

The Origins of the Taiwan Strait Crisis

The gradual reduction of tension between Taiwan and mainland China that has taken place since the early 1980s led many observers to believe that the possibility of military confrontation across the Taiwan Strait had greatly diminished, although economic and political differences between the two sides were expected to cause occasional friction and differences of opinion. But just when most observers were cautiously optimistic about cross-Strait relations, the situation changed abruptly. President Lee Teng-hui's visit to the United States in June 1995 provoked bitter criticism from the Beijing authorities. They launched a campaign of military intimidation which culminated in the test-firing of missiles in waters very close to Taiwan shortly before the island held its first direct presidential election in March this year. As Taipei also began to step up military preparations, it seemed as though war might break out at any time.

Taipei and Beijing have each provided different explanations for the crisis, blaming it on differences in political and economic development, ideology, way of life, and values; the power struggle in Beijing; Taipei's domestic and foreign policies; or even simply misunderstanding. But not even a combination of all these reasons can fully explain the issue. The two sides have long espoused different ideologies, ways of life, and values. The Beijing regime has experienced power struggles throughout its history. And differences in political and economic development cannot explain why the two sides came into conflict at that very moment in time and in this particular way. In this observer's opinion, the core of the problem lies elsewhere, with the "one China" principle.

Now, Taipei and Beijing both claim that the ball is in the other's court. Taipei does not want to clarify what it means when it says that there is only "one China" and is calling for a resumption of cross-Strait talks as soon as possible, leaving it up to each side to make its own interpretation of the term. However, Beijing insists that it will not respond until Taipei takes some concrete steps. The stands of the two sides are so radically different that deadlock seems inevitable.

According to international relations theory, it is not poverty and underdevelopment that are the main causes of international conflict but social change and development, such as democratization and modernization. Moreover, the more rapid the change, the greater the likelihood of conflict. For various reasons, Taiwan and the mainland were able to coexist without incident for quite a long period of time, but throughout this period, the capacity for conflict was probably accumulating. So the present crisis between Taipei and Beijing was not inevitable, but neither was it accidental. Trouble had been brewing for a long time.

In the past, due to various policy considerations, Taipei did not actively challenge the "one China" principle or seek a return to the international community. However, this situation has gradually changed as a result of economic and political development in Taiwan and President Lee Teng-hui's own political beliefs. In the face of this challenge, Beijing has shown itself unwilling to tolerate "provocation" from Taipei. The two sides have thus come into head-on confrontation. The origins of the present crisis, therefore, go back a long way, and Lee's visit to the United States simply relit an already smoldering fuse.

Taipei has blamed Beijing for overreacting to its actions and behaving in an irrational manner. However, since it believes that Taipei's policy has deviated from the two sides' tacit understanding on "one China," and that it might lead to international involvement in the Taiwan question, Beijing has no choice but to take a strong line. Taipei hopes that cross-Strait relations will return to the state they were in before the crisis, but Beijing refuses to play ball, as it perceives that Taipei has yet to pay any "price" for sparking off the trouble in the first place. Anyway, since the delicate dynamic equilibrium between the two sides has been upset, a return to the status quo ante will be very difficult. The two sides will have to work hard to achieve a settlement.

(George W. Tsai)