



Taiwan: Test Case of the Bush Doctrine

By Thomas Donnelly

While the Bush administration has articulated an ambitious agenda for the liberalization of the greater Middle East, fighting to establish beachheads of freedom in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as pressuring regimes in the region to adopt domestic reforms, it has thus far proven somewhat reluctant to embrace this commitment to liberty in other parts of the world. Nowhere has this retreat from its rhetoric been more pointed than in Taiwan, a flourishing free-market democracy menaced by an authoritarian colossus next door. Taiwan's March 20 election provides fresh evidence of the extent to which the "one China" policy and "strategic ambiguity"—those avatars of conventional wisdom—have passed into the realm of anachronism. Indeed, if the Bush Doctrine represents anything, it is the conviction that there must be nothing ambiguous about America's support for the forces of freedom.

Democracy is invariably a messy thing, and by any measure, Taiwan's March 20 presidential election was a particularly tumultuous and melodramatic affair. From an apparent assassination attempt against the incumbent to his razor-thin margin of victory (thirty thousand votes, or less than 0.2 percent of the ballot) and opposition demands for a recount, it is understandable if developments in Taipei have provoked more confusion than clarity about American grand strategy in East Asia.

In fact, however, the Bush administration can draw several lessons from the election in Taiwan. First and foremost, the vote stands as a monument to the vibrancy and maturity of Taiwanese democracy, which appears to have weathered an extremely divisive and potentially destabilizing series of events remarkably well. As Richard Vuylsteke, the executive director of the American Chamber of Commerce in Taipei, recently remarked, "It has been kind of a rocky week or so, but no massed police charges, no burning down buildings, and no burning tires in the street. They've gotten through it."¹

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The vote also reveals a great deal about the evolution of the Taiwanese political identity. Incumbent president Chen Shui-bian, who has argued that the island should move toward becoming an "independent, sovereign country," substantially increased his share of the popular vote from 39 percent in 2000 to 50 percent this year.² Even if he fails to win reelection in the final tally, it is undeniable that his Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) is an enduring force in Taiwanese politics. If Chen has been an occasionally mercurial politician, the democratic impulse among the Taiwanese people now has deep roots.

Moreover, the DPP has matured immeasurably as a party during its short tenure in power. It has accomplished a tremendous amount, helping to shift Taiwan's government from an appendage of the Nationalist Party (the Kuomintang, or KMT) toward a genuine civil service. This is particularly and vitally important in the case of the Taiwanese military, which now has, really for the first time, direct civilian oversight.

Perhaps even more saliently, the KMT itself has changed. While it still favors a less provocative policy toward the mainland than the independence-minded DPP, this is because the KMT reflects

Taiwanese business interests, not Chiang Kai-shek's dream of a return to Beijing.

In this regard, Taiwan's exercise in democracy has reverberations far beyond the island itself. Regardless of the election's ultimate outcome, it signifies an important milestone in the continuing collapse of America's traditional "one China" policy. Indeed, in recent polls, only about 10 percent of Taiwanese identify themselves as simply "Chinese." Most islanders think of themselves as "Taiwanese" or "Taiwanese-Chinese." At any rate, the core premise of the "one China" fiction—that both islanders and mainlanders believe there should be one government for both territories—is being rejected by increasingly wide margins of Taiwanese at the ballot box.

Events outside the island have likewise conspired to accelerate the collapse of the "one China" policy, as Beijing's saber rattling and its missile build-up have helped forge a separate sense of Taiwanese identity. So has its handling of Hong Kong, where the one-state, two-systems solution has systematically curtailed freedoms—a story followed with obsessive interest in Taiwan. In addition, the twists and turns of American strategy in the region—and indeed, globally—have contributed to the unique sense of Taiwanese separatism and nationalism. Efforts by the mandarins of the U.S. foreign-policy establishment to try to preserve the "one China" policy are increasingly doomed as the full ramifications of the Bush Doctrine's "forward strategy of freedom" become apparent.

China Policy before the Bush Doctrine

The enormity of the change brought on by the attacks of September 11, 2001, is a constant revelation. And even though President Bush has articulated a grand strategy, translating rhetoric into reality and aligning the various regional and subordinate policies to make them consistent with the president's broader vision remains very much a work in progress.

These problems are especially acute when it comes to U.S. China policy, as a very brief review of post-Cold War history reveals. The first Bush administration essentially continued the Cold War strategy of partnership with Beijing for the purpose of containing the Soviet Union. It was observed occasionally in passing that this strategy lost its *raison d'être* when the Soviet empire collapsed—and noted more frequently after the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989—but with so much happening elsewhere and with the first Gulf War to fight, the

United States found it impossible to think anew about its relationship with the People's Republic. Indeed, the more irrelevant the "one China" policy became, the more zealously it was defended.

The policy also survived the early years of the Clinton administration. Although in the 1992 campaign candidate Clinton excoriated President George H. W. Bush for "coddling" the "butchers of Beijing," and initially tried to make human rights the centerpiece of his China policy, it was not long before the administration began to talk instead of a "strategic partnership" with the PRC.

Despite the Clinton administration's desires and despite the success of Chinese economic reforms, Beijing was not ready for any partnership that would ratify American primacy or, as it was increasingly viewed by Chinese strategists, "hegemony and power politics." The People's Liberation Army, in particular, saw the United States as the inevitable enemy of a rising China eager to assert itself on the world stage. Not surprisingly, Taiwan provided the flashpoint in 1995 and 1996 when Beijing attempted to influence Taiwan's elections by conducting missile "tests" that bracketed Taiwanese ports.

The extremely limited prospects for partnership with Beijing were underscored when President Clinton dispatched a pair of American aircraft-carrier battle groups in response to the PLA exercises. This was not simply to defend Taiwanese democracy but also to protect U.S. interests in East Asia. When push came to shove, the polite fiction of "strategic ambiguity" was thrown aside for the reason that America's position as guarantor of regional security rested upon its willingness to protect Taiwan. Not only was the island itself of central strategic importance, but American credibility with long-time allies Japan, South Korea, Australia, and others was at stake.

Despite the Clinton administration's response to China's attempted intimidation of Taiwan, George W. Bush campaigned in 2000 on a still firmer line, characterizing China as a "strategic competitor" rather than as a prospective ally. Once in office, however, the new President Bush hastily retreated from clarity to ambiguity. This was perhaps most notable in the first crisis of his presidency, when on April 1, 2001, a hot-rodding Chinese interceptor bumped an American EP-3 surveillance plane, causing the Chinese pilot to crash and the American plane to make an emergency landing on Hainan Island. It would be hard to invent a clearer case of Chinese provocation short of actually firing upon U.S. forces. A White House spokesman nonetheless insisted that the

administration did not want to “overreact” to the situation: “We wanted to give the Chinese time, to avoid an escalation.” The president himself said only that China’s delay in allowing American access to the EP-3 crew was “inconsistent with standard diplomatic practice and with the expressed desire of both our countries for better relations.”³

The longer the crisis went unresolved, the more humiliating it became. The Chinese were truculent about returning the crew of the EP-3, with state television declaring that “the U.S. has total responsibility for the event.”⁴ In the end, on the recommendation of Secretary of State Colin Powell, who had shoved aside the Pentagon to seize control of the crisis, President Bush would only say, “This has been a difficult situation for both our countries. I know that the American people join me in expressing sorrow for the loss of life of a Chinese pilot.”⁵ Though pleased by the resolution of the crisis, U.S. Sinologists immediately argued that peace had been saved by Chinese leader Jiang Zemin, who now deserved special consideration. As a State Department official put it: “In the Chinese view, Jiang went way out there to get the crew back.” Any display of American assertiveness in the region, such as arms sales to Taiwan, would “undercut” Jiang, “to put it mildly.”⁶

Alas, President Bush did not feel the same sense of debt to the Chinese leader. Just three weeks later, in a television interview, the president declared that the United States would do “whatever it took” to protect Taiwan, calling the defense of the island an American “obligation.”⁷ Such clarity shocked the acolytes of “strategic ambiguity.” Massachusetts senator John Kerry took to the microphones to charge that the “implications” of the President’s statement were “serious” and “serve neither our interest nor Taiwan’s.” Kerry said he was reluctant to commit to the defense of Taiwan because he “understood the danger of doing so,” but he placed the onus on Taipei not to provoke the mainland: “[I]f China attacked in response to what it sees as a Taiwanese provocation, would we then respond? Apparently so.”⁸

The Bush Doctrine, Properly Understood

The attacks of September 11, 2001, destroyed not only the World Trade Center and a façade of the Pentagon but also the conventional wisdom of post-Cold War security policy. Al Qaeda and the Taliban were forces not amenable to American balancing-from-a-distance; they were, rather, ideological and violent organizations

dedicated to making war on the United States and killing Americans wherever they could be struck. But though this war had been going on for years prior to 9/11, and though President Bush instantly intuited this fact, the initial reaction of the State Department was to negotiate with the Taliban to turn over Osama bin Laden. And indeed the Democratic Party still has not fully accepted that the United States is at war.

But in the course of the year following September 11, the president gradually fleshed out a larger response to the new realities. Importantly, the problem of terrorism was linked to the larger political problems of the greater Middle East—foremost, the lack of freedom there—as well as the “rogue regimes” that sponsor terrorist groups and maintain illicit programs to develop weapons of mass destruction. Equally important, President Bush understood that American strength would be required to respond to these present dangers. Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom thus form part of a broader “generational commitment”—Condoleezza Rice’s term—to transforming the greater Middle East. The goal is not simply to contain the region’s threats, but to “roll back” the forms of autocracy that produce them. The September 2002 *National Security Strategy of the United States* was the first attempt to articulate a comprehensive “forward strategy of freedom” that lies at the center of the Bush Doctrine.⁹

The China Exception?

But when it comes to China, there is a distinct gap between the rhetoric of the Bush Doctrine and the reality of the administration’s actions. Indeed, China policy has been the last redoubt of the conventional-wisdom crowd.

The discussion of China in the *National Security Strategy* leaves a lot of room for doubt about how hard the United States will push for change in Beijing. “A quarter century after beginning the process of shedding the worst features of the communist legacy, China’s leaders have not yet made the next series of fundamental choices about the character of their state. . . . In time, China will find that social and political freedom is the only source of [national] greatness.”¹⁰ While appearing strong, such language echoes the empty hope that political liberalization is an inevitable consequence of economic development. But in fact, the entire premise of China’s drive for “modernization” is exactly the opposite.

Since 9/11, the pattern of Bush administration diplomacy toward China seems to have returned to

the strategic ambiguities of the past. Beijing has been warmly embraced for its supposed contributions to the global war on terror. But as John Tkacik of the Heritage Foundation has persuasively argued, the People's Republic has done precious little to aid the fight against al Qaeda. Beijing's main "contribution" has been to step up the repression of the Uighurs in western China, probably accelerating the radicalization of a Muslim people whose culture and society are under siege by the forced resettlement of Han Chinese in Xinjiang province.¹¹

And, lest we forget, China was a staunch, if quiet, ally to France in opposing a UN resolution backing the removal of Saddam Hussein from Iraq. The uncovering of the A. Q. Khan nuclear proliferation network is likewise revealing Beijing's role in making the world's most dangerous weapons increasingly available to the world's most dangerous regimes and, by extension, to terror groups. Many parts of the "Islamic Bomb" should have a "Made in China" label stenciled on them. The best one can say about the PRC's performance since 9/11 is that the Chinese kept mum while U.S. forces moved into Central Asian bases to invade Afghanistan.

In typical fashion, the Bush administration has seized upon the change of Chinese leadership from Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao as the moment to embark upon one of the periodic "improve the relationship" offensives that Americans seem incapable of resisting. As Robert Kagan has written, for U.S. China hands "the relationship" is regarded as an end in itself rather than as a means to achieve American political or strategic goals. Even Henry Kissinger, the original architect of current China policy, prided himself on rejecting this view held by professional Sinologists.¹²

Thus there has arisen, as Ellen Bork has put it, a "China Exception" to the Bush Doctrine.¹³ In a widely hailed November 20, 2003, speech to the National Endowment for Democracy, in which he acknowledged that America's past support for autocratic regimes in the Middle East had advanced neither the cause of liberty nor U.S. national security interests, President Bush would only allow that "eventually" the Chinese people would "want their liberty pure and whole." At the same time, Secretary of State Colin Powell was giving a speech at Texas A&M University claiming that China acts "in cooperation with us, not in competition with us. . . . [This] is how real friends get along."¹⁴

And when, a month later, Chinese premier Wen Jiabao visited Washington, officials at the National

Security Council and elsewhere in the bureaucracy cooked up a scheme to have President Bush make amends for his 2001 promise to defend Taiwan. The week before Wen's visit, Chinese military officers warned that Taiwan faced an "abyss of war" if it persisted in holding a referendum on March 20 demanding that China reverse the build-up of missile and other military forces across the Taiwan Strait. Parroting the Chinese line that the referendum was not simply an attempt to address a military threat but actually a move toward independence for Taiwan, President Bush deplored that "the comments and actions made by [Taiwanese President Chen] indicate that he may be willing to make decisions unilaterally to change the status quo."¹⁵

Somehow, the perverse view persists that Taipei—prosperous, democratic, the strategic lynchpin of East Asia, and the most potent symbol of the United States' ability to guarantee the safety of its allies even in the face of a communist colossus—and not Beijing, is the problem. In the most recent issue of *Foreign Affairs*, longtime China watcher Michael Swaine expresses precisely this attitude. He is unimpressed by China's military build-up across the Strait, arguing that it is not a "new threat" and "do[es] not constitute clear evidence that Beijing actually intends to attack the island."¹⁶ In fact, Beijing would far prefer to intimidate Taiwan than actually attack it.

"One China" and the Bush Doctrine

But to create a "China Exception" and preserve the "one China" policy contradicts the two most fundamental tenets of the Bush Doctrine: the assertion of universal political rights and the need for American primacy. Why should the liberation of Beijing be less important than the liberation of Baghdad? This is not to recommend an invasion of mainland China, but it is to recognize that "eventual" freedom is no substitute for actual freedom.

Furthermore, the United States has a compelling national security interest in preventing the "unification" of China with Taiwan. President Bush committed the ultimate Washington gaffe—telling the truth—when he admitted that America would do what it takes to defend Taiwan. "Strategic ambiguity" has, in fact, been a dead letter since the crises of 1995 and 1996, when the Clinton administration was forced to respond to the Chinese "missile blockade" of Taiwan. As Robert Kagan has argued:

[W]hen China began aggressive military intimidation of Taiwan, for the United States the issue

immediately transcended Taiwan. Even though there was not even a real prospect Taiwan would be invaded, with whatever strategic consequences that might entail, the U.S. administration believed it could not stand back and allow Taiwan to be intimidated by the Chinese military. American credibility was at stake, and American officials, especially in the Pentagon, felt this viscerally. East Asian allies were watching for signs of American timidity. Their fear that China was prepared to use military force and intimidation to have its way, undeterred by the United States, raised immediate questions about the future of U.S. staying power in East Asia.¹⁷

Not only East Asia, but the rest of the world too is watching how the United States reacts to the continued rise of China. Moreover, China is watching how well the United States fulfills its role of global leadership. This is especially true in the greater Middle East—the Islamic world extends into Central, South and Southeast Asia, abutting Chinese direct interests. The rise of China is not only a regional challenge, but a global challenge as well. Rapid Chinese growth has made Beijing an increasing consumer of Persian Gulf energy. The PRC's export-driven economy has benefited from globalization, but this also gives China global political and security interests.

It is an exaggeration to assert that, for the want of a Taiwanese nail the American kingdom might be lost, but it is equally true that a failure to peacefully contain Chinese ambitions—which begin at the shores of the Taiwan Strait—will make the new American century much shorter and the “empire of liberty” much smaller. At this writing, it is impossible to predict how exactly the reelection of President Chen will play out, but it would be a terrible mistake for Americans to believe that any political development in Taipei is capable of reviving “one China” as a useful policy. There ought to be less American ambiguity about the fate of freedom in East Asia.

Notes

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16. Michael D. Swaine, “Trouble in Taiwan,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2004, available at <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20040301faessay83205/michael-d-swaine/trouble-in-taiwan/html>.

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