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The Rise of China and the Question of Taiwan

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by Tanaka Sakai

A historical review of China's space program highlights the evolution of the country's national priorities. The initiative began in 1956, just eight years after the establishment of the People's Republic of China. The government of Mao Zedong devoted tremendous resources to science and technology in order to bolster Chinese military might. Learning from China's bitter experience of imperialist exploitation by the Western powers and Japan as a result of ignoring the relationship between Western science and military power, the leadership stressed the development of science and technology as the basis for military power.

From the second half of the 1970s, China's rocket research shifted away from purely military objectives to economic profit as Deng Xiaoping came to power and steered the country on a path of reform and openness. Soon, China began to compete with European and American military contractors for a share of the commercial satellite launching business.1

In the last several years, the Chinese government has begun a march to become an economic powerhouse, overcoming international embargoes levied after the Tiananmen Square incident and the collapse of socialism in the early 1990s. Beijing has announced its intention to land Chinese astronauts on the moon by 2010 in a plan that rivals America's earlier Apollo missions. Last October, China achieved its first manned space flight by sending Yang Liwei, an army officer, around the earth fourteen times on the Shenzhou 5 before landing in Inner Mongolia.2

The flight made China only the third country after the Soviet Union and the United States to successfully propel one of its citizens into space, and was meant to demonstrate to international and domestic observers that China, along with America and Russia, was a great nation. It is apparent that a quest for political prestige is one of the principal purposes of the country's space program.

After Yang's flight, President Bush reacted by announcing an ambitious plan to renew "manned space exploration, capped by the return to the moon by 2020 [and] a manned mission to Mars a decade later." He also declared that NASA's budget, which had been spiraling downward for years, would receive a dramatic upward boost. This would appear to be good news for the space agency, which had been humbled by the explosion of the Columbia space shuttle last February, but because the plan lacked specific details, many observers think that it is not serious and will not be implemented at the scale announced.3

Flying with the United Nations

When the Chinese spacecraft took off last October, it carried onboard the flag of the United Nations. Just as the successful mission symbolized China's arrival as a great power, the inclusion of the U.N. banner seemed to represent a national resolve that as "China becomes a great power, it does not represent a threat to the global community. Rather, China will contribute to the stability of international society."4 It was this message that Colonel Yang carried when he presented the flag to U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan in New York a few months later.

With these moves, China is attempting to stake a position contrasting to that of the United States. The United Nations opposes the militarization of space. Hard-liners in the U.S. have called for the extension of military capabilities into space and the development of spacecraft armed with nuclear weapons that would provide Washington with new strategic abilities to attack potential threats.5

Since the Bush administration ignored the United Nations and attacked Iraq, the organization has been attempting to extricate itself from its longtime status as an American puppet. In September, Annan, in the context of criticizing pre-emptive unilateralism, severely censured the U.S. government, though without naming it. "Rather than wait for that to happen, they argue, States have the right and obligation to use force pre-emptively, even on the territory of other States, and even while weapons systems that might be used to attack them are still being developed. According to this argument, States are not obliged to wait until there is agreement in the Security Council. Instead, they reserve the right to act unilaterally, or in ad hoc coalitions. This logic represents a fundamental challenge to…world peace and stability…. My concern is that…it could set precedents that result in a proliferation of the unilateral and lawless use of force."6

China, to combat the threat posed by the United States, has joined the United Nations in decrying America's militarization of space. One senses from Chinese actions an effort to gain international approval of its space program.

China's Participation in the Security Council's "Anti-American Alliance"

In diplomatic matters as well, China has begun to take a more prominent role, often using the stage provided by United Nations. Beijing's more assertive posture has been particularly evident as fissures developed between the United States and the United Nations, and the European Union over the Iraq War. In the Security Council, three of the Permanent Five, China, Russia, and France (supported by its European Union ally, Germany), have formed an "anti-American alliance" to oppose the attempt of the Anglo-Saxon coalition of the United States and Britain to dominate world affairs.7

For example, when the Security Council was debating the draft resolution sponsored by United States and Britain regarding the power and authority of the interim Iraqi government before the U.S. military's "transfer" of sovereignty at the end of May, China proposed amendments to the U.S.-British draft. The Anglo-American resolution promised to restore "full sovereignty" to the Iraqi people, but France, Germany, and other countries objected to the vague language of the resolution.8

The Chinese revisions, which drew the support of France and Russia, proposed giving the transitional Iraqi government complete command over the Iraqi army and required the American military to consult with the Iraqi government before launching major operations.9 The assertiveness of the Chinese in proposing these amendments surprised many China watchers. In the past, China had largely regarded the Middle East as a sphere of Europe and the United States and had been cautious in openly taking a position concerning the region's affairs.

After the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989, many Europe countries and the United States imposed an arms trade embargo on China, but this year France and Germany pushed for an end to the ban. In response, "most EU states insisted on clear evidence of an improvement in Beijing's human rights practices" and resisted abolishing the embargo, and the proposal was tabled in April.10 (Since American prestige crumbled after the Iraq War, a split has heightened within the European Union between France and Germany, which took advantage of the power vacuum to increase their hegemonic power, and neighboring mid- and small-sized countries, which are opposed to Franco-German ascendancy.)

U.S. Moderates and China

Two months later in June, Prime Minister Blair expressed his desire for Britain to resume exporting arms to China and his willingness to support

France and Germany. This about-face by Britain is noteworthy. Until 11 September 2001, the Blair government had generally struck a balance in its diplomatic relationships with the United States and the European Union, though it generally leaned more toward its continental neighbors. After the attacks in New York and Washington, though, Blair's loyalties moved completely across the Atlantic as the United States engaged in unilateralism. Once the war in Iraq turned into a quagmire, Blair began to search for ways to return Britain to its pre-9/11 equilibrium between America and the European Union.

Britain's dilemma is similar to the divisions between proponents of international cooperation (moderates) and unilateralists (hawks) in Washington. After September 11, the power of hawks in the U.S. government skyrocketed and they took control of the White House, while moderates, as represented by Secretary of State Colin Powell, became isolated. As the occupation of Iraq ran into difficulties and support for the Bush administration dropped, moderates have to an extent regained an upper hand in Washington by leveraging opposition to the hawks from domestic forces and international actors such as the European Union (Germany, France, and Britain), Russia, China, and the United Nations. This trend is symbolized by Powell's declaration in the January issue of Foreign Affairs that the administration prioritizes the United States' "relations with major powers, ...notably Russia, India, and China."11

Moderates regard a "balance of power," which had existed since World War I, as the ideal situation in international politics. They believe that if all major states are of roughly equivalent power, the outbreak of wars is less likely. The strengthening of the United Nations and China have long been strategic goals of moderates. As the U.S. became bogged down in Iraq, the European Union, China, Russia, and India became stronger and made their voices heard in the world through such venues as the United Nations. Britain, too, began to lean away from United States toward the European Union, as evidenced by Blair's decision to support lifting the ban on the export of weaponry to China. These were trends that surely pleased moderates.

Since the Korean War, American hawks have taken an anti-Chinese stance, but in order for the United States to extricate itself from Iraq, it needs the cooperation of the United Nations, and, therefore, the approval of China -- a permanent member of the Security Council -- is indispensable. Furthermore, in order to resolve the nuclear standoff with North Korea, Beijing plays a crucial role as a mediator in the six-nation talks. For these reasons, hard-liners can no longer afford to maintain their hostile policies toward China. Moreover, China, along with Japan, Taiwan, and Korea, has purchased a vast number of U.S. government bonds. The Bush administration, which is boosting U.S. budgetary deficits, is essentially funding its defense buildup by selling bonds to China. It is, then, becoming all the more difficult to regard China as an enemy.

Many people interpret the hegemonic rise of China as portending a crisis for Japan, which historically has either had too close or too far of a relationship with its Asian neighbor. Japan, they claim, "has no choice but to strengthen its dependent relationship (alliance) with the United States if it is to meet the Chinese threat." Such reasoning was logical before 11 September when America's commitment to international cooperation was strong, but now that the United States has become unreliable, perhaps the ascendancy of China as a balance to America is a positive development for the stability of Asia.

The trend toward the contraction of U.S. hegemony and the expansion of Chinese power in international affairs continues to escalate. As the New York Times recently editorialized, "The Bush administration can couch Beijing's new role in whatever politically advantageous language it wishes, but, ultimately, it comes down to this: China's influence [in Southeast Asia] is rapidly rising and America's is rapidly declining."12

China's Stymied Taiwan Strategy

Yet, even as China becomes stronger, it possesses a critical weakness: Taiwan. The Chinese communist regime has vowed that it will "eliminate the rule of the foreign powers from China and reunify the country." By this they mean they intend to eliminate the influence of the United States, which supported Nationalist Party throughout the Cold War, and bring Taiwan under mainland control.

Reclaiming Taiwan, however, will not be easy. Chen Shui-bian, the leader of the Democratic Progressive Party, which opposes Taiwan's return to China, defeated the Nationalist Party and People First Party, which support reunification, in the past two presidential elections in 2000 and in March 2004.

(Public opinion is an entirely different matter. Although the political parties are divided between proponents of Taiwan declaring its independence from China and advocates of unification, the majority of the island's population prefer the status quo. They are "against a return to China, but also against provoking China with a declaration of independence, and instead favor the current situation in which Taiwan is for all practical matters a separate country from China.")

Chen was involved in Taiwan's pro-independence camp before he became president. For this reason, Beijing has not trusted the Taipei government since his inauguration in 2000, and maintained communications only with the Nationalist and People First parties. China expected that the pro-independence camp would defeat Chen's Democratic Progress Party in March and limit him to one term in office, but not only did Chen win, his support rose from 39 percent in 2000 to just over 50 percent in 2004.13

(In 2000, the election was a three-way race between the Nationalist, People First, and Democratic Progress parties, but in 2004 campaign the former two parties united to create a two-way match-up.)14

After Taiwan's international status became tenuous when America normalized relations with China in 1979, the one-party Nationalist Party dictatorship led by Chiang Kai-shek gradually moved away from its goal of "overthrowing the Communist Party and unifying China under the Nationalist Party" and turned toward a more pragmatic "Taiwanization" policy. Over the last two decades since then, politics in Taiwan have become even more pragmatic, so few people now promote a return to China.

If the Nationalist Party or People First Party is to succeed in taking power, they must realign their position more closely with popular opinion by discarding their previous pro-China stance and stake out a position more like the Democratic Progressive Party's "a party for the Taiwanese people." In other words, even if the Nationalist Party retakes control of the government, by then relations with Communist China will have become even more strained than they are now, and it will have become all the more difficult for Beijing to exercise any political influence on Taiwan.

Catastrophe Awaits China if it Attacks Taiwan

One often hears from the Chinese leadership that the country "will not rule out the use of force as a means to unify Taiwan with China." But in my opinion, force is not an option for Beijing. What is most important for China now is to continue to strengthen its standing in the world and maintain political stability at home. An attack on Taiwan would devastate both of these priorities.

If China were to invade Taiwan, even it was successful from a military perspective, the Chinese communist party would completely loose the trust of the world, and the world community would regard Chinese leaders as "vicious criminals" like Saddam Hussein after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. The damage would certainly be greater than the fallout after the Tiananmen Square crackdown. At the moment, America's relationship with China is balanced between moderates and hawks, with pro-China policies maintaining a slight advantage, but if a attack were to occur, U.S. hardliners would instantly gain the upper-hand. Hawks have no scruples about the world being in disorder, in fact, perhaps because they have the tendency to prefer chaos, they would rejoice at the necessity of going to war with China. Such a confrontation would lead to the "Middle Easternization" of East Asia.

There would be severe limits to the length China could occupy Taiwan. If the U.S. military became involved in the conflict, it might drive the Chinese army from Taiwan. Defeat would inflict irreparable damage on the Chinese Communist Party and completely destabilize domestic politics. Whatever the outcome, the risks for Red China are immense. Regardless of ideological influences, it is almost unthinkable that the Chinese Communist Party leadership, which carefully considers matters from a practical perspective, would opt to take such huge risks and attack Taiwan.

In order to achieve unification, China must somehow persuade the majority of the island's people to want to merge with China. But since China's political system has much less political freedom, unless China advances domestic democratization to a fair degree, that cannot be realized. In China, democratic transformation has made little headway in the past and its future prospects are poor. Out of fear of stirring up

civil unrest, the Communist Party has resisted fully implementing elections at even the local municipal level.

A form of "reunification" that has a more realistic chance of adoption is the creation of a sort-of "Chinese federation," an organization like the European Union that would work toward convergence and integration while maintaining the present political structures of the two governments. Chen has suggested that this might be a model for bilateral relations, but the major obstacle is Beijing's rejection of a unity of equals, as it continues to regard Taiwan as simply a small part of greater China.15

Recently, the desire to "settle the cross-straits issue well ahead of the 2008 Olympics to be held in Beijing" has emanated from the Chinese leadership. They insist that China could possibly resort to arms to resolve the issue, but as mentioned, I think this is mere rhetoric. If one takes such statements with a grain of salt, the message Beijing is actually sending can be interpreted as China's hope "to resolve the issue (peacefully) and be regarded by the world, in every respect, as a great country." The possibility of negotiations between China and Taiwan about how to create a Sino-Taiwanese federation framework is not entirely non-existent.16

Notes

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