

Opinion – Taiwan’s Almighty Squeeze

Written by Martin Duffy

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MARTIN DUFFY, OCT 14 2021

Taiwan has emerged as one of the most enlightened democracies in Asia. Today’s Taiwanese enjoy an unrivalled level of public freedoms, untrammelled press, accountable governance, judicial fairness, as well as women’s, disability, LGBTQ and so many other rights which are the envy of its neighbors. All that has been achieved amidst a unique geo-political asymmetry which threatens at any time to engulf the Taiwan strait. Even As Taiwan celebrates “double ten” (the National Day of the Republic of China, marking the 10 October 1911 uprising against the imperial Qing dynasty and establishment of the Republic of China on 1 January 1912) the island’s future is threatened. During the Chinese Civil War, the Chinese government lost control of mainland China to the Chinese Communist Party and retreated to the island of Taiwan in December 1949. That delicate status quo achieved in 1949 is under unprecedented threat.

Taiwan’s emergence as a trusted upholder of democratic principles and international standards of human rights has not been without hiccups along the way. Taiwan’s political “saints” proved no less susceptible to corruption and human frailty, and the *realpolitik* of the cross-strait war often meant diplomatic compromises which threatened even the most earnest of political ideals. Now this island-state, uniquely protected by the Taiwan Relations Act passed by US Congress in 1979, is facing a squeeze in multiple directions. The Act does not guarantee the U.S. will intervene militarily if China attacks or invades Taiwan. However, nor does it relinquish it, as its primary purpose is to ensure that US Taiwan policy will not be changed unilaterally and ensure any decision to defend Taiwan will be made with the consent of Congress. The Act states that “the United States will make available to Taiwan such services... as may be necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability”. However, the decision about the nature and quantity of defense services that America will provide to Taiwan is to be determined by the President and Congress. America’s policy has been called “strategic ambiguity”, and it is designed to dissuade Taiwan from unilateral declaration of independence, and China from unilaterally unifying with Taiwan. Nevertheless, the Act is one of the US’s strongest pledges in defense of another state, and a crucial antidote against an “almighty squeeze” from China.

In recent years, as China has stepped up military pressure against Taiwan, it is legitimate to ask how far China extends the escalation ladder of coercion? China has options, a record of calculated risk under Xi Jinping, deep concerns regarding the future course of US-Taiwan relations, and a lack of realistic soft alternatives to attract Taiwanese leaders given the rejection of “one country, two systems” in Taiwan. This unique combination of factors makes further escalation likely, but not certain. Nevertheless, Taiwan has maneuvering space to maintain the status quo if it receives sufficient support from the US and other international partners.

Since the re-election of Tsai Ing-wen as President of Taiwan in 2020, military pressure has again taken center stage in the Taiwan Strait. China has exerted pressure on Taiwan’s air defense system by conducting circumnavigation flights around the island since Tsai first came to power in 2016. All this makes it imperative that the region be prepared for action from China and that there be renewed communication between Taiwan, Japan and the United States. Taiwan’s renewed communication strategy has offered the island a far greater voice on the world stage to tackle Beijing’s “squeeze”. However, China is also squeezing Taiwan’s international space, including forcing foreign companies to refer to it as being part of China on their websites and executing military drills near the island.

Another part of the squeeze of Taiwan is the ban by China on tourist visits to Taiwan, which came into effect in

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August 2019. China’s Ministry of Culture and Tourism cited current cross-Strait tensions when the ban was announced, and the move preceded national elections in Taiwan. Indeed, it was likely a failed attempt to alter the outcome in China’s favor – more specifically, to secure victory for the opposition Kuomintang (KMT) party.

Predictably the pandemic has also exposed Taiwan’s exclusion from the global health community. While Taiwan, home to nearly 24 million people, has never been ruled by China’s Communist Party, Beijing’s claims over the island have long blocked it from membership from UN agencies like the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). When the WHO issued a world map of the pandemic using color coding to indicate risk, Taiwan was given same level as China, despite Taiwan having a very different (and largely successful) experience with Covid-19.

The Beijing government’s real aim is to force unification via an “anaconda strategy” whereby the victim is squeezed until it cannot resist. During the administration of former Taiwan President Ma Ying-jeou (2008--016), this constriction was achieved through a series of agreements described as economic rather than political and off-set by apparent concessions such as Taiwan observer status at the World Health Assembly, that actually relegated Taiwan below that of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. Slowly, the pace of the anaconda strategy was stepped up, in across the spectrum moves that included diplomatic, economic, and military efforts as well as attempts to destabilize Taiwan society from within.

As seen above, one of the first areas to experience the squeeze was tourism. This was followed by pressure on private foreign businesses. Airlines were ordered to replace their designations of Taipei, Taiwan with Taipei, China, or their landing rights would be cancelled – most complied. In July 2018, the East Asian Olympic Committee rescinded its award to Taichung City to host the East Asian Youth Games due to pressure from China, after the city had already spent tens of millions of dollars in preparations. Only a few weeks before, the Taiwan government had discovered a Chinese project to promote unification in Taoyuan’s public schools. Conversely, there are rewards for foreign citizens and companies who declare fealty to China’s one China policy.

Although President Xi Jinping, while addressing the March 2018 meeting of China’s National People’s Congress, warned that Taiwan would face “the punishment of history” for separatism, kinetic military actions thus far have only been intimidatory. However, China has used cyber means and propaganda to influence Taiwan society in increasingly creative ways. Chinese surrogate parties have also engaged in demonstrations on matters unrelated to China policy with the seeming intent of discrediting any initiative of the Tsai administration.

While the US has exercised limited military muscle to remind China it still has a presence in the Pacific, a 2020 report from the Brookings Institute has shown that Europe can do more to help Taiwan. Indeed, one of Taiwan’s greatest opportunities to strengthen its standing may be in Europe. Germany, a key player in EU policy discussions on China, announced its first-ever Indo-Pacific strategy in early September. The strategy solidifies Germany’s decision to pursue Asia strategy to contend with China, rather than a China-centered strategy. At the very least, the denser the web of Taiwan’s relations with other countries, the higher the risk and cost Beijing will likely confront should it ever decide to use non-peaceful means in pursuit of its goals.

The re-election of Tsai in 2020 with such a resounding vote reflects a steely determination on the part of the Taiwanese to resist the “almighty squeeze” China is seeking to impose on them from across the strait. Reeling from embarrassment about Afghanistan, the Biden administration is unlikely to contemplate any diminution in Congress’s historic support for Taiwan. Therefore, albeit mainly as a result of “strategic ambiguity” Taiwan will continue to have its powerful supporters, and while not able to elude, will confidently shirk off, even China’s latest “almighty squeeze”.

About the author:

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beginning his career in Africa and Asia in the 1980s. He has served with a wide range of international organizations and has frequently been decorated for field service, among them UN (United Nations) Peacekeeping Citations and the Badge of Honour of the International Red Cross Movement. He has also held several academic positions in Ireland, UK, USA and elsewhere. He is a proponent of experiential learning. He holds awards from Dublin, Oxford, Harvard, and several other institutions including the Diploma in International Relations at the University of Cambridge.