Understanding Taiwan

Bridging the Perception Gap

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The sustained economic growth, unprecedented prosperity, and full democracy recently achieved by the Republic of China has one drawback: the speed of Taiwan’s progress has outstripped prevailing perceptions of what Taiwan is and how it should fit into the global order. To illustrate this, one need look no further than the attainment of full democracy on Taiwan, and the subsequent emergence of a new sense of national identity impelled by the force of the ballot box.

To convey a sense of the popular will on Taiwan today, I now refer to my fellow citizens as “New Taiwanese,” meaning those who are willing to fight for the prosperity and survival of their country, regardless of when they or their forebears arrived on Taiwan and regardless of their provincial heritage or native language. This fresh national identity based on the New Taiwanese consciousness, holding that Taiwan’s interests should be foremost and that the people of Taiwan all share a common destiny, has gradually harmonized the populace and provided a stable middle ground for Taiwan’s political development.

This new sense of identity manifests itself in every aspect of Taiwanese social and political life, including the role that the voters of Taiwan feel is appropriate for their democracy in the world. In turn, the way that its democratic achievements are perceived elsewhere in the region—particularly across the Taiwan Strait in Beijing—directly affects Taiwan’s security and future development in ways never anticipated by the international community. If peace and stability are to be maintained in the Taiwan Strait area, the perceptions underpinning policies involving Taipei and Beijing must be more firmly grounded in reality than in ideological wishful thinking. Only then can the international community faithfully take into account the full significance of democracy on Taiwan.

IMAGINED COMMUNITY

The people of Taiwan have long endured diplomatic isolation, which essentially began with the withdrawal of the Republic of China (R.O.C.) from the United Nations on October 25, 1971. Under pressure from Beijing, many countries were forced to switch official recognition

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Lee Teng-hui

from Taipei to Beijing. The R.O.C. was gradually excluded from most international governmental organizations and maintained formal diplomatic relations with only 29 countries.

After I became president in January 1988, the R.O.C. began to seek a role in the United Nations and other world bodies while stressing that it had no intention of challenging Beijing’s status in these organizations. But to this day the authorities in Beijing continue to use every opportunity to isolate my country diplomatically in hopes of turning fiction into reality. It is fiction to claim that the Chinese nation is not divided—and pernicious fiction to assert that the People’s Republic of China (P.R.C.) has any right or imperative to claim sovereignty over Taiwan. The attacks that Beijing makes on the legitimacy of the democratic government affront the people of Taiwan and the prevailing values of the international community. Such attacks also threaten world peace and stability.

This is where international perceptions of Taiwan play a crucial role. If the 21st century is to be one not where might makes right but where the rule of law and healthy economic competition provide the basis of lasting world peace, the development of democracy and respect for the right of representation must play a crucial role.

Beijing would have the world fear potential disaster should the people of Taiwan enjoy their inherent right to actual and legitimate representation in international organizations and activities. Day in and day out, the international media duly parrot Beijing’s mantra that it “regards Taiwan as a renegade province,” as if this were somehow a plausible pretext for the P.R.C. to undermine regional peace and stability in the name of reckless national-ism. Shrewd threats from Beijing directed at the “Taiwan authorities,” warning that military force would follow a declaration of independence, are faithfully reported as “news.”

The only problem with this scenario is that it is not true. The Chinese nation was divided in 1949 when the P.R.C. was proclaimed. Taiwan cannot cause national disintegration, because the Chinese nation is already divided. There is no need to warn against Taiwan’s declaring independence because the R.O.C. has been sovereign and independent since its founding in 1912. It does not need to declare independence from the P.R.C., which is a much younger state that exercises effective jurisdiction over a totally different part of the Chinese nation.

STRAW MEN, IRON FISTS

Beijing has, in effect, set up a straw man by claiming to regard Taiwan as a “renegade province”—over which it has never exercised effective jurisdiction and to which it has no legal claim under international law—so that it has something with which to threaten action whenever the government and people of the R.O.C. seek to exercise their right to representation in the international community. This unstable ideological house of cards is a threat to regional peace and stability.

One vivid example dates from June 16, 1995, when Beijing used my visit to my American alma mater, Cornell University, as a pretext for unilaterally suspending the promising series of talks between the Strait Exchange Foundation (SSEF) and the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait (ARATS). Beijing proceeded to “test fire” M-9 missiles in the waters off Taiwan on the eve of Taiwan’s presidential
Looking for the New Taiwan:  
President Lee campaigns for reelection, Taipei, March 1996

election in 1996 to intimidate voters.  
Thereafter, the R.O.C. government made more than 100 approaches to the mainland authorities, urging them to resume the SEF-ARATS talks as soon as possible. These overtures were ignored until February 1998, when the mainland leadership finally agreed to resume cross-strait communications. Koo Chen-fu, the chair of SEF, led a delegation to the Chinese mainland in October 1998 and met with Jiang Zemin and other Chinese communist leaders to discuss the future development of cross-strait relations. This visit has put cross-strait relations back on track and paved the way for a resumption of the series of SEF-ARATS consultations.

Nevertheless, these talks cannot be held under the unequal terms on which Beijing has been insisting. Preserving Beijing’s tactical straw-man myth of Taiwan as a “renegade province” flies in the face of reality. The R.O.C. has remained a sovereign state since 1912, although its jurisdiction now extends solely to the territories of Taiwan, the Pescadores, Quemoy, and Ma-tsu. Nevertheless, it is the world’s 19th-largest economy and its 15th-largest trading country. In the 50 years since the P.R.C. was founded, both sides of the Taiwan Strait have been separately ruled, with neither subordinate to the other. This situation has not changed in any substantive way since 1949.

In 1991, the R.O.C. government demonstrated its goodwill by renouncing the use of force to reunify China, acknowledging Beijing’s rule on the Chinese mainland,
Lee Teng-hui

and seeking to replace military confrontation with peaceful exchanges and dialogue. Despite these initiatives, Beijing continues to belittle Taipei as merely a local government. It has also sought to downgrade the status of the R.O.C. government in cross-strait exchanges and to insist on a hegemonistic interpretation of the "one-China principle" to force Taipei to gradually acquiesce to a "one country, two systems" formula. Simultaneously, Beijing has done its utmost to isolate the R.O.C. diplomatically. Consequently, the international community has become accustomed to Beijing's pronouncements while disregarding the obvious fact that each side of the strait is separately and equally ruled.

The facts have been distorted by Beijing and overlooked by the international community for many years. Cross-strait ties now form a "special state-to-state relationship."

Should the R.O.C. government conduct negotiations with the Chinese communists while claiming that we are only a vague "political entity," we would place ourselves in an unequal position that fails to accord with reality. Thus, before commencing any negotiations, Taipei must clearly define cross-strait relations. To engage in meaningful dialogue with the other side and protect the dignity of our country and the interests of its people, the R.O.C. government must reach out to the other side on the basis of reality. When any two states conduct a dialogue, they do so on an equal basis regardless of size or military prowess. There is no reason for the cross-strait dialogue to be any different. Only talks conducted on an equal basis can win popular support.

BRIDGING THE STRAIT

Cross-strait relations are inherently special because Taiwan and the Chinese mainland share the same culture, historical origins, and ethnic bonds. The people on the two sides engage in myriad social, economic, and other exchanges, a level of interaction not found in any other divided nation.

What is most important is that the two sides are willing to work in concert and consult on an equal basis to pursue the future reunification of China. If the two sides can recognize and appreciate this special relationship, they can transcend political differences and jointly develop a relationship conducive to the peaceful and democratic reunification of the Chinese nation one day.

But several obstacles must be overcome if cross-strait relations are to flourish in the years ahead. First, mutual trust between Taipei and Beijing has not yet been established. Although people-to-people exchanges have expanded since the ban on visits to the Chinese mainland was lifted in 1987, relations between Taiwan and the mainland are still overshadowed by more than four decades of hostility. People in Taiwan remain highly suspicious of the Chinese communists. Opinion polls conducted over the past few years indicate that most Taiwanese believe that the authorities in Beijing are hostile to them and the R.O.C. government.

Second, the mainland authorities' refusal to renounce the use of force as a means to solve the Taiwan Strait issue presents a large, insurmountable obstacle to improving relations. Beijing's hegemonic attitude has intensified the Taiwanese people's negative impression of the mainland authorities and their repugnance for
Understanding Taiwan

the lack of political accountability inherent in the mainland Communist Party dictatorship. Every time the authorities in Beijing have tried to intimidate Taiwan with military force, the percentage of Taiwanese voters advocating independence has increased. Thus, contrary to some inaccurate observations voiced overseas, it is not any of Taipei’s actions, but rather Beijing’s clumsy attempts at intimidation by belligerent rhetoric and provocative saber-rattling that have intensified the call in Taiwan for declaring independence.

Sadly, Beijing’s truculent attitude toward Taiwan and its political accomplishments displays a poor understanding of both Taiwan and the nature of diplomacy. No democratically elected government would enter into negotiations without the consent of its people—especially negotiations that might ultimately affect its domestic political accountability.

Third, five decades of separate rule have caused vast differences between the political, social, and economic systems of the two sides of the Taiwan Strait. Taiwan is already a full-fledged democracy; the Chinese mainland remains under authoritarian rule. Taiwan has long been a market economy; the Chinese mainland is mostly a planned economy closely controlled by the state. The mainland authorities disingenuously argue that reunification has nothing to do with the differences in socioeconomic and political systems between the two sides. In fact, the authoritarian nature of the communist regime is the key factor alienating the people of Taiwan from the Chinese mainland.

It is not in anyone’s interest to aggravate cross-strait tensions or see the mainland erupt in chaos. The R.O.C. government has no intention whatsoever of provoking Beijing. Its military strategy is defensive in nature, as are its military forces. This government long ago renounced the idea of force as a means of solving cross-strait disputes and is willing to take a pragmatic approach toward improving relations with Beijing. As a leading investor on the Chinese mainland and a major trading partner with the area, the R.O.C. would like to see the mainland remain stable and its people continue to work toward more prosperous lives. Taipei and Beijing can cooperate to maintain peace in the Taiwan Strait and promote the welfare of all Chinese. Therefore, during the past few years Taipei has made numerous concrete proposals: providing the Chinese mainland with the know-how to fight floods, assisting agricultural improvements on the Chinese mainland, exchanging ideas about reorganizing state-owned enterprises, and cooperating to find ways of coping with the after-effects of the Asian financial crisis. These proposals are aimed at creating a win-win situation for both sides of the Taiwan Strait.

Taipei does not rule out discussing political issues once meetings with Beijing resume on a basis of parity. But priority should be given to outstanding issues that affect people’s everyday lives.

Democratic development in Taiwan has now reached the point of no return. The people of Taiwan would never countenance any less-representative form of government. They are glad to see their country willing and able to serve as a responsible member of the international community. For example, the R.O.C. has pledged an aid package equivalent to $300 million to help the Kosovar refugees. The package will provide emergency support for food, shelters, medical care, and
education for Kosovars still living in exile in neighboring countries. It will also cover the cost of short-term accommodations for some refugees in Taiwan, with job training to help them restore their homeland upon their return.

Of course, democracy on Taiwan is hardly perfect. No democratic system is. Having achieved full democracy in only one decade, the R.O.C. is still in the process of deepening and consolidating its system. Traditional social values have been discarded while new ones have yet to take hold. Taiwan is engaging in educational and spiritual reform to improve the quality of life by promoting cultural development, teaching new virtues and values while rediscovering traditional ones, and developing the sense of civic and social responsibility.

Only nations willing to relinquish the known certainties of old-style authoritarianism for the unknowns of modern democracy can ultimately enjoy the flexibility, efficiency, and transparency necessary to meet the competitive challenges of globalization sweeping the world today. What Taiwan has done in the past decade is remarkable for the speed and scope of its economic and political changes and for the peaceful way in which such changes have been achieved. It is in the best interest of regional and even global peace and stability for Beijing to embrace democracy rather than try to contain it. The international community has a crucial role to play here—first by updating its perceptions of what has taken place on Taiwan and the implications of democratic development here for the region and the world, and then by working to accord Taiwan the international status and role it deserves.