

Stand-Off in Taiwan

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Few elections have offered such last-minute drama as Taiwan's presidential election in March, though whether the drama was a near tragedy, as followers of the victor believe, or a comedy, as his opponents maintain, was not immediately clear. The island is politically divided into two colour-coded blocs, along Byzantine lines. On one side is the 'pan-Green camp', comprising two pro-independence forces: the Democratic People's Party (DPP), in control of the executive since 2000, and its recently created ally, the Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU). On the other is the 'pan-Blue camp', composed of the Kuomintang (KMT), which ruled the island for half a century after Chiang Kai-shek was driven from the mainland in 1949, and a breakaway faction of it, the People First Party, both identified with a tradition, now attenuated, claiming Taiwan to be the seat of the legitimate government of the whole of China, and still opposed to the idea of Taiwanese independence.

The day before the election, the DPP leader and presidential incumbent, Chen Shui-bian, standard-bearer of the Green camp, was waving regally to his supporters aboard a jeep in his home-town of Tainan. The street was narrow and crowded, and his welcome noisy, firecrackers - de rigueur on such occasions - exploding joyfully on all sides. Nothing untoward appeared to occur. Some hours later, however, it was announced that the candidate had been the victim of a pistol shot, which by a miracle had grazed rather than penetrated his abdomen, and that he was now recovering in hospital. Television showed images of a bullet-hole in the windscreen of the jeep, and Chen, standing and waving beatifically behind the driver, with a pinkish patch on the lower part of the front of his shirt.

All parties cancelled their final rallies, and the next day the Blue camp, which had started with a comfortable lead in the polls, lost by a whisker - some 30,000 votes, or 0.2 per cent of the vote. There was no question about the reason. Estimates differ of the scale of the sympathy vote that the 'magic bullet', as supporters of the Green camp would jubilantly come to call it, delivered to Chen, but it is quite clear that he would have been defeated without it. The Blue camp spoke of a put-up job and denounced it with increasing fury. Chen Shui-bian explained that his miraculous triumph showed that God had called him to lead the nation.

Subsequent evidence has left no doubt that Chen was indeed grazed by a home-made bullet, and that another ricocheted harmlessly into padding round the injured knee of his running mate, Annette Lu, sitting beside him on the jeep. But no assailant was noticed at the time, and none has been found since. The deeper mystery is not so much the identity of the marksman, who fired a primitive weapon at very close range, as the motive behind the shots. Who stood to benefit from such an attentat? Certainly not the pan-Blue camp, which, had it not been for the bullet, would have won the election. Could Chen have staged the whole affair himself, to hijack a victory otherwise out of reach? There are precedents for something like this: the fake ambush that Mitterrand is generally believed to have arranged against himself in 1959, when he was trying to refurbish his image as a doughty fighter against the Right, comes to mind. But Chen was wounded, however slightly, in a vulnerable part of his body: would any politician really take the risk of a friendly bullet going astray? A Green conspiracy seems scarcely less improbable than a Blue one.

For those in search of a more plausible explanation, the most popular scenario - widely bruited in Taiwan - points at the island's powerful gambling syndicates, which stood to lose huge sums of money if the Blue camp, on which all bets had been placed, won. They could well have calculated that winging Chen was the best way of unleashing a sympathy vote for the Green cause that would

yield them an avalanche of cash in lost wagers. But how could they be sure that a bullet would not - counter-productively - actually kill him? A clue may lie in the embarrassed admission of Chen's security detail that, supposedly because it was a hot day, he was not wearing a bullet-proof vest, standard issue for a presidential incumbent on the campaign trail. An odd feature of the shooting was that aim was taken through the windscreen of an open vehicle, where a bullet was most likely to be deflected, and not at the candidate's head or upper body, which were clear of obstruction, unprotected above it. If a gang had assumed that Chen would be wearing an armoured vest, then a bullet slung low through the windscreen should have struck where it could cause a sensation without inflicting any real injury. That would make one, more or less coherent story. But perhaps the shots were just fired by a random misfit with a grudge, melting into the crowd. There have been plenty of incidents - George Wallace or Robert Kennedy - like that.

Taiwan is in its way a highly politicised society, in which partisan passions run deeper than in older and more jaded democracies, and the immediate effect of the magical missile has been to polarise public opinion more than ever before. Despite its lacklustre candidates, and belying its establishment reputation, the Blue camp mobilised vast popular demonstrations against the upshot of the poll, with student sit-downs in front of the presidential palace and indignant demands for a recount, for which there has never been any provision in island-wide elections. But even with a recount, the result is unlikely to be changed. Chen can look forward to another four years in office, with ardent supporters elated by his unexpected victory, and an embittered opposition convinced it has been cheated of power. The short-term prospect looks choppy.

The Green camp, committed to outright independence, started with 21 per cent of the vote in 1996. In 2000 it took 39 per cent. This year it reached 50 per cent. Even discounting the sympathy factor, and a variety of motives for not voting Blue, the trend of support is plain. A distinct Taiwanese national identity is in the process of crystallisation. The change has been relatively swift. As late as 1996, well over 50 per cent of the population, when asked, described itself as 'Chinese and Taiwanese', over 20 per cent just as 'Taiwanese', and under 20 per cent as 'Chinese'. Today fewer than 50 per cent define themselves as Chinese and Taiwanese, and not much more than 10 per cent as Chinese, while those who see themselves as simply Taiwanese number more than 40 per cent.

How should this development be understood historically? In an address given in Taipei a couple of years ago, Benedict Anderson suggested that it is best seen as a contemporary version of the originating form of modern nationalism: namely, the separation of overseas settler communities from an imperial homeland, such as gave birth to the United States in the 18th century, and to the Latin American republics of the early 19th century. This form, he showed in *Imagined Communities*, predated the romantic nationalisms of Central and Eastern Europe that are often thought to have set the pattern for 20th-century nationalism. Unlike these, the overseas settler - or 'creole' - type required no major linguistic or ethnic difference from the metropolis. Rather, the markers of nascent national identity were territorial and historical: geographical distance and colonial institutions engendered a distinct culture and self-consciousness, and, with it, a collective identity that laid the foundation for independent states. The late 19th century saw a repetition of this process in the white dominions of Canada and Australasia.

Seen in this light, contemporary Taiwanese nationalism belongs to a political family with a well-established ancestry. The great majority - perhaps 85 per cent - of its modern population of 22,500,000 descends from migrants who arrived in the island from Fujian and Guangdong between the 17th and late 19th centuries, pushing its Malayo-Polynesian natives back into the mountainous interior. Genetically and linguistically, they are as Chinese as white New Zealanders are British. But geographical separation and historical experience have produced over time a settler community with a national identity that is today as natural and legitimate as American or Costa Rican, Australian or

Uruguayan. There seems little doubt that within the morphology of nationalisms, such an analysis offers the right classification of the Taiwanese case. But determining its place within a general taxonomy invites a further step. Where does the specificity of Taiwan within the family of overseas settler nationalisms lie? Schematically, it might be said that four particularities set it apart within this group, corresponding to each of its decisive modern experiences.

First, separation of the overseas settlement from the imperial homeland came neither by revolt, as in North and South America, nor by negotiation, as in the white dominions, but by foreign annexation, when Japan took the island in 1895 as a prize of its victory in the war with China. Thereafter Tokyo ruled it as a colony within the Japanese Empire for half a century. This was a deeply formative experience, dividing the fate of the island from the mainland. For whereas Japanese imperialism was a ruthlessly destructive force once launched against China itself, responsible for millions of deaths and massive devastation, in Taiwan it established a relatively orderly, peaceful and productive system of rule: authoritarian as all European colonial regimes were, but in a more 'backward' rural society with, eventually, less repression than in Korea or Manchuria, and a record of economic and educational development superior to any area of Republican China. Acute hardships were suffered by the mass of the population only towards the end of the Pacific War, during which many Taiwanese volunteered and died loyally in the imperial armies. Few viewers of Hou Hsiao-hsien's film *The Puppet-Master*, a landmark of world cinema, are likely to forget the beauty and dignity of one of its greatest scenes, the funerary theatre of a Taiwanese soldier killed in Guadalcanal, with Japanese officers at attention. The ambiguity of this experience, utterly unlike that of the mainland at the hands of Japan, remains a basic element in island life to this day.

The end of the Pacific War returned Taiwan by Allied agreement to China. The KMT occupied the mainland after the Japanese surrender, and was very soon responsible for far worse exploitation and oppression than the Japanese had inflicted, leading to a spontaneous rising against it in early 1947 - the subject of Hou's other masterpiece, *City of Sadness*. Separation from the mainland was rapidly reproduced by the Civil War in China. Such wars often divide countries into hostile zones. But the second peculiarity of Taiwan's fate was to take no part in the battle itself, instead simply to become a passive victim and external depository of it, when Chiang Kai-shek's regime fled to the island in 1949 after its defeat by the PLA, along with two million mainlanders. As a fleet of Communist junks prepared to cross the straits, the KMT was saved from ejection by the Korean War and the interposition of the American Seventh Fleet.

From 1950 onwards, Taiwan thus found itself an outpost of the American empire, one of Washington's Asian trenches in the Cold War: a vital staging area for the US forces fighting in Vietnam, CIA activities in South-East Asia and Tibet, and a strategic base for nuclear weapons targeting China. Sheltering behind US fire-power, and benefiting from lavish US aid, the KMT reconstructed itself as an efficient development state. With no roots in island society, and under American pressure not to repeat its record on the mainland, it put through sweeping agrarian reform of the kind it had always resisted when it was tied to Chinese landlordism. Inheriting a huge cache of confiscated Japanese properties, it then drove industrialisation through a vast state sector, funded largely by Washington - up to 1965, some 40 per cent of all capital formation on the island was provided free by the US. Very rapid economic growth, with increasing export dynamism based on small local business, and educational progress ensued. Taiwan became one of the great material success stories of the region. It currently enjoys a per capita income of over \$13,000 a year and boasts \$200 billion foreign reserves.

The Blue tradition is understandably proud of these achievements. Part of its following's hostility to the DPP is based on a sense that Green politicians - whose economic management has not been their strong suit - are free riders on a prosperity they have done little to create, and something to damage. Taiwan has suffered its severest recession under Chen. The DPP, on the other hand, justifiably sees

itself as a descendant of the political resistance to a brutal dictatorship. The KMT's massacre of Taiwanese protesters in 1947 - estimates range from 7000 to 28,000 dead - is the founding episode in the memory of this oppression. But the White Terror unleashed in the 1950s, after Chiang Kai-shek was installed on the island, was still more ruthless. Targeting suspected leftists, mainlanders as well as locals, it led to 90,000 arrests and possibly as many as 45,000 executions. Torture and extra-judicial killings continued until the mid-1980s. The Green tradition is rooted in brave struggles against this long trail of Kuomintang thuggery - Chen's wife, paralysed by a truck attack, is a living victim of the regime. A truth commission has yet to establish the extent of the crimes of these years. Like Japanese colonial rule, the 35 years of KMT martial law - another world record, alongside the economic miracle - remain deeply ambiguous in private and public memory.

The condition of this third formative experience remained, throughout, the American overlord. The KMT regime was a ward of US power. When the US began to normalise relations with China, it had no option but to reposition itself. Once Carter had recognised the PRC in 1977, Chiang Kai-shek's heir - officially, though probably not in biological reality, his son - the Russian-trained Chiang Ching-kuo, seeing that he could be left high and dry by Washington, moved to relegitimise KMT rule by gradually liberalising its system from above, and then picking a local successor - calculating that this would make it very difficult for the US to abandon the island. Democracy, when it came to Taiwan, was thus the combined result of an opposition pushing against dictatorship from below, and a regime in quest of new credentials from above.

This dual movement found its ostensibly appropriate point of synthesis in the politician who took over when Chiang Ching-kuo died in 1987. Lee Teng-hui was a native Taiwanese, educated in Japan - he speaks better Japanese than Mandarin - who had once been a Communist; subsequently rose high in the anti-Communist ranks of the KMT; then, installed by the party as president, broke up the KMT and ultimately shoehorned the DPP into office. Today, having successfully betrayed everyone except himself, this former Blue president heads the most extreme party in the pan-Green camp, the TSU. Many people think he is the real political intelligence behind Chen. In his mastery of the arts of 'black gold' - the unrelenting use of political corruption and gang connections - he is perhaps best compared to Kanemaru Shin, the once legendary godfather of Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party, to whom he even bears a faint physical resemblance.

But unlike Kanemaru, a backstairs capo, Lee revelled in the limelight and had a consistent project. Democracy could be more than an insurance policy for the KMT: its real future lay in becoming the cornerstone of the cause of Taiwanese national independence. For what else could supply the island with such impregnable credentials for complete separation from the Communist dictatorship in China? And who was better equipped to become at a single stroke the forger of democracy and the father of the nation? The DPP is today the ultimate beneficiary of Lee's vanity and artistry: having first opened the political system to real competition, he then, when he himself couldn't run again, deftly engineered a split in his party to allow Chen to win the presidency in 2000.

Out of this sequence of historical experiences has come a distinctive kind of national sentiment. The typical forms of overseas settler nationalism required little or no linguistic differentiation from the homeland. In Taiwan, on the other hand, such a basis for local identification has always existed, since 70 per cent of the population speaks the Min-nan dialect of Fujianese, incomprehensible to Mandarin speakers. But this cultural specificity has never so far been the primary signifier of discursive identity. There are two reasons for this. Even apart from the aboriginal inhabitants of the island, who still number some 350,000, the settlers who arrived from China formed two different communities, with a long history of mutual hostility, the traces of which are still evident. Earlier than the Fujianese, Hakkas - a semi-outcast group, originally perhaps from Henan, who had found their way to Guangdong - had migrated to Taiwan, where they still make up 10 to 15 per cent of the population. The Hakka have their own language, and their cultural traditions are markedly different

from Min-nan - there is, for example, less subjugation of women. For centuries, relations between the two communities were scarred by pogroms, leaving the Hakka with an enduring suspicion and fear of the more numerous Min-nan.

Overlaying these tensions, in turn, is the more recent stratum of mainlanders, in origin an exile rather than migrant community, speaking mainly Mandarin and making up another 15 per cent of the population. Though urbanisation, education and intermarriage have reduced the differences between the three groups, they remain sharp enough to define much of the political map of the island. The North, where mainlanders and Hakkas are concentrated, is typically Blue; the South, where the Min-nan are dominant, is overwhelmingly Green.* Aborigines in the mountainous East, like Hakka enclaves elsewhere, vote Blue for fear of Green. There are ways in which this division recalls Ireland, a nationalist South chafing at a semi-unionist North. Calls by the DPP for the 'Taiwanisation' of the civil service, education or culture at large are read, and resisted, by others as Min-nanisation. Fears of a narrow-minded, philistine nativism - so to speak, a Formosan version of *Fianna Fáil* - are increasingly expressed by the island's artists and writers, whatever their origin. In much the way that Joyce or Beckett detested the petty bigotry and chauvinism of official Irishry, so Taiwan's world-famous film directors, Hou and Edward Yang, have voiced their forebodings at the crudity and arrogance of Green talk of 'de-sinicising' the island's culture.

So far, however, 'fundamentalist' appeals - the local term for such ethnic jingoism - have remained subordinate in the repertoire of the DPP. Specifically cultural claims of difference, though on the rise, are still secondary as discursive themes in Taiwanese nationalism, in part just because they are tactically divisive, tending to split Green from Blue constituencies, but also because they offer little international leverage. The principal definition of national identity lies instead in the contrast between democracy on the island and dictatorship on the mainland. The right of Taiwan to independence follows from its achievement of a democracy that the mainland has signally failed to realise. This is a claim that can both unite the inhabitants of the island, whose attachment to democracy leaves no room for doubt, and rally world opinion to their side.

In itself, such a political - as distinct from linguistic, ethnic or cultural - construction of the nation is not unusual in the history of settler nationalisms. The revolt of the Thirteen Colonies against the British *ancien régime*, or of South American creoles against Spanish absolutism - upheavals creating republics in a world of monarchies - could be regarded as early modern versions of the same programme. The peculiarity of the Taiwanese case lies in the fact that the nation claiming independence is itself completely dependent on a foreign power. The separation from the mainland that has formed its distinctive experience for the past century has always been a function of empire, not a revolt against it. First Japanese, then American suzerainty has been the condition of all else. The vitality of the democracy that has emerged from it is by any standards remarkable. It puts to shame that of both its overlords. But the underlying reality is that the island remains a protectorate of US imperial power.

If this set of traits distinguishes the Taiwanese case from previous settler nationalisms, what of the Chinese homeland? Here too, a number of features make it a case apart. First, and most simply, there is the question of distance. The overseas settlements of the European empires, all of them major maritime powers, were characteristically separated from the homelands by thousands of miles of ocean, favouring the growth of strong local identities and creating insuperable logistic problems for reconquest once they began to break away. By contrast, China was never a maritime power, and Taiwan is no more than a hundred miles away across the straits. The only European overseas settlement of comparable proximity was Ulster, planted in the 17th century, which still remains attached to the UK. In one respect, the parallel is not entirely remote. For, not unlike Tudor-Stuart Ireland, Taiwan was historically of concern to the Qing court primarily as a potential base for enemy attack on the mainland.

Second, the European powers that generated transoceanic settlements were typically much smaller in territory than their overseas outposts and in due course became so in population, too. Today's geographical and demographic ratios between the United States and Britain, Latin America and Spain, Brazil and Portugal, speak for themselves. But in the case of China and Taiwan, the disproportion in scale of population and power between the mainland and the island is enormous. The PRC is nearly three hundred times the size of Taiwan, and contains five hundred times as many inhabitants.

In living standards, the boot is on the other foot. Taiwan continues to be much more prosperous than the PRC, with an income per capita more than ten times higher. But since the 1990s the growth of the mainland economy has far outpaced that of the island, which has become a small moon revolving around the huge planet of Chinese industrialisation. Historically, capital as well as labour flowed from the European states to their former overseas settlements, once these gained independence. In the case of Taiwan, the process has been the other way around. Vast amounts of capital - in the region of \$100 billion - have gone from the island to the mainland, and now reverse migration is following investments. Getting on for half a million Taiwanese currently live in Shanghai and other coastal cities of the PRC. Such economic and demographic intermeshing has only just begun, historically speaking. It represents the opposite of the European settlement pattern.

What follows from this double set of co-ordinates? The cause of Taiwanese independence rests politically on the national right of self-determination. The DPP is positioning itself to call a referendum that would give formal effect to the claim of national sovereignty by popular vote. In doing so, it can appeal to the authority of one of the rare principles expressly shared by both of the two great antagonistic political ideologies of the 20th century, articulated respectively by Woodrow Wilson and Lenin, and embodied in the Charter of the United Nations, to which all existing states are formally committed.

Since it was canonically formulated, the right of national self-determination has historically had two main zones of application, corresponding to its dual ancestry. The first accorded independence to nations in Central and Eastern Europe which had previously been contained within dynastic empires - Romanov, Habsburg, Hohenzollern - but whose aspirations to statehood stretched back to the era of romantic ethno-linguistic nationalism in the 19th century, and were realised after the First World War: the Wilsonian moment. The second ratified the independence of the former colonial possessions of the European empires outside Europe, in the wave of anti-imperialist struggles during and after the Second World War: the Leninist moment. In both areas, the right of self-determination brought new nation-states into being.

At the same time, this right has always encountered a limit. Where a nation-state was already constituted, rather than still to be created, self-determination has been systematically rejected. In such cases, the right typically reverses into a taboo. For ideologically speaking, what is then at stake is not 'self-determination', but 'secession'. This is the Lincolnian moment. Its historical record is virtually as uniform as its Wilsonian or Leninist opposites. The American Civil War with its 600,000 dead - the largest military-industrial massacre of the 19th century - was fought to suppress the separation, approved by unimpeachable democratic majorities, of the Confederacy from the Union. Since the Second World War, the same bloody campaigns against break-outs from the nation-state have been fought again and again, with comparable results. Such has been, in Nigeria, the fate of Biafra; in Russia, of Chechnya; in Turkey, of Kurdistan; in India, of Nagaland; in Sri Lanka, of Tamil Eelam; in Spain, of the Basque country. No standard nation-state has so far ever allowed the detachment from its territory of a breakaway community.†

Separations, however, have occurred in multinational federations. In the cases of the USSR and Yugoslavia, constituent republics based on ethnic or linguistic identities became independent states

with the collapse of the Communist order, in the former without much strife, in the latter strewn with violence. Three cases of the peaceful separation of bi-national states are on record: Norway and Sweden in 1905, Malaysia and Singapore in 1965, the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1993. In each, political leaders on both sides saw mutual advantage in the break-up of a union of two territories, of approximately equal weight, whose linguistic or ethnic difference was constitutionally acknowledged from the start. One further case of separation, in Africa, was much bloodier, when Eritrea achieved independence from Ethiopia by reverting to pre-established colonial boundaries. Explicitly multi or bi-federations have proved friable as self-declared nation-states have not.

What are the implications of this three-sided record - the national right to self-determination; the taboo on national secession; the friability of pluri-national federations - for Taiwan? No overseas settler nationalism has acquired independence since the Treaty of Versailles, but the lapse of a century does not as such make it impossible. The difficulty lies with the modern self-definition of the Chinese state. The PRC, unlike the Kuomintang's Republic of China, acknowledges the existence of multiple nationalities within its territory, and concedes them a number of autonomous jurisdictions. But unlike the USSR, it has never accorded any of them republican status: China remains a unitary, not a federal state. Within it, three large areas - Tibet, Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia - contain ethnic and linguistic communities completely distinct from the Han who make up 92 per cent of the total population. They form part of today's PRC as bequests from the Qing empire, and it is not difficult to imagine them winning national self-determination in a democratised China. Taiwan, on the other hand, is ethnically Han, and by the late 19th century was administered as a normal province by the Qing. If China today can be envisaged as a large, relatively homogeneous nation-state, with an alien belt of dependent territories in Central Asia, by ethnic and linguistic criteria Taiwan falls within the 'national' core rather than 'imperial' periphery of this hybrid structure. In comparative terms, its independence would be a secession.

It is for this reason that there is little likelihood that the attitude of a future Chinese democracy towards the secession of Taiwan would differ significantly from that of the present dictatorship. Democracies show no more pity for such leanings than tyrannies, as the killing-fields of Lincolnism made plain from the start. In so far as the case for Taiwanese independence rests on the island's democracy, it would on the contrary be weakened rather than strengthened by the elimination of the authoritarian Other that is currently the main ground of its own identity.

The standard means of preventing or crushing a secession is war. But in the case of Taiwan, the PRC is in no position to send troops to the island, since it is protected by American naval might, against which China has no chance of prevailing. Military threats from the mainland are in that sense pure bluster, of no immediate significance to the island. As matters stand, the CCP's only hope is that growing cross-straits economic integration will eventually persuade Taiwanese business of the advantages of reunification. This is a delusion, based on a false analogy with Hong Kong, where a deal behind closed doors with a handful of billionaires, in a city that had never known a breath of democracy under the British, was enough to clinch a political settlement satisfactory to Beijing. No comparable magnates dominate the ranks of Taiwanese capital, which are both less stratified and much more numerous, while the business community as a whole enjoys significantly less political influence in a fully organised democratic system based on large mass parties. The chances of buying separation from a club of tycoons are virtually nil.

If Beijing has in effect no policy towards Taiwan, other than impotent complaint, Washington has little more. On the one hand, it is formally committed to the principle of One China, as proclaimed in the joint Shanghai communiqué of 1972. Furthermore, the US is now critically dependent on Chinese financial flows to cover its trade deficit and prop up the dollar, so has every reason to maintain close relations with the PRC. On the other hand, it is tacitly bound by the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 to protect the island against any threat of an invasion. Since the 1990s, moreover,

Washington is politically a hostage to Taiwanese democracy. The US, in other words, cannot accept Taiwanese independence de jure, but must ensure it de facto. This is a contradiction no less paralysing than the noisy threats and empty hands of the PRC. America's only policy is therefore to cling to the indeterminacy of the status quo. Both big powers are immobilised by the conflict.

In this situation, the only dynamic force is Taiwanese nationalism. Flushed with an electoral victory its leader ascribes to divine intervention, the Green camp has the wind in its sails, and seems likely to win an outright majority over a divided and demoralised Blue opposition in the legislature in December. Possible defections from the KMT benches to the DPP are already rumoured: a bandwagon logic could set in. The electoral system, offering minimal differences between the two leading parties in social or economic policy, is increasingly organised around identity politics. Here the Green bloc has a built-in advantage, since it can always set the patriotic pace and accuse its Blue opponents of foot-dragging, or much worse, in the advance to Taiwanese sovereignty. In this year's campaign, the DPP regularly attacked the KMT as Communist fellow-travellers doing the bidding of Beijing. So long as the national card is a trump, the Blue camp is forced onto the defensive, and can be easily outflanked.

The political system has already been bent in this fashion. The Green camp demanded that a law be passed allowing the executive to call a referendum. Seeing what might be coming, the Blue majority in the legislature balked at this, but under pressure voted through a mechanism allowing parliament, not the president, to approve a plebiscite. After much negotiation, however, the fine print of the new law included a clause permitting the latter to call a referendum in a situation of urgent external threat. Chen then coolly announced that such an emergency existed, since China (as always) was threatening Taiwan, and put a referendum on beefing up the island's defences to the vote for the same day as the presidential elections - with the aim both of polarising debate around the national question to his own benefit, and setting a precedent for appealing directly to the people when the time was ripe for moving to independence.

Manipulation could scarcely have been starker. One of the Green intellectuals involved in drafting the referendum remarked afterwards that he didn't care what was in it, and didn't even read it before signing it: the important thing was simply to set a plebiscitary precedent for future eventualities. In the event, the Blue camp - crying foul - called on voters to boycott the trick, and it just failed to secure the necessary 50 per cent of the electorate. But a mechanism is now in place that in principle enables Chen to call a plebiscite on independence when he wishes, though he would want to be sure of the result before doing so. The speed of DPP growth in the last four years suggests that this threshold is within reach. A date has been pencilled in by some of its tacticians. In 2008, Beijing will be hosting the Olympics in a blaze of global publicity and bogus bonhomie. Could it afford to sully its image by cracking down on the renegade province, even as the television cameras of the world are doting on the latest Lolita of the uneven bars?

The US has made clear its opposition to any declaration of Taiwanese independence. But what could it do to prevent one? Once the momentum towards a plebiscite began to roll, the only deterrent at its disposal would be a threat to withdraw the Seventh Fleet from the straits. But this is a bluff that Taiwanese nationalism could call, since the public rationale of the American protectorate is the need to protect a vibrant democracy, which would now be finding its culminating expression in a popular mandate. Within the US itself, the mainstream media and public opinion would whip up an unweatherable storm at the prospect of leaving the island at the mercy of the PLA.

The PRC, of course, would step up its denunciations of the DPP, but so long as the American military shield remains, it has few means of affecting political developments in Taiwan, about which it has in any case consistently shown its ignorance. At most it can seek to frighten the island's jumpy stock market, and hope for knock-on effects among voters. Beijing could apply real pressure on

Washington, in a way that it cannot on Taipei, since a Chinese threat to sell US treasuries could pull the rug from under the dollar, with potentially destabilising consequences for the whole American economy. But, even setting aside the costs to the PRC itself of any such line of action, which would by the same stroke cripple Chinese exports to America, the authorities in Beijing have no appetite for any conflict with Washington.

The CCP leadership has pursued international policies of all-round submission to the US for so long now - Hu Jintao has even received the chairman of the puppet government in Baghdad with all honours - that any reflexes of tough resistance seem at present very unlikely. Huffing and puffing about One China would become shriller than ever, but few consequent actions would follow. Behind closed doors the Standing Committee would tell itself that the problem can be left to succeeding generations, when China has become the world's leading economic power and its will irresistible. Meanwhile everything would continue as before, maybe with some extra harassments and restrictions for Taiwanese travellers to the mainland.

Viewed in this light, the plebiscitary dynamic in Taiwan looks less risky for the DPP than many commentators assume. The Greens could probably engineer a declaration of independence without paying any apocalyptic price. Not that they would gain any further international recognition by doing so. No other states of significance would acknowledge such a self-declared transformation into the Republic of Taiwan, any more than they recognise the mythical Republic of China today. But equally Taipei might not suffer any significant reprisals for a symbolic change either. The cross-straits stand-off would continue much as before.

If such a scenario seems quite credible, what are the contingencies that might derail it? One would be a deepening of the 'ethnic' split within the island itself. The Green camp is becoming increasingly nativist in its rhetoric and practice, with a sharp edge of prejudice against ex-mainlander families, who still number perhaps a sixth of the population and form the core of the People First Party, and a milder one against correct Mandarin speakers, a much larger group. Part of this expresses a natural resentment at earlier discrimination against Min-nan speakers. But pressed too crudely, Min-nanisation of the educational system, the civil service, the media and, in due course, the armed forces and security services could create a backlash, polarising Taiwanese society over internal issues, rather than - as intended - mobilising the nation in a union sacrée against the external enemy. But while the DPP leadership has given its fundamentalists some rein, it is probably alert to the dangers of prematurely unleashing such a process, and is more likely to focus on the immediate goal of winning over opportunist sectors of the KMT.

A second contingency would be a sudden stiffening of attitude by the CCP, however improbable that appears to be on current performance. Theoretically, the PRC could escalate pressure on Taiwan by lobbing demonstration missiles at uninhabited targets on the island, high over the masts of the Seventh Fleet, as a shot across the bows of independence. Beijing could perhaps hope that symbolic military action of this kind, well short of a casus belli with the US, might galvanise Washington into imposing a settlement along 'one China, two systems' lines, with complete Taiwanese autonomy within the PRC for fifty years, which it is still in a position to do, but would find much more difficult once a Taiwan Republic has already been declared. It remains difficult, however, to imagine any White House in prospect grasping this nettle with much resolve.

Whatever the short-term eventualities, the long-term prospects of China ever accepting a breakaway of Taiwan seem small. From the standpoint of the nation-state, for a former province without ethnic difference from the majority population to attempt independence is secession. So far, no nation-state has ever permitted this. There is, moreover, effectively an international pact against recognising such a breakaway, since so many states have reason to fear they would be the first to suffer once the precedent was set. Within China itself, fear of the precedent would be even more acute, since a

province like, say, Guangdong, with its own distinct language, has a much stronger claim to separate cultural identity than Taiwan, a population four times larger and a standard of living (already well above the mainland average) which it could certainly improve by no longer having to pay taxes to Beijing. Freely to accept the independence of Taiwan would, in the eyes of the central government, be to invite a dynamic of disintegration along Yugoslav lines. So long " as Taiwan remains an American protectorate, Beijing will put up with it, much as Nanjing put up with Manchukuo as a Japanese protectorate. But historically, some kind of reintegration seems the least unlikely outcome in the long run.

Footnotes

* The regional contrast is also a function of the greater industrialisation of the North, which has benefited from more investment and possesses a larger and better educated urban population. The Blue-Green divide thus also has a class aspect. Prosperous Min-nan still vote in significant numbers for the KMT, whose base remains ethnically more varied than that of the DPP.

† Post-partition Pakistan, circumscribed purely by religion, was never a conventional nation-state. The independence of Bangladesh was assured by overwhelming foreign intervention from India, as once - without the same popular basis - Panama was wrested from Colombia by US intervention.

P.S.

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