Another Edition of the Chronicles of the Taiwan Issue

The previous chapter of this Chronicle discussed perhaps the most relevant question of all - how strong the position of the Democratic Progressive Party ruling since 2016 (its second consecutive term) and led by Tsai Ing-wen, the current president of Taiwan, is among the Taiwanese. The answer to this question will largely determine the answer to another question (one of the most critical in contemporary world politics, at that): How will Beijing restore sovereignty over Taiwan, which it owns?

It should be recalled that in 2005, the Chinese parliament passed a law granting the country’s leadership the authority to solve its main foreign policy problem by any means necessary, including through force.

However, back in 1979, when Washington, guided by the realities of the Cold War, established diplomatic relations with Beijing, thus de facto depriving one of its most loyal allies in Asia of its international status, the US Congress passed the Taiwan Relations Act, which provided, among other things, for the US to “resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of the people on Taiwan.” It should be noted, however, that the TRA-1979, as well as the subsequent so-called “Six Assurances to Taiwan by President Reagan” are not acts of international law and are therefore ignored by Beijing.

This does not obviate the very problem of possible (let us stress it) intervention by the US in the Taiwan Strait if Beijing resorts to “military surgery” in order to finally remove the current most painful splinter from its own body of statehood. And the stronger the DPP’s position on the island (Tsai Ing-wen will not be able to run for president for a third time in early 2024), the more remote the prospect that the PRC will refuse to continue its policy towards Taiwan “by other means.”
Beijing itself is most certainly not happy about such a prospect. For a variety of reasons, including the need to use an inevitably highly sophisticated, almost jewelry-grade “technique,” which has almost nothing to do with the incomparable ratio of “absolute” military capabilities of the Mainland and Taiwan. The US Joint Chiefs of Staff have so far been rather skeptical about the availability of such tools in the current People’s Liberation Army (PLA). But, of course, everything in the world is changing and this is especially true of the quality of the PLA in general, and its technical equipment in particular.

Naturally, taking back control over a part of the territory that is still uncontrolled is a very important task in and of itself. But not at any cost, that is without devastating the island. Moreover, getting one of the world’s most advanced urban, transport, industrial and rural infrastructures in one piece, which all 23 million Taiwanese will continue to use, is equally important.

To give just one example, TSMC (Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co.) is a unique phenomenon in today’s global economy, accounting for some 56% of the global market for the manufacture and sale of advanced semiconductor devices. TSMC employs around 60,000 people (apparently including overseas subsidiaries), has a market capitalization of over $600bn and annual net profit of around $20bn.

The world’s leading powers (USA, Japan, Germany) are signing contracts with TSMC to build similar production facilities on their territories. At one time, President Trump approved paying TSMC $12bn to build such a facility in Arizona. What TSMC means for today’s global economy was shown by the forced restrictions (due to the Covid-19 pandemic) in the raw material and component supply chains. The world’s auto manufacturing giants were the first to feel the negative effects.

It is clear that TSMC as well as other important economic facilities in Taiwan and their employees should not be affected in any meaningful way in a future “jewelry operation.” The task is extremely difficult, even if the US refuses to militarily intervene directly (again, it is not obliged to do so) in a future armed conflict.

Especially since Taiwan itself has well-equipped and compact armed forces that are designed to repel amphibious landing attempts and fight paratroopers, should they happen to be on the island. Modernization of its armed forces has been the focus of the island’s leadership in recent years. Ms Tsai herself takes great pleasure in being photographed with her officers on the bridge of a frigate, in the cockpit of a modern fighter jet (standing, of course, on the ground) and at the missile and artillery positions. At first glance, this is no more than a common female weakness, encouraged, however, by the military. After all, they would not mind the island’s leadership paying attention to their problems.

But perhaps most importantly, a large proportion of Taiwanese not only disagree with the “non-peaceful” way of “returning to the motherland,” but also express their willingness to resist it with weapons. Note, however, that any poll on such a risky topic rarely has anything to do with real life since “everyone likes to believe they are a hero …” Still, the Taiwanese are clearly not showing a willingness to roll out the carpets in front of Mainland paratroopers.

This brings us back to the original question of how likely it is that the current “separatist” regime on the island will be replaced by one that is more acceptable to Beijing. This would obviously spare the latter the necessity of resorting to the above “jewelry surgery,” since a much less risky “political therapy” will do. The main contender for the role of such “therapist” is the good old Kuomintang party. How realistic the prospect is for the Kuomintang to lead Taiwan’s parliament and government in two years can be judged by the current acts of democracy where the island’s leadership asks its people to voice their views on particular issues. There have been two such acts recently, whose outcome has largely confirmed the continuing split in Taiwanese society over preferences between the DPP and the Kuomintang, but with a steady trend of the former leaving the latter further behind.

The confidence of the party led by Tsai Ing-wen was demonstrated when she opened a library in honor of Taiwan’s former president (from 1978 to 1988), Chiang Ching-kuo (son of Chiang Kai-shek). Commentators have already drawn noted that not only did she dare appearing in the “den of political opponents,” but she also gave a speech during the event where she contrasted the former “anti-communist” leadership of the Kuomintang with the current one “ready to agree with the CCP.” And that despite the fact that all the relevant current leaders of the Kuomintang were in the meeting room.

It was a strong PR move that is sure to boost the already increasingly visible popularity of DPP among the Taiwanese. The latest opinion poll shows that the DPP’s support rating is already at 46.3%, compared to 23.7% for the Kuomintang. But even worse for the latter, its anti-rating level has exceeded 63%.
However, Tsai Ing-wen’s political charisma is only one factor contributing to the DPP’s popularity. The main thing seems to be the increasing level of support for the party and its leader from the US and some Washington allies. Among the latter, Japan and a number of European countries are becoming particularly prominent. While the activity of Eastern European “Tabaquis” in this respect is understandable (they trade what little they have), what the United Kingdom, France and even Germany are trying to find on the other side of the globe remains a mystery to the author. Unless, of course, they admit that they are simply following the instructions from Washington.

But in the end, that’s their problem. More importantly, the recent internal and external developments on the Taiwan issue make the prospect of a peaceful resolution increasingly vague.

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