CHAPTER 4

MILITARIZATION OF THE TAIWAN STRAIT ISSUE

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Over the past decade, China has seen the growing danger of an independence movement by Taiwan and has increased its forces to deter that outcome. To counter China’s military preparation, the United States has upgraded its arms sales and has intensified military ties with Taiwan. Militarization alongside a political stalemate and an economic interdependence, characterizes the current cross-Strait relations. Given the uncertainty of Taiwan’s plan to reengineer its constitution, the Taiwan issue has become viewed as having a high possibility of military conflict that could potentially involve the United States. Although this issue is essentially a political one, “military might,” as Alan Romberg observes, “certainly plays a role for all parties involved.” A failed attempt to force a solution through military means would set off reverberations for decades to come.¹

CHINA’S POSITION ON THE TAIWAN QUESTION

In 1979, based on the premise that economic and social ties could eventually lead to reunification, China changed its policy on Taiwan from “liberation” to “peaceful reunification.” Owing to relatively stable cross-Strait relations until 1995, a sustained relaxation of military confrontations across the Strait had existed. China’s lowered priority for military spending had resulted in neglected military modernization. After Lee Teng-hui’s trip to the United States in 1995 and the

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1996 Taiwan Strait crisis, Beijing realized that the danger of an independent Taiwan was looming large and if forced to go to war, there were many gaps in its military capabilities.

Lee Teng-hui’s “two-States theory” in 1999, Chen Shui-bien’s victory in the 2000 Election, Chen’s “one country on each side of the Strait” in 2002, and the so-called creeping independence encouraged by Lee and Chen have together convinced Beijing that political campaigning, propaganda barraging, or merely displaying force cannot stop the separatist movement. Improved American security assistance to Taiwan further reinforces Beijing’s suspicions that the United States is actively working to prevent mainland China from unifying with Taiwan, and that it will never abandon its long-term strategy of “use Taiwan to contain China.”

Eventually, the conclusion was drawn that the better China prepares for a military struggle, the more likely it will gain a peaceful reunification. The ultimate solution to the Taiwan issue relies on China’s own strength. Adhering to the peaceful reunification policy, China reserves the right to use force in the case of a grave turn of events leading to the separation of Taiwan from China. In recent years, China has stepped up its efforts to modernize its military capabilities by increasing its forces opposite Taiwan.

Nevertheless, one of China’s top priorities is economic growth. It considers the first 20 years of the twenty-first century as a period of important strategic opportunity that it should capitalize on to accomplish its main goal to build a prosperous society. A peaceful periphery is foremost needed. Furthermore, as long-term indicators appear to favor the mainland, China believes reunification is a way to make itself stronger and more respected, but not at the expense of exhausting itself unnecessarily through a war. Therefore, China’s military buildup opposite Taiwan is not preparing to adopt a military option for reunification but rather to credibly prevent Taiwan from taking audacious moves toward independence. Although Chinese leadership remains prepared to use all means necessary to prevent Taiwan’s independence, they believe that the military option should be secondary to the full exploitation of political and economic incentives and thus would only be used as a last resort.

In November 2003, Chen Shui-bien put forward his controversial proposal to hold a referendum in conjunction with Taiwan’s election on March 20, 2004, adopt a new constitution through referendum on December 10, 2006, and enact the new constitution on May 20, 2008, which would turn Taiwan into a “normal, complete, and great state.” Beijing read this proposal as a clear timetable for independence as by changing the definition of the territory or the foundation of