



WAR AND PEACE

Sin-ming Shaw

ON A RECENT visit to Taiwan, it was clear to me that people now feel less inclined than ever before to accept a speedy reunification with the mainland. The entire population was antagonized and galvanized by the missile tests staged by China off Taiwan's coast in March last year, on the eve of the island's first direct presidential election. The message was clear: China would use force if necessary to prevent Taiwan from breaking away.

Since then, calm has reigned. Yet Taiwan remains arguably the most inflammable security issue in Asia. No wonder the missile affair lingers on the mind of every Taiwanese I talked to. If China's intention was to intimidate Taiwan's voters to turn away from President Lee Teng-hui toward pro-reunification candidates, then the show of military force was an utter failure. However, the tests were successful on two counts. They convinced Taiwan that China has a world-class arsenal of missiles, and reminded the ruling KMT and the pro-independence opposition Democratic Progressive Party that, if Taiwan is to avoid confrontation, there are limits on how far it can go. (The DPP itself now steers clear of openly promoting a split, and declares itself satisfied with the de facto independence of Taiwan.)

The missile tests also exposed the international nature of the conflict. Contrary to China's insistence that the Taiwan issue is entirely internal, the reality is different. The U.S., indeed, the rest of the world, does not recognize China's right to close the Taiwan Strait, even if Beijing's claim to Taiwan is recognized.

A Western analyst in Taiwan pointed out that U.S. vital interests would be affected if a maritime blockade or war disrupted the flow of strategic goods from Taiwan's semiconductor-manufacturing sector, now essentially fully integrated with U.S. high-tech industries. Japan's security would also be affected because the Taiwan Strait is the vital sea passage for most of its energy needs from the Middle East.

If a conflict broke out, what then? China's superiority in rocketry is offset by weaknesses in its air force. Taiwan is upgrading its air defenses with U.S. F16s and French Mirage 2000-5s, considered superior to China's planned fleet of SU-27s, to be built mostly with Russian help. A few dozen SU-27s are already in operation.

True, China's air force has more than 5,000 planes, compared with Taiwan's 500. But experts say air space over the strait, at any given time, can accommodate only a relatively small number of combat planes (about 50 on each side) without overloading ground-to-air-command controls, or getting in the way of each others' firing paths. Taiwan has two key advan-

tages. Its pilots are considered superior because they log more hours of flying time than mainland pilots. It can also count on higher standards of maintenance of military hardware.

What if the mainland were reckless enough to stage a Normandy-type invasion? That would require six invading against one defending soldier. Taiwan has a 400,000-strong army. At a 6-to-1 attack ratio, China would have to field an invasion army of 2.4 million, or 80 percent of its entire forces. Such a buildup of troops along the eastern seaboard of China is inconceivable.

If war broke out, Taiwan would also have a moral advantage: It would be fighting as a free people defending its freedoms against an aggressor army whose soldiers must follow orders to kill fellow Chinese over an abstract issue of territorial integrity.

The question for China would be: Is it worth it? If Beijing were to resort to "terrorism" by using cruise missiles on selected targets, Taiwan could conceivably disintegrate but would not be easily governable. Moreover, Taiwan is a far fat-

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ter "golden goose" than Hong Kong. Its impressive manufacturing and high-tech industries are light years ahead of Hong Kong. These are valuable assets China would want to acquire in a peaceful manner.

Does Taiwan want independence? I think not — provided China continues its economic and social development. Taiwanese hope that one day China will become not merely militarily and economically strong, but also that it will evolve into a country with values, habits and institutions that are close to those with which Taiwanese Chinese have become accustomed. But China must reconcile what it claims to be, a society governed by communist principles, with what it has become, one that is increasingly capitalist.

Once China changes its communist pedigree to build a humane and free society based on private ownership rights, future "wars" across the strait will be relegated to video games played by kids in amusement arcades. Then reunification between Taiwan and China will take place in the most desirable manner imaginable. The military solution would spell disaster for China and for Taiwan, regardless who is in the right or wrong. That should be the lesson from March 1996. ■

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