Taiwan's First Referendum: Democratic Milestone or Diplomatic Millstone?

Taiwan is due to hold its first national referendum on 20 March 2004. Timed to coincide with Taiwan's third direct presidential election, the referendum will ask voters for their views on two issues:

- The People of Taiwan demand that the Taiwan Strait issue be resolved through peaceful means. Should China refuse to withdraw the missiles it has targeted at Taiwan and openly renounce the use of force against us, would you agree that the Government should acquire more advanced anti-missile weapons to strengthen Taiwan's self-defense capabilities?

- Would you agree that our Government should engage in negotiation with China on the establishment of a 'peace and stability' framework for cross-strait interactions in order to build consensus and for the welfare of the peoples on both sides?  

Despite the seemingly innocuous wording, the 'peace referenda' has aroused great controversy both domestically and internationally.

Background

The gestation period for the referendum has been both long and contentious. The 1947 Republic of China Constitution included the right to hold referenda, but serious discussion of a plebiscite law did not begin until October 1992 over the issue of whether Taiwan should seek readmission to the UN. The Chinese Nationalist (KMT) government stubbornly resisted a Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) campaign for direct democracy, but during the 1990s, several 'illegal' local referenda were held, including one sponsored by President Chen Shui-bian, when still mayor of Taipei. Various domestic issues were also put forward as subjects for national votes, although most referendum proposals focused on the island's international status.

After overturning more than a half century of KMT rule in March 2000, President Chen Shui-bian resigned from the pro-independence DPP and promised, inter alia, not to promote a referendum on sovereignty as long as China did not intend to use military force against Taiwan. Thereafter, the Taiwan Strait enjoyed a period of relative calm. Economic ties were permitted to expand rapidly, but direct political dialogue did not resume. This window of opportunity started to close in mid-2002. Losing patience with what he saw as Beijing's inflexibility, Chen resumed the DPP chairmanship, declared that there was 'one country on each side' of the Taiwan Strait and called for a referendum law that would permit a vote on independence. Chen subsequently elaborated on the referendum's second question, which he anticipated would include the exchange of special envoys, mutual recognition of jurisdiction, and establishment of a demilitarised zone.

The View from Taipei

Taiwanese assessments of the referendum divide neatly into two camps. Critics portray it as a diplomatic millstone that has not only dangerously provoked China, but also upset friendly governments, including the US. They claim that it exaggerates the strategic threat from the mainland, endangers the profitable cross-strait economic relationship, and foreshadows a future referendum on independence. Moreover, these opponents assert that since the result is a foregone conclusion, the referendum is at best a waste of money, and at worst an illegal election ploy that will probably provoke riots. In contrast, defenders of the referendum define it as the last milestone on Taiwan's 14-year road to...
full democracy. They warn those KMT mayors refusing to cooperate in staging the poll that they risk legal sanctions. They praise Chen for drawing attention to the ever-expanding Chinese missile threat, and dismiss foreign criticism as the result of misunderstanding, unwarranted interference, or worse, appeasement of Beijing.

The View from Beijing

Since the Chinese Government regards Taiwan as a rebel province, it has naturally adopted a hostile attitude towards the referendum. In a February 2000 'White Paper', Beijing made explicit its opposition to referenda that would 'change Taiwan's status as a part of China'. Then in June 2003, it criticised Chen's referendum plan as 'creeping independence'. However, having learned from experience that aggressive actions prior to Taiwanese presidential elections tend to backfire, Beijing has adopted a more restrained strategy. Since July 2003, it has targeted foreign governments and the half-million Taiwanese executives living on the mainland, even allowing a KMT campaign office to open in Shanghai. Yet, despite some success in Europe, Japan and the US, to date this has not had the desired effect in Taipei.

The View from Washington

After China forced a US 'spy plane' to land on Hainan Island in April 2001, Bush attenuated Washington's existing doctrine of 'strategic ambiguity' with a pledge to 'do whatever it takes to help Taiwan defend itself'. Thereafter, the Defense Department quietly accelerated efforts to strengthen security ties, pressing Taiwan to purchase equipment to balance China's growing military power. Since then, US attention has become fixated on Iraq and terrorism, as well as North Korea, where Beijing's assistance is deemed vital to the peaceful resolution of the nuclear crisis. Moreover, China's relative economic 'weight' has grown to the point where US–China bilateral trade flows now exceed those with Taiwan by a 4:1 ratio. Nevertheless, strategic and domestic political imperatives, as well as shared values, still tilted policy in Taiwan's favour until Chen's referendum threatened to upset this delicate balance.

The Bush administration's response has been ambivalent. The White House and State Department oppose any unilateral changes to the status quo in the Taiwan Strait. They do not support the referendum and have questioned Chen's motives. But having succeeded in getting the referendum watered down, they now acknowledge Taiwan's democratic right to hold it. In contrast, the Defense Department has reiterated the US commitment to defend Taiwanese democracy and has blamed Chinese missile deployments for raising tensions. In return for its security guarantee, Washington apparently expects to exercise a virtual veto over Taiwanese policy.

The View from Canberra

The Australian Government has long combined a bipartisan 'one-China' policy with extensive 'unofficial' ties to Taiwan, including representative offices. It supports the peaceful resolution of the Taiwan problem, but given Australia's major commercial relationships with both economies—albeit trade with China currently exceeds that with Taiwan by 200 per cent—the Government has maintained a low profile on the referendum issue. Foreign Minister Alexander Downer's statement that the status quo in the Taiwan Strait is adequate and preferable to any referendum has gone unchallenged.

Conclusion

When an irresistible force (Taiwan's democratic transition and emerging national identity) meets an immovable object (Beijing's irreledentism) the result is likely to be explosive, hence the international devotion to the status quo. However, the status quo—non-intervention by Beijing in return for limited Taiwanese sovereignty—rests on increasingly shaky foundations.

The strategic, economic and socio-political environments are rapidly shifting. If there is no longer a consensus on what constitutes this status quo, the question becomes who has the right to define it. Chen's referendum suggests that this power should ultimately rest with the 23 million people of Taiwan, rather than with the leadership in Beijing or Washington. Chen is deploying the weapon of public opinion in the battle for international legitimacy. The referendum can be seen as a pre-emptive strike designed to constrain his opponents' room for manoeuvre. China is unlikely to take military action even if the referenda questions are answered in the affirmative. Domestically, the referendum has helped Chen to narrow his opponent's lead in the polls, but it is also a kind of insurance policy should he lose the election. The referendum has already succeeded in forcing the KMT to concede that reunification is not inevitable, but a positive result would make it harder for the KMT to return to a 'one-China' position. It appears that on this occasion Chen's salami tactics may succeed in advancing Taiwan one step towards total independence, but international recognition of the Taiwanese people's right to self-determination remains a distant prospect.