

## Solving the China-Taiwan Standoff: A Modest Proposal

by  
Alastair Iain Johnston  
Harvard University

Peace in the Asia-Pacific region requires an immediate, focused effort to reduce the probability of war in the Taiwan Strait.

China is determined to prevent Taiwan from acquiring *de jure* independence. For Beijing, Taiwan is a question of territorial sovereignty. In the past, China has tended to use military force most often to defend its territorial sovereignty. Thus, Taiwan is the one issue that could pull the US and China into war.

Limiting this war may be very hard. For reasons of operational efficiency the US will be tempted to strike at military targets inside China. Precisely because of this China may be tempted to threaten escalation against US bases and territory. A confrontation over Taiwan could also involve highly dangerous nuclear threats from both sides as they try to compel the other to back down. The only scenario where Chinese military strategists can envision threatened or actual nuclear exchanges is over US intervention in a China-Taiwan war. Thus the US-China dispute over US national missile defense is closely related to the Taiwan problem. Defusing the Taiwan issue and reducing the pressure on China to respond to US national missile defense are intimately connected.

To date the strategies of all sides have had their counterproductive effects. Beijing's saber rattling only encourages the militarization of the area. Taiwan, in turn, feels compelled to try to extract a stronger military commitment from the US in order to deter or defend against China. A stronger US military commitment leads US decision-makers to believe that the credibility of their formal alliance commitments elsewhere in the region is increasingly at stake in a Taiwan crisis. A stronger US military commitment, however, only encourages hard-liners in Beijing to believe that the US supports Taiwan's permanent separation and that the window of opportunity for resolving the problem is closing.

Thus, the behavior of all three sides has increase the probability of war. It would seem more sensible to think of ways of preventing a confrontation that go beyond the stale and often counterproductive advice to deploy, buy or sell more weapons.

The crux of the Taiwan problem is twofold. First China is unwilling to give up the right to use force to prevent Taiwanese independence. Second, Taiwan is unwilling or unable to convince China that it does not seek independence. These issues are closely related.

While China's military threats may undermine some support for formal independence in Taiwan, they also encourage Taipei to seek closer military, economic and political

ties with major powers in order to acquire arms and potential allies. In other words, it encourages precisely the type of Taiwanese diplomacy that Beijing deprecates.

But Beijing fears that if it were to give up the threat of force, Taiwan would quickly move towards formal independence. And Chinese leaders believe that US military support for Taiwan only encourages it to move in this direction. Formal independence would be disastrous for the leadership in Beijing, since no politician there would survive if he were seen as the one who 'lost Taiwan'. Some Chinese officials even fear a domino effect: if Taiwan becomes independent this may strengthen separatist movements in Tibet and Xinjiang.

Beijing might reconsider its threat to use force if it could be certain that Taiwan would never declare independence in the foreseeable future. Taiwan has not been able to provide a credible commitment not to pursue independence. Taiwan might be willing to provide such an assurance if it could be certain that the China would not use force to actively compel reunification along Beijing's lines. This suggests the broad outlines of a deal.

I start with the following assumptions, all of which are plausible.

First, all three sides would prefer to avoid war.

Second, all three sides prefer freezing the status quo to war. This is because there is a relatively low probability that war will result in unification; there is a relatively high probability that attempts to use force to reunify will result in the destruction of the Taiwanese economy and political reforms; and there is a relatively high probability that war will damage China's development process, its international status, and possibly the leadership of the Communist Party

Third, all sides need credible assurances that the other sides will not act in 'worst nightmare' ways. In particular, China prefers a credible assurance that Taiwan won't declare independence OVER unification through war.

Fourth, credible assurances or commitments are those that incur costs if they are broken or violated.

Fifth, Taipei prefers participation in international institutions and an end to China's military pressure OVER formal independence.

If these assumptions are relatively plausible, then the question is: how can one freeze the status quo in such a way that there is little chance Taiwan will seek independence, that there is little chance that Taiwan will fear the PRC use of force, and that there is little chance the US and China will have to go to war?

In order to get Beijing to drop the threat of force, Taiwan has to make a convincing pledge that it will not seek independence. To make this pledge credible, it has to incur heavy costs if it were to renege. In other words, Taiwan will have to pledge to give up something it values tremendously if it violates its pledge not to seek independence.

Otherwise the pledge will not be credible. One of the things that Taiwan values most is participation in international organizations such as the United Nations. **One of the most costly political losses to any Taiwanese leader would be for Taiwan to be granted a place in these institutions only to lose it or to be expelled.** Such a foreign policy setback would almost certainly lead to domestic political defeat.

This suggests the outlines of a deal: Taiwan should be allowed into all international organizations, such as the United Nations and its agencies, as a special non-sovereign state participant or observer. **The specific condition is that if it declares formal independence it would forfeit its status and get expelled from the organization.** Taipei has accepted symbolic non-sovereign state status before in some international organizations such as the Asia Development Bank, and has agreed to accept a non-sovereign state status in the World Trade Organization. Thus, this kind of status is not unprecedented. The only difference would be the proviso for automatic expulsion. The UN and other organizations have an interest in enforcing this pledge: if they were to renege on their commitment to kick an independent Taiwan out, they would risk offending China.

Under this arrangement Beijing would be assured that independence would incur very heavy political costs for Taiwanese leaders. It could then safely drop the threat to use force. The renunciation of force would have to be verified through confidence building measures, such as the demilitarization of parts of eastern China opposite Taiwan. Redeployments of the most provocative forces must be far enough away and in particular configurations such that there can be no stealthy build up. In particular, China would have to declare, and provide verification for, the number of M-9 and M-11 short-range ballistic missiles that it has deployed. It would have to move these missiles into escrow or observation zones far away from the Nanjing military region opposite Taiwan. These zones could be remotely monitored (by a neutral third party) using satellites, sound and motion sensors (similar to the systems used to monitor compliance with various European conventional arms control treaties) to prevent redeployment in eastern China as long as the deal with Taiwan held. China would also have to install portal monitoring devices outside of its missile production facilities to assure Taiwan that it was not secretly stockpiling missiles. Finally China would also commit to 'mothballing' its emerging AWACs capability.

The US, for its part, would publicly pledge, unambiguously, that it would not support or defend a Taiwan that declared formal independence from an entity called the Republic of China. It would pledge to reduce arms transfers to Taiwan, gearing this reduction to the over-all demilitarization of eastern China. A US pledge not to defend a Taiwan that declares *de jure* independence in the absence of a Chinese attack would not be a violation of US or international practice. In fact the US has generally been reluctant to grant recognition to any group that claims independence from an established state, and no where in international practice is there an unconditional right of recognition for any and all groups who declare sovereign independence. The US can also make the normative argument that Taiwanese independence and democracy on Taiwan are two distinct and separable issues. The US values the latter more than the former. Indeed, democracy for the Taiwanese people would probably suffer in the event of a war precipitated by a move

towards formal independence. It would be hard to preserve democratic practices in a highly militarized conflictual cross-strait environment.

If China refused to demilitarize, Taiwan could refuse to make its bargain with international institutions, the US could refuse to reduce arms sales, and the current situation would remain, no side having gained or lost anything.

If China were to renege on its commitment not to use force, in the absence of any formal declaration of independence by Taiwan, any build-up of military force would be telegraphed, and the US could resume arms transfers to Taiwan and upgrade its military commitments to Taiwan's security.

The win-win-win nature of this solution is obvious. Taiwan's leaders win a credible Chinese commitment not to use force to compel reunification even if Taiwan does not declare independence. Taiwan wins an improved security environment. It wins participation in international organizations. And it does all this without having to declare formal independence or deepen its military relationship with the US. Since it would lose all these benefits if it declared independence, a pledge not to declare independence should be highly credible to Beijing.

For China, the deal accomplishes a key goal -- a credible commitment from Taiwan that it will not seek the trappings of formal independence. In the past Beijing has not really opposed Taiwan's participation *per se* in international institutions; its primary worry has been that these efforts would lead to formal independence, and it is for this reason that Beijing has tried to constrain Taiwan's international 'space'. The proposal here dramatically reduces the incentives for any Taiwanese leader to seek *de jure independence* while political conditions on the mainland exclude any peaceful acceptance of Taiwanese self-determination. Demilitarization of portions of eastern China may be difficult for Beijing's leaders to accept conceptually. But they ought to be able to figure out that the political benefits from a credible Taiwanese pledge not to seek independence outweigh the costs of partial unilateral demilitarization.

For the US, this solution stabilizes the status quo, removing a major obstacle to improved US-China relations and reducing the likelihood of a major military confrontation with China.

A credible freeze in the status quo in the Taiwan strait has direct relevance for the emerging US-Chinese strategic nuclear relationship. Thus there is another tacit deal that should make this Taiwan solution attractive to the PRC. This would involve linking this Taiwan solution to the NMD issue. China's problem is that the planned US NMD system in principle, may eliminate China's nuclear deterrent. In the absence of a solution to the Taiwan problem this possibility is dangerous. Chinese leaders may believe that only by threatening the US with nuclear weapons will they deter the US from intervening in a Taiwan crisis. Thus as the US system develops, Beijing may believe there is a closing window of opportunity to solve the Taiwan problem. In order to reduce this source of pressure on China to force reunification, and in order to make China's demilitarization of eastern China appear more symmetrical with US moves, the US and China should do the following with regard to NMD:

Assuming that, despite its technical flaws and potentially counterproductive strategic effects, the US moves forward with a limited, land-based NMD system., the US should allow China, without comment or opposition, to build up its nuclear ICBM force to a level that can guarantee some ability to penetrate US defenses after a US first strike. China will have to dramatically improve its transparency and keep the US informed of the rough numbers of ICBMs and levels to which it builds. This tacit deal simply recognizes the fact that in any offense-defense race in the future the offense (China) will win over the defense (the US), given the inherent military and technical flaws in hit-to-kill defense systems. Thus any US effort to capture the Chinese deterrent is militarily and political destabilizing particularly when, with the exception of the Taiwan question, the PRC's interests on many major global strategic issues are not the polar opposite of US interests as Chinese and US elites have defined them.

The US, for its part, will have to keep its interceptors to a level below the number needed to intercept all of Chinese missiles. China could verify this using remote monitoring technologies including portal monitoring of production facilities. The US could also periodically invite Chinese inspectors to inspect interceptor sites and production facilities

The US could also strictly link the number of deployed interceptors with the number of extant DPRK and Iranian missiles. This means that if these numbers increased, the number of US interceptors would increase, thus reducing the safety margin for China's deterrent. Therefore China would have an incentive to put pressure on the DPRK and Iran not to develop more long-range missiles.

This NMD deal is a win-win solution as well. China wins credible assurances that US NMD won't undermine its deterrent. The US wins greater transparency in Chinese nuclear forces, the rudiments of an institutionalized strategic arms control relationship with the PRC, plus it provides an added incentive for Beijing to accept a deal on freezing the status quo across the Strait.

Each component of the two related deals suggested here is not all that complicated nor unprecedented (except for greater Chinese transparency on nuclear deterrence issues – but the security and political benefits for the PRC leadership ought to be fairly obvious). What makes them potentially useful is their synergy. The most unorthodox component would be the explicit conditionality for Taiwanese participation in international organizations. But many organizations require that states fulfill certain obligations before they can participate. In this case these obligations would be tailored to fit the problem. The Taiwan-China conflict is a uniquely dangerous one. It calls for uniquely creative solutions.