The independence that Taiwanese desire may turn out to be in the interest of China and all concerned

The Taiwan Tangle

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Recent setbacks notwithstanding, the Nationalist Chinese government of Chiang Kai-shek still has a tight grip on Taiwan. Beyond maintaining effective control over its diverse constituents, the government has also brought reasonable prosperity. Just as clearly, however, the regime has feet of clay.

The entire political system of Nationalist China rests upon the myth that it is the government of all China. The myth has finally been exploded in the diplomatic realm, but on Taiwan it remains the fragile foundation of the regime’s power and very existence. The legitimacy of the regime derives from legislative and electoral bodies elected on the Mainland in the 1940’s.

Absolute power resides with the president, elected every six years by the National Assembly. In the Assembly, elected in 1948, fully 98 per cent of the membership represents not Taiwan but the Mainland provinces lost in 1949. Why, one might ask, does the government refuse to elect new bodies based on the population it actually controls? This is the heart of the matter. Only by keeping in office the representatives chosen long ago on the Mainland can the Mainland Chinese who came to Taiwan with Chiang Kai-shek assure their continued dominance. Genuine free elections reflecting the actual population—85 per cent Taiwanese and 15 per cent Mainlanders—would quickly terminate the present monopoly of power.

As Nationalist spokesmen like to point out, their constitution is relatively democratic. They admit that since the late 1940’s martial law has been in effect and nationwide elections have not been held, but this does not mean constitutional government has been abandoned. It has only been suspended for the duration of the “Communist rebellion.” As soon as the Nationalist Government recovers the Mainland and delivers the Chinese people from their “Communist oppressors,” elections and other constitutional guarantees will immediately be reinstated. Thus the Mainlander rulers are assured of control on Taiwan until the chimerical day of “Mainland recovery.” Or at least until the accelerating death rate of Chiang’s aging followers removes the regime through natural attrition. Or until the native Taiwanese majority replaces them by other means.

During my five years of frequent contact with native Taiwanese, with whom I had hundreds of conversations, I found no one—not even one—who maintained that he seriously believed either that the Nationalist regime had a valid claim to be the government of China or that it represented the true interests of the Taiwanese people. This disbelief was invariably expressed only in private, for Taiwanese are well aware that public expression of such views leads to immediate imprisonment. Apparently as universal is the desire of Taiwanese to control their own affairs.

This does not necessarily mean that most Taiwanese actively oppose the Nationalist Government at this time, nor that they are about to—or even want to—overthrow the government by force in the near future. The Taiwanese are caught in a dilemma. On the one hand they want to control what they logically and rightfully feel is their own homeland at the earliest possible date. On the other, they feel time is on their side and are wary of a premature attempt to seize power. They reason that, although Chiang’s holdovers from the Mainland can hang onto power for a while longer, inexorable death reduces their number each year. With the passing of time there is a gradual erosion of the ability of the Nationalists to suppress a determined Taiwanese move for power. It would not be wise, most Taiwanese feel, to make their move now while the strength, determination

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and unity of the regime remain relatively strong. One event that will certainly weaken at least the symbolic strength of the regime is inevitable, the death of 84-year-old Chiang Kai-shek.

Yet another factor invites caution. While the Nationalist regime is the immediate obstacle, in the long view the greater threat to Taiwanese self-determination is Communist China itself. The Taiwanese fear that if they tried now to overthrow the Nationalist regime they might force the Nationalists to choose between accepting Taiwanese control or making the best deal they could with Peking. Given this unpalatable choice, it is thought that many Nationalists would opt for China in the hope that Peking would show its gratitude by leaving them in control of Taiwan's local affairs.

The older Mainlanders are more vehement in their resistance to Taiwanese control than are their children who were born or grew up on Taiwan. In talking with younger Mainlanders one gets the impression that they feel the Taiwanese have a valid claim to at least local autonomy if not independent nationhood, and many of them will say—again, in private only—that they would have no difficulty accommodating themselves to Taiwanese control.

Responsible Taiwanese are not anti-Mainlander. They can sympathize with Mainlanders who find themselves stuck on Taiwan and have no difficulty in working with individual Mainlanders in the government. Such Taiwanese are not excessively dissatisfied with the economy, educational system or cultural life of their present society. They complain about these things, of course, just as all people complain in all societies. It is only the political system, and their exclusion from meaningful political participation, that they want to eliminate entirely.

The Taiwanese hope for a peaceful transition, over time, allowing them to work with and absorb the Mainlander minority in their midst. With few exceptions they do not want a violent revolution. Maintaining an orderly society is more important than seeking revenge or kicking Mainlanders out of office—provided, that is, the Taiwanese can gain control of their own island through peaceful means and within a reasonably short time.

Nor are the Taiwanese bitterly anti-Peking. True, they see little attraction in the political or economic system of China today, but most Taiwanese feel that the Chinese on the Mainland are better off now than they were under Chiang Kai-shek. Most Taiwanese hope eventually to have close and friendly relations with China, provided China allows them to control their own affairs. Some Taiwanese have been quoted as agreeing to internal autonomy under nominal Chinese suzerainty. But the widespread fear is that, if China were granted even a nominal claim, the temptation to total control and to force Maoism on Taiwan would be hard to resist. Consequently, Tai- wanese feel that the only secure way to gain full and permanent control of their domestic affairs is to establish a new, independent nation of Taiwan.

The real question is not whether the Taiwanese want independence—they do—but whether they can ever get it. After the Nationalist regime fades, the answer will depend primarily on the attitude of China. So far, China has uncompromisingly demanded the return of Taiwan, and Chinese leaders have branded the Taiwanese independence movement an imperialist plot designed to dismember China. There is no way to know at this point whether China will ever agree to a genuinely separate status (independence or full autonomy under nominal Chinese sovereignty) for Taiwan. There are reasons for refusing to accept Peking's present stand as unalterable.

As long as the Nationalist Chinese Government was able, with U.S. backing, to represent all China in the world community, Peking could only look upon Taiwan as an intolerable challenge to its own legitimacy and as a symbol of U.S. interference in Chinese affairs. Under those emotion-laden circumstances China could not have been expected to give much weight to the pragmatic arguments for Taiwanese separation. The arguments are: first, Taiwan is not vital to the economic interests of China; second, if Taiwan had a representative, native Taiwanese government which made no claim to the Mainland, it would cease to be a political challenge to Peking; third, the Taiwanese people, with their non-Communist economy and non-Maoist society, have a strong desire to be separate and therefore would not be easy for China to digest; fourth, by allowing self-determination for Taiwan, the Chinese would be acting in accord with a principle that has wide international acceptance, in the United Nations and elsewhere, as the proper solution for disputed territories. Allowing the Taiwanese to determine their own future would be a humanitarian act which would win international respect for China, while taking Taiwan by force would be costly both in military terms and in international good will. Furthermore, by allowing the Taiwanese the separate existence they
want, the Chinese might win the friendship and cooperation of the Taiwanese people; whereas, if they rammed their system down the throats of the Taiwanese, Mao and his followers would find themselves no less despised than Chiang and his.

The communiqué issued at the conclusion of President Nixon's visit to China stated that the U.S. "does not challenge" the position that "there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China." Does this put an end to the prospects, however remote they may have seemed, for Taiwanese separatism? Not necessarily. In fact, the crucial prerequisite to winning eventual Chinese consent to Taiwanese self-determination may well be bringing China out of her embittered isolation. President Nixon's step toward bringing China into the world makes it more likely that at that future date when Taiwan works out the terms of its relationship with Peking it will be able to deal with a more mature China. Once China has won its rightful place as a major power, it could afford to show a measure of compassion toward the Taiwanese, who have been at the mercy of outside rulers for over three-quarters of a century.

Both Nationalist and Communist China say the Taiwanese are Chinese in culture, race and language. This is basically true, and few Taiwanese would deny their Chinese heritage. Their claim to separate status rests not on their origins but on their history since 1895, on their present situation and on their belief that justice requires giving them a say in their own future.

From the standpoint of international law the status of Taiwan is unclear. Both Nationalist and Communist Chinese insist that the island was returned to China at the end of World War II. Their case rests largely on the Cairo Declaration of 1943, which listed the return of Taiwan as one of the war aims of the Allies. Nevertheless, the peace treaty with Japan, signed in 1951, merely stated that Japan relinquished the island, without saying where sovereignty would thereafter reside. As a result, the Taiwanese can argue with some justification that the island was not formally and irrevocably turned over to China. The truth is that there is enough ambiguity about Taiwan's status in international law to justify referring the issue to the wishes of the people most directly involved. The Taiwanese are confident that a genuinely free plebiscite would lead to independence, and everything I have observed during five years on Taiwan supports their contention.

Quite apart from international law, it is apparent that historical and political realities will likely determine the future of Taiwan. Even before 1895, Mainland China's control over the island had been tenuous. When, in the 1870's, shipwrecked Japanese sailors were killed by the aboriginal headhunters who occupied over half of Taiwan, China refused to take the blame on the grounds that she did not have effective control over that part of the island. Taiwan was not made a province of China until 1874. Then, in 1895, Japan took Taiwan as her first overseas colony, and ever since that time Taiwan has been effectively cut off from Mainland China. After fifty years of rigid Japanese rule, the island was, from 1945 to 1949, once again supposedly united with the Mainland. Chiang Kai-shek arrived in 1945 claiming he was at long last liberating his Chinese brethren, and many Taiwanese, less than content under the Japanese, welcomed his regime.

Before long, however, the Taiwanese began to feel that the Nationalists were even more oppressive than the Japanese. In less than two years the Nationalists had so alienated the Taiwanese that the natives revolted and would have thrown them out had not Chiang Kai-shek sent thousands more troops to quell the rebellion. Chiang's troops executed a large proportion of the Taiwanese leadership (estimates range from 5,000 to 20,000 killed). Chiang emasculated the revolt of the moment but won the long-lasting enmity of the Taiwanese people. The Nationalist regime cannot deny that the Taiwanese were severely mistreated from 1945 to 1947. In fact, the Nationalist-appointed governor of the period, Chen Yi, was removed from office after the revolt and executed by Chiang two years later. In the interim, however, he had been promoted by his old friend Chiang to an even more prestigious governorship; and the Taiwanese noted bitterly that it was not until Chen had attempted to make a deal with the Communists that Chiang decided to execute him for his earlier "crimes on Taiwan."

The establishment of Chiang's rump regime in Taipei and the execution of Governor Chen in 1949 marked the end of the only four years during the modern era in which Taiwan and the Mainland were integrated under the same political authority. Since 1949 there has, of course, been an almost total absence of communication between China and Taiwan.

Their historical development for more than three generations makes the Taiwanese think of themselves as a political entity separate from Mainland China. They argue that this gives them a claim to independence that is at least as valid as that of the ethnic Englishmen in the American Colonies in 1776.

In 1936 Mao Tse-tung gave Edgar Snow his views on what China should do about the territories she had lost to Japan:

Manchuria must be regained. We do not, however, include Korea, formerly a Chinese colony... If the Koreans wish to break away from the chains of Japanese imperialism, we will extend them our enthusiastic help in their struggle for independence. The same thing applies for Formosa [Taiwan].

Thus in the 1930's at least one influential Chinese thought the Taiwanese had a right to determine their own future. Perhaps others might soon share that view.