

Taiwan's referendum on cross-strait relations

by John Quigley

The Adviser to Taiwan's President Chen Shui-bian and member of the Legislative Yuan, Professor Chang Hsu-Cheng, told the European Institute for Asian Studies, on 16th January 2004, that Taiwan intended holding a referendum on the nature of the military threat from the People's Republic of China. The referendum, which will be held on the same day as the March 20th Presidential election, should not be characterised as a move towards independence, Professor Chang said, as Beijing has alleged.

According to Professor Chang, even though Taiwan faces a threat of 500 missiles and where China has not renounced the use of force, the referendum is an initiative to help preserve peaceful cross-strait relations. Following the introduction of legislation in November 2003 permitting the holding of referendums, the government moved quickly to enforce Article 17, which permits the President to announce a referendum. The law had been held up for over twelve years by the Kuomintang in attempt to prevent the legislative Yuan from exercising direct democracy. The government expects a large turn out, exceeding 80% of voters, for both the March 2004 Presidential election and the referendum, which will be held on the same day to reduce the cost to the State.

The principal aim of the referendum is to preserve the status quo between China and Taiwan. This should not be construed as a step towards Taiwanese independence, Professor Chang said. As a self-governing country, Taiwan has no need to continually declare its sovereignty. The referendum will provide an opportunity for the Taiwanese people to focus on the nature of the military threat emanating from Beijing, which has both bilateral and regional implications.

Reports from the US Pentagon indicate that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) considers the use of force against Taiwan as a policy option. Indeed, the recent PLA military exercises included the scenario of sinking a United States aircraft carrier. Over the course of 2004, China is expected to deploy supersonic cruise missiles, which are very difficult to detect. Rather than engage in an arms race, Taiwan would prefer to use whatever financial resources it possesses to develop its economy. With an estimated one third of Chinese living in poverty, perhaps Beijing should consider doing the same, Professor Chang suggested.

As a regional power, China must consider carefully its role in preserving peace and stability. Threatening Taiwan, should be seen by the international community as unacceptable. As a start, the European Parliament has called on Beijing to withdraw the missiles aimed at Taiwan but we need more international pressure, to help protect the Taiwanese people. In a message to the people on the subject of the referendum, President Chen Shui-bian said that Taiwan demands that the cross-strait issue be resolved peacefully. China must renounce the threat of the use of force and withdraw the missiles. Otherwise, this could lead to an arms build up, which is in no ones interest. The second proposition in the referendum, President Chen has said, would ask the Taiwanese people whether they favour holding negotiations with China.

Contrary to Chinese allegations, the holding of the referendum will not raise tensions across the strait. Taiwanese intentions are clear in contrast to China's attempt to imply dark motives. Taiwan wants a policy of constructive engagement with China. The characteristics of this policy would be co-existence (hopefully peaceful), co-operation (through economic ties) and co-prosperity. However, in a bold propaganda move, Beijing has told the government of the Philippines that, in the event of war, there would be a large number of Taiwanese refugees trying to get to the Philippines. Speaking in December 2003, President George Bush told Prime Minister Wen Jiabao that, should China invade or threaten Taiwan, then the United States would intervene.

Responding to questions, Professor Chang indicated that talks between the United States and Japan were more focussed on countering the threat from North Korea, than trying to include Taiwan in a missile defence system to counter China. The US-Japan talks have progressed beyond the research phase, although the proposed system is not perfect. China is trying to deploy missiles with multiple war-heads, in an attempt to subvert the US-Japan defence system. Currently, Taiwan only has the ability to detect missiles that are 90 seconds away, but is trying to purchase technology which would provide early warning up to 300 seconds. Being so close to China, Taiwan must rely on international opinion to China, that Beijing would pay too heavy a price in attacking Taiwan.

Once the outcome of the referendum and the Presidential election is clear, hopefully China will recognise the need for dialogue. Unfortunately, some in the Chinese leadership harbour illusions that Taiwan will become like Hong Kong. Professor Chang acknowledged that the idea of a referendum had been controversial domestically but, now that the two propositions had been published, people's doubts would be lifted. ■

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