

INTRODUCTION



Taiwan: A Tale of Three Centuries

The Taiwan issue is extremely difficult to resolve for it straddles three centuries. Separatism originated in the 19th century, intensified in the 20th century and is likely to explode in the 21st century.

In the 19th century, an upcoming Japan defeated a sapping China in the 1894–5 War and annexed Taiwan. Until its defeat in the Second World War in 1945, it ran Taiwan for half a century and transformed the island to one of the most developed places in East Asia at the time.

Unfortunately the relative supremacy Taiwan inherited from Japan turned out to be the seed of separatism. When Japan surrendered all the territories it annexed from China, including Taiwan, after its defeat, some of the Taiwanese decided that they would not want to rejoin a China that was then more backward in many ways than Taiwan. This is the origin of the Taiwanese independence movement.

The most predominant feature of 20th century politics was the rise of communism and attempts to contain it. The Chinese Civil War (1945–49) itself and the subsequent division of the world into two camps — one capitalist and the other socialist — were products of that time. Both developments foreshadowed the separation of Taiwan from China.

The withdrawal of the nationalist government to Taiwan following its defeat in the civil war served to fortify the rift between China and Taiwan. It prolonged the split between the two that started in 1895 but which was supposed to have come to an end following the defeat of Japan.

Thus in the last 105 years the only time when Taiwan was part of one whole China ruled by one central government was pitifully brief: only four years, from 1945 to 1949. This explains the sentimental detachment Taiwanese feel towards China.

As Taiwan was strategically situated at the tangent of two rival camps, the island formed a crucial link in the US-led “island arc of defence” against communism that stretched from Japan in the north down to the Philippines in the south. During the Cold War, it was dubbed the “unsinkable aircraft carrier” of the US.

As the result of deliberate fortification against mainland China, the state of separatism was intensified. At the same time prolonged separation eventually gave birth to a nascent Taiwanese nationalism, marked by the rise to power of the separatist Democratic Progressive Party (DPP).

In the 21st century, world politics is likely to be dominated by one key issue: how to manage a rising China. This issue has already caused heated debate in the US since the end of the Cold War following the demise of the Soviet Union.

Policy prescriptions so far oscillate between containment and engagement, although there is a tendency to combine the two together to form the so-called “cont-gagement”.

As long as the US-led western world is unclear of what to expect from a growing China, the Taiwan card remains the most effective means to slow down its growth or even to thwart it, for it is the most likely way to draw China into a major war and thereby weaken it.

The separatist movement in Taiwan is quick to seize this point by stressing that Taiwan’s own security is an essential part of the overall security interests of US, Japan and Asia at large. By linking up its political ideal (to break away from China) with the US global security interest (to weaken China), the DPP greatly complicates the Taiwan issue.

Thus the Taiwan issue straddles three centuries. As such it calls for maximum care and attention to attain a peaceful solution.

If one day Taiwan succeeds in breaking away from China, or should war and bloodshed become inevitable, then who will be to blame?

Certainly one would blame Beijing more. Their failure to run China properly was the underlying factor that turned Taiwan away. After half a century in power the Chinese Communist Party failed to create the necessary economic glamour and cultural charm required to entice the Taiwanese.

In Taiwan there is a 51st Club with the explicit aim of turning Taiwan into the 51st state of America. Although it is treated no more than a joke, it nevertheless drives home one important point: if China is as strong as the US, Taiwan will be more than happy to be part of it. If one could apportion the blame quantitatively, Beijing would have to shoulder at least 50 percent of it on this count alone.

The rest of the blame must be shared between Taipei, for its unwillingness to respect history, and Beijing, for its unwillingness to respect reality.

Despite abundant historical records showing Taiwan as part of China, the separatists deliberately disputed these facts. This infuriates the Chinese.

On the other hand, Beijing's failure to respect the reality that there exists two separate authorities on Chinese territory serves only to alienate the Taiwanese.

Hence a viable peaceful solution would require Beijing to build up China's cultural charm and economic glamour first. It also necessitates a respect for history and reality on the part of Taipei and Beijing respectively.

This process will be a long and trying one. It is a challenge to the talent and innovation of the Chinese people. Whether they can resolve an issue spanning three centuries peacefully will determine whether China can rise to global pre-eminence in this century.