

Should Taiwan Take Sides Between the US and China?

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Given the constant stream of news about the US-China trade war, Huawei, the intra-DPP rivalry between President Tsai Ing-wen and former Premier William Lai, as well as the intra-KMT competition between Kaohsiung Mayor Han Guo-yu and FoxConn Chairman Terry Gou, it is easy to forget that Taiwan is now standing at a new turning point in history, and that the choice we make will determine its destiny.

This fresh beginning stems from a change of nature of the US-China relationship that has steered Taiwan's destiny for many decades. The period of “engagement” over the past forty years has now officially given way to a new period of “competition.” However, neither of the two great powers has yet devised a clear and coherent strategy for how to proceed with this relationship, and they are just beginning to grope for new ways to their interaction.

This turbulent state of affairs is very similar to that prevailing at the end of the nineteenth century. Great Britain, whose navy could defeat two navies of any other powers simultaneously, had dominated the world for nearly a hundred years. However, when Germany, France, Russia, the United States and Japan gained in strength, London found its financial and naval resources sorely strained. Among those aspiring nations, the rapidly rising U.S. was keen to drive Britain and Spain out of the Caribbean Sea. After weighing the more imminent threats from adjacent Europe (especially Germany) and heavy financial pressures, London finally decided to compromise and leave the Caribbean to the U.S. The U.S. then expelled Spain from the region following the Spanish-American War of 1898, and coexisted peacefully with Great Britain around the world thereafter.

Today, the United States has found itself financially pressed ever since the financial tsunami of 2008. The wars in the Middle East have proven arduous and intractable. And China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea are posing enormous challenges. Worse, the US has found its military power grossly and shockingly unsatisfactory. Not only has its defense budget begun to shrink since 2011, as US think tanks reveal, the

active-duty end strength of all three branches of the US Armed Forces are also at or near post-WWII lows. Because the US Navy is hampered by insufficient training and maintenance due to budgetary constraints, less than 40 percent of its warships are deployed globally; and those on duty are so over-tasked with missions that there are often reports of collisions or beaching incidents. Air Force suffers from severe shortage of pilots, and the shortfall can't be made up by hiring contractors. The US Department of Defense in charge of overall planning shifted its primary mission from "counter-terrorism" to countering China and Russia only in January 2018. It may take several years to develop an effective war-fighting force.

Hence the U.S. is currently in an awkward period of transition. It is undergoing fierce partisan struggles domestically, while weighing whether to adopt the Anglo-American model of peaceful coexistence in the late 19th century or to resort to the Spanish-American War model for dealing with an ever-more powerful China that is nipping at its heels.

As for China, it has kept a low profile for four decades while cultivating its might. Now it naturally wants to demand international status and influence commensurate with its newly gained strength. This is a law of history. It was the same mentality that motivated the U.S. to drive Britain and Spain out of the Caribbean in the 1890s, and moved Taiwan's entire population to support former President Lee Teng-hui's breakthrough visit to the United States in 1995 despite Beijing's intimidation.

Take the South China Sea for example. Given that China is now the world's largest trading nation, how can it countenance U.S. hands on the throat of its vital energy and shipping lanes? In order to counterbalance U.S. control of choke points such as the Suez Canal and the Panama Canal, and since the South China Sea is a trade route for one-third of global shipping, Beijing has decided to build islands from shoals in the South China Sea as a potential bargaining chip. No matter what the Permanent Court of Arbitration decides, no matter how the U.S. stresses "freedom of navigation," no matter how dissatisfied neighboring Southeast Asian countries may be, Beijing is determined to press on.

For the Chinese Communist Party, Taiwan is an even more valuable asset than the South China Sea because it is indispensable to Beijing's campaign to achieve the "rejuvenation of the Chinese nation." Strategically, Taiwan is located in the middle of

the first island chain, at a point most suitable for ships to enter and exit the Pacific Ocean. Taiwan is also the emotional focus of the entire population in China and can impinge on the stability of the Chinese Communist Party's rule. Therefore, Taiwan scenario has been the sole script for Beijing's military preparations over the past two decades.

This is the strategic logic of competition among the big powers. In the foreseeable future, it appears that the U.S. could no longer contain China within the first island chain. Nor could Beijing expel American power from East Asia. Hence the U.S. and China will most likely continue to bark and talk with each other for a long time to come. Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, who is the rotating ASEAN chairman, recently expressed his decision not to take sides between the U.S. and China in the Shangri-La dialogue: "all of the US allies in Asia, including Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand and Australia...Singapore...want to be friends with both...there can be no clear division between friend and foe."

Just like these neighboring countries, President Tsai could have refrained from taking sides and therefore gained greater maneuvering room for Taiwan. However, while solemnly intoning that she is "maintaining the status quo," she has in fact arbitrarily taken sides. This most likely will force the U.S. and China to shorten the period of time to work out their new mode of interaction, and puts Taiwan in a more precarious situation.

Recently, in order to win the DPP's primary election, she did not hesitate to postpone its election date against commonly accepted practice, in order to buy time for the May 25th meeting between US National Security Advisor John Bolton and Taiwan's National Security Council Secretary-General David Lee, as well as to change the name of the Coordination Council for North American Affairs to the Taiwan Council for U.S. Affairs. She managed to use the US factor to boost her political standing at home.

As she seeks re-election over the next six months, she will undoubtedly try to play the American card as well as the Taiwan card. If Beijing is then forced to adopt a confrontational approach in response, the US will instantly be put to the test. If Washington also elects confrontation, the Spanish-American War model will repeat

itself, and Taiwan will surely suffer dire consequences. If the U.S. pulls back, then the push for Taiwan Independence will simply end up consummating Reunification.

The DPP has taken sides. What about the KMT candidates? More importantly, can Taiwan voters think this through clearly?

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