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*December elections could edge Taiwan closer to a symbolic declaration of independence—and the United States toward military conflict with China. There's one way out*

BY TREVOR CORSON

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If the war on terror can be said to have a silver lining, it's that the United States has steered clear of conflict with China. Before 9/11 neoconservatives in Washington were more worried about an eventual war with Beijing than with Baghdad, and in 2001 the Pentagon declared China an emerging threat. But since 9/11 the government in Beijing has made common cause with the United States by squelching terrorist activity on China's western borders, and has cooperated with American efforts to contain North Korea. With global commerce fueling its stupendous economic growth, China is becoming integrated into the community of nations as never before—as best evidenced, perhaps, by Beijing's successful bid to host the 2008 Olympics.

This easing of tension has been especially welcome on the matter of Taiwan—the island that China still considers a renegade province. Trade and investment have blossomed so quickly across the Taiwan Strait that China has become Taiwan's largest export market, and also the destination for some \$70 billion or more in Taiwanese capital. To some, these developments suggest that time is on the side of a peaceful solution to the problem of Taiwan's disputed status.

But the reality may be quite the opposite. In fact, a number of analysts in both America and East Asia believe that military conflict between China and Taiwan is not only likely but imminent. Just how imminent depends partly on the Taiwanese legislative elections scheduled for December 11. If pro-independence parties gain a majority in the legislature, the stage will be set for a confrontation, producing a hellish prospect for U.S. foreign policy: on top of its ongoing military commitment in the Middle East, the United States may face a Chinese attack against Taiwan, a fragile democracy that America has promised to help protect.

On some level, of course, the idea that China would actually attack Taiwan—rather than merely threaten to do so, as it has for years—makes no sense. Attacking would invite a military response from the United States, and even without American intervention, it's not clear that China's military is up to the task of seizing the island. China would also risk losing the trade relationships that drive its economic growth.

Nevertheless, the threat of a Chinese attack has loomed over Taiwan since at least 1972, when China's Premier Zhou Enlai, in negotiations with Richard Nixon, refused to renounce the use of force against the island. Subsequent Chinese leaders have reiterated the point. Vice-Premier Deng Xiaoping threatened the Carter Administration with an

attack against Taiwan in 1978, and repeated the warning to U.S. officials during the 1980s. In 1995 China conducted military exercises near Taiwan, and President Jiang Zemin, in a major policy speech, reminded the world that China would use military force against the island if necessary.

"I don't think China *wants* to use force," Thomas Christensen, a professor of international affairs at Princeton University, told me recently. But he had just returned from his fourth trip to China in the past two years, and the mood he'd encountered while speaking privately with Chinese policy experts was decidedly pessimistic. "What I heard on several occasions," Christensen said, "is that you see a much more serious consideration of actual conflict with the United States over Taiwan."

The disagreement over Taiwan's status dates to 1949, when the Chinese Communists emerged victorious in China's bloody civil war and the vanquished Nationalists fled to the island. For years both sides clung to the notion that Taiwan was part of a larger China: the Communists hoped to finish the war and take the island; the Nationalists hoped to use it as a base from which to retake the mainland. After half a century under U.S. protection, few people in Taiwan still look to China for their national identity. But on the mainland a very different sort of evolution has occurred. In the late 1970s Deng Xiaoping began steering China away from communism toward capitalism, and subsequent Chinese leaders have justified their rule not with communist ideology but with the promise of making China prosperous and powerful. Bringing Taiwan back under the sway of the mainland—a prospect China calls "reunification"—would be a crucial sign that this promise had been fulfilled.

Yet China's leaders haven't indicated that they want to *occupy* Taiwan. Indeed, ever since Deng proposed a "one country, two systems" solution, in 1979, China has said that Taiwan could keep its own administration and even its military organs intact. More likely what they want is simply to prevent Taiwan from securing the legal independence that would end the promise of eventual reunification. "The Party needs to avoid humiliation on Taiwan more than it needs to gain a big victory on it," Christensen explains. A genuine sense of nationalism is involved, but the Chinese government also has domestic political motives: "The Communist elite worries that humiliation on that issue could provide a rallying point for people frustrated with the Party for other reasons." If they think their political survival is at stake, China's leaders may feel they have no choice but to go to war. Last year high-ranking Chinese military officials stated unequivocally that China was ready to use force against Taiwan, even at the cost of international censure, economic stagnation, and the loss of the Olympics.

So far the United States has managed to prevent conflict by pressuring Taiwan not to declare independence. But as Taiwan's democracy matures, America's ability to influence the island is fading.

In 2000 Chen Shui-bian, the candidate of the upstart Democratic Progressive Party, won election to the Taiwanese presidency. Chen was a former independence activist, and the DPP platform held that Taiwan should be considered a sovereign nation, independent of

China. In March of this year Taiwan's voters re-elected Chen to a second term. The DPP has also picked up more than a third of the seats in the legislature; with its coalition partners it stands to gain a majority this month. Opinion polls in Taiwan show growing support for independence.

"The implications of this are really frightening for U.S. policy," Andrew Peterson, a young legal scholar who lived in Taiwan during the 2000 election, observes. In a recent article in *The Washington Quarterly*, Peterson spins out a scenario of brinkmanship by Taiwan. Chen is unlikely to make an outright declaration of independence. But if a legislative majority frees his hand and Washington can't rein him in, Chen may take provocative steps toward more aggressively asserting independence. Peterson outlines a variety of possibilities; many observers think the most likely first step would be a popular referendum to add the word "Taiwan" in parentheses to the island's outdated official name, Republic of China. Aware that this seemingly innocuous change, or one like it, could constitute a *casus belli* for Beijing, Taiwan's pro-independence forces are, Peterson thinks, poised to act quickly. They believe that the military balance of power still favors their protector, the United States, and that Beijing will feel constrained by international opinion until after the 2008 Olympics. In other words, Taiwan is willing to gamble, because it sees its window of opportunity closing.

But so does China. "The Chinese Communist Party is acutely aware of what's going on in Taiwan," Peterson says. "And I don't think they have any effective policy means to deal with it." Thomas Christensen agrees. "China has tried to use economic integration as a tool to change the minds of the Taiwan public," he says, "but that strategy has largely failed. Politically, Taiwan is getting further away, not closer."

Since 1949 China's leaders have often resorted to pre-emptive military strikes to halt trends not in the country's favor. Christensen ticks off the examples: in 1950 in Korea, in 1954 and 1958 in the Taiwan Strait, in 1962 against India, in 1969 against the Soviet Union, and in 1979 against Vietnam.

For the United States, deterring China from an outright invasion of Taiwan is straightforward. A Pentagon report earlier this year concluded that China would have great difficulty mounting an amphibious assault on the island any time in the next five years. But invading Taiwan is probably not China's goal. "The conflict isn't about territorial acquisition, it's about political identity," Christensen says. "That means China's leaders might think they can achieve their goals through coercion instead of invasion. As a result, the threshold for using force could be much lower." With limited military action China could pursue a different and more modest goal—for example, compelling Taiwan to agree simply to the *idea* of reunification, to be implemented at some distant date in the future.

Suppose Taiwan did change its name to "Republic of China (Taiwan)," and Beijing responded with force—what form would the attack take? Most observers focus on the missiles China has amassed across the strait. But there is another, less visible threat: submarines.

China's submarine fleet has suffered a number of serious accidents over the years, leading many analysts to dismiss the program as inept. But two experts at the U.S. Naval War College—Lyle Goldstein, a specialist in security studies, and William Murray, a research analyst and a former submarine officer in the U.S. Navy—report that China is pouring resources into the fleet, and could launch an undersea blockade that would cut off Taiwan's lifelines. "Taiwan imports almost every bit of energy it uses," Murray told me recently, "and those ships would be relatively easy to identify and force to turn around or, if they didn't, to sink."

Goldstein and Murray don't doubt that the U.S. Navy could ultimately break a submarine blockade. But such a blockade would create a critical difficulty for Washington. In the absence of an unambiguous missile barrage or invasion, an American President might have a harder time rallying support; the naval response required to neutralize the fifty or sixty submarines China could field around Taiwan would be vast and risky—especially if U.S. forces are still stretched thin in the Middle East. China could capitalize on nervousness in Taiwan and offer generous terms to end the confrontation. "Because this is a highly symbolic political issue," Goldstein told me, "China's demands are likely to be flexible." A simple promise by Taiwan to accept a vague version of the one-China principle might be sufficient to allow Beijing to claim victory.

But if Taiwan refused to negotiate, and the United States sought to defend the island, it would be facing a nuclear power; and even China's conventional diesel submarines would pose a threat. America's sub-hunting capabilities have atrophied since the Cold War, and although the Navy has begun to rebuild them, Goldstein and Murray aren't optimistic. The U.S. nuclear-powered sub fleet no longer operates diesel submarines even for training purposes, and there is evidence that U.S. commanders may be losing some of the skills required to combat these maneuverable and very quiet vessels. During war games last year the U.S. Pacific Fleet was taken by surprise when an Australian diesel submarine managed to "kill" a U.S. nuclear attack sub.

Moreover, China's submarines would be operating close to home, in shallow and complex waters that could put the larger U.S. subs at a disadvantage. Chinese hydrological-mapping vessels have been a frequent presence in the waters around Taiwan in recent years, prompting speculation that the Chinese navy is studying exactly where to hide its submarines in the event of a conflict. The "geography of the scenario," as Goldstein puts it, "allows an [inferior] submarine force to do some major damage."

American intervention against a Chinese blockade "could be a tremendous strategic, tactical, or operational disaster," Murray says. "Take your pick."

Soon after taking office, in 2001, President Bush announced that the United States would do "whatever it takes" to defend Taiwan. But would America actually be willing to sacrifice lives, submarines, and ships just so that Taiwan could add a word in parentheses to its name?

For decades the United States has balanced its Taiwan policy on a contradiction: support for Taiwan and its nascent democracy on the one hand, suppression of the island's national ambitions in order to please Beijing on the other. So far Washington has managed to deliver the right combination of deterrence and reassurance to both parties. But Taiwan's drive to secure legal independence puts the United States in an increasingly impossible position.

The fact that Taiwan has matured into a prosperous democracy suggests a solution, albeit a radical one: let the island defend itself. In 1998 a Cato Institute analysis proposed that the United States withdraw its pledge to protect Taiwan; in exchange it would lift all restrictions on arms sales, allowing Taiwan to buy the weapons necessary to deter a Chinese attack. This course would require delicate diplomacy, because it would infuriate both Taiwan and China: Taiwan would lose its security guarantee, and China would face a new Taiwanese arms buildup.

Bereft of American protection, however, Taiwan would be forced to face the consequences of upsetting the status quo. The immediate result would be a dramatic reduction in China's political fears, thus removing the incentive for a pre-emptive strike and buying both sides some time to move toward a peaceful solution. For Taiwan and its supporters in Washington, the idea may sound like a betrayal. But the best way to help Taiwan mature into a full-fledged democracy might simply be to ask its people to take responsibility for their actions.