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Taiwan

Preliminary Theses on the Taiwan Strait Crisis and Taiwanese Self-Determination

- Features -

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The Historical Rights of Taiwanese People

The history of Taiwan's colonization from 1895 to the one-party rule of the Kuomintang (KMT) from 1945 to 1996 has solidified a Taiwanese identity and experience distinct from those of the Chinese on the mainland. This has also empowered the Taiwanese, who have been oppressed for more than a century (by the Japanese and mainland regimes), with the right to decide their own destiny democratically, including their relationship with mainland China.

The Myth of “One China”

Even now, Taiwan's official state name is still the “Republic of China” (ROC). In effect, there are two ‘Chinese’ governments today, though the government in Beijing—the People's Republic of China (PRC)—refuses to recognize this reality. However, many benshengren (those with ancestors who came to Taiwan before Japanese colonization) have disagreements with the ROC name, and instead call for Taiwan's independence. Thus, we believe that the people of Taiwan should also have the right to decide on their own country's name.

As seen from the three joint communiqués between the United States and China on the issue of Taiwan's sovereignty, neither side has respected the wishes of the people of Taiwan. Both sides have violated the most basic principles of democracy. China believes that both sides have agreed that “Taiwan's sovereignty belongs to the PRC.” However, from the text and the US' subsequent elaborations, it is clear that the US is only “aware that both sides of the Taiwan Strait advocate that Taiwan is a part of China,” not “Taiwan belongs to the PRC.” The two positions are different. And after the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the US in 1979, the US acknowledged that the PRC represents “China.” Still, it did not fundamentally change its position on who should have sovereignty over Taiwan. So, the US and China have disagreed on who should have sovereignty over Taiwan. However, with the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries, the US has also severed diplomatic relations with Taiwan, influencing other countries to sever ties with the ROC and instead establish ties with Beijing. Taiwan's international relations have continued to shrink in the face of China's rapid rise on the global stage. Today, Taiwan has diplomatic relations with only 11 small countries (that are members of the United Nations).

The Historical Development of the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China

But we must first consider the status of “Taiwan” or “ROC” from the Taiwanese people's point of view, not those of the Chinese, American, or other governments. Such a point of view must also be considered independently, in accordance with democratic principles, and in light of the history of political developments on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. The PRC was founded in 1949, while the KMT, whose corrupt and authoritarian behavior is well-known, retreated to Taiwan. At that point, global anti-colonial and progressive movements saw the PRC as a symbol of revolutionary advancement. Thus, they largely dismissed Taipei's regime, and sympathized with or supported the PRC's reunification of Taiwan. However, the PRC's treatment of its people has become increasingly

reactionary, even before, but especially after 1979. Meanwhile, in Taiwan, one-party dictatorship has ended, and its people now enjoy basic democratic rights, especially the freedom to protest against the government's injustices (which is not the case in mainland China at all). And so, cross-strait politics today is very different from what it was in the past. The KMT finally lost power in 2000 under the pressure of mass movements outside the party. And so, a military reunification of Taiwan under the PRC would only be a reactionary dictatorship conquering a representative democracy (even with its limitations), eliminating the Taiwanese people's basic political rights, especially their right to social protest.

Historically, China under the Mao era appeared to be developing along an anti-capitalist course, in contrast to KMT rule in Taiwan, which evolved into an authoritarian capitalist regime heavily dependent on the West. But anti-capitalism does not always signal a continued path of socialist transformation. The PRC had already degenerated into governance by a privileged clique of bureaucrats, serving only itself and causing the death and suffering of tens of millions of people. By the time the PRC had completely restored capitalism since Deng Xiaoping's reign, the regimes on both sides of the Taiwan Strait had become homogeneous in their class character, that is, capitalist. One can no longer say that China's class character is more progressive than that of Taiwan. Coupled with the fact that the PRC has become even more totalitarian, there would not be the slightest ounce of progress if it conquered and ruled Taiwan through military invasion. This is not to mention that the PRC has ignored the wishes of the Taiwanese people, committing the cardinal sin of a large nation oppressing a smaller nation.

There is another view in the international community that the crisis in the Taiwan Strait is merely a proxy war in the struggle between the US and China for hegemony. In this consideration, Taiwan only matters in the context of geopolitics, just as an appetizer is only meaningful in relation to the main course of a meal, so Taiwan's own wishes do not matter. This is an imperialistic perspective, not one that people should share, or else we would completely forfeit the legitimate rights of 23 million Taiwanese people.

The PRC's Understanding of the Chinese Nation

The PRC's chauvinist attitude towards Taiwan comes directly from its theory of the "Chinese nation". The PRC has directly inherited the KMT's claim that "the five ethnic groups are one" and does not recognize the right of self-determination of the ethnic minorities. Nor does it recognize the right of national minorities to secede from the "Chinese nation" if they are oppressed after joining it. Its chauvinistic arrogance manifests in its complete omission of the Indigenous residents of Taiwan in its official documents, who are not Han Chinese and were never part of any conception of a Chinese nation. This position thus betrays a founding principle of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that existed until the 1930s, which "recognizes the right of self-determination of China's minorities." In fact, the Taiwanese Communist Party advocated Taiwanese independence before the KMT destroyed it. Today, the PRC no longer mentions this part of its history. This conception of the Chinese nation is as reactionary as Russian President Vladimir Putin's claim that "Russia and Ukraine are one and the same" (a principle that has justified Russia's invasion of Ukraine). Both must be opposed.

The PRC accuses Taiwanese people of harboring "separatist" sentiments. But the PRC has never ruled Taiwan, and Taiwan's separation from China occurred long ago. It is also worth noting that the ROC preceded the PRC, which emerged 38 years later. Regardless of one's perspective, the separation of Taiwan from China is a historical fact. If the PRC truly regards the Taiwanese as "compatriots," it must first acknowledge this history and reality as a foundation for dialogue with the Taiwanese government, instead of dictating the myth that "Taiwan has belonged to China since ancient times" to the Taiwanese people.

Two Types Of Peace Movement

And so, we oppose the PRC's armed reunification, and advocate cross-strait dialogue between the two governments. The people of Taiwan have elected the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) administration. Therefore, if the PRC respects public opinion at all, it should set aside its arrogance, prioritize diplomatic negotiations, and abandon the prospect of armed reunification. But, people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait cannot expect the PRC to back down voluntarily, and must prepare accordingly. Mainland Chinese people must mobilize a peace movement in civil society, calling for cross-strait dialogue and pushing against armed reunification. Although space for collective action is limited in the mainland because of totalitarian rule, we must remember that there are many Chinese and Sinophone students and other communities living abroad. The diaspora can play a crucial role in developing such a peace movement: if these ideas can take root among these communities, it may break the PRC's media blockade and spark ideas among those at home.

There is a kind of peace movement that focuses its attention on calling for Taiwanese people not to provoke the PRC and to reject arms from the US, telling them to sit and wait with the hope that peace will come. However, it pays little attention to how the PRC's revanchism is not legitimate at its core. The whole concept of "the Chinese nation as a whole" is even more wrong, as it violates the basic principle that nationalities have the right to determine their own identity, or the right of national minorities to self-determination. This framework is not genuine peace, but an unprincipled accommodation of the PRC's autocracy and expansionism.

Why Taiwan Has The Right to Self-Defense

An armed reunification of Taiwan by the PRC would be an unjust war—an invasion. And so, though we must support calls for peace in Taiwan now, we also recognize that Taiwan is a weaker nation threatened by a larger neighbor with force. So, if the Taiwanese people choose to prepare for war and decide to fight against it in the event of war, they have every right to do so. For the oppressed nation, there is no contradiction between calling for peace and preparing for resistance in principle. Taiwan has the right to buy arms from other countries, including rival imperialists like the US, to defend itself.

As people outside of Taiwan, we respect the democratic decision of the Taiwanese people, whether they want to prepare for war and/or resist. This is a natural extension of respecting Taiwan's right to self-determination. This does not mean that we, as outsiders, should directly encourage Taiwan to prepare for war and resist: by recognizing that they have the right to do so in principle, we are also acknowledging that they have the freedom not to exercise that right (e.g., not to prepare for war or resist, and accept the PRC's conditions). We can recognize Taiwan's right to prepare for war, resist, or purchase arms, without necessarily agreeing that it is always prudent for Taiwan to exercise such a right. However, whether Taiwan's decision is prudent or not, we can criticize it while being clear that the Taiwanese people should be empowered to make these decisions.

These basic democratic principles remain unchanged even if the ruling party changes. Whatever party comes to power after an election, as long as the election is truly fair and its behavior after coming to power does not violate the sovereignty and will of the Taiwanese people, the ruling party can be considered as more or less representative of the public opinion, and has the right to exercise the right of preparedness for war and self-determination, if necessary. This is not the same as recognizing that the ruling party's decisions are always correct. "Electoral autocracy" is possible; as Thomas Paine once said, government is at best a "necessary evil." The state, as a specialized institution of coercion and violence, can easily become a tyrannical force overriding the will of the people. It is even more frightening when state power could be combined with multinational consortia. This is why we need to guard against any abuse of power by the government, and emphasize that support for a ruling party's preparedness for war against foreign invasion is not the same as political endorsement of that party. The two aspects should be

handled separately.

For Peace in East Asia; Oppose US Militarism

All things should have limits. First, at this stage, it may be appropriate for Taiwan to emphasize peace and unconditional dialogue, while preparing for resistance in a low-profile manner. Second, when it comes to national defense, the government must exercise restraint, avoiding excessive measures and respecting the people's civil rights. It must also not foment exclusionary nationalism and vilify Chinese people, giving the PRC an excuse to demonize its struggle further. Lastly, the strategy to defend Taiwan should concern politics as much as it does military defense, not just the latter. The more Taiwan strengthens its democracy and protects people's livelihood while preparing for war, the more it bolsters its soft power in the international arena. In China, there are many potential sympathizers of Taiwan within civil society, as well as within the party-state, including even the military. Winning over these elements, and not to mention, exploiting any fissures within the party caused by Xi Jinping's personal dictatorship, would be advantageous for Taiwan's allies at home and abroad.

Regarding international relations, being aware of our limits is even more important. We must oppose a US military landing on Taiwan or setting up a command center on Taiwan, and any efforts to use Taiwan's war preparations as an excuse to justify the development of nuclear weapons (as Chiang Kai-shek once tried). Any preparation for atomic warfare could escalate any war of self-defense into a major war between the US and China. In a war of this scale, the damage to the island of Taiwan would be devastating. And so, Taiwan's war preparations must have certain limits. We must be vigilant for any signs that a war of self-defense is escalating into more disastrous proportions. Otherwise, the impact will extend far beyond the Taiwan Strait and affect the people of East Asia as a whole, who also have the right to consider their own safety. For example, the residents of Okinawa in Japan, who, in addition to the bitter experience of World War II, have been suffering from eight decades of suffering brought about by American military bases. They have been mobilizing for peace in Asia, and also have every right to speak and act in the Taiwan Strait crisis. We also recognize that the US aggression against China builds on and stokes a long legacy of Sinophobia, which places a target on Chinese and other Asian communities. And so, it is all the more important to firmly oppose exclusionary sentiments toward Chinese people in Taiwan's fight for self-determination.

The US-China Rivalry and Taiwan's Right to Self-Defense

Some "pacifists" oppose Taiwan's right to prepare for war and purchase arms from foreign countries. Their reasons can be broadly categorized into three types. The first is based on the desire to avoid escalating tensions between China and the US over Taiwan, which could lead to an escalation of inter-imperial rivalry, even to the point of war. The second is due to an absolute opposition to US hegemony and military competition. The third argues that only the US is imperialist, not China, thus opposing the US while supporting China. Each of these viewpoints has its own focus and areas of avoidance, but they all reach the same conclusion. We believe that, first and foremost, it is essential to distinguish between stronger and weaker nations. Confusing the two is inherently misleading. As a hegemon, China is asserting power against the weaker nation of Taiwan. China's threat of armed unification is inherently an act of bullying the weak, and must be opposed. One cannot strip Taiwan of its right to self-defense just because of the threat of American intervention. Second, some argue that in the US-China rivalry, the US poses a greater threat than China, so to support Beijing, one cannot also support Taiwan's existence as a political entity. However, China is a nuclear-armed state, the world's largest trading nation, the second-largest economy, and the second-largest military spender. Who can convincingly claim that China's threat to the world's people will always be negligible in the future? China's military may be inferior to the United States', but its overall threat, especially for

Taiwan, may not be smaller. There is also a political consideration: while Trump may be authoritarian and bellicose, there is still some room for social movements from below to check his power and defend various institutional and non-institutional checks and balances in place. In contrast, China has already established authoritarian rule, with little room for dissent, let alone organized resistance. If Xi were to launch a war, there would be no one to check him, and it would be far more difficult for anti-war movements to emerge and sustain themselves in China than in the United States.

The three viewpoints above all oppose Taiwan's right to self-defense to varying degrees due to the possibility of US intervention. However, this simplistic approach is far too crude to capture the complex nuances of geopolitics, especially the relations between the world's leading imperial power and the nearly 200 other nations. As advocates of democracy and peace, we oppose any hegemonic nation engaging in military competition. However, international relations are extraordinarily complex. At certain times and in certain places, the need for self-defense for smaller countries may overlap and intersect with the designs of different imperialists, which is not uncommon. In light of these limits, weaker nations purchasing arms from another imperialist may result in some profit for the latter. However, the survival of a weaker nation facing war from a rival imperialist is one gain that offsets this harm, in a sense. Of course, between the US and China, the US is a stronger imperialist than China. However, between China and Taiwan, China is stronger than Taiwan, and also treats various Southeast Asian countries with arrogance (not dissimilar to the US). The viewpoints above focus solely on the dangers of the US-China rivalry, while ignoring that China's armed unification of Taiwan would also be disastrous for the world. If Beijing successfully unifies Taiwan by force, it will become even more emboldened to bully other small countries. It would further entrench its imperialist tendencies, competing with the US on the international stage, which would exacerbate the dangers of a world war rather than mitigate them. Instead, we should address both issues simultaneously. Regarding the US-China rivalry, we emphasize the need to oppose military competition between the two countries. However, regarding China's dominance over Taiwan, we continue to support Taiwan's right to self-defense.

During World War I, Lenin remarked that Tsarist Russia was at once subordinate to British and French imperialism on the global stage, just as it was the dominant threat to national minorities in its peripheries, like the Poles. At that time, peace movements challenged European hegemony, just as they combated any expressions of Great Russian chauvinism in Russia's peripheries. Our two-pronged approach to the US-China rivalry and Taiwan's self-defense serves the same purpose. This also means that we support all other local peace movements that oppose the US imperialists' use of Taiwan as an excuse to intensify the military competition. We support grassroots anti-war and peace movements in Okinawa, South Korea, the Philippines, and mainland China. We also call on these anti-war and peace movements in East Asia to actively intervene and speak out against any bullying of small countries by large countries in the event of a Taiwan Strait crisis.

De Facto /De Jure Independence?

Taiwan is too small (only one-sixteenth the size of Ukraine) to initiate a major military war, let alone a long-term and/or nuclear one. However, one political maneuver would surely escalate the possibility of armed conflict: for Taiwan to renounce the ROC title and formally become independent as the Republic of Taiwan (de jure independence). Although we support the right of the Taiwanese people to self-determination, including the right to independence, it would be unwise to risk serious escalation by pursuing de jure independence, given the disparity in power between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait. If the DPP maintains the 'ROC' state name, providing less justification for the PRC to pursue armed reunification, it would be more likely for Taiwan to win international support. Although the DPP's party platform, the "Resolution on Taiwan's Future" (1999), declared that the ROC had "in fact become a sovereign and independent democratic country," this sovereignty does not include mainland China (except for the three small islands of Penghu, Kinmen, and Matsu). This position makes it clear that the DPP is not pursuing de jure independence of Taiwan, but rather maintaining its de facto independence. It also makes clear that, although the country's name is the ROC, Taiwan's territorial boundaries have already excluded mainland China; therefore, this

“China” no longer has territorial disputes with the Beijing government.

Supporting Taiwan’s Self-Determination While Opposing Inter-Imperialist Rivalry

Although the US ostensibly defends Taiwan, it does not genuinely respect the Taiwanese people’s right to self-determination, which is why it has joined the PRC in suppressing Taiwan’s independence. After all, it protects Taiwan primarily for its own interests, not for the Taiwanese people. The US has also adopted the position of “strategic ambiguity”; in other words, it remains unclear whether it will actually come to Taiwan’s aid in the event of a cross-strait war. This deceptive attitude maximizes its own flexibility, while at the same time deterring both sides from making any rash moves—thus killing two birds with one stone. In Trump’s second term, the fate of the Taiwan Strait has never been more uncertain and treacherous. The US-China rivalry is increasingly dominating the frontstage of geopolitics, with cross-strait relations being a key flashpoint. This situation is particularly unfavorable to Taiwan. In these conditions, there is a greater responsibility for all the East Asian countries outside Taiwan, the US, and different peace movements to speak out for Taiwan—which must begin on the foundation of recognizing Taiwan’s right to self-determination.

Taiwan is caught between the US and China, and even if it pursues the best course of action, it is difficult to ensure that the two nuclear-armed countries will not go to war with each other. Regardless of whether Taiwan exists or not, once inter-imperial rivalry reaches a certain level, the possibility of nuclear war would increase to some extent. This is why peace activists around the world must intensify our opposition to inter-imperial rivalry, advocate for global nuclear disarmament and global arms reduction, starting with the US, China, and Europe, which are the root causes of global rivalry.

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