There are signs that the United States is moving away from the position it has held since 1971 when the island of Taiwan was an independent state, deserving not only of recognition as such, but also a place in the General Assembly of the United Nations. The revelation came in a recent speech by the United States secretary of state Antony Blinken. It has understandably brought a strong reaction from the government in Beijing for whom it is an article of faith that Taiwan is a province of China that should one-day be returned to the embrace of the motherland.

In truth, the United States acceptance of the “One China” principle has always been in name only, as it has never ceased to have contact with the government in Taiwan. Those contacts have become stronger in recent years, including most recently existing of United States military forces on the island, ostensibly for the purpose of training the members of the Taiwan Armed Forces.

United States rhetoric in support of Taiwanese Independence is also become progressively more overt, so the latest pronouncement by Blinken that Taiwan should receive the status of membership of the United Nations is really no surprise. One suspects that the United States has long held the position that Taiwan is really the legitimate Government of China. It was after all a position they had virtually supported from 1949 when the Communist party assumed control in China until 1971 when Taiwan was finally evicted from China’s role in the United Nations Security Council.

Looking back at that 22-year period, it is astonishing that the fiction could be maintained at such a high level that the government of China was in fact represented by a defeated faction that had fled to Taiwan. In retrospect it is difficult to believe that the world could accept such a fiction and that China could retain its important role as a
permanent member of the Security Council when in fact “China” consisted of a small island off the coast of the mainland.

It is significant that in the arguments in the General Assembly on the question of China’s representation in the United Nations, the United States actively promoted the idea that Taiwan should retain the status of membership. That was firmly rejected by the majority, in a vote of 76 to 35 with 17 abstentions. On 23 November 1971 the People’s Republic of China took China’s place on the Security Council.

In 1998 Taiwan proposed that she become a member of the United Nations, making clear it had abandoned its claim to represent China, stating that it only sought representation of the 21.8 million people that resided in Taiwan. That proposal was defeated by the United Nations General Assembly.

There is therefore nothing new in the attempt by Secretary Blinken to raise again the question of Taiwan’s membership of the United Nations General Assembly. Perhaps the more interesting question is why is he now trying to resurrect what is essentially a dead horse? The answer to that question lies in the behaviour of the United States in recent years to both the status of Taiwan and its broader attitude to the People’s Republic of China.

It is clear that the United States has never really accepted the notion that Taiwan is actually part of China. It maintains a heavy military presence in the South China Sea and as noted above, has in recent years significantly increased its military support for Taiwan. That military support commenced under the Carter administration and has steadily increased over the years, from about $240 million in 1979 to about $6 billion in Trump’s last year as president.

The massive arms sales, plus the presence of United States troops on the island, accompanied by explicit threats by President Joe Biden make it abundantly clear that the United States sees Taiwan as a separate and independent state. It has no intention of promoting any reunification of Taiwan with the mainland. The question is, what will the United States do to try and maintain the separate existence of Taiwan.

It is abundantly clear that if the People’s Republic of China decided to use force to end Taiwan’s current status and forcibly reunite with the mainland, there is very little that Taiwan could do to prevent that happening. Despite the brave words of its president and defence secretary, expert military opinion regards the length of Taiwanese resistance to a military takeover by the mainland to be measured in hours rather than days, let alone weeks.

Taiwan clearly expects to receive assistance from the United States to resist any takeover by the mainland. Again, expert opinion states that the United States has zero chance of winning such a conflict, and that is the opinion of the United States’ own experts, not just independent observers. The real question underlying a China – United States conflict over the future of Taiwan is whether the war would remain conventional, or whether the United States, given their losing, would resort to nuclear weapons.

The consequences of the United States using nuclear weapons against China would be horrendous. China already has the capacity to retaliate against the United States mainland, and it would undoubtedly rely on its Russian ally in the event of an actual war breaking out. That would also be true if the war remained conventional rather than descending to a nuclear conflict.

The United States has no modern experience of its homeland being the subject of a military attack, let alone one by such powerful opponents as Russia and China. It is difficult to forecast what the effect on the United States population would be were they to be the actual object of attack, particularly by two powerful allies such as Russia and China whose weaponry is years ahead of any United States equivalent.

It is recognition of this military reality that led United States figures to retreat from Biden’s open threats to China of an aggressive United States military action in the event of China making a serious move against Taiwan. It is obvious that the United States military high command has a more realistic appreciation of China’s actual military power (especially when combined with that of Russia) and are anxious to avoid a deterioration in the relationship to the point where they actually start shooting at each other.

One has therefore to expect a continuation of the status quo, with the United States and its allies such as Australia continuing with provocative actions in the South China Sea, but being careful to ensure that it never deteriorates to the point of a shooting war. That at least is the rational view. Unfortunately, the United States has regularly shown itself to be something less than a rational state.
The world has changed radically in the past half century. The United States is no longer the world dominant economic power. Recent developments in Russian military technology show that it is no longer the world’s greatest military power. One sincerely hopes that the United States recognises and accepts the limitations that places on its freedom of action that it once took for granted. One has to say that the words coming from its president, secretary of state for defence, and foreign secretary do not inspire much confidence that that is actually the case.

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