

Opinion – Taiwan Could Be to China What Canada Is to the US

Written by Kristian McGuire

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KRISTIAN MCGUIRE, MAR 11 2020

The victories of President Tsai Ing-wen and her independence-leaning Democratic Progressive Party in January's Taiwan elections have once again raised questions about Beijing's Taiwan policy. China's Foreign Ministry has already declared that it intends to stay the course on cross-strait relations. However, were China's leaders to undertake a serious policy review, they might find that there are better ways of approaching the Taiwan question that would not encumber Beijing or threaten Taiwan.

One place that they could look to for lessons and inspiration is the United States' experience transforming from a revolutionary upstart uncertain of its future on the North American continent into a superpower with global influence.

The American Experience

For decades after the American Revolutionary War (1775–1783), many Americans viewed Britain and its remaining North American territories with much the same wariness that the People's Republic of China (PRC) has viewed the US and Taiwan since its founding. As historian Reginald Horsman's research has shown, there was a popular belief among prominent American revolutionaries and early US political figures that their new republic would not be secure until it had absorbed the rest of Britain's North American possessions.

In the midst of the American Revolution, George Washington argued that as long as the British-ruled territory of present-day Canada remained separate from the US it would 'be at least a troublesome if not a dangerous neighbor [...].' Eminent American statesman Benjamin Franklin even included British cessation of its North American territories among his draft list of possible peace terms with Great Britain because, he contended, 'It is absolutely necessary for us to have them for our own security [...].' [1]

The Treaty of Paris, which formally ended the American Revolutionary War, did not dispel these concerns. Many Americans harbored fears of British re-colonization and economic sabotage long after the war. Such suspicions of Britain's intentions, what historian Lawrence Peskin dubbed 'conspiratorial Anglophobia,' were based on British abuses, real and imagined.

During the Napoleonic Wars, Britain interfered with US commerce, seizing American ships and sailors as it attempted to enforce a blockade of France. It also supplied arms to Native American tribes along the American frontier and encouraged them to oppose US territorial expansion. Skeptical Americans saw these actions as evidence that Britain wanted to retake its old colonies or at least keep the US down.

In 1812, things boiled over. The US declared war on Great Britain to defend its 'neutral rights' and avenge British 'insults' against American honor. But some saw the war as an opportunity to finally 'liberate' Canada and rid the US of an old foe lurking just beyond its borders. Months prior to the war declaration, Andrew Jackson, who was then a major general in the Tennessee militia, outlined US motives for waging war. Among them, he listed 'to seek some indemnity for past injuries, some security against future aggressions, by the conquest of all the British dominions upon the continent of north america [sic].'

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Contrary to the hopes of some, like Brigadier General William Hull who led the American Army of the Northwest's invasion of Canada, the Canadian people did not welcome US efforts to 'liberate' them from Great Britain. [2] In the end, the US failed to secure its northern border by conquest and it had to learn to live with a proximate British presence.

Over time, it became easier for the US to coexist with Canada and Great Britain as it grew stronger and the three countries' interests gradually aligned. By 1949, the former enemies were treaty allies with deep cultural, economic and political ties.

The Chinese Experience

In the case of the PRC, its perceptions of Taiwan and the US were forged in the crucible of the Chinese Civil War (1927-1949). Washington's support of the Nationalists during the war convinced early Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders that the US was bent on dominating their country; and they feared that the US would use Nationalist-controlled Taiwan to do so. Similar to Americans' 'conspiratorial Anglophobia', this fear was not without basis.

In November 1950, a representative of the PRC stood before the UN Security Council and laid out a litany of complaints against the US. He charged Washington with establishing a military presence on Taiwan; supplying the Nationalists with arms and advisors; and pursuing a strategy, articulated by US general Douglas MacArthur, of building a chain of islands controlled by the US and its allies—with Taiwan at its center—to, in MacArthur's own words, 'dominate with sea and air power every Asiatic port from Vladivostok to Singapore [...].'

In the decades since that speech, the US has abolished its military alliance with Taiwan, removed its troops from the island and switched its diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing. The PRC, for its part, has gained Taipei's seat as a permanent member of the UN Security Council; and it has built a military so powerful that the RAND Corporation has estimated that PRC forces now maintain approximate parity with or an advantage over US forces in six of nine operational areas related to a conflict over Taiwan, compared with just two in 1996. And yet, Beijing still frames the Taiwan question as a grave security concern.

China so overshadows Taiwan diplomatically and militarily that the primary threat the island now poses to the PRC is no longer external, but internal. The CCP has played up Taiwan's importance ever since the Cairo Declaration of 1943 officially claimed the island for the Nationalist government. It has portrayed Taiwan's separation from the mainland as one of the most egregious offenses committed by foreign powers during China's so-called Century of Humiliation. And President Xi Jinping has further invested Taiwan with symbolic import by making its unification with the mainland a key element of his Chinese Dream. Xi himself has reportedly expressed fears that the CCP could be overthrown by the Chinese people if it mishandles a Taiwanese push towards independence.

China's leaders now find themselves riding the tiger of their own revanchist claims with no apparent idea how to steer Taiwan towards unification. If Beijing were willing to learn from the US example and adjust its Taiwan policy, it could better manage mainlanders' expectations for the future of cross-strait relations and pave the way if not to unification at least to a relationship with Taiwan comparable to the US relationship with Canada.

This would not require Beijing to renounce its claim to Taiwan or even renounce its right to use force should Taiwan move towards *de jure* independence. But it would require that Beijing cease sending its military aircraft across the median line of the Taiwan Strait, cease peeling off Taipei's few remaining diplomatic allies, and shift the focus of its Taiwan narrative from the all-consuming goal of unification to improving the lives of people on both sides of the Strait.

The PRC's recent measures to deepen economic and cultural ties across the Strait have been steps in the right direction. But in the context of persistent military intimidation, diplomatic bullying and a narrative that treats Taiwan as a prize to be seized, they have done little to win hearts and minds on the opposite side of the Strait. Beijing has done a lot to strengthen cross-strait relations over the past 40 years, but its achievements have and will continue to be underappreciated so long as it holds unification in higher regard than the goodwill and well-being of the Taiwanese people.

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[1] See Horseman p. 7

[2] See Horseman p. 1, p. 9 & p. 15

About the author:

Kristian McGuire is an independent, Washington-based research analyst and associate editor of Taiwan Security Research. His main research interests include US–Taiwan relations, cross-strait relations, and East Asian regional security. His work has appeared in The Diplomat, South China Morning Post, Newsweek, The Interpreter, and TSR Weekly Report. You can follow him on Twitter at @KrisAMcGuire.