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Let the Taiwanese decide

By Fulton T. Armstrong

The United States is treating Taiwan like a chip in the Asia card game. It's about time we dealt the Taiwanese in. But Washington, Peking, and Taiwan's ruling Kuomintang (KMT) have all been reluctant to allow the people of Taiwan a voice in their own future.

Washington feared giving offense first to Chiang Kai-shek and now to Peking, both of whose cooperation at different times has been perceived as more important to US interests than Taiwanese democracy. Thus the US has consistently failed to support the Taiwanese democratic movement.

Without US pressure, the KMT has not allowed the movement to blossom for obvious reasons. Liberalization would mean repeal of martial law (now beginning its 34th year) and retirement of the hundreds of officials whose jobs and power are derived exclusively from martial law, including many elected in the 1940s in Nanking who have enjoyed "permanent" seats since.

Peking also, in designing its peaceful unification plans to appeal to the KMT only, has failed to acknowledge that a democratic and thus anticommunist movement even exists in Taiwan. If the Taiwanese were allowed a role in the game to decide their future, China knows they sooner or later would call its bluff.

The Taiwanese - anyone of Chinese, Hakka, or aboriginal extraction whose identity is integrally linked to Taiwan - have shown in their "economic miracle" how united and powerful they can be. Under often-inspired economic leadership, in just one generation they have transformed the island from a backward colony of Japan into a formidable player in international trade with one of the best-educated populaces in the world, adequate housing, no starvation - a society perfectly ripe for democracy.

What the Taiwanese would choose if given a chance to determine their future is tightly linked to how they resolve their centuries-old identity crisis, which has its roots in a late Ching Dynasty policy toward the island. Around 1870, when Tokyo demanded redress from China for the massacre of 50 Japanese sailors shipwrecked on Taiwan, a Ching official told the Japanese foreign minister that Peking could not take responsibility because the "Taiwan savages" were outside the influence of Chinese government and civilization. (Japan proceeded to invade Taiwan and punish the "savages.")

Through the Treaty of Shimonoseki 22 years later, Japan officially gained from China full control over Taiwan. From 1885 until the end of World War II, the Taiwanese lived as Japanese

subjects - speaking and studying in Japanese, serving (and dying) in the Imperial Army, and working under their foreign rulers for a pittance.

Less than two years after becoming "Chinese" again, in February 1947 the Taiwanese rose up in the most widespread rejection of what they saw as the cangue of Chinese identity. In that "2-28 Incident" against the KMT armed forces recently arrived from China, more people were killed than during the 50 years of Japanese rule preceding it and in the three-and-a-half decades of often harsh KMT rule since.

Taiwanese desperation in the search for identity has not reached such a high, violent level since. In fact, a great deal of progress has been made in people-government relations, partly because many dissidents have been eliminated over the years but mostly because the "native" Taiwanese (those families there before the 1940s), who now make up about 90 percent of the population, have set political differences aside and united with the government in developing the economy.

But setback after setback - loss of a voice in the United Nations, derecognition by all but an insignificant handful of nations, denial of participation in world sporting events, in essence becoming a pariah state - have convinced the Taiwanese that the new challenges they face demand new policies developed by a younger, more moderate generation. Finding an identity means an enhanced role in democratic government, which is only slowly being permitted by the KMT but is being facilitated by the natural passing away of old cadres within the ruling party. At home, time is on the Taiwanese's side.

Internationally, however, it is not. The longer it takes the Taiwanese to establish their own voice and earn international support for their right to have that voice, the dimmer the chance that they can effectively counter efforts to defeat them. Just recently, for example, President Reagan's letters to Chinese leaders were released stating: "There is only one China. We will not permit the unofficial relations between the American people and the people of Taiwan to weaken our commitment to this principle."

For the US and the KMT to continue to deny the Taiwanese a role in determining their future is unconscionable. No matter what the Taiwanese might decide - to unify or confederate with China, to declare independence, or to simply maintain the status quo - we should not be party to the conspiracy to deny them the right to decide.

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