TAIWAN ISSUE IN THE SINO-U.S. RELATIONS

Ghulam Murtaza Khoso[*]

Abstract

U.S.-China relations are arguably the most important and consequential bilateral ties in the twenty-first century. The United States of America and China have many areas of disagreement. Among all those, the confrontation over Taiwan has the potential to bring the two powers into actual military conflict. The continuous U.S. arms sales, to Taiwan, and Chinese deployment of weaponry in the Taiwan Strait increase tensions in the bilateral relationship. The U.S. considers emerging China as a threat to the current international as well as regional power status quo, therefore, trying to contain Chinese expanding power encircling it, maintaining military alliances, and keeping Taiwan away from the mainland. China on the other hand sees U.S. support and weapons sales to Taiwan as a threat to its territorial integrity. Miscalculations by either side may trigger a major military clash.

Introduction

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, Sino-U.S. relations have developed by twists and turns. The dawn of the Cold War and the East-West confrontation divided the world into 'two camps'. The United States, which was leading the capitalist and democratic forces and made alliances to check the growing communist influence in the world, saw communist China as a growing threat to the liberal forces in Asia.

From late 1940s to late 1950s China was blockaded, besieged and looked upon with enmity. For well known reasons, China and the United States met at the battle field in Korea. The next decade even did not witness any change in the Sino-U.S. relations.

---

[*] Lecturer, Area Study Centre, Far East & South East Asia, University of Sindh, Jamshoro

Frustrated United States, bogged down in the Vietnam War, at last softened its attitude towards China and recognized the communist regime in 1971. The relationship, however, was made hostage by the syndromes of 'China Threat', 'Revolutionary China', and 'the Imperial and the Unilateral United States'. It was only during the Clinton administration when Washington called Beijing 'Strategic Partner' but that term did not last for much and debates like how to contain emerging China again started in the United States.

The dramatic events of September 11, 2001 changed these syndromes for a while and the U.S perception of 'China Threat' changed or in fact, overshadowed by the new motto of Islamic fundamentalism. However, the major issues remained unresolved between the two powers. Among those issues Taiwan issue is the one which never let a military clash, between the two superpowers, to disappear.

Taiwan is the only issue on which a war can be erupted between the United States and China. The continuous U.S. arms sales to Taiwan and Anti-Secession Law passed by China in 2005 have complicated the issue more. No compromise is expected in the near future on this very crucial issue between the two countries.

Sino-U.S. Relations and the Taiwan Issue

By the time 1971, when Sino-Soviet split reached at its peak, the U.S. saw the opportunity to change the course of the Cold War by snatching China from the Soviet block. The Sino-Soviet split eventually escalated into Sino-U.S. rapprochement and President Nixon of the United States of America secretly visited China via Pakistan. According to the initial documents it seemed that the U.S. respected Chinese position and claims over Taiwan.

Besides achieving a thaw in bilateral Sino-U.S. relations, Nixon's visit also produced the first of three documents that are the key tones of the relationship between these two countries. The first of these documents (also known as communiqués) saw both nations

acknowledge differences in their social systems, agree to respect each other's national sovereignty, and work towards establishing full diplomatic relations. Where national securities are concerned, the U.S. agreed to accept China's definition of Taiwan being part of 'one China' and that U.S. would ultimately withdraw its military forces from Taiwan in order to facilitate a peaceful solution to the political disputes between PRC and Taiwan.[1]

Establishing Sino-U.S. diplomatic relations resulted in the creation of a second communiqué between the two countries. Within this document, the USA acknowledged, the PRC as China's sole legal government and agreed to end official diplomatic relations with Taiwan while maintaining unofficial diplomatic and other relations with Taiwan. The U.S. also reaffirmed China's position that there is only one China and that Taiwan is part of China.[2]

The U.S. recognition of Taiwan as an integral part of China created panic within U.S. political, academic and law making societies. The U.S. Congress, especially, did not welcome the move by the government to abandon itself from Taiwan. The establishment of diplomatic relations and its perceived abandonment of Taiwan created acute concern in Congress and led to the 1979 passage of the Taiwan Relations Act. This legislation provided for containing U.S. weapons sales to Taiwan to enable it to defend itself and an implicit assurance that the USA would not permit a hostile external force to endanger Taiwan's security or existing socio-political system.[3]

Chinese concerns over the perceived implications of the Taiwan Relations Act led to further negotiations between China and USA and culminated in the issuance of a third communiqué in 1982. In this document, the U.S. again started its adherence to their being only one China, started its desire not to interfere in Chinese "internal affairs", and agreed to reduce and eventually end arms sales to Taiwan.[4]

Taiwan resurfaced as an additional exacerbating irritant to Sino-U.S. relations during the 1990s. In May 1995, the USA granted a visa to

Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui to attend his class reunion at Cornell University and give a speech at Cornell's spring graduation. China's reaction to this was extreme displeasure which manifested itself several months later in the form of military exercises in the Taiwan Strait that included live fire missile exercises in March 1996. The U.S. responded by sending two aircraft carrier groups to the region to deter possible Chinese assaults against Taiwan. The United States also has expanded military ties with Taiwan after Chinese missile firings in 1995-96. However, there is no defense treaty with Taiwan. According to Bracken, the test firing of missiles at Taiwan in 1996 is a signal of Chinese willingness to take a more robust position in its relationship with Taiwan.[5]

Since then, the issue of Taiwan, though not hijacked the mega relationship but certainly created unrest in each other's policy making circles. People's Republic of China fearing a major military clash, in case of the declaration of independence by the Taiwanese officials, started to modernize its traditional guerilla army into an advanced and sophisticated defense institution while the U.S. maintained and even enhanced its security relationships with the regional countries such as Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea. The U.S. considers these countries as major players in the game of containment which has been played against China.

China responded to these measures in the third conference of the 10th National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China (PRC) passing an Anti-Secession Law (ratified on March 14, 2005 and went into effect immediately) which called for an immediate military action in order to merge the island (Taiwan) with the mainland in case of the independence declaration by Taiwan. The law passed by National People's Congress of People's Republic of China was condemned both by Taiwan and the United States.

The United States on the other hand continued its arms sales to Taiwan, which U.S. considers as part of the commitment made in the passage of the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979.

U.S. Arms Sales to Taiwan

The U.S. arms sales to Taiwan are governed by the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act and a 1982 joint communiqué with China. These two documents are not necessarily compatible. Under the former, The United States pledged to provide those arms necessary for Taiwan's self-defense. But in the 1982 Sino-American Communiqué, still in force, the Reagan Administration agreed that the United States government "does not seek to carry out a long term policy of arms sales to Taiwan, [and] that its arms sales to Taiwan will not exceed, either in qualitative or in quantitative terms, level of those supplied in recent years since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and China, and that it intends to reduce gradually its sales of arms to Taiwan, leading over a period of time to a final resolution".[6]

This policy largely held until throughout the 1980s, with annual sales to Taiwan around $500 million. In 1992, however, U.S. arms sales to Taiwan jumped over 1,000 per cent, with the sale of 150 F-16 fighter/bombers. The Chinese government protested the sale vehemently, saying it violated the 1982 agreement. Proponents of the $5.8 billion deal argued that the 1982 communiqué does not have the force of U.S. law, unlike the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act. Taiwan began taking delivery of the F-16 fighter-jets in May 1997.[7] In protest, China withdrew in late 1992 from arms transfer talks among the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. The talks were initiated after the 1991 Gulf War with the aim of reducing destabilizing arms sales. China has also said that its adherence to the Missile Technology Control Regime is conditional, linked to U.S. restraint in arms transfers to Taiwan.[8]

Despite the protests by the Chinese government, the U.S. continued to approve arms packages for Taiwan. The U.S. approved and transferred the most sophisticated weapons to Taiwan to balance the military equation in the Taiwan Strait. In April 2000, Washington approved yet another package of high-tech weapons for Taiwan,

including sophisticated air-to-air and anti-ship missiles and a “Pave Paws” long-range radar system.

In September 2007, the Pentagon announced possible military sales to Taiwan worth more than 2.2 billion dollars, including a dozen P-3C Orion anti-submarine patrol aircraft and SM-2 anti-aircraft missiles.[9] China protested on the U.S. decision and urged Washington to cancel the deal and end its ties with the islands military.[10] Earlier Taiwan’s Deputy National Defense Minster Ko Cheng-heng had said that Taiwan had an ‘urgent and legitimate’ need to buy F-16 jet fighters from the United States.[11]

Same year U.S. Congressional advisory panel, expressing concern over the likelihood of a U.S.-China clash if China attacks Taiwan urged the Bush administration to approve arms sales to Taiwan and promote joint military activities between Taiwan, U.S. and other allies to enable a more international response in case of a Chinese attack.[12]

Taiwan itself is developing sophisticated weapons in order to counter Chinese military balance in case of any Chinese attack. According to the reports Taiwan is developing a non-lethal graphite bomb designed to disable rival China’s power supplies. Should war break out, the so called “black out bombs” would be carried by Hsiungfeng 2E cruise missiles, to paralyze the power systems of China’s South Eastern coastal cities.[13]

The U.S. response to the Chinese protests against U.S. arms sales to Taiwan is that its Taiwan policy is guided by the Taiwan Relations Act, that it is committed to a "one China" policy, and that its arms sales to Taiwan are consistent with the 1982 communiqué because of their "defensive" nature and they are responses to PRC military efforts that threaten Taiwan. It is implied that the PRC is violating paragraph 7 of the communiqué which requires both governments "to make every effort to adopt measures and create conditions conducive to the thorough settlement of this issue." The United

States points out that China's 1992 purchase of 48 longer-range (4,000 km) Russian SU-27 fighter aircraft, superior to all aircraft in Taiwan's inventory, and China's firing of M-9 (range: 600 km) missiles at waters off of Taiwan in March 1996, were not measures designed to "create conditions conducive to the thorough settlement of this issue."[14]

The United States, however, wants Taiwan to be more interested in its self defense, especially in defense spending. Some in the United States have questioned Taiwan's seriousness about its self defense spending, and protection of secrets. The Pentagon has broadened its focus from Taiwan's arms purchases to its regular defense budget, readiness for self defense, and critical infrastructure protection.[15] Blocked by the opposition-controlled Legislative Yuan (LY), the special budget (not passed) for submarines, P-3C ASW aircraft, and PAC-3 missile defense systems was cut from $18 billion in 2004 to $9 billion (for submarines only) in 2005.[16] In March 2006, Taiwan's defense minister requested a 2006 Supplemental Defense Budget in part for submarine procurement, P-3C, and PAC-2 upgrades (not new PAC-3 missiles), but the budget was not passed. In June 2007, the Legislative Yuan passed Taiwan's 2007 defense budget with funds for P-3C plane, PAC-2 upgrades, and F-16 C/D fighters. While the LY did not commit to buy submarines, in December 2007, it approved $62 million to start the design phase. The Navy accepted Taiwan's formal request for this phase.[17]

U.S.-Japanese Alliance

The U.S.-Japanese security alliance dates back to the end of World War II, when U.S. occupied Japan. The new Japanese constitution drafted by the United States does not allow Japan to maintain a regular army except the Self Defense Forces (SDF). The United States itself guaranteed Japanese security by deploying its own forces on Japanese soil.

The U.S. forces deployed in Japan maintained a balance of power in East Asia and are playing the role of stabilizer especially in the Northeast Asia region. These forces, however, are seen as U.S. grand strategy to maintain its hegemony over rest of Asia, first by Soviet Union and now by the People's Republic of China.

As time progressed this security relationship enhanced its scope from securing Japan from outside aggression to contain the emerging power China. The U.S. and Japan pointed out the tensions at the Taiwan Strait as a major reason for maintaining such kind of alliance.[18]

The strengthened U.S.-Japanese alliance has led to Japan's accelerated involvement in the Taiwan issue. To Washington and Tokyo, the alliance will serve first and foremost as a formidable deterrent against Beijing's possible use of force against Taiwan. A possible understanding of this is that if deterrence fails, their alliance would serve as a platform for a joint U.S.-Japanese response to a contingency in the Taiwan Strait. In 1996 and 1997, when the United States and Japan worked to revise their defense cooperation guidelines, they included the Taiwan Strait in the Parameters.[19]

Even though Tokyo insisted that the parameters are situational rather than geographical, the Taiwan Strait and the Korean Peninsula have been listed by Tokyo and Washington as the two potential hot spots necessitating U.S.-Japanese security cooperation in East Asia. Since the defense cooperation guidelines were revised, both U.S.-Taiwanese and Japanese-Taiwanese security ties have been remarkably enhanced.[20] In fact, interaction between Washington and Tokyo on the Taiwan issue has been increasing, with Tokyo more actively consulting and coordinating with Washington in its relations with Taipei. After listing Taiwan as a common strategic objective in February 2005, Japan and the United States are reported to be working on a joint war plan for the Taiwan Strait.[21]

As the U.S.-Japanese alliance assumes the function of security guarantor to Taiwan, it serves to embolden the separatist forces in Taiwan, who believe that, no matter which side provoked a war in the Taiwan Strait, Washington and Tokyo would be ready to come to their rescue. Based on this calculus, Taiwan has been pushing for the creation of a 'U.S.-Japan-Taiwan security coalition in recent years.[22]

For Beijing the hard reality is that, if the situation in Taiwan spins out of control and requires force, it has to be prepared to deal not only with the United States but also with a militarily more active and capable Japan.[23]

Future of Sino-U.S. Relations

U.S.-China relations are arguably the most important and consequential bilateral ties in the twenty-first century. The United States and China still have several areas of disagreement. The major dispute among all is the Taiwan's future, although the disagreement on the issue is perhaps narrower today than three decades ago. Compared with other issues in the bilateral relationship, such as, trade imbalances, China's currency regime, intellectual property rights, and Tibet, only the Taiwan issue has the potential to bring the two powers into actual military conflict. As the former U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powel, stated in 2002 that "whether China chooses peace of coercion to resolve its differences with Taiwan will tell us a great deal about the kind of relationship China seeks not only with its neighbors, but with us."[24] The U.S already showed great deal of concerns on the military potential of People's Republic of China. The U.S. Defense Department has issued its annual report on China's military capability, citing continuing efforts to project Chinese power beyond its immediate region and to develop high-technology systems that can challenge the best in the world.[25]

Since the Nixon administration the U.S. government has adopted the "One China" policy and has refrained from supporting a separate and independent Taiwan. The U.S. government recognizes the

Beijing regime as the sole legitimate government of China and acknowledges the Chinese position that there is only one China and Taiwan is part of China. This basic principle has been adhered to by all the administrations. But America's treatment of Taiwan as a de facto nation-state, based on the Taiwan Relations Act, and its gradual upgrading of its "unofficial relations" with Taiwan, particularly its increasingly robust sale of advanced weapons to Taiwan, have added elements of uncertainty to U.S.-China relations and made a U.S.-China conflict over Taiwan ever more likely.

To maintain stability and prosperity in East Asia is in America's national interests. The United States can definitely do more to promote cross-Strait exchanges and integration. Most importantly, if the United States helps in the process of China's peaceful unification, the accommodating gesture will be appreciated by the PRC, removing the largest hurdle in relations between the two countries and making a smooth relationship. Encircling or separating China with military alliances and using Taiwan as a pawn will only create a resentful and revengeful China.

Conclusion

Compared with other issues in the bilateral relationship between the United States and China, such as, trade imbalances, China's currency regime, intellectual property rights, and Tibet, only the Taiwan issue has the potential to bring the two powers into actual military conflict. The United States considers China a threat to the current international as well as regional power status quo, therefore, trying to contain Chinese expanding power through encircling it or maintaining military alliances. China on the other hand sees U.S. weapons sale to Taiwan as a threat to its territorial integrity and the violation of the communiqués signed between the two countries during early 1970s.

There is unrest in the policy making societies of both countries regarding each other's intentions. Senior U.S. policy makers have

noted several times that China's approach to resolving the Taiwan issue is a key indicator of China's future behavior as a major power.[26] For many Chinese, U.S. policy toward Taiwan is the counter piece of the perceived U.S. attempt to contain China. The U.S. arms sales to and military interactions with Taiwan seek to prevent reunification and compel Beijing to spend scarce resources on military modernization, thereby undermining its revival as a great power in Asia.[27]

There is a need for U.S.A and China to establish bilateral regional conflict management mechanisms, having a U.S. diplomatic envoy for China-Taiwan relations. If both sides are creative and flexible, the situation can be managed. China must be more restrained in terms of the deployment of weaponry in the Taiwan Strait, and the United States must be moderate in its level of arms sales to Taiwan.

References

[1] U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, "Shanghai Joint Communiqué", *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, Vol. 8, No. 9, February 28, 19972, p. 473-76

[2] Quoted in Bert Chapman, "U.S.-China National Security Relationship: A Resource Guide", *Collection Building*, Vol. 20, No.3, 2001, p. 132

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Bracken P., *Fire in the East: The Rise of Asian Military Power and the Second Nuclear Age*, Perennial, New York, 1999, p. __

[6] www.fas.org/asmp/profiles/taiwan.htm

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] "Pentagon Could Make 2.2 Billion Dollars Arms Sales to Taiwan", http://taiwansecurity.org/TSR-Arms-2006.htm

[10] "China Protests against Proposed U.S. Weapons Sales to Taiwan", http://taiwansecurity.org/TSR-Arms-2006.htm

[11] "Taiwan Has 'Urgent' Need to Buy United States' F-16s", http://taiwansecurity.org/TSR-Arms-2006.htm

[12] *Taipei Times*, October 28, 2007

[13] "Taiwan to Develop 'Blackout Bomb': Report", http://taiwansecurity.org/TSR-Arms-2006.htm

[14] http://www.nti.org/db/china/twnpos.htm

[15] "Taiwan: Major U.S. Arms Sales Since 1990", *CRS Report for Congress*, August 4, 2008

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Wu Xinbo, "The End of Silver Lining: A Chinese View of the U.S.-Japanese Alliance", *The Washington Quarterly*, Winter 2005-06, Vol. 29, No. 1, p.125

[19] Wu Xinbo, "The End of Silver Lining: A Chinese View of the U.S.-Japanese Alliance", *The Washington Quarterly*, Winter 2005-06, Vol. 29, No. 1, p.125

[20] Ibid.

[21] Le Shaoyan, "Japan-U.S. Decided to Make Joint War Plan", *Xinhau*, May 12, 2005

[22] Wang Jianming, "Taiwan's Role in the U.S.-Japan-Taiwan Strategic Coalition", *World Affairs* (Beijing) No.6, 2005, pp.58-59

[23] Wu Xinbo, "The End of Silver Lining: A Chinese View of the U.S.-Japanese Alliance", *The Washington Quarterly*, Winter 2005-06, Vol. 29, No. 1, p.126

[24] Evan S. Mederos, "Strategic Hedging and the Future of Asia-Pacific Stability", *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No.1, Winter 2005-06, p.158

[25] "Pentagon Says China Working to Project Power Further", *Voanews.com*

[26] Evan S. Mederos, "Strategic Hedging and the Future of Asia-Pacific Stability", *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No.1, Winter 2005-06, p.158

[27] Ibid.