Toward China”, March 2001, [www.brookings.org/comm/policybriefs/pb072/pb72.htm](http://www.brookings.org/comm/policybriefs/pb072/pb72.htm). Interesting though they are, these proposals overestimate the US’s capacity to influence and change the Chinese political regime, and tend to sanctify the concept of One China that, we should not forget, is no more than a diplomatic fiction, and far from the truth as perceived not only in Taiwan but also in the rest of the world, at any rate outside government circles.

<sup>4</sup> Philippe Chevaléras, “Chine-Taiwan: le poids des échanges économiques”, *Politique étrangère*, 1/2001, pp. 71-72.

the best way to persuade the ROC to commit itself to unification with the mainland is to give it once again a seat in the United Nations. This proposal, however provocative it may seem, does illustrate how out of step, even anachronistic, the Chinese are in their conception of sovereignty in a world that, while it has not destroyed this historically based notion, has badly damaged it—sometimes for the worse but in most cases for the better (Europe being cited here as an example). Whether we like it or not, sovereignty is less and less absolute: but has it ever been completely so<sup>5</sup>?

Our three articles have one idea in common. This is that, while Taiwan does not enjoy external or negative sovereignty (expressed in terms of diplomatic recognition), it is better placed than many other countries to claim that it does exercise internal and positive sovereignty (the right of jurisdiction and security) over its inhabitants. Consequently, in the view of these commentators (and that of a growing number of observers, including the present writer), it is almost impossible for Peking and Taipei to find a lasting agreement unless and until the PRC and—to a lesser extent, in my opinion—Taiwan begin some fresh thinking on the notion of sovereignty and draw from the experience accumulated by other divided nations and supra-national entities such concepts as might help them find a mutually satisfactory formula.

Really, we are dealing here with two Chinas: as is shown by He Baogang as much as by Jeremy Paltiel and Phil Deans, Taiwan's dreamlike quest for formal independence seems to be a thing of the past. Contrary to what some Taiwanese people hoped, the democratisation of the island has not enabled them to achieve that goal. The question today is not the creation of a Republic of Taiwan that most Taiwanese people would reject and that the US—no less than the PRC—would block; it is to decide what form of association both Taipei and Peking could accept. The problem is twofold: fundamentally, any eventual agreement will largely depend on the balance of power, not only bilateral and military but also more generally as between all the parties involved: that would include Japan, a power that, as Deans reminds us, we would be wrong to forget. And, more immediately, one would have to sound out whether Peking and Taipei are now ready to negotiate, and whether they really wish to reach an agreement. One thing is certain: the former would have to accept that, like it or not, the ROC is a separate state from the PRC, while the latter would have to accept that the ROC belongs to the Chinese nation and that its fate is linked, whatever is decided, to that of the Chinese mainland. The “unification-association” proposed by Paltiel (that is my own qualification, putting aside any misplaced allusion to New Caledonia's independence-association) is tempting. Two obstacles remain, however, and cannot be ignored. Firstly,

---

<sup>5</sup> Bertrand Badie, *Un monde sans souveraineté — Les Etats entre ruse et responsabilité*, Paris, Fayard, 1999, 308 p.

most Taiwanese people would be unwilling, despite the relative weakening of the independence movement, for their *de facto* independence to be challenged in any way at all (that is the *status quo*, in its true sense, in Taiwan) without a profound change in the PRC. Secondly, it is impossible for the present leadership of the Chinese Communist Party to accept the international implications of the proposals by Qian Qichen and others. Indeed, if Peking does accept that Taiwan should stay outside the PRC, what would be the island's international status *before* unification becomes a fact and *before* the two component parts of One China come together? Is the PRC really disposed to make a space for Taiwan and to build a confederal structure that would force the Peking leaders to review the whole range of their diplomatic agreements with the outside world?

Hence Taipei's reluctance to go back to a concept of One China that it verbally and only half-heartedly approved in 1992: even then, the Taiwanese only endorsed it in their own way, with the phrase "one China, two interpretations"—their interpretation being subject to subsequent evolution and coming ever closer to German or Korean precedents (one nation, two states). Indeed, if the ROC confirms the notion of One China that Peking is proposing, before opening any negotiations, might it not sacrifice the margin for manoeuvre that it needs for improving its international status? One thing is certain: in the Taiwanese view, the ROC is a nation-state like any other, and so could not possibly be shoe-horned into a political formula that would erase, or even threaten, its existence. For this reason, as long as the PRC goes on refusing to talk with Chen despite the flexibility and weakness he is showing, one has to treat with caution any new proposal for a settlement.

The fact remains that, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Peking has adopted a strategy that is anti-US and anti-Japanese; paradoxically, this stance contributes to the island's security and the ROC's survival. It may be that Taipei would judge this environment to be favourable to negotiation, for if, by chance, mainland China became pro-Western and, worse still, democratic, Taiwan would find itself facing new perils and—*mutatis mutandis*, like Kosovo faced with the new Belgrade government—likely to find itself forced by Washington into reconciliation with the new mainland authorities. Unfortunately or fortunately, there is little chance of this "nightmare scenario" becoming a reality, at least not in the foreseeable future. Sadly, in the meantime other direr nightmares may occur...