

**Engagement, Confrontation and Brinkmanship:
A Preliminary Political-Diplomatic Analysis of
Military Situation in Cross-Taiwan-Strait Relations***

By

Yung Wei
Distinguished Visiting Fellow
Hoover Tower, Room 1105
Hoover Institution
Stanford University
Stanford, CA 94305-6010

And

President
Vanguard Institute for Policy Studies
15 Chi-nan Rd., Sec.1
Taipei, Taiwan 100
Republic of China

Engagement, Confrontation, and Brinkmanship: A Preliminary Political-Diplomatic Analysis of Military Situation in Cross-Taiwan-Strait Relations

Yung Wei

Ever since the Government of the Republic of China retreated from Mainland China to Taiwan, the military situation in the Taiwan Strait has always been closely related to the political as well as diplomatic conditions facing both Taipei and Beijing. The withdrawal of national troops from the Tacheng Island, the Quemoy Crisis, the 1996 missile crisis, and most recent crisis across the Strait were all affected by political events inside Mainland China and Taiwan as well influenced by external forces, notably the United States.

The purpose of this short paper is to examine the military and security problems facing Taiwan with a broad strategic and political perspective. In the course of analysis, the nature of the tension in the Taiwan Strait, the different scenarios of military threat and confrontation in the Taiwan Strait and the ways to avoid military confrontation will be discussed one after another.

From Engagement to Brinkmanship: The Effect of President Lee's "Special State-to-State Relations" Statement

Despite difference in ideological orientations, most political as well as military observers in Taiwan and abroad tended to agree on one thing, i.e., the current crisis in the Taiwan Strait was caused almost solely by the sudden utterance of the so-called "special State-to-State relations" statement by the President of the Republic of China (henceforth ROC), Dr. Lee Teng-hui. In an interview by a German Radio representative, President made the statement that "the 1991 constitutional amendments have placed cross-Strait relations as a state-to-state relationship or at least a special state-to-state relationship, rather than an internal relationship between a legitimate government and a renegade group, or between a central government and local government."¹ Despite later

¹ From <http://web.oop.gov.tw/web/msgsch>.

“clarification” by relevant government agencies, President Lee’s statement caused immediate angry response from the PRC and grave concern from the Government of the United States.

For the PRC government, Lee’s statement brings Taiwan one step closer toward separating the Island from China. For the United States, the logical thing for President Lee to do was to bring about another meeting between Wang Daohan and Koo Cheng-fu, and not to agitate Mainland China for another round of military confrontation in the Taiwan Strait.

Why President Lee, in the eve of Wang Daohan’s visit to Taiwan, made such a daring, or, to put more accurately, provocative statement on cross Strait relation, has been under analysis by specialists on Chinese as well as international affairs the world over.

Several explanations have been offered. First of all, President Lee was not unaware of the possible hostile response from the PRC across the Taiwan Strait. Yet out of a sense of mission as well or of history, Lee felt compelled to speak his mind before the term of his presidency is over. Since Beijing and Washington were in an *impasse* in their relations with each other, and since Taiwan was approaching a presidential election next spring, President Lee and his close advisers might think that this was the opportune time to put forth the “State-to-State” statement. One may ask: Did Lee anticipate hostile response from the PRC as well as negative, or at least, reserved responses from US government? Did he foresee the recurrence of a military situation in the Strait? Answers on both questions might both be “yes”.

What has happened has been the conversion of a basically non-military interaction between both sides of the Taiwan in the form of continuing engagement to that of brinkmanship of air skirmishes which could have developed easily into a full fledged war in the Taiwan Strait.

Military Confrontation in the Taiwan Strait: Possible Scenarios

Until 1996, Mainland China’s basic tactics of taking Taiwan had been to increase trade and communication contact with Taiwan and to

apply increasing political pressure through diplomatic isolation to compel Taiwan to accept the “one country, two systems” formula. Yet with President Lee’s intention of making Taiwan into first a *de facto* and then a *de jure* independent state increasingly clear, Beijing felt compelled to demonstrate that its repeated statement of “not ruling out the use of force” was not just empty words. This in essence was the major impetus for the July 1995 and March 1996 missile crises.

The situation facing Mainland China after the utterance by President Lee, however, was somewhat different from the scenarios of 1995 and 1996. First of all, as events following the missile tests in 1996 have clearly shown, while this kind of para-military action may have some initial threatening impact on the psyche of the people of Taiwan, it is not a sufficient instrument to subdue Taiwan. Furthermore, the reaction from the international community, notably the United States and Japan, was far more negative than the PRC originally anticipated.

Secondly, Lee Teng-hui is definitely on his way out as the President of the Republic of China on Taiwan. Lien Chan, the Vice-President, has already been officially nominated as the Presidential candidate of the KMT. James Soong, the KMT breakaway presidential candidate is the leader in almost all the public opinion polls. Both Soong and Lien have more moderate and pragmatic policies toward Mainland China. Even Chen Shui-bian, the DPP candidate, is less militarily against Mainland China than President Lee in regard to cross-Strait trade and transportation. Any military action taken by the PRC would immediately heighten tense and anxiety in Taiwan which most likely would hurt James Soong, even Lien Chan, and would help Chen to gain more support. Furthermore, a serious military threat might provide President Lee the golden opportunity to prolong his term or to proclaim a state of emergency which in turn would be used as an excuse for the postponing of Presidential election. All of these are not what leaders in Beijing would like to see happen.

Despite the reluctance of Beijing in using military forces against Taiwan, military confrontation in the Taiwan Strait is still a quite distinct possibility. In fact, at present both Taipei and Beijing have not ruled out a military confrontation in the Taiwan Strait and are actively preparing for

it. According to military experts in Taiwan, U.S.A. and Europe, there may be six types of military or para-military confrontation in the Taiwan Strait.

First of all, all-out war launched by the PRC against ROC along the conventional line is possible but not probable. Not only because it would be extremely costly for both sides, but also because the PLA, according to most western military experts, is not fully equipped with the capability needed for such an operation. The main limitation is focused on PRC's limited amphibious capacity. It is the opinion of most military experts that in order to establish a beach head on Taiwan or Pescadore it takes 300,000 soldiers. Yet Mainland China can only send between 15,000 to 50,000 soldiers across the Strait at any a given time. Besides, the Taiwan Strait has been well known for its bad and changeable weather. Certain newspapers in Hong Kong put out the scenario of having Beijing sending out thousands of fishing boats to subdue Taiwan. For military experts in the know, this can not work. Taiwan Strait is too wide for this type of civil war operation. The tremendous difficult communication problem facing this type of clandestine operation makes it not likely scenario.

A second scenario is for the PRC to subdue Taiwan by air and navel battles. Implication of this tactics is that after the air force and naval power of the ROC is wiped out, defense of Taiwan purely by ground force would be such an unpleasant and costly option that the leaders and people of Taiwan might be willing to compromise with Mainland China. As data in table 1 reveal, both in terms of military force and equipments, the ROC is in a numerically unfavorable position. Yet both the Defense Ministry of the Republic of China and western military experts agree to one thing, i.e., although the quantity of air and naval forces of Taiwan is less than that of Mainland China, it makes up by superior quality. Through the purchase of Mirage 2000 from France and F-16 from the USA, coupled with the production of the indigenous defense fighter planes, Ching-kuo, the ROC actually enjoys a qualitative edge over the PRC. The same may apply to naval competition. (See Table 1)

A third scenario of cross-Strait conflict lies in the possibility of a PRC blockade against Taiwan. The idea seems to be logical and feasible at first glance. Mainland China definitely have the capability to

exercise a boycott or blockade against Taiwan. Yet given the importance of air routes and sea lanes surrounding Taiwan, a Mainland blockade of Taiwan would arouse so much international criticism and resistance that leaders in Beijing would think twice before taking such a measure.

A fourth option available to Beijing to subdue Taiwan is to take over one or several of the offshore islands. The most likely candidate for such kind of attack is probably Wu-chiu, a tiny island in the mid-point of Quemoy and Matsu in the Taiwan Strait. Beijing, however, may opt not to take such an action unless they believe that the morale of the people of Taiwan would be so much affected that it would lead to a breakdown or the will to resist. Otherwise, taking over an offshore island may add to the “we” feeling among Taiwanese people against outsiders that it may provide more fuel to the separatist movement in Taiwan.

The fifth military option available to Mainland China is through missile test, military exercise, and electronic warfare. Mainland China enjoys overwhelming superiority over Taiwan in the area of missile development and deployment; and the disparity against Taiwan will increase over time. According to both U.S. and Taiwan sources, mainland China has around 400 to 600 short range ballistic missiles (SRBMS) deployed in various locations facing Taiwan. Among these missiles, the most notable are M-9s and M-11s. The former has a range of 500 kms and a payload of 500 kg while the latter has a range of 280 kms and a payload of 800 kg. Both have been used during the missile “tests” in 1995 and 1996. (See Figure 1)

In addition to missile tests, military exercises in areas near Taiwan has been another method employed by Beijing against Taiwan. Although not a direct attempt against Taiwan, military exercises can be rather effective instruments to create tension in the Taiwan Strait, thus leading to psychological pressure upon the population of the Island. It also may function as a device to wear out the resources of the defense force in Taiwan, particularly if it is carried out in prolonged fashion. Frequent flights by PRC fighter planes to and sometimes cross over the middle line in the Taiwan Strait is an example. Recently, the US Government became quite concerned with this type of brinkmanship-type

of skirmishes between the air forces of Mainland and Taiwan; and issued statement asking both sides of the Taiwan Strait to exercise restraint.

Finally, electronic and computer warfare may be another arena of cross-Strait confrontation. With military satellite of its own, Mainland China enjoys certain electronic warfare over Taiwan. Taiwan, however, has a rather developed information industry. Consequently, the unofficial and undeclared computer warfare has found Taiwan more often the victor in cross-Strait hacker activities which are against law of the ROC.

Cross-Taiwan-Strait Relations: The Need to Transform Para-military Confrontation to Peaceful Engagement and Cooperation

Having presented the various scenarios of military and para-military confrontations between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait, I would like to draw several conclusions:

First, a war in the Taiwan Strait will be a major military operation since the end of the Second World War. It would not be an one-sided “punitive” action launched against Taiwan, as some of the militant leaders of the PRC are inclined to believe; for the Republic of China has one of the most up-to-date military operations supported by a growing economy and increasingly sophisticated science-and-technology.

Second, a war in the Taiwan Strait, will not be an isolated and self-contained warfare. It would disrupt vital air routes and sea lanes of communication in one of the most dynamic regions of the world. For Mainland China, it could not be anticipated that the people of Taiwan would easily be crumbled, or that the United States would not intervene to prevent a military takeover of Taiwan by the Mainland. For the current leaders in Taiwan, they could not assume that the United States would always come to the defense of the Island, especially if it is a conflict with Mainland China that it is clearly provoked by Taiwan. Furthermore, United States cannot endorse Taipei’s move if it contradicts with the declared US policies embedded in laws and treaties. This is especially true if Taiwan clearly move towards legal independence. As

far as the United States is concerned, it cannot be anticipated that Mainland China will easily alter its long-held position of national unification, nor can the USA expect Taiwan to accept any arrangement that may lead to amalgamation by Mainland China, and not a mutually agreed upon integration with China.

Consequently, peace in the Taiwan Strait calls for both restraint and imagination. For the leaders in Taiwan, it must retreat from President Lee's "special state-to-state relations." Not only it cause serious tension in the Taiwan Strait but also it is against the Constitution and laws of the Republic of China. Article 4 of the ROC Constitution stipulates specifically that "the territory of the Republic of China according to its original national boundaries shall not be altered except by resolution of the National Assembly." Much has been said about public opinion surveys. Yet it must be pointed out that quite a number of opinion surveys have shown that the proportion of the people supporting the so-called "special state-to-state relations" drop dramatically once the people is reminded that the new statement by President Lee will lead to war in the Taiwan Strait. In addition to giving up the so-called "state-to-state" statement, the ROC Government must return to the "One China" principle. Yet here the "One China" must not be interpreted as equivalent to the PRC, but a "historical, geographic and cultural China."

As for the PRC, it must review its policy both on the use of "One China" principle and its effort toward diplomatic isolation of the ROC. If Beijing continue using the "One China" principle as an instrument to block whatever participation of the ROC in governmental and non-governmental international organizations and activities, more and more people in Taiwan would become resentful of the term. This is a situation that can easily be exploited by the separatists and political leaders with a separatist inclination and sentiments. As for diplomatic jockeying between Beijing and Taipei, it has reached a point that both sides are wasting valuable resources in extremely costly operation in exotic countries. Any change on Beijing's part in relaxing cross-Strait competition in this arena will lead to more friendly response from Taipei which in turn might pave the way for peaceful integration. In sum, the key for averting military confrontation lies in broad and far-sighted political as well as diplomatic thinking and planning. Restraint,

imagination and innovation are the keys to peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.

Finally, any analysis of cross-Taiwan Strait analysis would not be complete without evaluating the role played by the United States. First of all, the United States undoubtedly is the most important balancing factor in cross-Taiwan relations. Had it not been the intervention of the United States in the March 1999 crisis, the outcome of the missile crises in the Taiwan Strait at that time could have been quite different. For fifty years since the Chinese Communists took over the Mainland in 1949, the United States has been able to lend assistance to the Chinese Nationalist Government in Taiwan with military and economic aids cumulating with a mutual defense treaty in 1954 which was later replaced by clauses expressing US concern with the security of Taiwan in the Taiwan Relations Act passed by the Congress in 1979. After the establishment of formal diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China, however, the triangular relations among Washington, Taipei, and Beijing have become more complex and complicated, with the United States frequently becoming the target of complaint simultaneously from both Taipei and Beijing.

For instance, despite the fact that US Government has stated repetitively its official positions on the China question embedded in the "One China principle," the Taiwan Relations Act", and Clinton's "Three No's" statement issued in Shanghai, both Taipei and Beijing have complained that American position on the Taiwan issue has not been as steadfast and consistent as they have wished.

Likewise, many western observers are of the opinion that Clinton administration's wavering stand on the issuing of visa to President Lee Teng-hue for his visit to Cornell might also have been one of the contributing elements leading to the breakout of the missile crises in March, 1999. Even the issuing of the "three 'no's" by Clinton in Shanghai has been viewed as one of the excuses utilized by defenders of President Lee for Lee's statement on the so-called "special state-to-state relations" between Mainland China and Taiwan. As the US Presidential election is getting momentum, an increasing number of presidential candidates are voicing very critical opinions on the PRC and at the same time making

quite friendly gestures toward the Republic of China on Taiwan. Yet if history is any guide, overtly friendly and exceedingly supportive positions manifested by US presidential candidates toward Taiwan oftentimes will not be delivered after the winning candidate takes office. Both Ronald Reagan and Bill Clintons are outstanding examples. Hence the U.S. Government, particularly the State Department and the Defense Department must make added efforts to remind and assure both Mainland China and Taiwan that most likely there will be no fundamental changes in US China policy so that Beijing will not be unnecessarily edge and that Taipei will not be unduly complacent or unrealistically optimistic. In short, how to chart a course of action which will make both friends and foes feel that US policy is consistent and predictable is the most important task for future leaders of the United States.

-end-

Table 1
ROC and PRC: Comparison of Military Capabilities

	ROC	PRC
GDP	\$ 293 bn	\$ 639 bn
Per capita	\$ 13,800	\$ 3,400
Def. Budget	\$13.6 bn	ε \$ 36.6 bn
Total Armed Forces		
Active	376,000	2,820,000
Reserves	1,657,500	1,200,000
Army	240,000	2,090,000
Air force	68,000	470,000
Ballistic Missile	non	Many types, increasing rapidly
Combat Aircraft	529	2,556
	30 Mirage 2000 (30 to come)	1,800 S-6/B/D/E
	60 F-16 (90 to come)	500 J-7
	100 Ching-kuo (60 to come)	150 J-8
	272 F-5 (B, E, F)	46 Su 27 SK/UBK etc.
Navy	68,000	260,000
Submarine	4	63
Destroyers	18	18
Frigates	18	35
Missile Crafts	53	163

Data Source: *Military Balance, 1998/1999* (London: IISS, 1999); *U.S. and Asia Statistical Handbook, 1998-1999* (Wash., D.C.: Heritage Foundation, 1999).