Sovereignty, Democracy and Identity: 
Domestic Debates Over the Definition of the Nation in Taiwan

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The legitimacy of Taiwanese sovereignty has been exposed to various interpretations over the past 60 years, oscillating between the Chinese heritage and the affirmation of a specific identity. The democratization of the former Chiang Kai-shek regime since the late 1980s has amplified the divergences between these two opposite postures, generating a domestic political debate that opposes the two biggest political parties and divides the Taiwanese population. Although different, these definitions of a Taiwanese identity and sovereignty have in common a constant reference to the Mainland and the current political regime of Communist China. They also play a key role in determining the strategic relationship with the United States and the affirmation of a defense policy vis-à-vis Beijing. This article explores the evolution of Taiwanese nationalism and its constant link with both Mainland China and the democratization of the regime, and analyzes the differences between the nationalist and the pro-independence postures and examines their consequences for the sovereignty of Taiwan and the definition of the nation.

Keywords: Taiwan, Sovereignty, Identity, Democracy, Nation, China.

Introduction

Since its separation from Mainland China at the end of the Chinese civil war in 1949 and the retreat of the nationalist government, Taiwan is the only territory in East Asia not officially recognized as such, while it is still considered a “rebel province” in Beijing. Taiwan, or the Republic of China—its official name—advocates both the same cultural heritage as Mainland China1 and some insular particularities, while pursuing a process of democratization that has been continuous over the past three decades,2 following the democratic reforms initiated under Chiang Ching-kuo’s presidency3 and significantly improved upon by his successors. The Republic of China is now undoubtedly and unanimously praised as a respectable democracy. Besides this spectacular improvement, and while the rivalry between the “two Chinas” has seen alternating periods of tensions and dialogue for over 60 years, Taiwan has continued to question its national identity at the cost of intense political and societal domestic debates and divergences on an issue legitimately particularly sensitive in the island.4

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The security issue in the Strait is still regarded by many observers, notably in the United States, as particularly critical. Alongside the North Korean nuclear crisis, the dispute between Beijing and Taipei is undoubtedly potentially the biggest security challenge in East Asia. This security “knot” is the combination of historical, ideological and cultural disputes, and has nourished a renewed nationalist discourse on both sides of the Strait. In Mainland China, the confrontation with Taiwan, although it remains hypothetical, has been used as an argument for a subsequent modernization of the armed forces, notably the navy. In Taiwan, the perception of the Chinese threat has a direct and permanent impact on the elections as well as the political debates. With the exception of a quite unlikely spontaneous military invasion, the destabilizing element in the relationship between Beijing and Taipei is a hypothetical declaration of independence of Taiwan that the Mainland authorities could use to justify military escalation, according to the 2005 anti-secession law.

In that prospect, a unilateral declaration of independence, which has been more or less wisely brandished by Taiwan’s former president Chen Shui-bian between 2000 and 2008, has been the best test to measure China’s ambitions, and especially to see whether the Taiwan issue still remains a priority for a more pragmatic and responsible Chinese foreign policy. A rising China seems unlikely to take any risk of exposing itself to international critics and facing possible isolation—and a potential confrontation with the United States—for a question that could be considered secondary, if not irrelevant. Is China willing to jeopardize its successes, risk the military consequences of an escalation—considering Taiwan’s significant military potential—and face the consequences of an invasion? This is most certainly one of the keys to the future of the relationship between the two rival entities.

On the other side of the Strait, is the concept of “Free China,” claimed since the separation in 1949 and meaningfully after the democratization in the 1990s, still relevant? Nothing is less certain, as the biggest challenge for Taiwan now seems to be to define itself in relation to its powerful neighbor. Hu Ping, Chief Editor of Beijing Spring, based in the United States, once summarized the question of Taiwanese sovereignty by stating that “an overwhelming majority of Taiwanese people regard their country as a sovereign one. They say: ‘We have our land, our people, our government, our military, our currency, and our flag. We have Customs. We issue visas. We can exchange our currency abroad and our government administration is well structured.’” It is true that the sense of identity in Taiwan, although still hesitant, is very strong. Defining itself as a de facto independent state, Taiwan could avoid an official declaration of independence that might jeopardize not only its appeased relationship with Beijing, but also its sovereignty. But is not the declaration of full independence a question of honor for a civil society where nationalism has radically changed over the past decades? Therein lies the real challenge for a rich, powerful and internationally renowned island, but which is not officially a state, and therefore does not receive any recognition.

**On the Difficult and Perilous Art of Defining a Nation in Relation to its Neighbor**

If we take a look at the rhetoric as well as historical and cultural references, may we consider that Taiwan’s nationalism is limited to the relationship with China? This