



A Dangerous New Policy Toward Taiwan?

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SENIOR BUSH ADMINISTRATION OFFICIALS may be engineering a dramatic and dangerous shift in American policy toward Taiwan as a gift to the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, who is visiting the United States next week. There are two elements of this proposed policy change, both of which favor Beijing at the expense of democratic Taiwan, and one of which may actually encourage Beijing to take military action against Taiwan. Both policy changes are being pushed by the staff of the National Security Council over the objections, we understand, of both the Departments of State and Defense.

First, according to numerous government sources, the senior director for Asian affairs at the National Security Council, James Moriarty, and Doug Paal, the de facto U.S. ambassador to Taiwan, are urging President Bush to declare, privately and perhaps publicly, that the United States opposes Taiwan's independence. This would be a

significant change in America's so-called "One-China Policy," a change very much in Beijing's favor.

Until now, the American position on Taiwan's independence has been agnostic. American presidents have said they do not support independence but have also insisted that the cross-Strait issue be settled peacefully and by common agreement of the two sides. The point was that no solution should be imposed on either side. It was also to leave open the possibility that both sides might agree on independence, as indeed might occur were mainland China ever to become democratic (just as Moscow let go of Ukraine after the fall of communism in Russia). If the Bush administration changes its policy, it will place the United States in opposition to Taiwanese independence even under that scenario. Above all, however, if the administration makes this change, it will strike a severe blow against the vibrant Taiwanese democracy in

a kow-tow to Beijing. After the president's recent stirring remarks in favor of democracy worldwide, this core principle in foreign policy.

Moriarty's second proposal is even more worrying. He proposes the United States declare that it will not defend Taiwan if Beijing launches a military attack on the island in response to a "provocation," i.e., some action or statement by Taiwan that Beijing determines moves in the direction of independence. This proposal, if adopted by the administration, could prove disastrous on several grounds. First of all, it would appear to run counter to the Taiwan Relations Act passed by Congress in 1979. Indeed, it may constitute an effort by the Bush administration in effect to repeal that law by executive fiat. The Act makes it U.S. policy that there should be a peaceful resolution of the dispute between China and Taiwan. But, by suggesting that there may be "legitimate" grounds for China to take offense, this new declaration would condone the very action the law intends to prevent. This would be all the more remarkable given that less than two years ago President Bush reaffirmed the American commitment to Taiwan by declaring that the United States would do "whatever it took" to defend Taiwan.

Second, this proposed policy shift would make war in the Strait more likely, not less. If the United States tells Beijing that it will not defend Taiwan in the event of a "provocation," this can only serve as an inducement to Beijing to threaten to use force, or perhaps actually to use force, on any occasion that Beijing deems Taiwan's behavior "provocative." After all, what constitutes a "provocation"? Beijing believes Taiwan's current status of de facto independence is already unacceptable.

Of course, the reason behind the latest maneuverings within the Bush administration is the recent decision by the present government of Taiwan to hold national referenda on a variety of issues this spring. Beijing fears that Taiwan may eventually decide to hold a referendum on subjects pertaining to independence. China has therefore denounced all referenda on any subject as "provocative." They have even warned darkly of possible "consequences" should Taiwan go ahead with the referenda. In addition, senior Chinese officials have repeatedly demanded that the Bush administration use American pressure to force Taiwan to abandon all referendum plans.

It appears that the Bush administration has at least partly caved to Beijing's pressure. Moriarty recently traveled to Taipei to deliver a stern warning against holding any referendum on any subject. Now he wants the administration to offer assurances to Premier Wen that the United States will indeed oppose referenda in Taiwan. This means, in turn, that the administration will effectively be agreeing with Beijing that such referenda constitute a "provocation." So what happens when Taiwan goes ahead and holds its referendum this spring, as it surely will?

We hope the Bush administration will pull back from this catastrophic change of course. The Clinton administration bent to China on the issue of Taiwan as well, but never as dangerously as senior Bush administration officials are now proposing. Nor so immorally. Taiwan is a thriving democracy. The Beijing government remains a tyranny. Will the Bush administration stifle democracy in Taiwan--actually demanding that it not hold popular votes--to curry favor with the dictatorship?

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