Taiwan’s Strategic Relations with its Neighbors: A Countervailing Force to Rising China

The international status of Taiwan/Republic of China (ROC) has been weaker since the day that the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was recognized as “the sole legitimate government of China” at the United Nations (UN) in 1971, an action which was consequently followed by many other countries. Thus, whether Taiwan can still maintain its de facto sovereignty or not, hinges on its strategic relations with other nations who value Taiwan’s security and international legitimacy and, since, for strategic reasons, China could also potentially be motivated to impose unification by force, Taiwan regards the United States as a particularly important guarantor of security. However, China’s rapid rise, in terms of military power, economic factors and trade, has begun to be perceived as challenging U.S. hegemony in the Asia Pacific so that the ways in which other states react to the increasingly competitive relationship between the United States and China, and particularly the potential U.S.-China clash over Taiwan, have become matters of critical concern, as are Taiwan’s strategic relations with its immediate neighbors: Japan, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the European Union (EU).

The legacy of Japanese rule (1895-1945) and the importance of Taiwan’s strategic position make Taiwan’s relations with its Asian neighboring states a delicate but critical factor in Asian Pacific regional security. Although colonial rule remains a sour memory, Taiwan’s relationship with Japan is vital for Taiwan’s security, because of the strategic influence wielded by the U.S.-Japanese combined security operations. Without Japan’s substantial commitment and logistical support, the U.S. pacific forces would not be able to perform at maximum capacity in the event of a Taiwan Strait contingency. Japan’s sensitive role in regional security is a source of irritation for Beijing, particularly because of the historical legacy of Japan’s colonial rule over Taiwan. This legacy has a considerable effect on Beijing’s perception of potential threats. Beijing, recognizing the importance of the Japan factor, has concentrated its diplomatic efforts on driving a wedge between Taiwan and Japan. For instance, the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, which are the subject of a territorial dispute between Japan, China, and Taiwan, provide an opportunity for Beijing to foment unrest between Japan and Taiwan. Beijing has constantly made proposals to Taipei with regard to forging an alliance against Japan over this territorial dispute. Meanwhile, Japan and China have been struggling over the rights to develop the oil and gas fields in the East China Sea, which has serious implications for the exploitation of natural resources and also for security.

The South China Sea is another example of a major territorial dispute, involving Taiwan, China and several Southeast Asian countries, which has significant regional security implications. Currently, with the concluding of a series of multinational agreements, the South China Sea issue seemed to be pacified. However, given the rapid expansion of China-

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1 Regarding the relation between Taiwan and the U.S., see the Chapter by Jean-Pierre Cabestan.
na’s naval forces, there is a potential risk of conflict, should the U.S. military presence be weakened. Taiwan’s security suffered a major setback when South Korea normalized its diplomatic relationship with China and severed diplomatic ties with Taiwan. The regional economic situation, trade and politics also influence the dynamics of Taiwan’s security strategy.

China’s increasingly sophisticated diplomatic moves, such as the “new security” concept and “new thinking” toward Japan, represent another challenge for Taiwan, as does the recent sweetening of cross-Strait relations under the new Kuomintang (KMT) government. Although China’s new soft approach is a positive factor with regard to threat reduction, it could also weaken the raison d’être for a strong U.S. military presence in the region, which is the cornerstone of the security leverage for Taiwan to maintain its status quo vis-à-vis China. Despite the softening of cross-Strait relations under KMT rule, Taiwan’s security strategy still hinges on how to ensure that the United States and Japan remain committed to securing the Taiwan Strait, and to keeping Southeast Asian countries at arm’s length from China. At the same time, it is important for Taiwan to maintain the interest of other nations in the international community in what happens in the Taiwan Strait. In this context, the EU plays an important role in maintaining the balance in cross-Strait relations.

This chapter examines Taiwan’s security in the context of its relations with the Asian neighboring states by scrutinizing the implications for Taiwan’s security and arguing that Taiwan can best secure its de facto sovereignty by forming close strategic ties with its Asian neighbors to constitute a countervailing force against China’s dominance in the region. The paradox here is, that the apparently positive de-escalation of tensions between China and other states might weaken this countervailing force against China, eroding the basis for security and the de facto sovereignty of Taiwan. Taiwan is faced with the urgent task of restoring its foreign policy to counter-balance China’s military, economic and diplomatic expansion. Finally, this chapter argues that Europe not only has a stake in stabilizing cross-Strait relations and developments but can also play a significant role in managing cross-Strait relations.

Rise of China: A Challenge for Taiwan’s Security

In post-Cold War Europe, the risk of major armed conflicts has been reduced to a very low level, while non-traditional threats, such as terrorism, currently dominate European security concerns. In Asia, on the contrary, the picture is much gloomier. There is still a risk of conventional inter-state conflicts and power struggles, as well as unconventional threats, for example, from the Korean Peninsula and the Taiwan Strait, where the risk of inter-state conflict involving weapons of mass destruction (WMD) cannot be ruled out, given the worst case scenario of conflict escalation. Additionally, the East China Sea and Spratly Islands can be counted as a risk zone for armed conflicts over territory and natural resources, as China’s search for natural resources is intensifying, backed by its growing mili-

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2 A part of this section appeared in Ikegami 2006 and 2007.

3 “Europe is the region that, annually, has experienced the lowest number of major armed conflicts; since 2000 after the conflicts in the Balkans in the early 1990s, the only active conflict in Europe has been that between Russia and Chechnya” (“Appendix 2A. Patterns of major armed conflicts, 1990-2005,” SIPRI Yearbook 2006: 109-111).