

Taiwan's Centrality in Asian Geopolitics

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For decades, there has been talk of "Emerging Asia". The reality is that from the 2008 crash in US-EU financial markets, Asia has emerged and is now once again the primary continent on the globe, accounting for a rising share of output of goods and services, and with an accelerating pace of innovation, all this without a major war between any two major Asian powers since the 1979 conflict between China and Vietnam. It is not coincidental that growth has been quickest after the reduction in tensions in the most economically dynamic corner of Asia - the eastern shores - caused by the "Peace in our time" policy adopted by Deng Xiaoping in contrast to that of "Permanent war" favoured by Mao Zedong. Because of the enervation of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) structures caused in large part by the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and other Mao-inspired measures, Deng was able to fend off challenges from ideologically conservative senior colleagues to his emphasis of growth by any means, subject to the retention of the CCP's monopoly over political power. While China has indeed experienced high growth since the 1980s, a fault line has emerged within the CCP, which is the appearance of what may be termed a "ruling caste" within the party, with descendants of party leaders and their progeny having an inside track in getting control of positions of preferment. Aware of the tensions within the cadre that is the consequence of the emergence of a privileged (and birth-based) caste within what prides itself on being a proletarian party, the CCP leadership core (i.e. the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau and its informal group of senior advisors) has been seeking to divert attention to outside threats (more perceived rather than actual) in a manner counter to the "Peace in our time" policy of Deng Xiaoping. Exactly as the Pakistan army is an obstacle to the development of that country, because of its draft on resources and a strategy of stoking tensions with countries

which could benefit Pakistan were there to be better relations, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is emerging as an obstacle to the continued progress of China towards middle income status. Since Bo Xilai attempted to launch what was clearly an internal coup against the preferred leadership choices of the CCP core six years ago, those who had been at risk as a consequence have allowed the PLA to set external policy in a manner seen only in Pakistan, which incidentally is a country whose military has very close linkages with the PLA. Over the past six years, and entirely because of the hectoring and threatening tone adopted by policy mechanisms of the People's Republic of China as a consequence of pandering to the (naturally) militaristic instincts of the PLA senior commanders, China's relationship with several countries in Asia has deteriorated to the point where each is now seeking closer engagement with the United States and with other powers that could be relied upon to come to their assistance should there be an operationalisation of the threats uttered by Chinese authorities.

More than fifteen years after the concept was first articulated, the contours of an Asian version of NATO (North America Asia Treaty Organisation) or NAATO are becoming visible, with the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, Japan, India and other countries formally and otherwise are multiplying contacts designed primarily to deal with a possible escalation of armed hostilities with China. A few years of posturing have led to the elimination of much of the goodwill created by Beijing because of the Deng policies which are now clearly in the process of being repudiated in favour of a more NATO-inspired line that stresses reliance on armed combat and operations rather than on diplomacy.

Although U.S-EU scholars often posit a link between economic progress and political reform of the kind favoured by the bloc during the "Arab Spring" and other similar manifestations, including that being played out in Hong Kong over the past

weeks, the reality is that the PRC's economic system relies on an authoritarian state structure in order to ensure its viability. A dilution of state power would impact the current engines of growth in China not favourably but otherwise, and only a prolonged period of adjustment of structures both economic and administrative would render it feasible for the kind of political chemistry and process favoured by the U.S. and the EU in (for example) the "Arab Spring" to continue to generate high levels of growth in China. Rather than "political reform" (which is commonly used to denote a dilution in CCP control), the second leg of China's advancement towards the pre-eminent position in the global economy is the "Peace in our time" policy initiated by Deng Xiaoping after the conflict with Vietnam. The escalation of militaristic rhetoric (consequent on the releasing of the PLA from the box in which it had been caged till the Bo internal revolt occurred) has resulted in the near-total elimination of the goodwill which Beijing had acquired within the region. This has now been replaced with a worry that a conflict may no longer be impossible or at the least improbable, but may in fact be very probable.

This could have been the case earlier this year during the standoff between the Indian forces and the PLA at the Line of Actual Control, were General Secretary Xi Jinping not successful in reining back the PLA generals from their interventions in the field of foreign policy. In the case of India, for instance, the election to office of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has given an opportunity for the two countries to harmonise their stands in a manner that would serve the interests of both. When Xi visited India during September 17-19, 2014, Prime Minister Modi went an extra few miles to make his visitor (and his charming spouse) feel welcome, receiving him at the capital of his home state of Gujarat and taking time out to accompany Xi and Peng Leyuan to places of interest in Gandhinagar, at a time when the public mood towards China was less than cordial. The reason for this was the fact that a small detachment of the PLA had chosen the exact time when the Head of State of their country was visiting India to intrude into territory in Ladakh on the Indian side that was not even part of the areas which China has been contesting since

the 1950s.

They did more, attempting to build a road within the territory. If any organisation (presumably including the CIA) had wanted to poison the well during the Xi visit to India, this was a superb way of doing so. The generals who ordered that their men enter into Indian territory and even seek to build a road on it during the month when Xi was visiting the country ensured that Prime Minister Modi was dismayed and embarrassed by his show of bonhomie towards the Chinese leader and that the atmospherics between Delhi and Beijing remained as frosty as they had been prior to the visit, which incidentally was the first time since the 1950s when a top Chinese leader visited India without going to Pakistan. This in a context where India offers a \$100 billion market each for Chinese telecom, infrastructure and energy companies, while a vastly accelerated flow of Chinese tourists into India (from the present annual level of 47,000) could significantly reduce India's trade deficit with its northern neighbour, as would increase PRC off take of India's pharma, services and other sectors where the country is relatively at an advantage.

Not only are the generals in the PLA blocking Chinese companies from taking optimal advantage of markets such as India, but they are also reducing the flow of investment into China, notably from Japan, which is now placing many of its bets elsewhere, including in India and Vietnam. It is known that the Indian side pointed out the damaging consequences to Chinese interests of the adventurism of the PLA to the visiting Chinese delegation during the September 18 talks in Delhi, but what is less clear is whether President Xi will be able to "return the gun to the command of the party" or whether the post-Bo license given to the PLA in the field of foreign policy will continue. The manner in which the Chinese military is eager to follow the example of the U.S. and the EU in using the military to intervene in selected locations

in order to promote their interests ensures that Taiwan will have a central role in the international calculus of security and economic interests. Any integration of Taiwan into the PRC would act as a force multiplier which would immensely boost the technological (and therefore military) capabilities of China, besides its economy. In times past, the absorption of territories by countries by force were plainly responsible for higher and higher levels of concessions sought from neighbours and from others. In a particular case, with each absorption of territory, the country concerned got ever more strident in seeking to expand its territory and its interests, eventually leading to a generalised conflict. Given the tone of the PLA and the state structures in Beijing which apparently march to the PLA tune, it would be a risk too far for countries in Asia that have been at the receiving end of Beijing's rhetoric to welcome any further expansion in the territory or the capability of China. Should Taiwan get integrated into the PRC, with the exception of China itself and possibly a few countries such as North Korea or Venezuela, no other country in the world – certainly not India - would regard such a development as anything other than a direct threat to its vital interests. Delhi has ritually spoken of its adherence to "One China", but has yet to affirm in a way as conclusive as it has in the case of Tibet that Taiwan is, or was, or will ever be, part of "One China". Indeed, given the continued approach of the PLA and the apparent backers of its line within the CCP to India and this country's core interests, a time may come in Delhi when Tibet too gets de-bracketed from "One China". Should this happen, it would be Beijing's continuing departure from Deng Xiaoping's policy of "Peace in our time" that would be to blame.

Countries in Asia need to ensure that war and other manifestations of armed conflict - in any form - be avoided in relations between themselves. The 1939-45 war ensured that European pre-eminence on the globe was weakened to a level where first India and thereafter other countries were able to wrest back their freedom. Although

efforts were made subsequently to protect past privileges, such as in Vietnam or in Egypt, these were all ultimately unsuccessful so far as countries in Asia were concerned. If the European Union and the broader Atlantic Community has succeeded in continuing to ensure prosperity for its citizens, in large part that is because of the complete absence of armed conflict between themselves, a situation never before witnessed in history. Such a policy needs to be emulated, which is where the PLA in its efforts at replicating the tactics of NATO (in locations other than the US and the EU) has turned its back on both history as well as the core interests of Asia. In view of this, countries need to be aware of the need to ensure that there remains a balance of power in Asia (such that a situation where any single country cannot dominate over others by virtue of economic and other size). Should the CCP succeed in integrating Taiwan into the PRC, a limit would be crossed that would make future conflict inevitable rather than absent. Hence the strategic imperative of ensuring that Taiwan retain its current autonomy. The history of Europe shows what takes place when a military overconfident of its abilities witnesses territorial gains sans sacrifice, a history that Asia needs to avoid by the simple expedient of ensuring that there is status quo of current boundaries and authorities.

Taiwan is at the heart of the Calculus of Capability in Asia, and while this may be obvious, yet bears reiteration. Reasons include:

(a) Location. Its position ensures immense significance for any attempt at domination of the China seas, especially the eastern section. Japan, China, the Koreas, Vietnam and the Philippines are each affected by any changes in the policies followed by Taipei. In such a context, it needs to be noted that successive governments there have adhered to a "No War" line, focusing on the defensive and building up offensive capability only to the extent needed to ensure deterrence against attacks. Any change in the mode of governance of Taiwan such that there may be a shift in such a beneficial policy would be to the detriment of India, Japan, the US and several other

powers.

(b) Knowledge. From the 1980s, Taiwan has been the leader in Asia in the mastering of technologies and processes across a slew of economic activity, yielding only to Japan in its proficiency. If China is emerging as an advanced technological power, much of the credit rests with Taiwanese entities active in that country, which have given access to such technologies. Given the importance of technology and the knowledge economy in both the military as well as the commercial sphere, the continued "neutrality" of Taiwan is essential to maintain a level playing field between the powers of Asia. Such neutrality is also in the best interests of Taipei.

In such a context, while China has been helpful to Taiwan in the creation of manufacturing platforms, a similar level of engagement with India in the field of software would help to ensure that this field develops to the same level as hardware and peripherals have. This is why there has been some (though not adequate) focus on creating partnerships between Indian and Taiwanese universities. A policy whereby only students from a particular country are encouraged to come and study in Taiwan and others from countries with as significant a population get ignored is not optimal.

Another corollary which needs attention is the relative neglect of the English language in Taiwan. A 21st century Anglo-sphere would include not only the Churchillian model of "white" countries but also India, certainly Singapore and hopefully in the future, Taiwan, should Taipei abandon its obsessive focus with a single regional language and embrace the international link language as enthusiastically as its interests mandate.

(c) Democracy. It has been a mystery why the CCP has been as obsessed as it has been about integrating Taiwan into the PRC, for the reason that such a move, even if

successful, would bring into a communist state twenty million and more high-capability individuals committed to political democracy. Already, exposure of PRC citizens to the feisty but largely free politics of Taiwan, especially that playing out not only on soapboxes but on television screens daily, is having an accelerating impact on the perceived desirability of political democracy as a system of governance. The maturing of democratic politics in Taiwan has shown to be untrue views such as that the Sinic peoples are "unsuited" to political democracy, and the obvious question is that if the people of Taiwan can so safely and so speedily embrace political democracy, why is it made an article of faith that larger Sinic populations cannot do the same without danger to economic progress and social stability? The pervasive acceptance of political democracy within Taiwan has made the island a "poison pill" which, if swallowed by China, would seep into the general population in a way toxic to the present structure of authority in Beijing, on a scale several degrees of magnitude higher than the effect of the (sharply diluted) level of democracy in Hong Kong.

The Taiwan Example is significant in the mind space of East Asia in particular, in a context where not everywhere is there the same respect for alternative views and lifestyles. The people of Taiwan have shown that modernism and moderate values move in a synchronous manner rather than get into conflict with each other. The demonstration effect of the emergence of Taiwanese society as a model of democratic temperance is substantial, and can only grow.

(d) Importance in a boundary less world. The reality of the 21st century is that physical boundaries have become an impediment to progress. Take for example the European Union, which on grounds of ethnic origin prevent highly skilled individuals from Chennai or Hyderabad to settle on its shores, while opening them either to those making the crossing illegally or those coming from locations where the pool of

high-value human power is far more limited than in such hubs in India. Institutions and governments which place their faith on such 19th century concepts as "my sea" or "my widget of land" are a block on the progress of Asia. Hopefully, Taipei will before long abandon such paper quests as "winning back the China seas" or "taking back trans-Himalayan land from India" and declare its adherence to a policy which anchors itself in the status quo so far as territorial claims are concerned. As mentioned before, the PLA's obsession with getting control of small wedges of barren land in India may derail the immense prospects for geopolitical synergy between Delhi and Beijing, and it is time that Taipei called for not only a "No War Pact" in Asia but a call to maintain the status quo in matters of territory. Its own commitment to a "Peace in our time" policy and to liberal values and practices has been exemplary.

In brief, the status quo relating to Taiwan needs to be maintained to ensure stability in Asia and the avoidance of future conflict. Such a view contrasts with others which claim that such a status quo is a "magnet for war" when in factor, it is among its major deterrents. Also, that Taipei needs to proceed beyond its two-country obsession (i.e., the US and China, lately only a single country, China) and accept the reality of a multipolar world, where countries other than the US and China should be a policy priority, especially India, a country determined to maintain the status quo in Asia in order to ensure continued progress towards the elimination of poverty in a continent whose major component parts (and eventually the whole) are rid of conflicts.

This article was part of the speeches delivered at the 2014 International Conference on New Asian Dynamics and the Role of Taiwan