

This opinion piece by PCI Vice President, Tom Plate, appeared in the South China Morning Post on Tuesday, July 16, 2019.

Machismo has no place in relations between mighty China and tiny, isolated Taiwan



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Published: 3:00am, 16 Jul, 2019

- Paranoia about a rising China is unwarranted. Yet Beijing should also check its impulse to press its advantage over the self-ruled island
- Neither side wants war, and many Taiwanese just want to keep the status quo



Illustration: Craig Stephens

Taiwan, with a population nearly that of Denmark, Sweden, Finland and Norway together, doesn't deserve to have to prepare for a defensive war against the People's Republic of China – population four times the United States'.

The Chinese leadership should hardly have to effect Taiwan's integration into the mainland polity through violence; instead it might resolve to keep a cool head and prevent macho nationalism from getting out of hand or military muscle to shadow the Taiwan Strait so darkly, even as China's rise continues apace.

Hasn't Beijing more or less already won – or, at least, gained an insurmountable edge? Strikingly few nations recognise Taiwan as a sovereign state (all credit to Beijing's dollar diplomacy); the variegated 193 member states of the United Nations include tiny islands like Tuvalu and Nauru, but not Taiwan.

Even so, Taiwan garners respect here and there around the world, especially from non-state actors, which is more or less how the People's Republic feels it must treat it: as a wayward piece of non-state.

Enter gigantic US research and development non-profit RAND, which once had a hawkish image burnished by the US military-industrial complex during the cold war, and whose founders included iconic Air Force general Curtis ("Bomb them back into the Stone Age") LeMay. RAND has long since expanded into domestic and foreign policy research, and has some of the best policy analysts anywhere.

Earlier this month, the think tank held a conference on China versus Taiwan (mainly from the latter's perspective). With all that has been happening lately in Hong Kong, when I received an invitation to the conference, I had to accept, was glad I did, and came away from the event with these thoughts.

The first takeaway: given the cosmopolitan cadre at the RAND Centre for Asia Pacific Policy, a few of the official contributions from Taiwan sounded oddly off-key. Consider the conference's opening address given by the minister for the Mainland Affairs Council, "Taiwan: A Vital Bastion in the Defence of Democracy".

Someone back in Taipei should have given this career Democratic Progressive Party politician a heads-up that to make this tired pitch, at a time when some Americans aren't entirely sure what democracy means and even fewer are sure it's working that wonderfully, is to misjudge where America's head is today. It was like screening an old *I Love Lucy* episode at Cannes: haven't we seen this show somewhere before?

At the conference, some panellists expressed such paranoia about China, hyperventilating over the myriad threats from the Chinese military, that the net effect was defeatism and hopelessness. All extreme cross-strait war scenarios are predicated on the assumptions that the governance of China will never change substantially and that the US' commitment to Taiwan is total and eternal. Yet, history is full of jarring surprises which come to acquire an aura of inevitability – always in retrospect, of course.

The second takeaway: other panellists offered fresh insights, whether they were from RAND or Taiwan's Institute for National Defence and Security Research, which was founded last year and is already creating a buzz. To summarise, the overall picture is that neither populace, offshore or on the mainland, wants war, despite the overheated media climate. In polls, more than 80 per cent of the Taiwanese prefer no change whatsoever in cross-strait relations: neither any closer to the mainland, nor any further.

They don't have much of an appetite for spending public funds on pricey US military technology, and are instead clamouring for an expansion of Taiwan's social safety net. Taiwan's arms purchases have to be cheap and "prestige" weapons are not affordable, the US' arms community is being told. In Taiwan, neither the public nor the legislature is keen on increasing defence spending, and a military career is often viewed as a desperate decision.



Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen attends a forum at Columbia University in New York City on July 12, while on transit to the Caribbean. There is little public appetite in Taiwan for more defence spending. Instead, Taiwanese want a better social safety net. Photo: EPA-EFE / Taiwan Presidential Office handout

As it turns out, the People's Liberation Army on the other side of the strait is also finding it difficult to recruit needed quantities of warm bodies and the best brains, which is in part a happy consequence of the Chinese economy still offering better-paying jobs. And China's military planners were said to have hit the great wall of nerd-reality in realising how slow-witted even the smartest computer can become when fed only limited information.

The third takeaway: there's nothing wrong at all with Taiwan being – and remaining – Taiwan. As endlessly annoying as it might be to the Chinese leadership, I am sure more than a few mainlanders could quietly agree that Taiwan is simply one of those accidents of history (not unlike much of Africa, where the processes of revolution, decolonisation and nation-formation produced not geopolitical stability but separatism and tension). Taiwan's stand-alone existence is no one's fault – neither that of the Chinese, nor the Taiwanese.

History can be stupid and sloppy, but this is the insane world we live in: we need to accept this, instead of adding to the insanity we inherited by making crazy calculations with unknowable and perhaps unprecedented consequences.

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