

Sin-ming Shaw

Let's Get Real, Folks

Beijing, Taipei and Washington need to calm down and quit posturing

LAST WEEK, COMMUNIST CHINA ISSUED A BLUNT WARNING to Taiwan on the eve of the island's presidential election: speed up the process of reunification, or risk an invasion. These are fighting words. If they are meant to influence how voters cast their ballots, then Beijing still does not understand present-day Taiwan. One need only engage a random selection of Taiwanese to appreciate how well-informed they are as voters and how seriously they take their right to vote. They keep their own counsel. Beijing would be unwise to think that a friendly population awaits its invasion, or that the world would stand idly by if war were to occur.

Nevertheless, Beijing's ire is understandable on at least two grounds. First, it has long maintained that Taiwan is a province of China and that the Taipei government is not legitimate. Taiwan is unlikely to concede these points. Second, American presidents from Richard Nixon onward have signaled to Beijing's leaders that the United States seeks a "strategic partnership" with China. Yet much of the U.S. Congress is generally unwilling to accept a geopolitical rationale that places China's easily hurt feelings above the interests of Taiwan.

Will Taiwan turn into a Chinese Chechnya? No, but the situation requires a new mindset in Beijing, Taipei and Washington. China's leaders must know that its insistence on sovereignty does not buy love and affection. People in Taiwan do not trust the communist regime, and they do not want to risk being treated like their compatriots on the mainland. Individual rights and dignity are a fact of life in Taiwan; they remain an elusive goal in China. Beijing should know it looks ridiculous when it accuses Taiwan of being "unreasonable and undemocratic" for "forcing the more than 1.2 billion people in China to practice the political and economic systems in Taiwan," as it asserted in last week's policy statement. If given the option, the Chinese public would choose precisely that.

Beijing should take pride in the village elections it has encouraged throughout the country, which are less and less manipulated by the Communist Party. The tentative foundations of an open society are slowly

taking shape in rural China. Given time, they could spread to the cities. In the economic arena, large numbers of Chinese, including the privileged children of top Beijing leaders, are world-class capitalists. Their drive and expertise are second to none in forming start-ups in Silicon Valley, floating shares in New York, manipulating share prices in Hong Kong, opening numbered accounts in Switzerland and much more. They are no different from Taiwan's go-getters. In short, the initial signs of a convergence of the two societies are coming into view.

Beijing is miffed because it feels Taiwan is setting the parameters for reunification, a prerogative it reserves for itself. But if China becomes more like Taiwan, reunification will come faster than anyone expects. History moves at its own pace. Twice, Mao tried to speed things up by launching, first, the Great Leap Forward and, subsequently, the Cultural Revolution. Students tried to midwife instant democracy in 1989. The results were unmitigated disasters. Deng Xiaoping let Chinese peasants do what they wished, and they created one of world's most spectacular economic booms. Nobody, not even Deng, predicted that.

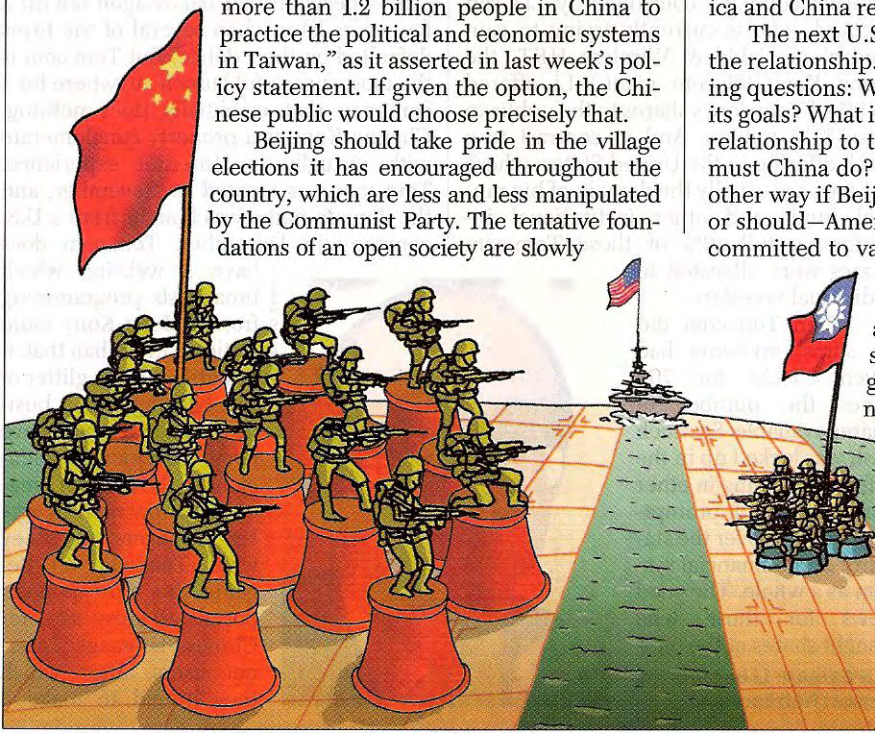
The best assurance Beijing can give Taiwan is to deliver and protect, in deed and not merely word, all the rights the constitution promises to every Chinese citizen. The party must also abandon its political monopoly and compete, like Taiwan's ruling Kuomintang, for the mandate to govern.

Washington shares a significant portion of the blame for Beijing's belligerent self-righteousness. It has consistently misled Beijing into believing the U.S. seeks a strategic partnership with China. A partnership entails closeness, equality, reciprocity and agreement on a common goal. Do America and China really share such a relationship?

The next U.S. president has the opportunity to redefine the relationship. To do so, he should ask himself the following questions: What is a strategic partnership, and what are its goals? What is Washington willing to do to maintain that relationship to the satisfaction of China? Conversely, what must China do? Specifically, is America willing to look the other way if Beijing decides to take Taiwan by force? Can—or should—America form a partnership with a government committed to values and behavior that are often offensive

to voters in the Land of the Free? Unless the answers can be clearly spelled out and accepted by Congress, the White House should drop meaningless terms like strategic partnership. They serve only to confuse, not clarify, foreign relations.

Taipei, for its part, must learn to live with the reality that independence is unlikely. The government should avoid provoking an excitable, if slightly neurotic, Beijing leadership that sees danger and conspiracy at every turn. Nor should Taiwan try to maneuver America into harm's way, in the Taiwan Strait. War is not inevitable. Relax. ■



Sin-ming Shaw

Let's Get Real, Folks

Beijing, Taipei and Washington need to calm down and quit posturing

LAST WEEK, COMMUNIST CHINA ISSUED A BLUNT WARNING to Taiwan on the eve of the island's presidential election: speed up the process of reunification, or risk an invasion. These are fighting words. If they are meant to influence how voters cast their ballots, then Beijing still does not understand present-day Taiwan. One need only engage a random selection of Taiwanese to appreciate how well-informed they are as voters and how seriously they take their right to vote. They keep their own counsel. Beijing would be unwise to think that a friendly population awaits its invasion, or that the world would stand idly by if war were to occur.

Nevertheless, Beijing's ire is understandable on at least two grounds. First, it has long maintained that Taiwan is a province of China and that the Taipei government is not legitimate. Taiwan is unlikely to concede these points. Second, American presidents from Richard Nixon onward have signaled to Beijing's leaders that the United States seeks a "strategic partnership" with China. Yet much of the U.S. Congress is generally unwilling to accept a geopolitical rationale that places China's easily hurt feelings above the interests of Taiwan.

Will Taiwan turn into a Chinese Chechnya? No, but the situation requires a new mindset in Beijing, Taipei and Washington. China's leaders must know that its insistence on sovereignty does not buy love and affection. People in Taiwan do not trust the communist regime, and they do not want to risk being treated like their compatriots on the mainland. Individual rights and dignity are a fact of life in Taiwan; they remain an elusive goal in China. Beijing should know it looks ridiculous when it accuses Taiwan of being "unreasonable and undemocratic" for "forcing the more than 1.2 billion people in China to practice the political and economic systems in Taiwan," as it asserted in last week's policy statement. If given the option, the Chinese public would choose precisely that.

Beijing should take pride in the village elections it has encouraged throughout the country, which are less and less manipulated by the Communist Party. The tentative foundations of an open society are slowly

taking shape in rural China. Given time, they could spread to the cities. In the economic arena, large numbers of Chinese, including the privileged children of top Beijing leaders, are world-class capitalists. Their drive and expertise are second to none in forming start-ups in Silicon Valley, floating shares in New York, manipulating share prices in Hong Kong, opening numbered accounts in Switzerland and much more. They are no different from Taiwan's go-getters. In short, the initial signs of a convergence of the two societies are coming into view.

Beijing is miffed because it feels Taiwan is setting the parameters for reunification, a prerogative it reserves for itself. But if China becomes more like Taiwan, reunification will come faster than anyone expects. History moves at its own pace. Twice, Mao tried to speed things up by launching, first, the Great Leap Forward and, subsequently, the Cultural Revolution. Students tried to midwife instant democracy in 1989. The results were unmitigated disasters. Deng Xiaoping let Chinese peasants do what they wished, and they created one of world's most spectacular economic booms. Nobody, not even Deng, predicted that.

The best assurance Beijing can give Taiwan is to deliver and protect, in deed and not merely word, all the rights the constitution promises to every Chinese citizen. The party must also abandon its political monopoly and compete, like Taiwan's ruling Kuomintang, for the mandate to govern.

Washington shares a significant portion of the blame for Beijing's belligerent self-righteousness. It has consistently misled Beijing into believing the U.S. seeks a strategic partnership with China. A partnership entails closeness, equality, reciprocity and agreement on a common goal. Do America and China really share such a relationship?

The next U.S. president has the opportunity to redefine the relationship. To do so, he should ask himself the following questions: What is a strategic partnership, and what are its goals? What is Washington willing to do to maintain that relationship to the satisfaction of China? Conversely, what must China do? Specifically, is America willing to look the other way if Beijing decides to take Taiwan by force? Can—or should—America form a partnership with a government committed to values and behavior that are often offensive to voters in the Land of the Free? Unless the answers can be clearly spelled out and accepted by Congress, the White House should drop meaningless terms like strategic partnership. They serve only to confuse, not clarify, foreign relations.

Taipei, for its part, must learn to live with the reality that independence is unlikely. The government should avoid provoking an excitable, if slightly neurotic, Beijing leadership that sees danger and conspiracy at every turn. Nor should Taiwan try to maneuver America into harm's way, in the Taiwan Strait. War is not inevitable. Relax. ■

