

The U.S. Role In the Taiwan Strait Crisis

Of the measures adopted by Washington in response to the recent heightening of tension between Taiwan and mainland China, the most conspicuous has been the dispatch of the aircraft carriers *Independence* and *Nimitz* and their battle groups to the area. The purpose of Washington's actions, both the administration's naval deployments and the two congressional resolutions on the issue, as well as the various statements made by U.S. officials, is to send a message to both sides of the Strait, warning them to avoid coming to blows and dragging the United States into the fray.

Washington's actions are designed to express a certain degree of support for Taiwan and to put Taiwanese minds at rest, and at the same time to demonstrate U.S. dissatisfaction with Beijing's behavior and show the Chinese that the United States cannot help but be concerned about this threat to regional peace. But while it is true that the Chinese are trying to intimidate Taiwan with their military exercises, the Americans are also employing a kind of "gunboat diplomacy" to deter Beijing. Like Beijing, Washington is hoping that a display of military force, combined with verbal warnings, will enable it to attain political objectives.

Of course, Washington has other motives for its limited military moves. On the domestic front, the administration is taking this opportunity to demonstrate its respect for Congress. In this way, it can avoid any further criticism from that source and, by preventing the Taiwan Strait crisis from escalating, guard against Taiwan becoming a major issue in the year-end presidential election. And where the Asia-Pacific countries are concerned, the U.S. show of force demonstrates Washington's concern for regional security. In particular, by emphasizing international right of passage through the Taiwan Strait, Washington hopes to quiet any misgivings the countries of the region may harbor about its stance.

Washington's actions and statements on the recent crisis are basically exercises in preventive diplomacy. The American objective is to prevent war from breaking out either intentionally or acciden-

tally, and although U.S. statements have varied in intensity, Washington has always behaved cautiously, endeavoring to keep its policy options open and to extract the largest political advantage at the smallest possible price. Indeed, it is in Washington's best interests that the situation in the Taiwan Strait remain as it is at present—neither unification nor independence, neither war nor peace. For this reason, the U.S. government will not unconditionally support all of Taipei's policies, though it will not tolerate any aggressive moves on the part of Beijing.

Even if a habitually voluble Congress, spurred on by Taipei's lobbying, manages to heighten the tension still further, Washington will still have to tread carefully. The case of the two congressional resolutions is a good example. Some individuals advocated postponing the resolutions and others said the language should be toned down. The Senate resolution was indeed toned down and a note was added reconfirming Washington's "one China" policy and the three Washington-Beijing communiqués. As always, Congress's primary consideration was American interests and it was careful not to paint the United States into a corner.

It is safe to say that the present crisis has upset the dynamic equilibrium among Taipei, Washington, and Beijing, and a great deal of time and effort will have to be expended before a balance can be restored. The three parties must draw up new rules of the game, for which a period of readjustment will be necessary, and whether the outcome will be beneficial or harmful to Taiwan remains to be seen. A misjudgment by any of the three parties might well harm Taiwan, and this is something for which the Taipei government should prepare.

As for the future of the "one China" policy, mainstream opinion in Washington is for broadening and intensifying contacts with Beijing. The United States has no intention of adopting a policy of containment toward mainland China and coming out in support of "one China, one Taiwan" or Taiwan independence. However, from a long-term point of view, as mainland China grows steadily more powerful, friction with the United States will probably increase. If this is not handled properly, the two sides will sooner or later come into confrontation with each other. Taipei should give careful thought as to what it should do in those circumstances.

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