

AS CHINA'S PRESIDENT LI VISITS, THE U.S. MUST STICK TO ITS CHINA POLICY

INTRODUCTION

President Li Xiannian of the People's Republic of China will visit the United States later this month. This trip by the 76-year-old titular head of the PRC will be mainly ceremonial. He will be feted at a White House state dinner, open a PRC consulate-general in Chicago, and probably sign pro forma agreements on commercial and cultural matters. It is possible, however, that Li's visit also will provide an opportunity to complete the stalled Washington-Beijing agreement on nuclear cooperation. The U.S. has been seeking clarification of how China intends to implement the agreement, which was initialled by President Reagan during his visit to the PRC in April of last year.

The business-as-usual approach adopted for Li's visit is a welcome change. Too often in the past decade have American officials viewed every trip to China or every high-level Chinese trip to the U.S. as a test of the U.S.-PRC relationship. The result has been a series of costly and premature (or unnecessary) U.S. concessions. The Reagan Administration wisely does not seem to be planning to bestow any lavish diplomatic gifts on Li.

Yet the near-complacency surrounding the visit could mask two key issues that threaten to alter the course of Sino-American relations. The first deals with China's reappraisal of the strategic balance of power between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. The second involves Beijing's determination to move quickly toward reunification with Taiwan and to do so, if possible, with U.S. assistance.

Beijing's assessment of the current correlation of global forces is decidedly more favorable to China than at any time in recent history. Both Washington and Moscow want to improve relations with the PRC, and the friendly U.S. is judged to be

stronger than the threatening Soviet Union. This power configuration enables Beijing to pursue a generally "independent" foreign policy--not aligning with either superpower while pursuing China's own international agenda. Many elements of this agenda are contrary to U.S. interests.

An example is Taiwan. PRC leaders now seem to want to resolve the reunification issue as quickly as possible. Beijing indicates that it will leave untouched for some time the economic and political system on Taiwan. Chinese leaders cite the "one country, two systems" formula in the recently concluded agreement transferring Hong Kong from British to Chinese rule. At the same time, however, Beijing has begun to talk tough about Taiwan. PRC leaders, Deng Xiaoping, Chairman of the Central Advisory Commission of the Chinese Communist Party, and Party General Secretary Hu Yaobang even have threatened to blockade Taiwan if necessary. The PRC has begun hinting to the U.S. that it may be more in American interests to help resolve the reunification issue peacefully now than to wait until force must be used in the future.

The U.S. response to these developments must be carefully calculated. On the one hand, Washington must continue to strengthen its global position relative to Moscow, although this will result in greater "independence" in China's foreign policy. On the other, the Reagan Administration must resist Beijing's suggestions that the U.S. get involved in China's reunification. Instead, the Administration must reaffirm its strong commitment to the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979, in which the U.S. pledges to help Taiwan defend itself and to maintain commercial, cultural, and other relations with the people of Taiwan. This explicitly includes selling Taiwan the arms needed to deter a PRC blockade or to resist other uses of force by Beijing. If the matter of Taiwan arises, Ronald Reagan must remind his Chinese guest that friendly Sino-American relations depend on China's policy of using only peaceful means to reunify Taiwan with the mainland.

PRC FOREIGN POLICY GOALS

The pursuit of an independent foreign policy and the recovery of Taiwan have been priority PRC goals since 1949. Immediate security and economic needs, however, at times have forced Chinese leaders to set aside these fundamental goals. Thus, during much of the 1950s, the PRC sacrificed foreign policy independence to be aligned closely with the Soviet Union. And from 1978 to 1980, the PRC flirted with the idea of a strategic alliance with the U.S.

Today, the PRC feels that it has sufficient nuclear and conventional military strength to deter the two superpowers from attacking China. Experts in the PRC seem to have concluded recently that the U.S. is marginally stronger militarily and economically than the Soviet Union. Since the U.S. seeks to contain Soviet expansion in East Asia, China benefits from

America's new strength. Further contributing to Beijing's sense of security is Moscow's desire to reduce tensions with China and to seek areas of mutual cooperation.

China is becoming stronger domestically as well. Pragmatic economic reforms have increased agricultural and industrial production significantly. And the PRC's open trade policy with East and West is introducing advanced technology to China rapidly. Politically, strongman Deng Xiaoping seems to be succeeding in manning the positions of power with second and third generation leaders who are sympathetic to his brand of socialism.

CONFLICTING U.S.-CHINESE NATIONAL INTERESTS

As China's security environment becomes less threatening and its modernization progresses, the PRC can be expected to devote more attention to pursuing an independent foreign policy and recovering Taiwan. PRC steps in either direction, if taken too far, could affect Sino-American relations adversely.

A stronger, more independent Chinese foreign policy, for example, might mean a more assertive PRC role in Asian affairs. China's neighbors, who include important U.S. friends and allies, could begin to feel mounting diplomatic, economic, and military pressure from Beijing. As this happened, Washington would find that certain elements of its relations with the PRC, especially military cooperation, could threaten the vital interests of non-communist Asia. Singapore, for instance, is becoming very nervous about the possibility of U.S. arms sales to Beijing. And a number of leading Indonesians warn privately that Jakarta views Beijing rather than Moscow as the chief potential threat in Southeast Asia.

Beijing likely will continue to try to improve relations with Moscow. Both capitals want to reduce tensions, partly to devote more resources to economic development. Although the USSR remains the more immediate threat to China's interests, the United States is now seen as the stronger power. In the past, this type of assessment has often presaged Beijing's "leaning" in the direction of the weaker power. In fact, Beijing recently accused Washington of "launching an ideological offensive" against socialism worldwide.¹

At some point, improved Sino-Soviet relations can undermine the strategic foundation of Sino-American relations. Strategic cooperation against Moscow was the key mutual interest that first drew Washington and Beijing together and today permits American

¹ "Reagan's Diplomacy: An Overview," Beijing Review, 23, 24 (June 1985), p. 23.

domestic consensus on U.S.-China policy. Closer ties between the PRC and the Soviet Union challenge the rationale for American arms sales to Beijing and weaken arguments for transfer to the PRC of American high technology, since it could find its way to the USSR. A PRC-USSR rapprochement also could spur a fundamental rethinking of U.S. strategic policy in East Asia, since improved Sino-Soviet relations would decrease the number of Soviet divisions "tied down" by the Chinese along their common border.

INCREASED PRESSURE ON TAIWAN

As long as China's security was threatened by the Soviet Union and the economic reforms known as the Four Modernizations were in their infancy, Deng Xiaoping and his reformists could temporize on the reunification issue in the interests of improving relations with the U.S. Now that security and modernization priorities are more manageable, PRC leaders can devote more time and resources to the Taiwan issue.

Since Beijing concluded its September 1984 agreement with London over the future of Hong Kong, Chinese leaders have made it clear that they view the "one country, two systems" approach suitable for Taiwan as well. In recent months, the PRC through diverse channels has sought to enlist U.S. support in convincing Taipei to moderate its policy of no contact, no compromise, and no negotiations with the Chinese Communists. To date, however, Beijing's efforts have had few results.

Perhaps frustrated by their failure to attract the people of Taiwan, PRC leaders in recent months have threatened to blockade the island if necessary to return it to the "embrace of the motherland." Deng Xiaoping and Hu Yaobang both have made statements to this effect. Hu Yaobang, for example, said in May of this year that in seven to ten years, "if we have the strength to enforce a blockade and if Taiwan vehemently opposes reunification, we shall have to consider enforcing a blockade."² The PRC is well aware, of course, that trade-dependent Taiwan is highly vulnerable to a blockade.

Nonetheless, increased PRC pressure on Taiwan may make it difficult for Washington to pursue its current policy of maintaining friendly ties with Chinese on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. The U.S. has been doing this in a manner generally consistent with the three major communiqués that it signed with Beijing and with the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA).³

² See Hu Yaobang's May 10, 1985, interview in Pai Hsing, FBIS-China, June 3, 1985, pp. W7-W8.

³ The three Sino-American communiqués are the Shanghai Communiqué of February 28, 1972; the Joint Communiqué on Establishment of U.S.-PRC Diplomatic Relations on January 1, 1979; and the Joint Communiqué of August 17, 1982.

The PRC wants the United States to alter its policy toward the Republic of China on Taiwan by (1) repealing the Taiwan Relations Act; (2) curtailing U.S. defensive arms sales to Taipei; and (3) encouraging the Republic of China (ROC) to accept reunification with the mainland under the "one country, two systems" formula.

Emboldened by the balance of power it now perceives, Beijing hopes that it can persuade Washington to abandon its current China policy in favor of one tilting toward the PRC. The unspoken threat is that, if the U.S. refuses to go along, Beijing may settle the Taiwan issue by force within a decade. Beijing apparently assumes that the PRC will be strong enough both to (1) impose a blockade on Taiwan or use other military means to force Taipei to the negotiating table and (2) deter an American military response to support the ROC.

THE U.S. RESPONSE

China's more independent foreign policy and increased pressure on Taiwan are encouraged by the Reagan Administration's success in countering the Soviet military buildup and by U.S. readiness to assist the PRC's economic modernization and improvement of its armed forces. To be sure, Washington must continue rebuilding the U.S. arsenal to prevent Moscow from recapturing the strategic supremacy that it enjoyed in the late 1970s. And Washington also must attempt to foster friendly Sino-American relations.

At the same time, the U.S. must not compromise further over Taiwan. Many American economic, political, ideological, moral, legal, and security interests are served by close unofficial ties with the Republic of China. In 1984, Taiwan was the fifth largest trading partner of the United States, while the PRC was the 21st. U.S. trade totaled \$20 billion and \$6.4 billion respectively. U.S. loans and investments to the ROC top \$6 billion, and nearly 350 American businesses have branches in Taiwan.

Politically, continued U.S. support for Taiwan gives Ronald Reagan strong bipartisan support for his overall China policy. U.S.-China policy was not an issue in the 1984 presidential election because both liberals and conservatives felt Reagan's China policy to be balanced and fair. Any move on the part of the Administration to limit its support of Taiwan would reopen the China issue in U.S. politics.

Ideologically, the ROC and the U.S. share commitments to individual freedom, democracy, and the free enterprise system. It would be morally wrong for the U.S. to push the people of Taiwan against their will into unification with the communist mainland.

Legally, the Taiwan Relations Act is the law of the land, passed overwhelmingly by Congress and signed into law by President

Jimmy Carter in April 1979. Although the TRA is domestic legislation, it takes legal precedence over any communiqué signed between Washington and Beijing.

U.S. security interests in the Western Pacific are served by a prosperous and stable Taiwan, as are the security interests of Japan, South Korea, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand). Moreover, the continuation of American support for Taipei is seen by these countries as evidence of the U.S. commitment to their own security.

Americans also should keep in mind that, even if the Taiwan issue were settled between the United States and the PRC, Beijing would not change its independent foreign policy. Indeed, PRC leaders surely would view China as being even stronger and thus able to assert itself even more forcefully in regional affairs.

There is no way, moreover, that the PRC can substitute for the benefits the U.S. receives in its very close unofficial ties with the ROC. Unlike Taipei, Beijing will not enter into a military alliance with the U.S. against the Soviet Union; it will not permit American bases on Chinese territory; it will not abandon its plans to improve relations with Moscow; it will not sever remaining ties with illegal communist parties in Southeast Asia; and it will not side with the U.S. in touchy issues concerning the Third World. Perhaps most important, even the most pragmatic of Beijing's communist leaders will not give the Chinese people on the mainland the freedom and opportunity enjoyed by Chinese in Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and elsewhere in Asia.

CONCLUSION

In light of the current balance of global forces, the Reagan Administration must expect China to pursue a more independent foreign policy. But this is no reason for Washington to acquiesce to PRC pressure concerning Taiwan. U.S. policy makers must abide by the law of the land and fulfill the provisions of the Taiwan Relations Act, including the sale of U.S. arms to Taipei sufficient to deter PRC threats to the security or the social and economic system of the people of Taiwan.

Undoubtedly, Beijing will react to a tough U.S. response to a more assertive Chinese foreign policy. The resulting tensions in Sino-American relations are the price Washington must pay as it pursues U.S. interests by (1) strengthening the American military posture in the Western Pacific, (2) assisting the modernization of China, and (3) maintaining close ties with the ROC.

The U.S. is looking increasingly toward Asia and is on the threshold of a Pacific-first policy. By every conceivable measure, Taiwan plays an important role in Pacific affairs. To maintain the credibility of its evolving Pacific Basin policy, Washington

therefore must fulfill its obligations as outlined in the Taiwan Relations Act.

It is eminently appropriate that President Li Xiannian be welcomed to the United States with the all the honor accorded a visiting head-of-state from a friendly and powerful country. But it is also appropriate that he and his delegation understand that the U.S. will not retreat from its principles with regard to Taiwan and other bilateral issues.

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