

The Rise of China and the Question of Taiwan

Tanaka Sakai

The Rise of China and the Question of Taiwan

by Tanaka Sakai

Tiananmen Square incident and the collapse of socialism in the early 1990s. Beijing has announced its intention to land Chinese astronauts on the moon by 2010 in a plan that rivals America's earlier Apollo missions. Last October, China achieved its first manned space flight by sending Yang Liwei, an army officer, around the earth fourteen times on the Shenzhou 5 before landing in Inner Mongolia.² The flight made China only the third country after the Soviet Union and the United States to successfully propel one of its citizens into space, and was meant to demonstrate to international and domestic observers that China, along with America and Russia, was a great nation. It is apparent that a quest for political prestige is one of the principal purposes of the country's space program.

After Yang's flight, President Bush reacted by announcing an ambitious plan to renew "manned space exploration, capped by the return to the moon by 2020 [and] a manned mission to Mars a decade later." He also declared that NASA's budget, which had been spiraling downward for years, would receive a dramatic upward boost. This would appear to be good news for the space agency, which had been humbled by the explosion of the Columbia space shuttle last February, but because the plan lacked specific details, many observers think that it is not serious and will not be implemented at the scale announced.³

A historical review of China's space program highlights the evolution of the country's national priorities. The initiative began in 1956, just eight years after the establishment of the People's Republic of China. The government of Mao Zedong devoted tremendous resources to science and technology in order to bolster Chinese military might. Learning from China's bitter experience of imperialist exploitation by the Western powers and Japan as a result of ignoring the relationship between Western science and military power, the leadership stressed the development of science and technology as the basis for military power. From the second half of the 1970s, China's rocket research shifted away from purely military objectives to economic profit as Deng Xiaoping came to power and steered the country on a path of reform and openness. Soon, China began to compete with European and American military contractors for share of the commercial satellite launching business. In the last several years, the Chinese government has begun a march to become an economic powerhouse, overcoming international embargoes levied after the

Flying with the United Nations unilaterally, or in ad hoc coalitions. This logic When the Chinese spacecraft took off last October, it represents a fundamental challenge to...world peace carried onboard the flag of the United Nations. Just as it did stability.... My concern is that...it could set the successful mission symbolized China's arrival as precedents that result in a proliferation of the great power, the inclusion of the U.N. banner seemed unilateral and lawless use of force."6

to represent a national resolve that as "China becomes China, to combat the threat posed by the United a great power, it does not represent a threat to the States, has joined the United Nations in decrying global community. Rather, China will contribute to America's militarization of space. One senses from the stability of international society."4 It was this Chinese actions an effort to gain international message that Colonel Yang carried when he presented approval of its space program.

the flag to U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan in China's Participation in the Security Council's New York a few months later. "Anti-American Alliance"

With these moves, China is attempting to stake In diplomatic matters as well, China has begun to take position contrasting to that of the United States. The more prominent role, often using the stage provided United Nations opposes the militarization of space by United Nations. Beijing's more assertive posture Hard-liners in the U.S. have called for the extension of has been particularly evident as fissures developed military capabilities into space and the development of between the United States and the United Nations, spacecraft armed with nuclear weapons that would and the European Union over the Iraq War. In the provide Washington with new strategic abilities to Security Council, three of the Permanent Five, China, attack potential threats.5

Russia, and France (supported by its European Union Since the Bush administration ignored the United ally, Germany), have formed an "anti-American Nations and attacked Iraq, the organization has been alliance" to oppose the attempt of the Anglo-Saxon attempting to extricate itself from its longtime status coalition of the United States and Britain to dominate as an American puppet. In September, Annan, in the world affairs.7

context of criticizing pre-emptive unilateralism For example, when the Security Council was debating severely censured the U.S. government, though the draft resolution sponsored by United States and without naming it. "Rather than wait for that to Britain regarding the power and authority of the happen, they argue, States have the right and interim Iraqi government before the U.S. military's obligation to use force pre-emptively, even on the transfer" of sovereignty at the end of May, China territory of other States, and even while weapons proposed amendments to the U.S.-British draft. The systems that might be used to attack them are still Anglo-American resolution promised to restore "full being developed. According to this argument, States sovereignty" to the Iraqi people, but France, Germany, are not obliged to wait until there is agreement in the and other countries objected to the vague language of Security Council. Instead, they reserve the right to adopt the resolution.8

The Chinese revisions, which drew the support of its continental neighbors. After the attacks in France and Russia, proposed giving the transitional New York and Washington, though, Blair's loyalties Iraqi government complete command over the Iraq improved completely across the Atlantic as the United States engaged in unilateralism. Once the war in Iraq with the Iraqi government before launching major operations.9 The assertiveness of the Chinese to return Britain to its pre-9/11 equilibrium between proposing these amendments surprised many China America and the European Union.

watchers. In the past, China had largely regarded the Britain's dilemma is similar to the divisions between Middle East as a sphere of Europe and the United States and had been cautious in openly taking and unilateralists (hawks) in Washington. After position concerning the region's affairs. September 11, the power of hawks in the U.S. After the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989, many government skyrocketed and they took control of the Europe countries and the United States imposed a White House, while moderates, as represented by arms trade embargo on China, but this year France Secretary of State Colin Powell, became isolated. As and Germany pushed for an end to the ban. The occupation of Iraq ran into difficulties and support response, "most EU states insisted on clear evidence for the Bush administration dropped, moderates have an improvement in Beijing's human rights practices to an extent regained an upper hand in Washington and resisted abolishing the embargo, and the proposal leveraging opposition to the hawks from domestic was tabled in April.10 (Since American prestige forces and international actors such as the European crumbled after the Iraq War, a split has heightened Union (Germany, France, and Britain), Russia, within the European Union between France and China, and the United Nations. This trend is Germany, which took advantage of the power vacuum symbolized by Powell's declaration in the January to increase their hegemonic power, and neighboring issue of Foreign Affairs that the administration mid- and small-sized countries, which are opposed to prioritizes the United States' "relations with major Franco-German ascendancy.) powers, ...notably Russia, India, and China."11

U.S. Moderates and China Moderates regard a "balance of power," which had Two months later in June, Prime Minister Blair existed since World War I, as the ideal situation in expressed his desire for Britain to resume exporting international politics. They believe that if all major arms to China and his willingness to support France states are of roughly equivalent power, the outbreak of and Germany. This about-face by Britain is wars is less likely. The strengthening of the United noteworthy. Until 11 September 2001, the Blair Nations and China have long been strategic goals of government had generally struck a balance in its moderates. As the U.S. became bogged down in Iraq, diplomatic relationships with the United States and the European Union, China, Russia, and India became the European Union, though it generally leaned most stronger and made their voices heard in the world

through such venues as the United Nations. Britain too, began to lean away from United States toward the European Union, as evidenced by Blair's decision to support lifting the ban on the export of weaponry to China. These were trends that surely pleased moderates.

positive development for the stability of Asia. The trend toward the contraction of U.S. hegemony and the expansion of Chinese power in international affairs continues to escalate. As the New York Times editorialized, "The Bush administration can couch Beijing's new role in whatever politically advantageous language it wishes, but, ultimately, its anti-Chinese stance, but in order for the United States to extricate itself from Iraq, it needs the cooperation of the United Nations, and, therefore, the approval of China -- a permanent member of the Security Council -- is indispensable. Furthermore, in order to resolve the nuclear standoff with North Korea, Beijing plays a crucial role as a mediator in the six-nation talks. For these reasons, hard-liners can no longer afford to maintain their hostile policies toward China. Moreover, China, along with Japan, Taiwan, and Korea, has purchased a vast number of U.S. government bonds. The Bush administration, which boosting U.S. budgetary deficits, is essentially funding its defense buildup by selling bonds to China. It is, then, becoming all the more difficult to regard China as an enemy.

China's Stymied Taiwan Strategy
Yet, even as China becomes stronger, it possesses a critical weakness: Taiwan. The Chinese communist regime has vowed that it will "eliminate the rule of the foreign powers from China and reunify the country." By this they mean they intend to eliminate the influence of the United States, which supported the Nationalist Party throughout the Cold War, and bring Taiwan under mainland control. Reclaiming Taiwan, however, will not be easy. Chen Shui-bian, the leader of the Democratic Progressive Party, which opposes Taiwan's return to China, defeated the Nationalist Party and People First Party, which support reunification, in the past two presidential elections in 2000 and in March 2004. Public opinion is an entirely different matter. Asian neighbor. Japan, they claim, "has no choice but to strengthen its dependent relationship (alliance) with the United States if it is to meet the Chinese threat." Such reasoning was logical before September when America's commitment to international cooperation was strong, but now that the United States has become unreliable, perhaps the ascendancy of China as a balance to America is practical matters a separate country from China.")

Chen was involved in Taiwan's pro-independence camp before he became president. For this reason, Beijing has not trusted the Taipei government since his inauguration in 2000, and maintained communications only with the Nationalist and People First parties. China expected that the pro-independence camp would defeat Chen's Democratic Progressive Party in March and limit him to one term in office, but not only did Chen win, his support rose from 39 percent in 2000 to just over 50 percent in 2004.¹³

Catastrophe Awaits China if it Attacks Taiwan
 One often hears from the Chinese leadership that the "will not rule out the use of force as a means to unify Taiwan with China." But in my opinion, force is not an option for Beijing. What is most important for China now is to continue to strengthen its standing in the world and maintain political stability at home. An attack on Taiwan would devastate both of these priorities.

If China were to invade Taiwan, even if it was successful from a military perspective, the Chinese communist party would completely lose the trust of the world, and the world community would regard Chinese leaders as "vicious criminals" like Saddam Hussein after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. The damage would certainly be greater than the fallout after the Tiananmen Square crackdown. At the moment, America's relationship with China is balanced between moderates and hawks, with pro-China policies maintaining a slight advantage, but if a attack were to occur, U.S. hardliners would instantly gain the upper-hand. Hawks have no scruples about the world being in disorder, in fact, perhaps because they have the tendency to prefer chaos, they would rejoice at the necessity of going to war with China. Such a confrontation would lead to the "Middle Easternization" of East Asia.

After Taiwan's international status became tenuous and the world community would regard Chinese leaders as "vicious criminals" like Saddam Hussein after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. The damage would certainly be greater than the fallout after the Tiananmen Square crackdown. At the moment, America's relationship with China is balanced between moderates and hawks, with pro-China policies maintaining a slight advantage, but if a attack were to occur, U.S. hardliners would instantly gain the upper-hand. Hawks have no scruples about the world being in disorder, in fact, perhaps because they have the tendency to prefer chaos, they would rejoice at the necessity of going to war with China. Such a confrontation would lead to the "Middle Easternization" of East Asia.

There would be severe limits to the length China could occupy Taiwan. If the U.S. military became involved in the conflict, it might drive the Chinese army from Taiwan. Defeat would inflict irreparable damage on

the Chinese Communist Party and completely destabilize domestic politics. Whatever the outcome, China's hope "to resolve the issue (peacefully) and the risks for Red China are immense. Regardless of how Beijing is actually sending can be interpreted as, China is regarded by the world, in every respect, as a great ideological influences, it is almost unthinkable that the country." The possibility of negotiations between Chinese Communist Party leadership, which carefully considers matters from a practical perspective, would take such huge risks and attack Taiwan. ¹⁶

In order to achieve unification, China must persuade the majority of the island's people to want to merge with China. But since China's political system has much less political freedom, unless China advances domestic democratization to a fair degree, that cannot be realized. In China, democratic transformation has made little headway in the past and its future prospects are poor. Out of fear of stirring up civil unrest, the Communist Party has resisted fully implementing elections at even the local municipal level. ¹⁶

A form of "reunification" that has a more realistic chance of adoption is the creation of a sort-of "Chinese federation," an organization like the European Union that would work toward convergence and integration while maintaining the present political structures of the two governments. Chen has suggested that this might be a model for bilateral relations, but the major obstacle is Beijing's rejection of a unity of equals, as it continues to regard Taiwan as simply a small part of greater China. ¹⁵

Recently, the desire to "settle the cross-straits issue" has emanated from the Chinese leadership. They insist that China could possibly resort to arms to resolve the issue, but as mentioned, I think this is mere rhetoric. ¹⁷

10. <http://washingtontimes.com/upi-breaking/20040418/71134-7222r.htm>
11. <http://tanakanews.com/e0122powell.htm>
12. http://www.axisoflogic.com/artman/publish/print_10104.shtml;
13. <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/07/12/opinion/12SFA.html>
14. <http://news.ft.com/servlet/ContentServer?pagenam=FT.com/StoryFT/FullStory&c=StorytFT&cid=1085944394668&p=1012571727269>
15. <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2004/07/29/2003180861>
16. <http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/0722/p06s03-woap.html>
- Tanaka Sakai is the editor of Tanakanews, a Japanese newsletter on international affairs. This article appeared originally in the August 2, 2004 issue of Tanakanews at <http://tanakanews.com>*
- Translation for Japan Focus by Aaron Skabelund. Aaron Skabelund is completing a doctorate at Columbia University.*