A Peacefully Rising China and Taiwan’s Security

Dilemma

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Taiwan faces only one external security threat but it is an existential one. The threat can be seen in terms of Chinese irredentism or a determination of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) government to bring Taiwan into either the PRC’s jurisdiction or a yet to be designed format for a common Chinese sovereign state dominated by the Chinese Communist Party. Any solution that is satisfactory, in contrast to merely tolerable, to Beijing will imply the end of Taiwan as a sovereign state.

While the PRC government has consistently retained the right to use force to resolve ‘the Taiwan issue’ its preferred solution is to do so without resorting to actual military hostilities. Here a distinction needs to be made between the deployment of forces to intimidate or to back up diplomacy and the actual use of force in combat. The former is not inherently objectionable to Beijing as military intimidation is relatively low cost whereas it genuinely prefers to avoid the latter because of the very high costs implied. One should bear in mind that while this distinction can be made clearly conceptually an attempt to deploy forces solely to support diplomacy can easily lead to an unintended escalation if the other party should respond in an unexpected way.

In policy terms what this means is that the PRC government’s preferred solution is to persuade the government in Taiwan to do ‘the sensible thing’ – rejoin China in some form - by speaking softly but carrying an enormous stick. Whichever way Beijing chooses to speak its intention remains the same. The big difference is that the scope for it to succeed increases when it speaks softly and induces the rest of the world to accept increasingly the idea that China is a rising superpower that behaves like a ‘responsible stakeholder’.

This reveals a basic dilemma in Taiwan’s security. With the PRC’s rise being a reality and the rest of the world caught up in a China fever, the world is inclined to engage China positively as a responsible stakeholder. On the one hand if Taiwan tries to persuade the rest of the world that without abandoning its ultimate design over Taiwan Beijing will end up using force to secure sovereignty over Taiwan and risk a war with the United States it will be portrayed by some as warmongering and provoking Beijing. On the other hand if Taiwan plays along with China’s assertion that its rise is peaceful it provides a disincentive to the USA and others to help Taiwan modernize its modest defence forces while China dramatically upgrades the capacities of its armed forces.

All countries other than Taiwan have a vested interest in taking seriously China’s avowed policy to develop peacefully and not threaten any other country as it aims to promote a harmonious world. China or, for that matter, any new great power, rising not peacefully will destabilize the region in which it is located and possibly the international community. Thus no peace loving country can object to China rising
peacefully. As a practical policy matter it is blatantly in China’s interest to rise peacefully since the alternative will provoke others to pre-empt or arrest China’s rise. Thus, it is pointless to ask if the Chinese government is sincere in adhering to this policy in the foreseeable future. It must be because it is in its interest to do so. The real question is what China will do when it has finally risen. Since Chinese leaders have never articulated the conditions under which they consider China to have risen, it is not possible to say with any degree of certainty who the top leaders of China will be when this stage is reached. If one cannot even know who the top policy makers will be it is not meaningful to speculate what they will do. This being the situation, policy makers in countries that are China’s potential competitors are put in a situation where they have no choice but work with the PRC government and try to ensure it will indeed become a stakeholder in both the short and the long term. The alternative is to treat a rising PRC as a potential enemy which will almost certainly ensure that it will become one.

The tendency for their policy makers to take such a view of relations with China is reinforced by the existence of a China fever. The latter has created an atmosphere where taking China seriously in the positive way is taken for granted whereas negative analysis of China requires good justifications. Like opinion leaders in newspapers and the media bureaucrats and diplomats are more likely to act in accordance with the China fever than against it.

With counties generally seeing China as a partner and mostly a positive force in the international community, the PRC government’s own narrative over Taiwan gets more widely accepted. It was one thing to look benevolently at a blood thirsty Communist totalitarian state or even an authoritarian and repressive Leninist regime threatening an American protégé (as Chiang Kai-shek’s Taiwan was in the Maoist period) or a democratizing Taiwan (as the situation became in the Deng Xiaoping era). It is a different matter when an increasingly open, capitalistic, vibrant and modern China that asserts it will develop peacefully tries to persuade Taiwan to rejoin mother China. The fact that a high degree of economic integration across the Taiwan Strait has taken place since the 1990s further provide scope for policy makers in third countries to see China as acting reasonably towards Taiwan. Consequently, when Taiwan found itself at odds with China, as it frequently did under the Chen Shui-bian Administration, Taiwan (rather than China) was often seen as the ‘trouble maker’. Since the primary interest of the USA and the rest of the world is to maintain peace, stability and order in order to promote prosperity, economic wellbeing and development in East Asia, the Chen Administration’s inability to shake off the ‘trouble maker’ image put Taiwan at a disadvantage. It became politically impossible for any government, other than that of the USA, to help Taiwan strengthen its defence capacity.

Taiwan is in any event only allowed to procure defensive weapons from overseas and from an extremely limited source of suppliers. After the sale of Mirage jets to Taiwan by France in the early 1990s the only country that has continued to help Taiwan strengthen its military capabilities is the United States. With the PRC apparently rising peacefully, and speaking to all non-US weapon manufacturing countries softly but carrying under wrap what appears like a stick, it is most unlikely that any country other than the US will sell any weapon to Taiwan to replace aging and no longer serviceable hardware that Taiwan’s defence forces badly need. A country of 23 million when the potential external threat is a continental size leading
military power with a population of 1.3 billion Taiwan cannot possibly design and manufacture all the modern weapons and related equipment it needs. Even if Taiwan can do so, it cannot maintain the production facilities that can resupply losses sustained in the event of a conflict. Thus, Taiwan must rely on its only patron and protector to sustain a capacity to face off or survive a PRC attempt to forcefully impose unification.

The USA will continue to sell arms to Taiwan as it is required to do so by the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979, under which ‘the United States will make available to Taiwan such defense articles and defense services in such quantity as may be necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability’. The same Act also stipulates that ‘[t]he President and the Congress shall determine the nature and quantity of such defense articles and services based solely upon their judgment of the needs of Taiwan’. It means it is entirely up to Washington to assess Taiwan’s actual needs to maintain a sufficient self-defence capacity against the threat from the PRC at any given time. Any procurement decision Washington may make cannot but be affected by its analysis of the scale, nature and urgency of threat that the People’s Liberation Army may pose towards Taiwan.

Any such US assessment will be affected not only by the requests for specific materiel and justifications for procuring them that the government of Taiwan may provide but also by Washington’s overall analysis of the trilateral relations among itself, Taipei and Beijing. This means a successful projection by Beijing that its rise is peaceful and cross-Taiwan Strait relations are cordial and improving must influence Washington’s judgement of Taiwan’s defensive needs. If policy makers in Washington should conclude that the risk of the PRC using force against Taiwan is receding and mechanisms are in place for an efficient dialogue between itself and Beijing to resolve unexpected crisis, it is reasonable for Washington to downgrade the security risk that Taiwan is believed to face in the foreseeable future. Such an assessment is likely to result in a more restrictive policy in arms sales to Taiwan, as the specific type and quantity of weapon sales must, in accordance with the Taiwan Relations Act, not exceed what Washington judges to be appropriate for Taiwan’s defence. This being the case the more successful Beijing is in spreading the message that its rise is peaceful, the more difficult it will be for Taiwan to maintain a sufficient defence capacity.

Does the Ma Ying-jeao Administration’s policy to engage China positively in order to ease tension and make the most of the economic complementarities across the Taiwan Straits accentuate the security dilemma outlined above? At first sight it must have done so by encouraging the rest of the world to overlook the long-standing security problem Taiwan still faces. But one should not forget that the rest of the world does not, in any event, want to see Taiwan’s security problems if they can avoid doing so. Whether Ma’s policy harms Taiwan’s security or not needs to be judged against what else it has done to strengthen Taiwan’s security while it eases tension.

The security threat Taiwan faces remains the same as before. In promoting its rise as a peaceful one, the PRC government under the Communist Party still adheres to one of its highly treasured methodology call the United Front. The fundamental principle behind the United Front has not changed since its inception in the 1930s. It basically requires the Chinese leadership to divide the world in policy
terms into three parts, with China at one end, its principal enemy (in this case Taiwan) at the other, and the rest of the world in ‘the intermediate zone’. The United Front requires the Chinese government to target the principal enemy for destruction while it works on ‘the intermediate zone’ to win over those which can be persuaded and minimize the hostility of those who cannot be persuaded. Once the principal enemy has been eliminated, the PRC government is required to move on to choose from among its secondary enemies in the unfriendly end of ‘the intermediate zone’, elevate it to the status of principal enemy and repeat the process, until every other player have been converted to become its friends. As applied to Taiwan, the PRC government has not yet succeed in achieving the goal in the first round of such a strategy. However, by promoting its peacefully rising concept, it has created an international environment that makes it difficult for the government of Taiwan to refuse to deal with it on reasonable terms. In other words, in applying the United Front against Taiwan, Beijing has managed to make it diplomatically awkward for the Ma Administration not to behave as if it were itself in ‘the intermediate zone’.

The Ma Administration is in principle free to refuse to play Beijing’s game, as its predecessor, the Chen Shui-bian Administration had done. However, the alternative approach adopted by the Chen Administration did not improve Taiwan’s security either. Chen’s policy towards China had the advantage of relative clarity. But it did not win general international support as the rest of the world was not minded to understand Taiwan’s predicament and preferred to engage China positively instead. With the rest of the world and a large part of Taiwan’s own people infatuated with the China fever, the Ma Administration’s efforts to ease tension with Beijing is actually popular both domestically and internationally. It also suits Beijing.

The fact that the easing of tension is more advantageous to Beijing than to Taipei does not, however, imply that it must be an inappropriate policy for Taiwan or that the Ma Administration is pro-Beijing or willing to do Beijing’s biddings. However much the general public in Taiwan would like to see tension eased across the Taiwan Strait, there is no question that they would also like to maintain their right to self-determination. This being the reality no one elected to the office of state president in Taiwan can afford to be pro-PRC in contrast to being pro-Taiwan. The difficulty for the Ma Administration is how to avoid the easing of cross-Strait tension from reinforcing China’s success secured by an adroit application of its United Front methodology packaged attractively under the policy of promoting a harmonious world.

To minimize the impact of this particular security dilemma two objectives seem essential for the Ma Administration to achieve. The first is to persuade the international community, particularly the USA, that while Taiwan is committed to improve relations with China and reduce the risk of a military confrontation, as a democracy its government must ensure its people retains the right to self-determination. For Taiwan to insist on this basic democratic right does not necessarily imply adopting a policy for either the independence of Taiwan or the unification with China. It just means that the future of Taiwan should be decided by the people of Taiwan if and when such a decision needs to be made. But to ensure such a democratic right can be maintained for the indefinite future, Taiwan needs to modernize its defence forces until and unless the only threat to its existence has disappeared. In presenting its case for modernizing its defence capabilities, Taiwan requires a well thought through long term strategic plan that gets domestic bipartisan endorsement and is designed to give Taiwan the ability to hold off any external threat
for 2-3 weeks or whatever timeframe deemed necessary for the political process to run its course in the USA for it to dispatch forces to help Taiwan defend itself. In light of the Taiwan Relations Act the US government is legally required to enable Taiwan maintain sufficient self-defence capabilities that is consistent with the interests of the USA, for which maintaining the conditions for democracy to survive in Taiwan is one.

The most challenging objective the Ma Administration must fulfil is to forge a domestic political consensus on two issues. The first is to transform the so-called independence Vs one-China preference dichotomy into a common position that the future of Taiwan must be decided by the people of Taiwan, though there is no time frame for them to exercise this right. It is a position of ruling nothing in and ruling nothing out in terms of Taiwan’s future relationship with China. It should be a position similar to that inherently exists in all democratic countries, namely that only the people of a democratic country can decide their own future in an open, fair and democratic way. This is a position that Beijing dislikes but can live with since it does not cross its bottom line. The second is to accept that Taiwan’s military procurement will always have to be opportunistic, as American politics can have as much, if not greater, impact any US Administration’s willingness to sell military hardware than Taiwan’s actual security needs. The mistakes that both the Kuomintang and the Democratic Progressive Party made in not taking advantage of the Bush Administration’s offer of a major arms package in 2001 must be avoided. Taiwan’s security and its defence procurement must be transformed into a bipartisan issue if Taiwan is to secure its own long term future.

To conclude it is not in Taiwan’s interest to challenge or confront China’s policy of rising peacefully, as it will go against the interest of the whole world and will not get a sympathetic hearing. But Taiwan must adroitly respond to the new international situation created by the successful implementation of China’s peacefully rising strategy. It requires Taiwan to focus on persuading the whole world that Taiwan’s only interest is to defend its democracy and in asserting its right to self-determination it sees no need to hold a referendum on this matter, unless a compelling reason should present itself. It will not change China’s irredentist intentions but should remove the basis for the international community to see a particular policy of Taiwan - a wish to assert de jure independence - as a cause for war. It leaves the option open for China to seek unification by making such an option so attractive to the people of Taiwan that they will choose to embrace it. The creation of such an option for China gives it a credible alternative to the use of force and eliminates the need for it to insist on having a timeframe for a solution. To move in this direction the Kuomintang Administration will need to reach out to the DPP and others to forge a political consensus to make the issues of Taiwan’s future and security non-partisan. This is a very tall order but it provides the best basis for Taiwan to secure a long term future that is satisfactory to its people while China continues to rise.