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THE IMPACT OF CROSS-STRAITS DEVELOPMENT ON ASIA-PACIFIC STABILITY

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Taiwan's Sorry Plight

Three recent events have again dramatized Taiwan's sorry plight in East-Asian and in broader world politics. The first one was a crisis in Taiwan's long-standing solid non-official relationship with Singapore, sometimes called “the Fourth China” after the PRC, Taiwan and Hong Kong. The second was a tragicomic flip-flop in Taiwan's struggle to make diplomatic inroads in a world that is almost completely shunning the island as a state. This time the prime minister of Vanuatu traveled to Taiwan to set up diplomatic relations with the island, but within days the rest of the Vanuatu cabinet declared the agreement null and void. The Vanuatans made the fantastic claim that Taiwan had offered them \$ 6 billion. China was reported to have remitted \$ 2 billion to beat off the Taiwanese advances.

Last but not least: U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, during a tour of East-Asia made several statements, one of them inaccurate that confronted Taiwan with the harsh realities of improved U.S.-China relations and may be a prelude to a further tightening of the screws on Taiwan's defiance of China during Bush's second term.

The Singapore Crisis

The Singapore crisis was triggered by a visit of deputy premier and premier-designate Lee Hsien Loong to Taiwan in July. Singapore had maintained close relations, short of diplomatic recognition with Taiwan since the 30 year rule of Lee's father, former premier, now Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew (1959-1990), which were continued after Lee Sr's resignation and the establishment of diplomatic relations with China in 1990. Apart from massive trade, investment, family and cultural links, the Singapore army has a training-programme in Taiwan. Lee Jr.'s travel plans apparently had been discussed with China prior to the trip and China had expressed its strong displeasure. Nevertheless, Lee persevered and explained that if Singapore were to call off the trip at China's request, Singapore's right to make independent decisions would be undermined and its international standing damaged. Kong Quan, the spokesman of the Chinese Foreign Minister sharply rejoined: “Why should Singapore's rights and international standing come at the expense of China's sovereignty and core interests? This is both unreasonable and illogical.” Singapore was hit by a comprehensive package of retaliatory measures. First, the governor of the People's Bank of China, Zhou Xiaochuan cancelled his participation in a major monetary conference in Singapore and other ministerial exchanges were called off as well. Furthermore, a training-programme for 120 Chinese civil servants at Nanyang University was halted and worst, China threatened to postpone scheduled negotiations on a Free Trade Agreement. In typical old-line communist cant,

spokesman Kong said that Singapore should use 'concrete actions' to ~~w~~back the confidence of the Chinese people.¹

After assuming the premiership, one month later, Lee Hsien Loong said in his first major speech, he was "very worried" about the growth of pro-independence forces in Taiwan and warned that the city-state would not support Taipei if it provoked a war with China. "There is a real risk of miscalculation and mishap. If Taiwan goes for independence, Singapore will not recognise it. In fact, no Asian country will recognise it. China will fight. Win or lose, Taiwan will be devastated.... Unfortunately, I only met very few Taiwanese leaders who understood this." It was one of the starkest statements by an Asian leader about the chances of a military conflict as yet.²

If Lee's words were meant to placate China, it worked to an extent, but now he came under fire from Taiwan, which accused him of caving in to Chinese bullying. Full scale escalation, however took another month, when Singapore's foreign minister George Yeo addressed the General Assembly of the United Nations. Yeo told world leaders the international community should not allow the deteriorating relationship across the Taiwan Strait to get out of control. "The push towards independence by certain groups in Taiwan is most dangerous because it will lead to war with mainland China and drag in other countries. At stake is the stability of the entire Asia-Pacific region" he said.³

The climax came the next day, when Mark Chen, Taiwan's new foreign minister, a 69 year old former leader of the Taiwan Independence Movement in the U.S. addressed a crowd of DPP activists. "Singapore is a country only as big as a piece of snot, it holds China's balls in its hands!" he fumed.⁴

The Singapore Foreign Ministry had its response ready: "This is not the first time Singapore has stated our concerns about Taiwan. Many other countries also believe that Taiwan is pursuing a dangerous course towards independence. Resort[ing] to intemperate language cannot assuage these concerns."⁵ One Taiwanese MP added another insult to Singapore. He said: Lee Hsien Loong acted like a "dragon" when he visited Taiwan, but turned into a "worm" once he returned home.⁶

The Vanuatu Farce

On November 4, Vanuatu prime minister Serge Vohor had signed an agreement with Taiwanese foreign minister Mark Chen in Taipei on the establishment of diplomatic relations, for which Taiwan according to Vanuatu statements would offer \$6 billion in aid. Taiwanese premier Yu Shyi-kun emphatically denied that the government would give such a huge amount of aid to one single "ally".⁷ Taiwan maintains diplomatic

¹ Jason Leow, China rejects DPM Lee's reasons for Taiwan visit, The Straits Times, July 22, 2004.

² John Burton, Singapore warns Taipei on independence, Financial Times, Singapore, August 22 2004.

³ Melody Chen, Singaporean FM's words prompted by China, MOFA says, The Taipei Times, Sep 27, 2004.

⁴ Melody Chen, HARSH LANGUAGE: Foreign Minister Mark Chen used a rude colloquialism to blast his Singaporean counterpart for criticizing Taiwan, The Taipei Times, Sep 28, 2004.

⁵ STAFF WRITER, MOFA backtracks on Singapore: 'INTEMPERATE': Singapore responded to MOFA head Mark Chen's comments by repeating that 'Taiwan is pursuing a dangerous course towards independence', The Taipei Times, Sep 29, 2004, Page 3

⁶ Derrick A Paulo, Taipei scrambles to contain damage, TODAY online, September 29, 2004

⁷ CNA, Government did not offer Vanuatu money, Yu says, November 10, 2004.

relations with 26 states, mostly impoverished Pacific, Caribbean, Latin-American and African mini- and micro-states plus the Vatican. Many of them had been “procured” by aid-packages in recent years, but what was unusual this time is that Vohor insisted that Vanuatu would not change its “one China policy” and maintain its diplomatic relations with China. He said he would welcome aid from China as well. His spokesman Kalvau Moli said – incredibly - that China had deposited \$ 2 billion one week before with the Vanuatu Reserve Bank for “restructuring in education”.

Vanuatu’s Foreign Minister Barak Sope said a few days later that the full Cabinet had rejected relations with Taiwan, even as Vohor claimed he was sticking with the agreement to recognize Taipei. He reiterated that “the government is not asking China to leave. We cherish the long relationship we have with China”.⁸ Vohor initially lost the power-struggle with the rest of his cabinet. In a statement issued in Port Vila and confirmed by Beijing, the Vanuatu government said it had unanimously agreed to revoke the communiqué that was signed on Nov. 4 by its prime minister and Taiwan’s foreign minister, Mark Chen Tan-sun. “It was a unanimous decision, so it leaves the prime minister with two options, to agree or to sack us all,” Foreign Affairs Minister Barak Sope said. The about-face was made Wednesday at a cabinet meeting in the tiny Pacific nation. Top Vanuatu leaders started preparing a mission to Beijing before the end of November “to restore confidence and ensure normalcy in political and economic relations” the statement said.⁹ But there was a next round in this serial soap-opera. Spokesman Moli of prime minister Vohor said that Vanuatu had decided to modify its “one China policy” to a “one China – one Taiwan policy”. The Chinese ambassador in Port Vila, Bao Shusheng was enraged and threatened China would cancel its \$ 10 million aid package. Moli talked the astronomical amount of \$ 6 billion that Taiwan allegedly pledged down to \$ 30.2 million. “As we often say here, the ‘one China’ policy will not take you to heaven”. He said financial assistance from Taipei of about 3.3 billion Vanuatu vatu (US\$30.2 million) per year, in addition to agricultural and fishery programs and scholarships, were currently on the negotiating table, but that the figures were not definitive.¹⁰ The latest position, on November 20 was that the Vanuatu cabinet had revoked ties with Taiwan awaiting financial offers from China.¹¹

The Powell Shock :

Amidst speculation and anticipation what the outcome of the U.S. presidential election would mean for China and Taiwan, Secretary of State Colin Powell reiterated on October 25 during a brief visit to Beijing America’s “non -support” for independence for Taiwan. Powell then emphasized strong support for America’s “one China policy ”, which had served all of the parties quite well and for a long period of time. He then restated an old cliché, from the nineteen seventies and eighties, that although never explicitly revised, is no longer valid, i.e.: “We want to see both sides not take unilateral action that would

⁸ Melody Chen with AP, Claims of Vanuatu switching sides questioned, The Taipei Times, November 12, 2004.

⁹ Agence France Presse, Vanuatu reverses itself on Taiwan, November 12, 2004.

¹⁰ Joy Su, Are Vanuatu ties for real ? Who knows ? - Taipei Times, November 14, 2004.

¹¹ Joy Su, MOFA officials deny Vanuatu flip-flop reports, Taipei Times, November 20, 2004.

prejudice an eventual outcome, *a reunification that all parties are seeking.*”¹² Under the presidencies of Chiang Kai-shek (1949-1975) and his son Chiang Ching-kuo (1978-1988), both China and Taiwan were seeking eventual reunification, but during the era of “Taiwanization” and democratization, under presidents Lee Teng-hui (1988-2000) and particularly president Chen Shui-bian, increasingly large sections of the population shifted to favoring the indefinite status quo or outright independence. On top of this erroneous wording, Powell gave another interview to Murdoch-owned Hong Kong-based Phoenix Television, which caused even more consternation in Taiwan. Answering a question about president Chen Shui-bian’s position that Taiwan doesn’t have to declare independence, “because it is already an independent and sovereign state”, Powell said: “Well, they can make these sorts of statements but our policy is clear. There is only one China. Taiwan is not independent. It does not enjoy sovereignty as a nation, and that remains our policy, our firm policy. And it is a policy that has allowed Taiwan to develop a very vibrant democratic system, a market economic system and provided great benefits to the people of Taiwan. And that is why we think it is a policy that should be respected and should remain in force and will remain in force, on the American side, it is our policy that clearly rests on Three Communiqués. To repeat it one more time: we do not support an independence movement in Taiwan.”¹³ The far right in Washington D.C. and the pro-independence hardliners in Taipei joined in chorus to condemn Powell and even demanded an apology, while Beijing obviously expressed appreciation. The only clarification Powell gave back home in another interview with CNBC was that the U.S. wanted a peaceful resolution: “Well, the term of art really is to have a peaceful resolution of the problem”, he said, replacing the word *reunification*. “And that’s the term of art, and that is our policy and remains our policy”.¹⁴ His other statement that Taiwan is neither independent, nor sovereign, which was even more shocking to the Taiwanese faithful, remained unrescinded.

The big question remaining is what this whole episode meant. Was it a “slip of the tongue” of general Powell, who apparently was not too well versed in or briefed on all the intricacies of Cross-Straits relations? As if he had foreknowledge, the spokesman of China’s Taiwan Affairs Office, Zhang Mingqing rejected this, feeding speculation that Powell’s “kowtow” was carefully orchestrated with Beijing as compensation for the huge arms deal that Washington is trying to impose on Taiwan. Another theory is that Powell’s

¹² U.S. Department of State, Interview with Mike Chinoy of CNN International T.V., Beijing 25 October 2004. Powell’s full answer to the relevant question: “We have made it very clear to the authorities in Taiwan, to President Chen Shui-bian, that we do not support independence for Taiwan. Our One-China Policy, resting on the Three Communiqués and the Taiwan Relations Act, has served all of the parties quite well for a long period of time, and we would not support anything that would change that approach. We want to see both sides not take unilateral action that would prejudice an eventual outcome, *a reunification that all parties are seeking* (sic!) And we think that this is the time for both sides to reach out to each other and find ways to discuss these issues. We were hoping that we would see an improvement in cross-straits dialogue, but our position is rather clear, we do not support independence for Taiwan. That would be inconsistent with our One-China Policy. And There is no doubt by either Chen Shui-bian’s mind or any other Taiwanese leader’s mind that that is a firm US policy that is not going to change”.

¹³ Interview - Secretary of State Colin L. Powell with Anthony Yuen of Phoenix TV, Beijing, 25 October 2004.

¹⁴ AFP, Washington, Powell clarifies no change in U.S. Cross-Straits policy after protests, October 27, 2004.

statements were an answer to recent Taiwanese efforts to persuade the U.S. to abandon its “one China policy”. Foreign minister Mark Chen had suggested this in interviews and a presidential adviser Koo Kwang-ming had taken out full page advertisements in leading American newspapers to that extent.

A third more persuasive theory is that Washington has concluded that dealing with the North-Korean nuclear threat will be a top-priority for the second Bush administration. Washington-insiders believe that China may be the only power that can induce North Korean leader Kim Jong-il's erratic regime to give up its quest for nuclear weapons. Washington knows that Beijing's help will not come for free, and that a change in US policy on Taiwan appears to be the price that Chinese officials are demanding. The Bush administration is apparently ready to pay that price.¹⁵

Asia-Pacific Stability:

In his Phoenix TV interview, Secretary Powell had stressed, that the “One China Policy” had created stability throughout the Asia-Pacific Region for the last 30 years. “It has allowed China, instead of concerning itself about whether there's going to be a conflict with Taiwan, to develop itself and to join the international community, economically and politically. And it has also provided stability for other nations in the Asia-Pacific region so that they could pursue their development. So our One China Policy is not going to change”.¹⁶

Most East- and Southeast Asian countries would agree with Powell's statement and consider the internal politics of the current ruling party in Taiwan as the main challenge to that fragile stability. In contrast to - ill-informed - American (and European) public opinion, much of the elite and the media of Southeast Asia hold the Taiwanese presidents Lee Teng-hui and Chen Shui-bian largely responsible for cross-Straits friction. On the other hand, Taiwan is a major trading partner, investor and donor in Southeast Asia and informal diplomacy with Taiwan is common. There would be little sympathy with Taiwan in a crisis, but there would be concern about regional economic effects and Beijing behavior would be examined closely for signs of incipient hegemonism. If China were involved in a bloody incident - domestic or foreign - it could rekindle concerns about Chinese communist brutality.¹⁷ A leading specialist in Singapore expressed similar views: “Singapore in the form of Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew has tried to play the role of interlocutor between China and Taiwan and Singapore hosted the first official cross-Straits talks in 1993. However, Singapore cooled notably towards Taipei since Lee Teng-hui's presidency as his attempts to raise Taiwan's international profile were regarded as unnecessarily provocative. It would seem that Singapore officials continue to see Taipei, rather than Beijing as the potential troublemaker in this issue”.¹⁸

¹⁵ Ted Galen Carpenter, On Colin Powell's dismal kowtow, *The Taipei Times*, November 5, 2004.

¹⁶ See note 12.

¹⁷ Brantly Womack, *China and Southeast Asia: Assymetry, Leadership and Normalcy*, Pacific Affairs: Volume 76, No. 4 - Winter 2003-2004, pp. 529-549.

¹⁸ Evelyn Goh, *Singapore's Reaction to Rising China: Deep Engagement and Strategic Adjustment*, Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Singapore, No. 67, May 2004.

One of the unintended consequences of '9-11' was the return of the US to SE Asia, a region it had neglected since its defeat in Vietnam in 1975. Now it has brought the region back onto its strategic radar and declared it the 'Second Front in the War on Terror'. The US is using the War on Terror as an excuse for active military engagements to prepare for any contingencies in the Taiwan Strait, Korean Peninsula and the South-China Sea, making SE Asia again highly vulnerable to great power politics. The return of the US to SE Asia is causing security anxieties in China because of the perception that American intentions in the war on terror aim not only at destroying terrorism, but also to strategically encircling China. A recently published study of the Nixon Center states bluntly that the reinvigorated American presence in SE Asia not only aims to wage a war on terror, but to 'hedge' against a rising China.¹⁹

If a China-Taiwan military conflict would break out, and the United States would intervene in some way, it would probably divide the region in two opposing camps. The US has already ambiguous legal instruments to force Japan to support its war effort. Alliance relations were bolstered with the April 1996 Japan-US Joint Declaration on Security and the release in September 1997 of new guidelines for US-Japan defence cooperation. The guidelines define an augmented role for the Japanese Self Defense Forces in 'situations in areas surrounding Japan', including increased host nation support; rear area logistic assistance to US military operations in terms of supply, transportation and maintenance; and greater interoperability and cooperation between the two forces.²⁰ These measures were triggered by the 1995-1996 Straits crisis, when China conducted missile tests close to Taiwan's shores to scare the electorate during the first direct presidential election in Taiwan. The *areas surrounding Japan* are not defined but this clearly refers to Taiwanese waters.

Annoy thy neighbor

Relations with China are a divisive issue in Japanese domestic politics. Relations in general have been poisoned by the dogged persistence of the current prime minister Junichiro Koizumi to visit the Yasukuni Shrine honoring the Japan's war-dead including the top war criminals. Koizumi has visited Yasukuni every year since taking office, igniting

Chinese outrage on all four occasions. Koizumi's initial visit in 2001 was the first by a serving Japanese premier since Yasuhiro Nakasone made a visit back in 1985. Opinion surveys show that most Japanese do not approve of their prime minister's yearly jaunt to Yasukuni and realize it offends China, Korea and also Taiwan. This makes Koizumi's undiplomatic actions even more difficult to justify as they have resulted in a ban on him to visit China. "Visiting Yasukuni is simply natural, and it can't possibly harm Sino-Japanese relations" is Koizumi's justification for the visits.²¹ It has no logic and is just a careless reflex of a weak politician who has nothing meaningful to say. Koizumi's actions did do tremendous, unnecessary long term damage to Sino-Japanese relations.

¹⁹ Rommel C. Banlaoi, Southeast Asian Perspectives on the Rise of China: Regional Security after 9-11, Parameters, US Army War College Quarterly, Summer 2003.

²⁰ Evan S. Medeiros and Jing-dong Yuan, A US military presence in Asia: offshore balancer or local sheriff? Jane's Intelligence Review, January 2001.

²¹ J. Sean Curtin, Only Koizumi cannot go to China, Asia Times Online, 16 October 2004.

Unless Koizumi sees the light, it will take years to undo the damage his premiership has caused.

Even Yasuhiro Nakasone, Koizumi's predecessor during the 1980s, who visited Yasukuni once and didn't repeat it after strong Chinese criticism disapproves of the foreign policy of the current premier who in the first place is trying to make himself look good to the Americans, e.g. in dealing with the Iraqi situation. "The bottom line is independence, Mr Nakasone said. But recently, such thinking seems to be on the wane as more people believe it's easier to depend on the US for everything. That's why Japan and China are drifting apart."²²

Attitudes towards Taiwan also contributed to a major uproar during Koizumi's first year, when foreign minister Makiko Tanaka spoke out in favor of peaceful reunification. Koizumi fired the highly popular, but undiplomatic Tanaka, mainly because of her critical attitudes towards the Bush administration and because he couldn't discipline the warring factions in his own Liberal Democratic Party.²³ Koizumi himself has spoken out in favor of military support for an American war in support of Taiwan against China, but the general mood in Japan militates against this, as it does against Koizumi in general, particularly his obsequiousness to Bush.

"Australia will have a lot of dirty work to do"

United States politicians and diplomats have also frequently insisted that the ANZUS (Australia New Zealand United States) Treaty should come into full force in case of a war over Taiwan and this has been a divisive issue in Australia. Former prime minister Malcolm Fraser revealed in a TV interview in 2001 that senior American officials had told Australians more than once: "If or when we go to war with China over Taiwan, you'll have to do a lot of the dirty work." Fraser noted that it would be ironic indeed if a treaty designed to secure the security of Australia were used to drag us into a conflict which would be extraordinarily damaging and dangerous for Australia's future. Fraser said, he didn't believe that Bush was heading directly towards war with China over Taiwan, but he depicted a scenario in which a few senators from the religious right of the Republican party or from the human rights left of the Democratic party would incite Chen Shui-bian and his radical entourage to push towards independence, and that American would support them no matter what. Fraser described the conflict as it might unfold in his view in very stark, tragic terms:

I don't believe America would use nuclear weapons in relation to a conflict with China, and unless they were prepared to do that, I do not believe they could win. They couldn't beat Vietnam—much smaller, much more backward, and in spite of half a million men on the ground, the United States in the end was defeated, as we all know.

Now, I believe that a conflict over Taiwan would probably lead to massive destruction of the Taiwan infrastructure and countryside, and that would be tragic. It would probably mean that the US would bomb areas of China very heavily, and much of that would be destroyed, and that also

²² Yoichi Funabashi, Japan must engage the Chinese Dragon (Interview with Yasuhiro Nakasone), Asahi Shimbun, November 14, 2003.

²³ Tanaka told a press conference in Tokyo on December 26, 2001: "I think Chinese people have the wisdom to take their time concerning political issues. Hong Kong was returned to China and the situation was resolved quietly, and I hope the Taiwan issue will be handled in a similar manner. Japan, as a neighboring country, and the rest of the world should make efforts so that the issue will be resolved peacefully."

would be a tragedy. But, at the end of the day, I would see Chinese persistence, determination winning, as North Vietnamese persistence and determination won.

If you see that as the likely outcome, it would only make being a partner in the conflict all the more difficult, all the more damaging for Australia. America can go back to the American hemisphere. They'll always be a power economically, we know that.

But Australia is left in this region, and I wouldn't want to be part of an Australia that's a discredited ally of a discredited superpower in eastern South-East Asia.

I could imagine no worse situation for our kids and for our grandchildren.²⁴

The issue was raised again a few months ago by Australia's incumbent foreign minister. In response to a question about what support Australia would provide to the United States if Taiwan were attacked by Beijing, he said that no one should assume Australia would automatically come to America's aid. American officials, including the U.S. ambassador to Australia immediately criticized Downer, saying "Australia's obligations under the treaty were pretty clear". The Australian Prime Minister John Howard appeared to side with the US by saying Australia and America "have to consult and come to each other's aid when we're under attack or involved in conflict".²⁵

Taiwan is missing no chance to aggravate its own isolation. Foreign minister Mark Chen has developed the habit of insulting senior officials of countries that are friendly to Taiwan short of supporting its independence activism. Chen said Foreign Minister Alexander Downer's "weak-kneed behavior in Beijing in August 'did not befit a courageous politician in this democratic era.'" After meeting with Chinese leaders in Beijing, Downer had told reporters that he assured the Chinese that Australia has been urging Taiwan "not to move down the path of proclaiming independence, that this would create very substantial upheaval in the region."

Chen yelled back that Downer's comments made it seem like he had gone to Beijing "to present tribute to his sovereign," ... "But then [Downer] visits China and states that Taiwan should not provoke the situation. He does not even mention the fact that China is creating regional instability with its threats and intimidation. ... Tension across the Taiwan Strait is not our fault. The ball is in their court. How they choose to pass this ball to us is their responsibility, not ours. It is not Taiwan that causes cross-strait tension but China, which is making preparations to attack us."²⁶

China's Rising Soft Power, Southeast Asia and Korea

The invasion of Iraq and the Bush administration's approach to fighting terrorism have reinforced an image of the United States as heavy-handed and insensitive to the opinions and feelings of other nations and cultures. By contrast, China has gone out of its way to

²⁴ Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Lateline, Interview with Malcolm Fraser, 4-7-2002

²⁵ Greg Barns, Australia's superpower balancing act, South China Morning Post, August 26, 2004. China is now Australia's second largest export partner - after Japan - having, ironically, overtaken the US. It was to Australia that China turned in 2002 to source its first large liquefied natural-gas contract, worth A\$125 billion. More than 70 per cent of China's aluminium oxide and 40 per cent of its iron ore imports come from Australia. And as Australian Trade Minister Mark Vaile noted this month, manufactured exports to China have risen 134 per cent between 1999 and last year. Some sectors of the Australian economy are less than enthusiastic about a free-trade deal with China; the plastics, chemical and cement industries accuse the Chinese of flooding their markets with cheap goods. But the fact is that Australia believes it cannot afford to miss out on an early free-trade agreement with the world's newest economic powerhouse.

²⁶ The Associated Press, Foreign Minister Mark Chen bashes his Australian counterpart, 21 August 2004.

ease fears among its neighbors and win points by emphasizing a multilateral, consultative approach to solving problems. "More and more, China is doing the things the United States used to do: cooperating, pushing trade, offering help. . . . People are less scared of China now"

Over the last 15 years, China has become a vastly different, more friendly country that is overtaking the United States as a popular destination for bright young students from Asia to get their degrees. China Radio International now broadcasts 24 hours a day light fare, upbeat news and features, against Voice of America 19 hours. CCTV-9, China's leading English channel is not yet CNN but it broadcasts high quality news, commentary and documentaries worldwide. Last year, 2,563 students from Indonesia, a country 10 years ago still deeply suspicious of China enrolled in Chinese universities against 1,333 in American schools. "People here are talking about China and economics. People don't care about democracy now", said a Thai professor. "People looked down on China before. Now there is a 180 degree turn. In the past, experience in the US was important; now experience in China is just as good" a Singapore graduate smiled.²⁷

"If Washington cares about its influence in the region, if it wants to win hearts and minds, it needs to do more than just talk about terrorism."

When a research group in Bangkok asked residents in October 2003 what country they consider Thailand's closest friend, about 76 percent named China. By comparison, fewer than 8 percent of residents, questioned by the Kasikorn Research Center picked Japan, Thailand's top trading partner and its number one source of foreign investment.

Barely 9 percent chose the United States, a longtime military ally and the world's leading importer of Thai goods.²⁸

The revived USA Alliance System

The USA's long-standing alliance with Thailand is a central element of its strategy of engagement with Southeast Asia. Thailand serves as a key point for refuelling and transit to enhance US operations in the region. The alliance facilitates co-operation on pressing transnational security issues such as counterdrug and anti-piracy operations. The 'Cobra Gold' annual military exercise, the single largest event in Southeast Asia, provides the opportunity for joint training among various US allies in the region.²⁹ Despite these arrangements, it is highly unlikely that Thailand will want to get involved in an American war against China over Taiwan.

Following the closure of U.S. bases in the Philippines in 1992, the Clinton administration moved to rebuild security relations with the Philippines. This effort culminated in the 1999 Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) that provided for joint U.S.-Philippines military exercises and for U.S. military access to Philippines military bases and ports. The American military presence in the Philippines has been re-upgraded again after '9-11' so as to assist the Philippines in fighting terrorism in its southern Muslim region but China is concerned that the U.S., or at least elements in the U.S. government, e.g. the Pentagon are using the war on terror as a pretext for the resumption of containment against China.

²⁷ Jane Perlez, For many Asians, China is Cultural Magnet, International Herald Tribune, November 19, 2004.

²⁸ Philip Pan, China's improving image challenges US in Asia, The Washington Post, November 15, 2003.

²⁹ Medeiros/Yuan, op.cit.

So the country most likely to support and participate in an American war against China over Taiwan would be Japan and less likely but possibly, the Philippines. A third one could be Singapore, despite the assurances to the contrary of premier Lee Hsien Loong. The US military benefits from a series of access agreements, such as port calls, use of repair facilities, training and logistics support in Singapore. The city state has made its new Changi Naval Station available to the US Navy. It was built big enough to dock the largest US aircraft carrier, the Kitty Hawk.³⁰ The extent of the U.S.'s security relations with Singapore is hardly known. In the aftermath of the crisis over the Lee visit to Taiwan, there was ample speculation in various media that the real irritant for China was that Singapore had moved too close into the American military and intelligence orbit. According to one commentator, the United States is engaged in a counter-offensive to block the expansion of China's influence in the region and Singapore seems to be receptive to U.S. advances.³¹

The US-ally least likely to support a US war effort against China is itself still a host country to 37,000 troops: South-Korea. Under the imperial Chinese (Confucian) order, Korea had the closest tributary relationship with China, which is deepening again as the Cold War relationship with the US is further cooling. The US, which was once viewed as Korea's saviour, is increasingly seen as an arrogant imperial power unilaterally imposing its values and systems on others. In contrast, China is gradually regarded as a new friendly neighbour, despite some acrimonious debates on Korean history.

In his farewell address, former president Kim Dae Jung used the warmest language for China, "an ally and cultural partner to Korea for thousands of years ... We are extremely satisfied with relations. The two countries are going to enter a comprehensive partnership to become stronger allies."

The strongest force dragging Seoul towards Beijing is trade. South Korea believes it is uniquely positioned, through geographical and cultural ties, to benefit from the opening of China's markets. China overtook the US in 2003 as top destination for South Korean exports and the trend has accelerated this year.

"China fever" has been gripping the country in recent years. China-towns are springing-up in cities, language schools report surging demand for Chinese lessons and tourist destinations are targeting the growing China tourism market.

Pro-American Koreans are concerned that Chinese influence could undermine South Korea's development into a western-style democracy. "South Korea could become a vassal state of China again", said one banker.³²

Conclusions

As time passes, Taiwan's international room for maneuver is being steadily further eroded and Taipei's aggressive responses to its further isolation appear to be increasingly counterproductive. What the Singapore case has shown is that the leader-in-waiting of a small but prominent regional state sticks out his neck in favor of Taiwan. After continuous heavy pressure and sanctions from China, he then admonishes Taiwan to face

³⁰ Medeiros/Yuan, op.cit.

³¹ Eric Teo, A counter to the US tilt, Asia Times Online, October 11, 2004

³² Andrew Ward, Seoul's links with the US under threat, Financial Times, April 30, 2004; B.J. Lee, South-Korea - US-China: Changing Partners, South China Morning Post, May 7, 2004.

reality and restrain itself, but then he is scolded by Taiwan for caving in and having a country no bigger than a piece of snot etc. (expletives deleted). The Vanuatu case illustrates that Taiwan can no longer conduct foreign relations except for multi-million dollar extortion money for third world thugs. The Vanuatu case had one interesting moment: the effort of prime minister Serge Vohor to establish diplomatic relations with Taiwan for a big bonus and persuade China to stay for an additional fee. China apparently rejected that and exerted effective pressure to declare the deal with Taiwan null and void. Taiwan's response to Colin Powell's statements illustrate the "state of expanding denial" Taiwan lives in, first by reasserting even more forcefully that Taiwan doesn't have to declare independence because it is already an independent and sovereign state, regardless of what the Secretary of State of the United States, their sole benefactor, protector and arms supplier says. Fundamentalist editorial writers invoke old documents, from the Cairo Declaration to the San Francisco Peace Treaty to underpin that Taiwan on the one hand is sovereign and on the other that its status is undetermined. These old debates of the 1950s and 1960s have lost their relevance, since they have been overtaken by the Shanghai Communique, the 1978 Sino-Japanese Peace Treaty and new realities across the board.

Taiwan got an unambiguous message from Colin Powell, but it refuses to register this, partly because it gets so many ambiguous messages from other circles in the U.S., such as the Pentagon, right-wing think-tanks, the Congress, the arms dealers etc., the Japanese ultra-nationalist right wing and also from the European Parliament. The Pentagon is regularly sending its own delegations to Taiwan without consulting other departments. We have to wait and see what message they will get from Powell's successor, Condoleeza Rice.

The ruling clique of Taiwan's DPP uses warped logic. They say China threatens them with its missiles but they refuse to take note that the missiles are a deterrent against moving further towards de jure independence. If the DPP hardliners would be willing to enter into preliminary discussions or formal negotiations about some vague, loose form of the "one China principle", the threat would cease to exist and a dialogue process could start that could still take as long as 15 years. Chen Shui-bian and his inner circle cannot bring themselves to such broadmindedness, because like all hardliners they are fundamentalists, ultra-orthodox believers in the sanctity of their cause and in a fluke that America's neo-con imperialists will sooner or later realize their dream of a preemptive war against China. Preempt what? That China becomes the leading power of East Asia. The Japanese ultra-nationalists and the American militarists think they can block this and Taiwan under the DPP is too eager to be their little errant boy, rather than thinking big and preparing for the inevitability of becoming a highly autonomous, very special, privileged part of China.

What can be achieved to reduce the risks of war?

Former Chinese president Jiang Zemin offered to president Bush in 2002 at their Crawford, Texas meeting to withdraw missiles from the Zhejiang coast, aimed at Taiwan in exchange for parallel reduction of U.S. arm-sales to Taiwan. The American side rejected this for obvious reasons.

The United States is extremely alarmed by European intentions to lift the embargo on European arms sales to China, an issue that will pre-occupy European politics for some time to come. Europe should consider linking the lifting of the embargo to China's positioning of missiles on the Fujian and Zhejiang shores and also tell the US that it will make its decision on lifting the arms embargo in consideration of the U.S. policy of arming Taiwan massively and long term. This could be the beginning of a European-Chinese-American strategic grand triangle.