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**Taiwan In International Organizations:
Internationalization of the Taiwan-China
Relationship**

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Taiwan In International Organizations: Internationalization of the Taiwan-China Relationship

Since it was replaced in the United Nations by the People's Republic of China 30 years ago, the Republic of China's formal presence in international organizations has been greatly restricted, but not completely eliminated. Taiwan maintains membership in several important international organizations, including the International Olympic Committee, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, Asian Development Bank, Governmental Advisory Committee of the Internet Cooperation for Assigned Names and Numbers, and, most recently, World Trade Organization (WTO). Yet, Taiwan desires greater participation on the international stage, especially within the United Nations and the World Health Organization (WHO), and its efforts to promote them are generally met with strong resistance from China. The territory's seventh attempt to join WHO failed in 2003, and its eleventh attempt to join the United Nations seems doomed to failure. Why does Taiwan persist year after year in what seem to be fruitless endeavors? What does Taiwan hope to gain by these attempts to participate in international organizations? What is the cost of these efforts, and how are they impacting the United States?

Strategy

A fundamental change in attitude about its participation in international organizations has occurred in Taiwan over the last couple of decades. Even after losing its place in the United Nations, for many years the authorities on Taiwan continued to insist the Republic of China was the legitimate government of China and eventually would be reinstated to its rightful place on the international stage. Basically, the leaders in Taiwan were in agreement with those in China that there was only one China. The major question was which government was the legitimate one. However, over time Taiwan's assertion of its right to govern China succumbed to the reality that the People's Republic of China was in control of virtually all of China's territory, except for Taiwan and a few other islands.

About a decade ago, a more pragmatic approach toward international relations began to take shape under the direction of the Kuomintang. The Republic of China (ROC) began seeking to expand its presence on the international stage by emphasizing that the territory under the ROC government's control—Taiwan and surrounding islands—and the people within that territory deserved to participate in international forums. Today, under the leadership of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), that pragmatic approach continues and is evolving as the territory endeavors to find a place for itself that stresses the rights and obligations of Taiwan's people and its democratic society. In the view of the DPP, this new approach highlights the unique position of Taiwan as a territory—as a sovereign nation—that has never been governed by the government of the People's Republic of China; therefore, the people of Taiwan currently go un-represented in many important international forums.

In November 1999, the DPP published its “White Paper on Foreign Policy for the 21st Century” that seems to offer a fairly clear guide to the strategy the current government is pursuing with regard to participation in international organizations. In this paper, the DPP highlighted what it called a “new internationalism” that seeks to establish a creative, flexible vision of international relations to help create a new role for the territory and to help it break out of the diplomatic stagnation the DPP claims is the legacy of the KMT.¹ This requires an expansion of “independent and autonomous diplomatic space to form more extensive and more reliable international cooperation.”² The resulting new internationalism will focus on non-traditional diplomacy that recognizes Taiwan’s national identity and shifts away from the use of money diplomacy, as seemed to be common for so long before.

Taiwan is unfairly excluded from many international organizations. But as an important member in the international community, Taiwan should commit itself, as a sovereign nation, to abide by the U.N. Charter and various international conventions, and to exercise its proper rights and obligations by contributing to world peace and development. Taiwan is a small nation, and Taiwan cannot afford to draw on isolationist, self-centered conservative thinking. Nor should Taiwan be obsessed with the issue of sovereignty and thus passively subject itself to the rules of the game played by the great powers. Rather, simply because Taiwan has very limited recourses to count on, it should explore various channels to intensively open battlefields outside of the international mainstream establishment. The principle of “new-internationalism” actually consists of pragmatic strategies such as the extensive participation in international activities, and the focus on establishing sustainable, long-term friendships.³

The DPP seems to be saying Taiwan will act as a responsible member of the international community and will abide by international conventions, even without membership in certain organizations, so as to demonstrate to the world it is worthy of membership. The DPP asserts “Taiwan’s new role will be one of the ‘loyal supporter of the world order’ who respects the world’s mainstream values, actively engages in international interactions, and extensively participates in various levels of international affairs, instead of being a ‘trouble maker.’”⁴ It believes moving beyond the boundaries of traditional military and political affairs to emphasize “economy, environmental protection, human rights, and trade” will help mitigate politically sensitive topics, especially “debates of sovereignty.”⁵ (The inherent contradiction of espousing debates of sovereignty while emphasizing it is a sovereign nation should be noted.) This also means Taiwan must attempt to develop long-term relationships with other organizations that share its values and do not focus exclusively on statehood or sovereignty issues. To that end, Taiwan is also seeking closer contacts with groupings such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) by building on its strong bilateral relations with most ASEAN members and its collective contacts in APEC and other forums. Taiwan’s eventual goal is to become an ASEAN dialogue partner and a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum political dialogue.

The DPP recognizes China does not want the relationship with Taiwan to be internationalized, but that is exactly what the current strategy seems to be pursuing. In seeking to “improve” relations with China,

¹ *White Paper on Foreign Policy for the 21st Century*, Democratic Progressive Party, November 28, 1999. Accessed on the Internet, August 29, 2002, www.taiwandocuments.org/dpp02.htm.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

the DPP calls for the replacement of “the ambiguous tone of ‘balancing cross-strait relationships and diplomatic practices,’ with ‘active participation in regional organizations’...so the ‘China factor’ can be subsumed under a larger framework.”⁶ In fact, Taiwan hopes these international organizations will be able to facilitate dialogue on trade, economics and a broad range of other issues that will assist reconciliation between Taiwan and China. Taiwan hopes not only that its responsible interactions in international forums will win friends that will accept Taiwan’s right to participate on the international stage, but also that these friends will feel the resolution of issues between Taiwan and China is not a strictly internal affair, but is the business of the international community. The thinking may be if the relationship is internationalized, China would be less likely to use force to resolve the issue. While joining the United Nations and WHO are important means for achieving this goal, Taiwan should also attempt to join and participate in the many international non-governmental organizations as a means of counteracting “China’s attempt to turn the cross-strait problem into one of China’s internal affairs.”⁷ Participation in these NGOs will enhance Taiwan’s position and influence on the international stage, and, it hopes, will provide leverage in its relationship with China.

As mentioned above, the DPP argues that Taiwan is not now nor ever has been a local government or province subject to the People’s Republic of China. The territory maintains its own national defense and conducts its own foreign policy. Its democratically elected government represents the 23 million people living in Taiwan, and no other government can claim to represent them. By virtue of this actual state of affairs, Taiwan deserves to participate in international organizations. The Taiwan authorities believe membership in the Olympics, WTO, APEC, etc., has already provided important platforms that have enhanced Taiwan’s international participation, and they should be leveraged to facilitate entry into additional international organizations, particularly the United Nations and World Health Organization, by strengthening bilateral relationships with members of those organizations in which Taiwan already has membership, and by emphasizing economic rather than political issues.

United Nations

By following this strategy, Taiwan hopes to attain what would be its crowning achievement, joining the United Nations. Recent efforts to join the United Nations have focused on the fact that the territory is basically the only “country” excluded from membership (the state of the Vatican maintains observer status). East Timor and Switzerland were inducted into the United Nations in 2002, leaving only the 23 million people of Taiwan without U.N. representation. According to Taiwan and its supporters from the 26 countries with which it maintains diplomatic relations, this violates the human rights of its citizens. Taiwan also emphasizes that the territory is capable of making significant contributions to many U.N. efforts around the world, but is often prevented from doing so because it cannot participate in U.N. forums.

Taiwan seems to place considerable hope for eventual success of its efforts on its interpretation of resolution 2758, which was adopted by the U.N. General Assembly in 1971 to seat the People’s Republic of China in the United Nations. Taiwan now avers resolution 2758 addressed only the issue of the representation of the People’s Republic of China in the United Nations and related organizations and did not determine that Taiwan is a part of the People’s Republic of China, nor did it grant the

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

People's Republic of China the right to represent Taiwan or its people in the United Nations. This interpretation places substantial weight on what was not said. This may serve to influence some U.N. members, but the fact of the matter is that membership in the United Nations is reserved for nation states, and few countries in the international community are ready to contradict China's assertion of the One-China Policy and regard Taiwan as an independent nation. Even so, since U.N. membership would signal full acceptance by the international community, Taiwan will continue to pursue all possible avenues, including establishing "good relations with a wide variety of members of the international community and not rely solely on the current number of formal diplomatic partners to accomplish the task."⁸

World Health Organization

Taiwan's efforts to join the United Nations continue to be met with international resistance. By contrast, Taiwan's efforts that began in 1997 to gain observer status at the World Health Assembly have made slight headway, with the United States, Japan and the European Union offering some level of support for the territory's position. Despite China's success at again thwarting Taiwan's attempts to join WHO in 2003, Taiwan remains hopeful it will eventually succeed. Taiwan's support is not limited only to its traditional diplomatic allies, but, as mentioned, now has spread to Europe and the United States. In recent years, the U.S. and European legislatures have passed bills directing their governments to develop plans to help Taiwan obtain observer status.

Taiwan emphasizes that WHO membership is a humanitarian rather than a political issue, and being prevented from WHO participation negatively impacts the health of the territory's people because Taiwan's health authorities cannot attend WHO-sponsored meetings to discuss new approaches to disease control, diagnosis and monitoring. Taiwan emphasizes that its democratically elected government, and no other government, exerts full authority over its own public health system, meaning the people of Taiwan are left without adequate interaction on global health issues. Taiwan now argues it should be treated as a health entity, not a sovereign state, for the purposes of participation in WHO. As evidence political issues could be successfully put aside, authorities point to Taiwan's membership as a customs territory in WTO, as a fishing entity in several international fishing organizations, as an economy in APEC, and as a sports organization in the International Olympic Committee.

Probably the primary reason for Taiwan's relative success in drumming up support for its position is that, in the past, some non-state observers have been allowed to participate in WHO activities, including the Palestinian Liberation Organization, Knights of Malta, and the Vatican. Therefore, Taiwan can be expected to continue pressing its case each year at the World Health Assembly, with the likelihood of success growing each year.

The outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in Taiwan in March 2003 has lent further credence to Taiwan's push for participation in WHO. The U.S. government and others have argued that the epidemic demonstrates the need for Taiwan's inclusion in the U.N. body in order to facilitate the timely dissemination of vital health information; however, China continues to insist that Taiwan, as part of its sovereign territory, does not have the right to participate. In fact, WHO officials were delayed by seven weeks from providing Taiwan with assistance on SARS because of objections from China.

⁸ Ibid.

PRC Stance

China views most of Taiwan's efforts to join international organizations as betrayals of its One-China Principle, as attempts to separate Taiwan from China by creating two Chinas, or one China and one Taiwan. For its part, China continues to assert that the Taiwan issue is strictly an internal affair and opposes any efforts to internationalize it. China maintains Taiwan is ineligible for membership in many international organizations, in particular the United Nations, because it is not a sovereign state but rather a province of China.

In its February 2000 "White Paper—The One-China Principle and the Taiwan Issue" (and consistently through numerous other media) China reiterated that when founded in 1949, the People's Republic of China became "the only legal government of the whole of China and its sole legal representative in the international arena, thereby bringing the historical status of the Republic of China to an end" despite the continued use of the name Republic of China by the authorities on Taiwan.⁹ China does not waver in its conviction that the Taiwan issue is a matter of China's internal affairs and China is fully within its rights to use force if Taiwan attempts to declare independence or if foreign forces attempt to interfere in the territory's reunification with China. Even though that reunification has yet to happen, "the long-term existence of this abnormal situation has not imbued Taiwan with a status and rights in international law, nor can it change the legal status of Taiwan as a part of China."¹⁰

The United Nations is an organization composed of sovereign states, therefore, "Taiwan is ineligible for membership of the United Nations and other international organizations whose membership is confined to sovereign states."¹¹ From China's perspective, U.N. resolution 2758 clearly recognized the PRC's rights and authority in the organization, including its representation of all Chinese people whether on the mainland or in Taiwan. In response to Taiwan's assertion that the resolution does not address the issue of Taiwan's representation, China declares it "will never permit such a separatist act of creating 'two Chinas' or 'one China, one Taiwan'" and advises U.N. members they "should never allow Taiwan to join the United Nations or other international organizations whose membership is confined to sovereign states."¹²

China insists it has been flexible in allowing Taiwan to participate in those international economic, trade and cultural organizations for which sovereign statehood is not a requirement, and this demonstrates "that adhering to the One-China Principle has neither prevented Taiwan compatriots from engaging in non-governmental international exchanges nor affected the needs of Taiwan's normal economic, trade and cultural activities."¹³ However, there is no need for Taiwan to join organizations such as the WHO because Taiwan already has more than enough access to health and sanitary information from existing international interactions.

Taiwan had hoped its membership in the WTO would facilitate dialogue on economic and trade issues

⁹ *White Paper—The One-China Principle and the Taiwan Issue*, The Taiwan Affairs Office and the Information Office of the State Council, February 21, 2000. Accessed on the Internet, August 29, 2002, www.china-embassy.org/eng/7128.html.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

between itself and China, but China has thwarted those attempts, probably to prevent the possibility that this would internationalize their relationship. While both China and Taiwan are WTO signatories and normally would be able to resort to the forum for consultations on areas of disagreement or even on strategies for collaborating, China has refused discussions on all other issues until Taiwan agrees to the One-China Principle. For instance, both China and Taiwan had common interests with regard to the U.S.-imposed steel tariffs, but China refused consultations with Taiwan. Ultimately, this position is more likely to play in Taiwan's favor rather than China's because Taiwan will be perceived as playing by WTO rules and China will be perceived as not playing by the rules by which it agreed to abide.

U.S. Perspective

The U.S. government has been supportive for some time of Taiwan's participation in certain international organizations. The 1994 Taiwan Policy Review directed the United States to support Taiwan's participation in "appropriate international organizations," particularly WHO, yet no other specific entities are mentioned.¹⁴ In recent years, the United States has become even more amenable to Taiwan's participation in WHO and, as already mentioned, the Bush Administration has previously signed bills directing the U.S. government to devise a plan to help Taiwan obtain observer status in the organization. The United States was also supportive of Taiwan's efforts to join WTO. The U.S. government does not believe such support for Taiwan's participation in these international organizations is inconsistent with the one China policy; nevertheless, the United States has not deemed support of Taiwan's bid for U.N. membership appropriate.

International precedents for participation of non-state entities in certain organizations, such as WHO, could result in Taiwan gaining admittance at some level to a wider array of international organizations without a serious increase in tensions across the Taiwan Strait or a real deterioration in U.S.-China relations resulting from U.S. support for such participation. China has accepted such conditions in the past. The challenge for the United States will arise if China perceives such moves as real efforts at Taiwanese independence or a reversal of the One-China policy. China will not docilely accept the internationalization of the Taiwan issue and will certainly look askance at any U.S. efforts viewed as seriously supporting such steps. At this stage, the United States has no desire and sees no need to support internationalization of the Taiwan-China relationship, maintaining the position that the issue should be resolved by peaceful negotiations between Taiwan and China.

Conclusion

Taiwan's desire for greater participation and acceptance in the international arena can be appreciated; however, it is obvious from many perspectives that the two sides are still far apart in their visions for Taiwan's future. While it is safe to say neither side wants violence, it is equally safe to say neither side is yet willing to compromise significantly on its position. China's continuation in asserting its One-China Principle is the bedrock for the future, and Taiwan increasingly seems to be pursuing a path in opposition to that position. Not only is Taiwan attempting to gain access to the international arena, it seems to wish to internationalize its relationship with China as a buffer against the use of force. The question is: will this truly be a buffer or will it provoke a resort to force? Taiwan asserts, even without

¹⁴ *Concerning the Participation of Taiwan in the World Health Organization (WHO)*, 1994 Taiwan Policy Review, U.S. Public Law 106-137. Accessed on the Internet, August 29, 2002, www.taiwandocuments.org/pl106-137.htm

membership in all international organizations, it will play the role of sovereign state, abiding by international conventions, contributing to international peace, stability and development, and not being a troublemaker. However, by these very efforts it actually may be playing the role of troublemaker.

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