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President Bush's Muddled Policy on Taiwan

by Ted Galen Carpenter

Executive Summary

The Bush administration has gone from one extreme to the other with regard to U.S. policy on Taiwan. During the early months of his administration, the president gave a seemingly unconditional pledge to defend Taiwan from attack by mainland China—going significantly further than his predecessors had. He followed that assurance by approving the largest arms sales package to Taiwan in nearly a decade. In marked contrast to the Clinton years, high-profile visits by Taiwanese leaders to the United States have been encouraged, despite Beijing's protests.

That pro-Taiwan stance appeared to change dramatically in December 2003 during a visit by Chinese premier Wen Jiabao. President Bush publicly admonished Taiwanese president Chen Shui-bian for seeking to change the political status of the island unilaterally and emphasized

Washington's opposition to any unilateral actions. At issue is the Taiwanese government's intent to hold referenda on sensitive issues, which Beijing believes is the latest installment in an ongoing campaign to achieve independence.

Neither the earlier pro-Taiwan policy nor the latest pro-Beijing posture serves the best interests of the United States. It is not America's proper role to take a position on Taiwan's independence or other issues involving relations between Taipei and Beijing. Taiwan is a vibrant democracy, and the United States should respect that society's democratic prerogatives. At the same time, U.S. leaders should make it clear that Taiwan must bear all of the risks entailed in whatever policies it adopts. In particular, Washington should state that it will not intervene if an armed conflict breaks out between Taiwan and mainland China.

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Introduction

President Bush made a startling change in Washington's Taiwan policy during a visit by Premier Wen Jiabao of the People's Republic of China in December 2003. With Wen at his side, Bush stated that the United States opposed "any unilateral decision by either China or Taiwan to change the status quo." Making it clear that his warning was directed primarily to Taipei rather than Beijing, he added that "the comments and actions made by the leader of Taiwan indicate that he may be willing to make decisions unilaterally, to change the status quo, which we oppose."¹

If that were not enough, the president stood mute when Wen characterized U.S. policy as one of "opposition to Taiwan independence" and expressed China's appreciation for that stance.² Whether Bush intended it or not, that characterization suggested that Washington's policy was now closer to Beijing's position than it was even during the last years of the Clinton administration. The furthest Clinton had been willing to go was to state that the United States "does not support" Taiwanese independence.³ The difference between "does not support" and "oppose" may be subtle, but it is quite important. Beijing had unsuccessfully pressed a succession of U.S. administrations for an expression of explicit opposition to an independent Taiwan; now, China seems to have achieved that goal.

Bush's undercutting of Taiwan drew immediate and sharp rebukes from his political allies. Neoconservatives William Kristol, Robert Kagan, and Gary Schmitt immediately issued a statement criticizing the president for rewarding "Beijing's bullying" but saying "not a word" about China's missile buildup across the Taiwan Strait and the PRC's repeated threats of war against Taiwan. They added, "Appeasement of a dictatorship simply invites further attempts at intimidation."⁴ John Tkacik, who studies East Asian security issues at the Heritage Foundation, was even more caustic. Accusing the president of "losing his bearings" on the Taiwan issue, Tkacik did not attempt to conceal his dismay. "It just boggles the

mind," he said. "I'm just appalled. Clinton never would have gone this far."⁵

The president's political allies were not the only people who believed that Bush went much too far in placating Beijing. The *Washington Post* weighed in with a scathing editorial criticizing President Bush for essentially placing "the United States on the side of the dictators who promise war, rather than the democrats whose threat is a ballot box." Such action suggested "how malleable is his commitment to the defense of freedom as a guiding principle of U.S. policy."⁶

Administration officials sought to mollify critics by reaffirming that the United States was still committed to Taiwan's security. But both Taiwan and its friends in the United States remain deeply concerned about Washington's new apparently pro-Beijing tilt.

A Stark Reversal of Policy

What made Bush's comments especially surprising is that they were such a sharp reversal of the course he had adopted during the initial months of his presidency. In a television interview on April 25, 2001, Bush appeared to discard all nuances and caveats about protecting Taiwan. When asked by ABC News reporter Charles Gibson if the United States had an obligation to defend Taiwan, the president replied, "Yes, we do, and the Chinese must understand that." Would the United States respond "with the full force of the American military?" Gibson pressed. "Whatever it took to help Taiwan defend herself," Bush replied.⁷ That statement was far more categorical than the assurances offered by previous administrations, both Republican and Democratic. Bush's predecessors had implicitly embraced a doctrine of "strategic ambiguity," implying that the United States would defend Taiwan—unless the Taiwanese provoked the attack by too vigorously asserting the island's de facto political independence.

Although Bush's aides rushed to give assurances that there had been no change in

Washington's policy on Taiwan, that is not how the episode was interpreted in either Taipei or Beijing. Moreover, later that month, the administration made a decision that confirmed that U.S. policy was tilting noticeably in favor of Taiwan. President Bush approved the largest arms sales package to Taiwan since his father's controversial sale of F-16 fighters in 1992.⁸

It wasn't just the firmness of the commitment to defend Taiwan against attack that marked the administration's policy. During the Clinton years, the U.S. government was so committed to a "one-China" policy that it barely tolerated "stopovers" in the United States by Taiwanese officials on their way to destinations elsewhere in the world. When Taiwan's president, Chen Shui-bian, made such a stopover in 2000, the State Department strongly discouraged him from making any public appearances or even meeting privately with members of Congress. He was kept virtually incommunicado in his hotel.⁹ The attitude of the Bush administration was dramatically different. Subsequent visits by Chen and other officials included public appearances and meetings with Washington's apparent blessing—even as Beijing seethed.¹⁰ At one point in 2002, Taiwan's defense minister met "informally" with Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz during a security conference sponsored by a think tank in Florida.¹¹ That was the highest-level meeting between U.S. and Taiwanese officials since the United States switched its diplomatic recognition from the Republic of China (the government on Taiwan) to the People's Republic of China in 1979.

In short, the Bush administration gave every indication of sympathy for Taiwan's quest for international recognition of its de facto independence. What then accounted for the policy reversal in late 2003?

Reasons for Washington's Policy Reversal

The most obvious answer is that Chen's government has been pushing the envelope on the issue of independence to the point that Beijing has responded with rather blunt warnings that such provocations could lead

to war. The most controversial action was a decision by Chen's administration to push for a new statute that would allow the holding of referenda on various issues. The first referendum, scheduled for March 20, was originally quite bold. One proposition would have condemned China's growing deployment of missiles across the Taiwan Strait and demanded that this threat to Taiwan's security be removed. Under pressure from Washington, Chen softened the wording somewhat. The new version will ask voters whether Taiwan should purchase more advanced anti-missile systems if China does not remove the offending missiles and renounce the use of force. Another question will be whether the government should engage in negotiations with the PRC on the establishment of a "peace and stability" framework for cross-strait interactions.¹²

To the authorities in Beijing, even the watered-down versions are unacceptable, since the Chinese government regards Taiwan as nothing more than a renegade province. The very act of holding a referendum on such issues implies that Taiwan is an independent state. PRC officials have been in no mood for compromise. The government's Taiwan Affairs Office condemned the proposed referendum as "a one-sided provocation to the peace and stability of the Taiwan Strait."¹³

Beijing also fears that the March referendum is just the thin end of the wedge. Chinese leaders suspect that sooner or later there will be a referendum on changing Taiwan's official name from the Republic of China to the Republic of Taiwan or perhaps even a referendum on declaring independence. A statement from the Taiwan Affairs Office reflects that worry, accusing Chen's administration of seeking "to use the referendum to realize Taiwan [sic] independence in the future." The PRC is "resolutely opposed to this move on the separatist road to 'Taiwan independence.'"¹⁴

China's warnings that such provocations could lead to a war in the Taiwan Strait are taken seriously in Washington, and they have

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led U.S. officials to wish that Chen's government would curb its exuberance. But that is only one factor. The Bush administration believes that the United States needs China's help on an array of important issues. U.S. officials desire Beijing's assistance against Islamic radical groups, but the need for China's cooperation on the North Korean nuclear issue is probably the most important factor. U.S. leaders believe that China may be the only power that can induce Kim Jong Il's erratic regime to give up its dangerous and provocative quest for nuclear weapons.¹⁵ Washington knows that Beijing's help will not come for free and that a change in U.S. policy on Taiwan appears to be the price that Chinese officials are demanding. The Bush administration apparently is ready to pay that price.

America's Perilous Position

Unfortunately, the president has gone from one extreme to the other regarding our policy on Taiwan. His April 2001 unconditional pledge to defend Taiwan was irresponsible. No reasonable American would be happy about the possibility of a democratic Taiwan being forcibly absorbed by an authoritarian China, but preserving Taiwan's de facto independence is not worth risking war with a nuclear-armed power capable of striking the United States. America should never incur that level of risk except in the defense of its own vital security interests.

And the risk of war is not far-fetched. The status of Taiwan is a hot-button issue for most mainland Chinese. Even those Chinese who are not especially fond of the communist regime in Beijing tend to believe that the island is rightfully part of China. From their perspective, Japan stole that province from their country in 1895, and, by shielding the island militarily, the United States prevented reunification following the defeat of Chiang Kai Shek's Nationalist forces in 1949.¹⁶ The mainland Chinese want the territory back, and their patience is beginning to wear thin.

A Chinese government white paper issued in 2000 emphasized that the Taiwanese authorities could not expect to indefinitely stall negotiations for reunification and that Beijing might consider such a delay sufficient grounds for resorting to military force.¹⁷

The PRC has also made a number of threatening gestures in recent years. In the months prior to Taiwan's first fully democratic presidential election in 1996, the Chinese military conducted large-scale maneuvers in the Taiwan Strait—including highly provocative missile tests. Those military measures were accompanied by incendiary rhetoric from Chinese officials. Beijing repeated those tactics during Taiwan's 2000 presidential campaign in a vain effort to discourage voters from electing Chen-Shui bian, the candidate of the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party. Perhaps most ominous, China has expanded its deployment of missiles on its side of the Taiwan Strait. There are now more than 500 missiles arrayed against Taiwan.

At the same time that China is becoming more confrontational about the Taiwan issue, separatist sentiments are growing in Taiwan—especially among younger Taiwanese. To them, China is an alien country.¹⁸ A vibrant society has grown up on Taiwan, and many Taiwanese point out that their island has been ruled from Beijing only 4 of the last 108 years and that the government in question was not communist. Taiwan has developed separately from the mainland, and it is understandable that many Taiwanese want that reality ratified by an independent state that enjoys full international recognition. True, the bulk of the Taiwanese business community favors close ties with the mainland, and that faction is an important force for caution and restraint, helping to counteract the influence of the pro-independence faction.¹⁹ But the overall trend seems clear. Very few Taiwanese are interested in reunification with a communist China; large majorities explicitly reject the Hong Kong model of "one country, two systems." Indeed,

a growing number of Taiwanese may not be interested in reunification even if the mainland someday becomes democratic. At the very least, there is a broad consensus in favor of the island's current de facto independence, and most Taiwanese want some form of political recognition from the international community.

In short, the ingredients exist for a nasty confrontation between Beijing and Taipei at some point. The two sides have mutually incompatible agendas, and it is not easy to see how such profound differences can be bridged. The United States needs to be careful lest it get caught in the middle of such a conflict. True, the PRC is not in a strong position at the moment to militarily challenge the U.S. commitment to defend Taiwan. Indeed, it is likely to be many years before China's military can match the overall capabilities of the U.S. military.²⁰ But there are two important caveats: First, China does not need to match the U.S. military globally; it only needs to raise the cost of a confrontation in the Taiwan Strait to such a painful level that U.S. officials might recoil from honoring the commitment. And China may be fairly close to having that capability. In particular, the PRC's acquisition of sophisticated Sunburn anti-ship missiles from Russia could create a nasty situation for the U.S. Seventh Fleet in the event of a clash. Second, when emotional issues of national pride are at stake, nations sometimes resort to military action even when they have little hope of victory. Taiwan may be such an issue for China.

Toward a More Prudent U.S. Strategy

The Bush administration has adopted the worst possible combination of policies regarding Taiwan. On the one hand, the administration is pressuring a sister democracy to abstain from exercising some of its important democratic prerogatives. On the other hand, in the weeks following President Bush's chastisement of the Chen government, Washing-

ton renewed its pledge to protect Taiwan's security.²¹ In taking those actions, the administration both compromised its moral position and exposed the United States to the needless risk of military conflict.

Although it is imprudent for the United States to pledge to defend Taiwan, it is equally inappropriate for Washington to tell Taiwan what its policies ought to be. It is especially unsavory for the United States to criticize another democratic polity for choosing to hold a referendum on a particular issue—however sensitive that issue might be. Chen's government rightly rebuffed such interference and declared its intention to go ahead with the March 20 referendum.

Instead of either risking going to war to defend Taiwan or kowtowing to Beijing regarding Taiwan's political status, the Bush administration should adopt an entirely different approach. The president should state that the United States takes no position on the question of Taiwan's independence. It is not our place to support or oppose that outcome. Washington should be willing to continue selling arms to Taiwan, if the Taiwanese are willing and able to pay for them. A well-armed Taiwan raises the cost to Beijing of using force against the island and makes it more likely that PRC leaders will confine themselves to peaceful options in their quest for reunification. The Taiwanese ought to be told that the question of independence is up to them to decide but that if they opt for independence, they must be prepared to bear all of the consequences on their own. Both Taipei and Beijing need to be informed that the United States will not be a party to any war that might break out in the Taiwan Strait.

Such an approach would respect Taiwan's dignity as a democratic society while limiting America's risk exposure. Bush's strategy does exactly the opposite. It pressures Taiwan not to exercise its prerogatives as a vibrant democracy, and it keeps America's risk exposure at a dangerously high level if a conflict should erupt. President Bush has had several chances to get America's Taiwan policy right. He has not yet succeeded.

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Notes

1. "Bush, Wen Meet at White House: Text of the Chinese and American Leaders' Comments," *WashingtonPost.com*, December 9, 2003, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn?pagename=article&node=&contentId=A49483-2003-Dec9¬Found=true>.
2. Ibid.
3. For a discussion of Clinton's important remarks in Shanghai in June 1998, see Ted Galen Carpenter, "Let Taiwan Defend Itself," Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 313, August 24, 1998, pp. 2-3.
4. Quoted in Dana Milbank and Glenn Kessler, "President Warns Taiwan on Independence," *Washington Post*, December 10, 2003, p. A1.
5. Quoted in *ibid.*
6. "Mr. Bush's Kowtow," editorial, *Washington Post*, December 10, 2003, p. A30. The president's action has attracted a few defenders, however. See Michael D. Swaine, "Trouble in Taiwan," *Foreign Affairs* 38, no. 2 (March-April 2004): 39-49.
7. Quoted in David E. Sanger, "U.S. Would Defend Taiwan, Bush Says," *New York Times*, April 26, 2001, p. A1. For a discussion of the implications of that statement, see Ted Galen Carpenter, "Going Too Far: Bush's Pledge to Defend Taiwan," Cato Institute Foreign Policy Briefing no. 66, May 30, 2001.
8. "White House Announces Arms Sale to Taiwan," <http://www.cnn.com/2001/ALLPOLITICS/04/24/us.taiwan.arms/>, April 24, 2001.
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10. See, for example, Willis Witter, "Leader's New York Speech a Prod; Beijing Frowns on High Profile," *Washington Times*, October 31, 2003, p. A19.
11. Robert Burns, "No. 2 Pentagon Official

Scheduled to Meet with Senior Taiwanese Officials in Florida," Associated Press, March 8, 2002.

12. "Text-Taiwan President Details Proposed Referendum," Reuters, January 16, 2004. Also see "Taiwan Referendum Seen Milder after U.S. Concern," Reuters, January 17, 2004.
13. Quoted in Scott Hillis, "China Says Taiwan Referendum Plan Is Provocative," Reuters, January 17, 2004.
14. Quoted in *ibid.*
15. For a discussion, see Ted Galen Carpenter, "Overestimating China's Willingness to Pressure North Korea," *In the National Interest*, August 6, 2003, <http://www.inthenationalinterest.com/Articles/Vol2Issue31/Vol2Issue31Carpenter.html>.
16. Taiwan was returned to China after Japan's defeat in World War II. The Nationalist government, which fled to the island after communist forces expelled it from the mainland, continued to claim to be the rightful government of all China.
17. People's Republic of China, The Taiwan Affairs Office and the Information Office of the State Council, "White Paper-The One-China Principle and the Taiwan Issue," February 21, 2000, p. 6.
18. For a discussion of the growth of a distinct Taiwanese identity, see Philip P. Pan, "New National Identity Emerges in Taiwan," *Washington Post*, January 2, 2004, p. A13.
19. Keith Bradsher, "Still Wary, Taiwan Split over Change on the Mainland," *New York Times*, November 16, 2002, p. A6; and William Foreman, "Taiwanese on Mainland Support China," *Washington Times*, February 7, 2004, p. A7.
20. See Ivan Eland, "Is Chinese Military Modernization a Threat to the United States?" Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 465, January 23, 2003.
21. Philip P. Pan, "Myers Stresses U.S. Stance on Taiwan," *Washington Post*, January 16, 2004, p. A14.

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