

Ménage à Taiwan

By Jeff Oliver

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The diplomatic dance of managing allies can mimic that of a romance, complete with courtships and jealousies. Rivals such as China and Taiwan often put other nations in the awkward but flattering position of being a coveted prize, wooing them with contracts, foreign aid, and political promises. But what happens when the object of their affection undergoes a sudden change of heart?

Yu-Shan Wu, a political scientist at National Taiwan University, raises this question in the March edition of *Issues & Studies*, a quarterly publication of the Institute of International Relations in Taipei. In his forward-looking essay, "From Romantic Triangle to Marriage? Washington-Beijing-Taipei Relations in Historical Comparison," Wu argues that American regime change has turned the triangle into a marriage between the United States and Taiwan while transforming the People's Republic of China into a pariah.

Wu notes the recurrence of such arrangements throughout history and chooses the 19th century triangulation between Berlin, St. Petersburg, and Vienna as the best metaphor for today's trans-Pacific relationship. In that scenario, a newly united Germany was aggressively courted by both Russia and Austria-Hungary. German

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Chancellor Otto von Bismarck attempted to create a ménage à trois, all the better to isolate France. But the threesome quickly split: Russia and Austria-Hungary bickered over the Balkans, leaving Berlin to vacillate between two enemies. A new, idealistic kaiser eventually fell out with Bismarck and declared Germany's devotion to Austria-Hungary in 1890.

This drama, Wu believes, is again unfolding between Washington, Beijing, and Taipei. The cast does seem to bear a remarkable resemblance: A nascent superpow-

er (China/Russia) battles with a weaker candidate (Taiwan/Austria-Hungary) for favor with an established power wishing to escape the pressures of playing the field (the United States/Germany). A change in leadership altered the balance of power in the relationship. In 2001, U.S. President George W. Bush—in a moment that surely sent shivers down State Department spines—said the United States would do "whatever it took to help Taiwan defend herself." Monogamy, it seemed to Wu, was once again a prerogative of power.

Although Wu's comparison deserves attention, it fails on a few important fronts. First, though "romantic triangle" accurately describes the Washington-Beijing-Taipei political relationship, it fails to fit the economic one, which benefits everyone. Further, Wu is wrong to call today's United States—like yesterday's Germany—an "unwilling pivot." Only a gunshy and risk-averse nation would shrink from playing paramour to two archenemies. Germany, sans Bismarck, ran for the altar, and Wu argues that the Bush administration

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is following suit. But this assertion ignores ample evidence that the United States remains a willing player, anxiously swinging across the Taiwan Straits when it proves politically profitable.

Certainly, the United States swung decisively in Taiwan's direction in the months after China introduced an anti-secession law in December 2004, which threatens retribution if Taiwan attempts independence. Washington and Tokyo released a joint statement expressing mutual concern over Taiwan's security in February, and Bush later



The other special relationship: President George W. Bush and current Chinese President Hu Jintao strengthen U.S.-China ties in 2002 (top); Taiwan's president, Chen Shui-bian, takes in a baseball game in Houston.

convinced the European Union to maintain weapons sanctions against China.

Wu undoubtedly sees these gestures as further evidence of pending U.S.-Taiwan nuptials. But they actually demonstrate America's strong desire to balance its often conflicting priorities of Pacific hegemony and peace. In the interest of maintaining these goals, Washington subsequently turned toward Beijing by offering repeated, if qualified, support for meetings last May between China's leaders and Taiwan's pro-unification parties. Those encounters delivered a stunning political coup for China by undercutting the authority of Chen Shui-bian, Taiwan's pro-inde-

pendence president—hardly the outcome a committed partner would have endorsed.

The truth is that Washington not only values but needs its pivotal position, for only by strumming the ties that bind it to both China and Taiwan can the United States hope to achieve its regional priorities. The Washington-Beijing-Taipei “romantic triangle” will not dissolve before Pacific hegemony and Pacific peace become mutually exclusive, an eventuality that hinges

on the prospect of Taiwanese independence. Once China feels sufficiently secure, it will stop threatening and start implementing a military response to force the return of the “renegade province.” As Wu no doubt knows, tempers can run hot in love and war. **FP**

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