



China's Taiwan dilemma: Beijing must rethink its ideas of nation, state and sovereignty by Muthiah Alagappa

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It is commonly argued that Taiwan faces a China dilemma. Posited as the weaker party, Taiwan, it is asserted, confronts a dilemma when dealing with mainland China, which has the upper hand in the relationship. The conventional wisdom is wrong: increasingly it will be China and not Taiwan that will face a dilemma.

The worm is about to turn

Taiwan's China dilemma is rooted in the belief that the island's economic wellbeing is intricately tied to the mainland and that declaring independence would provoke Chinese use of force that could compromise the de facto independence Taiwan enjoys. Declaring independence is thus considered a dangerous option leading to a strong preference in Taiwan for the status quo. Assuming time is on its side, Beijing hopes economic interdependence and emotional attachment would help unify and integrate Taiwan with the mainland. Although it has blown hot and cold over the idea of military conquest, military force remains a key element of Beijing's Taiwan policy. But Beijing's Taiwan policy is unsustainable in the long run and increasingly it will be Beijing and not Taipei that will face a dilemma.

China will eventually have to accept Taiwan as a separate nation and state that may share some affinities with China. For this to happen in a peaceful manner, Chinese ideas and thinking about nation, state, and sovereignty have to change. Beijing will have to move away from the notion of one Chinese nation-state and accept that there can be more than one Chinese nation and state. Failure to do so will bring about violent change to the Chinese nation and state as presently conceptualized.

Key elements of Beijing's Taiwan policy

Growing economic interdependence, threat of military force and the "one country, two systems" principle are key elements in Beijing's Taiwan policy. This policy assumes that growing economic interdependence will minimize cross-Strait political tensions, providing Beijing with time, and eventually will help integrate Taiwan with the mainland. This has not been the case. Growing economic interdependence has temporarily ameliorated political tensions across the Strait, but it has not dampened Taiwanese aspirations for nationhood and sovereignty.

On the contrary, closer economic interaction has created resentment of the mainland in Taiwan and strengthened those aspirations. Even a pro-mainland president like Ma Ying-Jeou was unable to move toward closer political dialogue with Beijing. Growing sense of a separate Taiwanese identity and a thriving democracy in Taiwan have set clear markers beyond which politicians of any color dare not tread. The closeness of Ma to the mainland became a liability in the recent presidential elections. Further, growing economic interdependence has created apprehensions of dependence in Taiwan. As a result, Taipei is seeking to diversify its international economic relations. The slowdown in mainland China's economy also weakens the economic pillar of Beijing's Taiwan policy.

Likewise, the threat of using military force to achieve unification is becoming an unsustainable pillar of that policy. It is still presumed that the threat of military force will deter Taiwan's leaders from declaring independence. That may have worked until now. However, Chinese use of force carries great international and domestic risks. Despite Beijing's rhetoric to that effect, the use of force by China in its international interaction has become very costly with negative consequences for its international aspirations – especially if that effort is unsuccessful. Beijing cannot be certain that use of force against Taiwan will succeed in light of the implicit US support for Taipei. Washington cannot easily abandon Taiwan. And even without US military support, Taiwan may be able to resist China. The role of force in international politics is changing. It now favors defense and deterrence over conquest. Inconclusiveness, and worse, failure, by China in its military adventure in Taiwan would undermine the legitimacy of the CCP. This is not a risk that Beijing will take lightly.

Inadequacy of the "one country, two systems" principle

If closer economic interaction and use of force are no longer tenable key elements of China's Taiwan policy, then peaceful resolution is inevitable. However, Beijing has made peaceful resolution difficult by sticking to the "one country, two systems" principle that has been made worse by its interpretation and practice of that principle. Although it may have been attractive in settling the Hong Kong and Macau issues, Beijing's heavy-handed application of "one country, two systems" is alienating democrats in Hong Kong and creating fear in Taiwan.

The "one country two systems" principle is defective in dealing with Taiwan because it assumes there is only one Chinese nation (one country) and that there can only be one sovereign Chinese state. The "two systems" component falls short of accepting there can be more than one sovereign Chinese state. Hence, it is unable to cope with demands for more than autonomy. Further, Beijing is only willing to consider the autonomy option for entities outside mainland

China. Emphasizing a unitary state conception and monopoly of power by the CCP, Beijing is unwilling to consider autonomy demands from Tibetans, Uighurs and Mongols. It is securitizing these autonomy demands and resorting to the liberal use of force in dealing with these groups.

Rethinking nation, state and sovereignty

If Beijing is to resolve the Taiwan conflict in a peaceful manner, it must rethink its ideas about nation and state making as well as sovereignty. It has to accept that there can be more than one Chinese nation and state. This will allow Beijing to accept Taiwan as a separate nation and sovereign state with which it shares cultural affinities that may facilitate closer interaction. China's failure to rethink the concepts of nation, state, and sovereignty would prolong the conflict with Taiwan and create a dilemma for Beijing. Not only would China's Taiwan policy not be able to deliver on its core objective of unification of Taiwan but it could also lead to militant struggles and violent fragmentation of China.

Time no longer favors Beijing. The continued existence of Taiwan as a separate entity and a thriving democracy along with growing sense of nationhood will increase the chances for Taiwan to gain international recognition as a sovereign state. Growing nationalism in China may require quick action on the part of Beijing but its present policy tools are not up to that task.

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