



Bubble Tea Diplomacy: The Nuclear Solution to Taiwan's International Recognition

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Taiwan's unique status, denied the status of nation-state by the international community and claimed by the People's Republic of China (PRC), creates a loophole that can lead to problematic consequences. In one such scenario, the Republic of China (ROC) could develop a nuclear weapons arsenal in a bid to gain international recognition, a move here termed "bubble tea diplomacy." Indeed, as a non-state actor, the ROC is not bound to international treaties governing the development and deployment of potentially hostile means, chief amongst them the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). Throughout history, a number of countries and non-state actors alike have successfully rallied international attention to their respective causes through violence. North Korea's test launch of ballistic missiles, Hezbollah and Hamas' kidnappings of Israeli soldiers, Israel's invasion of Lebanon and Iran's nuclear missile program are all recent examples of this trend. For Taiwan to regain international attention, and in turn political recognition, one may argue that the island nation might engage in this new form of brinksmanship.

On 25 October 1971, the ROC was in effect expelled from the United Nations as the PRC replaced Taiwan at the international governing body. Keen on improving relations with China, the Reagan administration no longer supported the ROC with the fervor it had in earlier attempts at its removal from the UN, and formally severs its diplomatic relations with Taiwan in 1979. A coalition of nations sympathetic to the mainland government in Beijing forced the ROC, a founding member of the organization and a permanent member on the Security Council, out of the UN. This event ushered in the start of Taiwan's struggle for international recognition. Today, that effort continues with renewed zeal as Taiwan's most powerful ally, the United States, shifts its priorities in East Asia. With China recognized as the next major economic superpower, the US and Europe are eagerly investing political and economic capital in the country. Despite its vast human rights abuses, China has been granted a seat on the UN Human Rights Council and has gained increasing power on the international stage. Taiwan fears that the growing US and European interest in China will lead to less support for its protection and autonomy.

Theory

In order to draw the spotlight on Taiwan, the ROC might engage in a provocative show of strength that forces the international community to recognize it as a legitimate state and not a territory of the People's Republic of China. The pursuit of nuclear weapons is



arguably the most efficient way to achieve this goal. By initiating a nuclear weapons program, the ROC will instigate an international crisis leading to calls for cessation of the program. Taiwan's sophisticated science and technology sector would make for the rapid development of a nuclear program. Taiwan has engaged in nuclear weapons development before; the first program is suspected to have taken place following the 1964 Chinese nuclear missile tests. Throughout the late 60s and into the 70s, Taiwan pursued its nuclear program, obtaining a research reactor from Canada and necessary nuclear materials from the United States. (Epstein 1977; Kapur 1977) Ironically, the US was one of the main forces involved in forcing the ROC to halt its weapons development. (Albright & Gay: 1998)

While the Taiwanese failed to complete a warhead, they gained key knowledge in the sector, thus greatly reducing the time and effort needed to create nuclear weapons in the future. However, a country need not produce a functional nuclear warhead in order to draw international attention. By merely launching a nuclear development program—for research or hostile purposes—Taiwan would force the international community to secure promises from the ROC to halt such an initiative. Taiwan can then point to its history of signing the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. 188 states currently adhere to the treaty, including the five nuclear-weapon states—the United States, Russia, China, the United Kingdom and France. As a founding member of the UN, the ROC was held accountable to NPT conditions and was recognized by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)—the UN's nuclear regulatory body. After 1971, however, the ROC's expulsion also annulled its NPT signatory status and required the IAEA to no longer recognize their membership. China did not accede to the NPT until 9 March 1992. In practical terms, however, Taiwan is considered as part of China, which, in turn, is bound by the treaty's obligations.

Prior to 1971, Taiwan became a signatory to a number of key international treaties, including the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (NTBT) in 1963. In 1972, the ROC signed the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC) before the treaty entered into force. However, its signature to this treaty was not officially recognized, as the ROC was no longer considered a sovereign state. Taiwan's status also prevented it from signing the Chemical Weapons Convention (1997) and from joining such non-proliferation organizations as the Australia Group. The Taiwanese government has nonetheless declared that it will abide by the BTWC, Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), NPT, NTBT and the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR). In light of Taiwan's non-state status, all such declarations bear little significance.

Were Taiwan to engage in a nuclear development program and come under pressure to halt it, the island nation could offer to resign these treaties, giving up its nuclear program. In order to sign such a treaty, a nation must be considered an autonomous state. Where



Iran has been offered economic packages and uranium refining by foreign countries, Taiwan would only demand political recognition.

Benefits

Taiwan stands much to gain from such a bargain, fulfilling one of its main political goals of the past few decades—political recognition as an independent nation-state. Should the international community not offer sufficient recognition, Taiwan may develop nuclear weapons even before international sanctions would be applied. A nuclear weapons arsenal would provide a number of positive factors for Taiwan. First, the ROC would have secured nuclear deterrence to invasion from the mainland. The justification for Taiwan's first nuclear weapons program was to defend itself in the case of a quick, massive attack from China before US troops could deploy to Taiwan. With US priorities in the region now quickly shifting to China, the ROC has reason to believe that the US government would not come to its defense in the case of a PRC invasion.

Beyond political and tactical benefits, social benefits could also arise from a nuclear weapons program. In an article hypothesizing why nations build nuclear weapons, Scott Sagan suggests, "From this sociological perspective, military organizations and their weapons can therefore be envisioned as serving functions similar to those of flags, airlines, and Olympic teams: they are part of what modern states believe they have to possess to be legitimate, modern states." Taiwan certainly considers itself a legitimate modern state and other nations, especially China, do not. The international community would recognize the legitimacy of a nuclear Taiwan far sooner than one without these weapons.

Negative Consequences

Such brinksmanship also bears a number of potentially hazardous consequences. The first and most damaging result would be direct hostilities with China. The PRC has the military capability and will to destroy Taiwan in a very short time period. The mainland's nuclear arsenal and traditional army are competent enough to invade Taiwan, despite its US supplied weapons. The international backlash against the PRC would certainly be damaging, but China is aware of its status in the global economy and understands that economic sanctions will damage foreign nations as much, if not more, than itself.

A nuclear Taiwan also poses great threats to stability in Asia, where "proliferation pressures are already building more quickly than anywhere else in the world." (Cirincione 2000: 123) North Korea has tested weapons and continues to threaten that it will further develop its nuclear and missile programs while South Korea is seeking to obtain its own weapons to counter Pyongyang's threats; Pakistan and India continue hostilities while slowly building up their nuclear arsenals; Russia has extensive nuclear deployments in East Asia; and China has revamped its nuclear capabilities as tensions developed between the mainland with Taiwan and the United States. "If a nuclear



breakout takes place in Asia, then the international arms control agreements that have been painstakingly negotiated over the past 40 years will crumble,” highlights Cirincione. “Like neutrons firing from a split atom, one’s actions can trigger reactions throughout the region, which in turn, stimulate additional actions.” (Cirincione 2000: 123) Illustrating this last point, a Chinese ballistic missile designer asserted, “If North Korea acquires nuclear weapons, it will influence Japan and Taiwan to go nuclear.” (In Garrett & Glaser 1995: 51)

The third backlash to Taiwanese nuclear development could come from its many foreign investors. The US especially would likely halt all defensive weapon sales to the island as well as sever many economic ties. Economic sanctions against the ROC from the broader international community could be devastating. As the seventh largest US trading partner, Taiwan’s economy would suffer dramatically without American support.

The international fallout of such a move could also be damaging. Comparisons to nations like Iraq and North Korea and even terrorist groups like Hamas and Hezbollah would be abundant. With a downtrodden reputation, Taiwan would suffer ostracism on all fronts political, economic and social.

Weighing the Options

Engaging in “Bubble Tea Diplomacy” is a risky proposition. The Taiwanese would have to thoroughly weigh their priorities before applying such a tactic. Is international recognition worth risking being labeled as a rogue nation, an economic, or worst of all, an invasion from China? While international recognition is not a tangible interest, a number of related tangible benefits may transpire. Access to international resources would be greatly increased. Taiwan currently has limited such access, as demonstrated in the recent SARS outbreak, where Taiwan was unable to receive assistance from the World Health Organization (WHO). Taiwan cannot collaborate with a number of international governmental organizations, including the UN and the World Trade Organization (WTO). Finally, Taiwan cannot maintain recognized embassies in a number of countries and enjoys diplomatic relations with no more than 25 countries. Taiwan’s foreign representatives also bear less influence and fewer rights than an official ambassador. Balancing these benefits with the possible consequences is perhaps the most difficult and important step Taiwan must consider before implementing such a provocative strategy.

Why Bubble Tea?

Bubble tea is a Taiwanese drink made from a mixture of sweetened tea, flavored milk or sugar powder and tapioca pearls. This blend is shaken to provide a homogenous mixture with the pearls at the bottom of the recipient. Taiwan’s place in the international community has long remained unshaken. Bubble Tea Diplomacy is a metaphor to “shake” the status quo in order for Taiwan to top the international agenda.



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