Has September 11th and its Consequences Diminished the Bush Administration’s Security Commitment to Taiwan?

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Anti-US Terrorist attacks that took place on September 11, 2001 in New York City and Washington DC as well as the wars against terrorism and Saddam Hussein’s Iraq that have unfolded since then have forced the Bush Administration to redesign its foreign and security policy priorities. But has this change of priorities weakened George W. Bush’s support for Taiwan’s security?

It would be easy to compare two blunt statements made by president Bush Jr. himself before and after September 11th to argue for a positive answer to this question. Indeed, a gulf of events and perceptions seems to oppose what G. W. Bush said on April 25, 2001—“whatever it takes, we help Taiwan defend itself”—and what he said on the side of Premier Wen Jiabao, two and a half years later, on December 9, 2003—“We oppose any unilateral decision by either China or Taiwan to change the status quo. And the comments and actions made by the leader of Taiwan indicate that he may be willing to make decisions unilaterally to change the status quo, which we oppose”. It is also true that since September 11th, busy with its new international priorities, the US government has toned down its concern with China’s emerging power and strategic competition as well as tried hard to develop with this country a more cooperative relationship, in particular in the area of the war against terrorism.

Nevertheless, many other factors, in particular the attitude of both Peking and Taipei, explain much better this evolution in America’s China policy. The former capital has largely contributed to the improvement of US-China relations, moderating its Taiwan policy, taking advantage of Washington’s global war against terrorism to propose new avenues of cooperation and avoiding becoming an obstacle to America’s action in Iraq. The latter one, after two years of caution, reignited tension with the mainland in publicizing in early August 2002 a new version of Lee Teng-hui’s two state theory (one country on each side of the Strait) and, more recently, pushing for a new constitution and a referendum on China’s missile deployment. Have the genuine improvement in the US-China relations and the US concern with Chen Shui-bian’s initiatives had a negative impact on the American security commitment to Taiwan? As this paper will try to demonstrate, there is no evidence of that. There has actually been much more continuity in the Bush’s China policy as well as between this and the previous’ US administration China policies, especially regarding Taiwan, than some have perceived. And the growing military pressure exerted by Peking on Taipei has forced Washington, in particular since the 1996 missile crisis, to reassess Taiwan’s defense needs and strengthen its security links with the (de facto) island-state. These new challenges much more than the US’s preoccupation with Iraq or North Korea explain the Bush administration’s growing impatience with Chen Shui-bian’s government.

A Better US-China relationship

There is no doubt that September 11th has contributed to improve US-China relations. But other factors, both American and Chinese, have also played their part in this evolution.

Qualified in 2000 by the Republican candidate George W. Bush as a “strategic competitor”, China was clearly not a foreign policy priority when the new president came
into office. Conversely, traditional US allies in Asia, such as Japan and South Korea were to be given more attention. And April 1, 2001 EP-3 incident revealed the level of mistrust and frustration accumulated with the Chinese as well as the American government. But this incident also helped both sides to understand that any further deterioration of their relations could easily poison the diplomatic atmosphere and eventually affect economic development and reforms in the whole Asia-Pacific region. And in spite of G. W. Bush’s April 25, 2001 statement regarding US support for and arms sales to Taiwan, as early as June Secretary of State Colin Power already made some moves to defreeze the US-China links, indicating that these links were made of both competition and cooperation and that the latter can prevail.

And China had already made some steps in a direction that could only please any US administration. In December 1999, it had reached an agreement with Washington regarding its accession to the WTO. As early as July 2000, Vice-Premier Qian Qichen had uttered a new, somewhat more flexible definition of the “one China” concept (three new sentences, xinsanju, hinting that the mainland and Taiwan are on an equal footing, at least on the domestic stage) which inter alia heralded a departure from the threatening words of the February 2000 white paper on Taiwan (that included a new scenario of resorting to a military solution in case of Taiwan’s indefinite procrastination of unification negotiation). And reassessing the cost of the too visible and noisy anti-US strategy and rhetoric that they had promoted in the second half of the 1990s and willing to avoid provoking a new US administration a priori ill-disposed towards them, the Peking authorities toned down their criticism of US alliance systems in the Asia-Pacific region and demonstrated more support for the status quo, both in the Taiwan Strait and in the region as a whole. For instance, China seems to have been very anxious, since the early 2000s, to prevent its rising influence in Asia and in world affairs from being perceived as a challenge to US power and influence. In other words, realizing the unbridgeable gap between the US and China power and influence in its own environment and concerned first of all with their country economic development and reforms, the Chinese leaders decided to adopt a non-confrontational strategy towards the US, hoping that this strategy would be less counterproductive for their short and longer term interests that the previous one.

This is not to say that September 11th did not at all contribute to improving US-China relations. The necessity to stabilize this relationship became immediately clear for the US side. Its best illustration was probably the statement made by G. W. Bush at the APEC meeting in Shanghai (October 2001) where he qualified the relationship as “cooperative, constructive and candid”. For his part, in the aftermath of September 11th, after a few days of hesitation fed by some real concerns about China’s encirclement by US military might expressed within the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and some conservative segments of the Party leadership, Jiang Zemin brought his support to

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American’s global war against terrorism, reluctantly approving the US’s military deployment in Central Asia and its toppling of the Taleban regime in Afghanistan\(^3\). Since then, both sides have been publicly satisfied with their mutual relationship and have gone as far as claiming that it has been the best they ever had\(^4\). And the Iraq war, which China did not really try to prevent in the UN, letting France and Russia taking the lead in their opposition to the US, has not become a serious shadow to a relationship that was on the contrary consolidated by Peking’s active role in the multilateral negotiation aimed at defusing the nuclear crisis between Washington and Pyongyang.

**But Is the US-China relationship the best ever?**

The recent improvement of US-China relations results from a conjunction of converging interests and priorities. But reasons for disagreements and frictions have not disappeared. Some are still very visible, such as the commercial dispute regarding China’s abidance by WTO regulations, US abyssal trade deficit with this country (over US$100 billion) and the under-value of the yuan, the Chinese currency. Other have for the moment been shelved or buried by both sides, such as the US-China strategic rivalry or conflicting interests, as far as Taiwan, the South China Sea, US bilateral alliances in the Asia-Pacific region or Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD)’s proliferation control. And other differences are managed in such a way that they are unable to derail the whole relationship: among them, are the nature of the Chinese polity, its persistent, in spite of some progress, infringement of human rights, Tibet and Peking’s lack of support for the US war in Iraq. In both China and the US, some are insisting on these differences because they estimate that their country’s interests would be better served if relations were more conflicting\(^5\). However, such views have not prevailed for the reasons indicated above. Having said that, we should keep in mind how much this rapprochement has been circumstantial and can be jeopardized if other priorities are set in Washington or in Peking. Though much better than any time since Tiananmen and rather satisfactory for two nations with opposed political systems and values, this relationship will not turn the US and China into “friends” or allies—as during the war against Japan—nor make them agree on the Taiwan issue, as we will see.

As a more sober and somewhat open-ended State Secretary Powell indicated in a recent article in *Foreign Affairs*: “Neither we nor the Chinese believe that there is anything inevitable about our relationship any longer—either inevitably bad or inevitably good.

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Instead, we now believe that it is up to us, together, to take responsibility for our common future.\(^6\)

In other words, both sides have been pro-active in preventing differences from overwhelming common interests. And September 11th has probably contributed the US to be more pro-active than before. But the differences mentioned above, in particular on Taiwan, have not disappeared. Interestingly enough, in the same article Colin Powell refrained from mentioning the Taiwan issue, underscoring by his silence both his willingness to avoid any unexpected development in the Strait in the current context of global war against terrorism and the large continuity of his government policy in that area.

**Taiwan’s New Course and the Global War against Terrorism: jingdi zhiwa (the frog in the well)**

Since Chen Shui-bian’s election, Taiwan has been on a new course, asserting its own identity, building a new nation every day more Taiwanese than Chinese and actively projecting this image outside. In this context, as under Lee Teng-hui, the Republic of China (ROC) government has continued to give priority to the strengthening of its international status on any improvement of its relations with the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

These policy choices were encouraged by the reaffirmation of US’s security commitment as well as US’s openness to widening Taipei’s diplomatic breathing space. Substituting in April 2001 “strategic clarity” to its traditional “strategic ambiguity”, Washington has consolidated its support for the separation and the *de facto* (but not *de jure*) independence of Taiwan, relegating ambiguity to the level of US’s tactical involvement of any armed conflict in the Strait.\(^7\) At the same time, the US offered Taiwan an unprecedented arms package, including for the first time offensive weapons, such as submarines. And September 11th has not watered down this commitment. For instance, in February 2002, George W. Bush was the first US president to mention the Taiwan Relations Act to a Chinese audience on China’s soil (as for instance at Peking University). A month later, a new *US Nuclear Posture Review* was made public directly threatening the PRC in the event of war in the Strait.\(^8\) While not supporting Taiwan independence, Bush Jr. has so far refrained from publicly mentioning the “three no’s” that his predecessor, Bill Clinton, had taken out of their secrecy, in June 1998 in Shanghai (no to two Chinas or one China, one Taiwan, no to independence of Taiwan and not to Taiwan’s participation in organizations where statehood is required). He pushed Taiwan’s case in some international organization where statehood is generally but not always required, such as the World Health Organization (WHO). He let Chen pay unofficial (and transit) visits to the US several times, allowing him to shake hand with Collin Powell in Panama in early November 2003 (although not meaningful, this handshake was largely exploited by Chen and his supporters on the island). Bush also (for the first time?) put the question of People’s Liberation Army (PLA) conventional missile deployment near Taiwan at the top

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8 *Los Angeles Times*, March 9, 2002.
of the discussion agenda, when he invited Chinese president Jiang Zemin to his ranch in Crawford (Texas) in October 2002. And US arms sales to Taiwan have not been affected whatsoever by the war against terrorism or the improvement of US-China relations. However, at the same time, Chen Shui-bian did not realize that the US government not only had little time to devote to Taiwan’s problems but also was involved in an unprecedented and much more important and complex than expected global game, which the diplomatic cooperation (on North Korea and terrorism) or “neutralization”(on Iraq) of China, in the UN and elsewhere, constituted an important part of. Thus, this was not the time for Taiwan to rock the boat or push its envelope. But Chen, busy with his domestic agenda, more islander than his predecessor, acted as “the frog in the well” (jingdi zhiwa), whose visible sky is narrowed by the well’s margin (or as a horse wearing blinkers): he clearly did not include the new US international priorities in his equation. So when he launched his “one country, one side” (yibian, yiguo) initiative in early August 2002, Chen was surprised to be discreetly but firmly rebuffed by the American government. And in retrospect, the more optimistic spirit of the US government in the pre-Iraq war environment contributes to explain its subdued reaction. So in December 2003, when he jumped on one particular provision (art. 17) of the freshly adopted referendum law to organize a plebiscite denouncing the PLA’s missile deployment against Taiwan, Chen triggered a strong and unexpected reaction from George W. Bush, uttered, to add offense to injury, in the White House’s Oval Office on the side of visiting Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, who could not be more delighted to congratulate the US president for his stance on Taiwan. It has been rightly said that more than the referendum on PLA missile as such, a deployment that the US also has constantly opposed, it was the general context on Taiwan in which this initiative took shape—in particular Chen’s ambition to draft a new constitution and more generally please his pro-independence electorate—that provoked Bush’s December 9 statement9. True, facing an uphill battle for his reelection on March 20, 2004, Chen badly needed to create a momentum that would assure him the support of both his radical and moderate voters. And his advisers, including Joseph Wu, wrongly estimated that announcing this initiative on the eve of Wen’s trip to the US would attract much more world attention. It did but not in a positive way, most Western governments (including the Japanese and European ones) publicly cautioning Chen. And in alienating the US, Chen has exposed himself to lose the support of the centrist electorate, in particular if the opposition ticket, Lien Chan and James Soong Chu-yu, can capitalize on this new weakness10. That is the reason why in mid-January he finally informed the Taiwanese public, probably after much negotiation with Washington, that he will submit to the voters two questions rather different from and much more moderate than the original one; the new referendum project was immediately qualified as more “flexible” by Colin Powell himself11.


11 The two questions made public on January 16, 2004 by Chen are:
But has this recent evolution weakened the US security commitment to Taiwan separate status and de facto independence?

**The large continuity of the US policy on Taiwan**

There is no doubt that since September 11th, the US has concentrated its action and diplomacy in Western Asia and the Middle East rather than the Far East. Moreover, in East Asia, the North Korean issue has dominated the Bush Administration agenda, helping as we have seen, the US and China to enhance their cooperation in a multilateral setting. Nevertheless, in the same period of time, Washington has continued to reassert to both Peking and Taipei its constant stance on the Taiwan issue: no use of force, no unilateral change of the status quo.

On the one hand, George W. Bush has made clear, and probably clearer than his predecessors (see above), that the use of force by China to resolve the Taiwan issue was unacceptable. This stance was repeated on several occasions12, including when Bush rebuffed Chen in December 2003. And, a month later, in January 2004, when visiting Peking, General Richard B. Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, reasserted to the PLA leaders the US commitment to Taiwan security, indicating that China understood “very clearly” that the United States “would resist any attempt to use coercion” to resolve the status of Taiwan.

On the other hand, Washington has constantly opposed any move that would jeopardize the status quo wherever it comes from. In this respect, the Bush administration, far from challenging the “five no’s” (sibu yi meiyou) imposed by the Clinton government on the newly elected Chen Shui-bian, has abided by them and forced on a number of occasions, through its representative in Taiwan, American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) director Doug Paal, the Taiwanese president to reassert them, in particular since August 200213. Moreover, it can be added that Doug Paal’s appointment to this position in late 2001, a choice that was for a several months opposed or questioned by a number pro-Taiwan (and Republican) members of the Congress who suspected him of being a “Panda Hugger” (or

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1. The People of Taiwan demand that the Taiwan Strait issue be resolved through peaceful means. Should Mainland China refuse to withdraw the missiles it has targeted at Taiwan and to 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?

2. Would you agree that our Government should engage in negotiation with Mainland 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?


13 The “five no’s” are presented in the following extract from Chen’s inaugural speech of 20 May: “As long as the CCP regime has no intention of using military force against Taiwan, I pledge that during my term in office, I will not declare independence, I will not change the national title, I will not push for the inclusion of the so-called ‘state-to-state’ description in the Constitution, and I will not promote a referendum to change the status quo with regard to the question of independence or unification. Furthermore, the abolition of the National Reunification Council or the National Reunification Guidelines will not be an issue.”
a blue team member), postponing his arrival in Taipei until late spring 2002, underscored the Bush administration’s willingness to stick to the traditional “one China” policy that the US had promoted since Nixon. And although it was more subdued in its criticism of Chen’s yibian yiguo (one country on each side of the Strait) than the previous administration had been of Lee’s liangguolun (two state theory), in spite of the similarities between the two approaches, it made clear to Taipei that such remarks were unhelpful, should be stopped and never be integrated in one way or another in the constitution (one of the five no’s pledged by Chen in his inauguration speech). When visiting Peking in late August 2001, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, repeated this message, underlining the US’s “agnostic” attitude towards the solution that both sides could find to their differences (if both Peking and Taipei agree about Taiwan’s independence, we would not oppose it, he even declared in substance)14.

And George W. Bush’s reaction to Chen’s referendum initiative in December 2003 was largely inspired by the same line of conduct: the US wanted to make sure that Chen would not use the referendum to change Taiwan’s status, (e. g. abolish the Republic of China or altering its official borders and putting an end to both Chinas’ overlapping sovereignty claims).

But the US criticism of Chen has been fed by another factor: the island’s growing insecurity and the Taiwanese government’s lack of awareness of the weaknesses of its armed forces.

**A Growing Concern for Taiwan’s Security**

This US concern is not really new. Then Deputy Assistant Secretary for Defense Kurt Campbell was reported to have said after an evaluation visit to Taiwan in 2000: “Before we arrived in Taiwan, we expected to see Israel but actually we found Panama!”15. And indeed, since the 1996 missile crisis, the US government has increased its pressure on Taiwan in order to persuade it to speed up the modernization and adaptation of its armed forces to the new military threats originated from China.

*Taiwan: An Uneasy Modernization of the Armed Forces*

This process has not been easy, contributing to increasing, sooner than later, Taiwan’s strategic dependence upon the US military and feeding fresh frictions between the two

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14 In his August 26 press conference, to the following question: “You just mentioned that the administration doesn't support Taiwan independence. Can you explain why the administration is taking a position on the final outcome in the Taiwan Strait? And, what could happen if, this would shock us all but, if the people on both sides of the Strait decided that Taiwan could go independent? Would Washington continue not to support Taiwan independence? Could you flesh out this policy a little more, so we'd understand it more?”

Armitage answered: “The wording is important. By saying we do not support, it's one thing. It's different from saying we oppose it. If people on both sides of the Strait came to an agreeable solution, then the United States obviously wouldn't inject ourselves. Hence, we use the term we don't "support" it. But it's something to be resolved by the people on both sides of the question.

15 *International Herald Tribune*, April 25, 2001, p. 1. This newspaper did not attribute this sentence to Campbell but this sentence’s author was rapidly identified in Washington DC.
countries. True, the Taiwanese authorities have demonstrated a genuine intention to reform their armed forces, streamlining their Army, turning its traditional divisions into lighter and more mobile “integrated brigades”, improving its anti-missile systems (purchase of Pac-3), acquiring numerous modern weapons from the US to equip their Navy (four Kidd destroyers) and their Air Force (missiles AMRAAM) and in implementing a new “national defense law” that clearly puts the defense minister, in principle a civilian (wenguan), above the general chief of staff and answerable to the president’s orders. For its part, the US has for long buried its third communiqué with China (August 17, 1982) in which Washington promised to gradually cut the amount of weapons sold to Taipei), offering to the Taiwanese more and more items of their shopping list (short of the Aegis-equipped destroyers that only Japan, a full US allies, has acquired and can only be operated by US Navy officers).

Nevertheless, Taiwanese military faces two main weaknesses: the lack of talent and of financial resources. Like its predecessor, Chen’s government has tested, with mixed results, various recruitment formulae based on limited-time contracts. But attracting capable men and women to the military remains a serious problem that can only be (partly) solved if more money is put into the system.

But since Chen Shui-bian’s election, less money has been allocated to the military. Chen has always spoken strongly about the ROC’s sovereignty, independence and security, but he has not followed up his words with corresponding actions. Since he was elected, the defense budget has actually decreased in the local currency and even more in US$, from NT$285.6 billion in 1999 (US$10.4 billion) to NT$261.6 billion in 2003 (US$7.7 billion). Between these two years, the share of the defense budget within the state budget fell from 22.7% to 16.6%, while its ratio to GNP fell from 3.1% in 1999 to 2.6% in 2002. This trend has put additional pressure on arms purchases in the US and has forced Taipei to set up again (as in 1992) a special budget in order to acquire the weapons promised in April 2001 by George W. Bush.\footnote{This budget will be formally established in 2004 and for purchasing weapons (in particular the Pac-3, 12 Orion P-3 planes and 8 submarines) in 2005 and onward.}

It is open to debate, however, whether a Kuomintang (KMT) government would have been able to allocate, in the same lapse of time, more resources to the military. The negative economic growth that Taiwan registered in 2001 (-2.2%) and its slow recovery the following year would have prevented any Taiwanese administration from giving in to the demands of the military (and the US). And today, all political parties appear to agree on the plan to set up this special acquisition budget. True, Chen and his Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) may be keener to develop social programs and fulfill some of their domestic electoral promises than to put more money into the military. But the cuts to the defense budget were started in the second half of 1999, under Lee Teng-hui, and, ironically, just after the former president had raised tensions in the Strait with his two-state initiative (the 2000 defense budget amounted to NT$276.1 billion).

In any case, whichever political party controls the government in Taipei, it will have great difficulty allocating significantly more to the military than it has received in the last few years (the 2004 defense budget amounts NT$281 billion, or US$8.26 billion), in particular due to the growing burden imposed by social programs. And most parties in power will probably be very hesitant about cutting these expenses or increasing taxes in
the current economic environment where many industries, for cost-saving reasons, have already been “hollowed out” and relocated to the mainland. This trend will contribute sooner rather than later to changing the military balance in the Strait (perhaps between 2010 and 2015) and thus to increasing Taiwan’s dependence on the US for its security. 

*The US: A more hands-on attitude towards Taiwan military... and government*

This has alarmed the US government which has adopted a gradually more hands-on attitude vis-à-vis the Taiwanese military... and government. Already strengthened under Clinton (in particular after 1996), US-Taiwan military cooperation and coordination have become more obvious and visible since 2001. And September 11th has not at all slowed down what some Chinese analysts rightly characterize as the establishment of a “de facto” or “quasi” alliance between Washington and Taipei.

Interoperability seems to remain an objective too far and in a war scenario could well prove counterproductive. In fact, military co-operation and communication were never suspended after 1979. For instance, a leak in January 2003 revealed that the US had maintained a signal intelligence (SIGINT) facility on Yangmingshan, on the outskirts of Taipei, providing Taiwan’s National Security Bureau with information vital for ensuring its security against the military threat posed by the PLA. But during the missile crisis, the US realized not only the weaknesses of the Taiwanese armed forces but also the lack of proper direct communication between the US Pacific Command and the Taiwanese general staff. The situation clearly had to be rectified.

The increasing co-operation between the armed forces of the two countries aims to provide them with the ability better to prepare and organize a *coordinated reaction* in the event of a military crisis or war in the Strait. Today, it includes exchanges of intelligence, partial sharing of communication codes (datalinks), discussions on strategies and war scenarios, US assistance for and participation in Taiwanese military exercises (as in Hanguang 19 in 2003) and more training of Taiwanese military personnel in the US.

The unprecedented visits, in 2002 and 2003, of the Taiwanese minister and vice-ministers of defense to the US (which included a trip to the Pentagon for the vice-ministers Kang Ning-hsiang and Lin Chong-pin) symbolize this growing co-ordination.

The new US objective has also strongly increased the pressure on the Taiwanese armed forces to fulfill the requirements of their role more professionally, something that has created tensions between the two militaries in terms of weapon choices and strategic culture. The US is supposedly willing to give the Taiwanese armed forces the ability to resist any attack from China for one month (compared with supposedly two weeks today). At the same time, the Bush administration has intensified its demands for the Taiwanese government to buy in due course the numerous armaments offered in its

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18 *Taipei Times*, 18 January 2003, p. 4; *Asia Times Online*, 6 March 2003. A more secretive US-Taiwanese signal intelligence base exists somewhere else but no public information is available on it.
19 In January 2003, a leak revealed that some US military servicemen would take an active part in these exercises. Presented by the US as an “evacuation taskforce” in order to calm Beijing, this information has stirred up resentment both in Taiwan and in the US; *Zhongguo Shibao*, (China Times), 2 January 2003 (electronic version).
package of April 2001 and subsequently. Facing, as we have seen, mounting financial difficulties, Taipei is trying to slow down these purchases as well as select the equipment that it feels as most needed (C4IRS). This has generated additional friction with the US and its powerful military industrial complex, which has been insisting for instance on the sale of the Kidds and the Pac-3 systems, two weapon packages which are considered by many Taiwanese military as less of a priority, if not totally irrelevant. The Kidd, in particular, is a large ship that would prove of little use in the Strait. And the Pac-3 systems are very expensive in view of the added-defense value.

Whatever the case, the message from America is clear: we will get more involved in Taiwan’s security but you have to do your homework, share the burden with us more equitably and demonstrate to us your resolve in the defense of your own land, a resolution which has not always appeared very obvious to the US in the last few years. This hands-on attitude adopted by the US is likely to produce implications for regional missile defence systems. While it can be assumed that Taiwan will not formally take part in the missile defence system that the US is planning to set up in East Asia (with Japan), Taiwanese territory cannot be artificially excluded from its perimeters. For the moment, as we have seen, Washington is trying hard to persuade Taipei to acquire the Pac-3 in order to boost the island’s own low-altitude antimissile capability. But both governments are pretty much aware that the Pac-2 and Pac-3 systems will never form an efficient umbrella against the missiles held by the PLA; they primarily provide some additional psychological security for Taiwan’s inhabitants. And while the US has not excluded delivering its Aegis (navy-wide) systems to Taiwan at some point, the financial difficulties that the island is facing and the on-going military debate concerning missile defence will probably delay such a sale to a more distant future. In the meantime, Taipei has decided to harden or put underground a growing number of its military facilities and command and control headquarters and place its reliance on America’s theatre high-altitude area defence (THAAD) system when it is ready.

Despite Beijing’s more moderate attitude towards the US and Taiwan since September 11th, the PLA is continuing its build-up against the island. In late 2003, Chen Shui-bian revealed that the PLA had deployed 496 missiles in Fujian, Guangdong and Jiangxi targeted at Taiwan (against 100 M-11d and 350 M-9s according to US reports)\(^\text{21}\). And the PLA has concentrated in the vicinity of the island, under the command of the Nanking military region (and potential “war zone”) its newly acquired Sovremenny class destroyers, Kilo class submarine and aircraft (Su-27s and Su-30s).

In this context, Chen’s initial referendum initiative appears awkward, to say the least, because he took the risk of not only losing the support of the few Taiwan supporters remaining in the State Department but also alienating his friends—and in particular the thinkers who believe that the island still has some strategic value to contain China’s ambitions in East Asia—in the Pentagon. Hence, digesting all these inputs, the National Security Council (e. g. Jim Moriarty, a recognized China and Taiwan expert who was discreetly dispatched to Taiwan in early December) could but recommend to the

\(^{21}\) Chen indicated in particular that China had deployed 96 missiles each in Leping and Ganxian of Jiangxi Province, Meizhou of Guangdong Province, as well as 144 in Yongan and 64 in Xianyou of Fujian Province. Taipei Times, December 2, 2003, p. 3; Department of Defense, Report to Congress on the Military Power of the People's Republic of China, [http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/20030730chinaex.pdf](http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/20030730chinaex.pdf)
president to send a warning signal to Taipei. Hence also, Chen eventually changed the content of his referendum and decided to submit to the voters’ approval the Pac-3 purchase.

But it is hard to link this signal to the post-September 11th international environment and US priorities. It is rather the US’s growing commitment to and responsibility in Taiwan security and de facto independence that has increased its pressure on as well as narrowed the room for maneuver of the Taipei government, whoever sits in the Zongtongfu (presidential palace). Of course, Chen or his successor will try to take advantage of the divisions surfacing among US politicians on the cross-Strait situation and the US administration’s China policy, playing whenever it is possible the Pentagon off against the State Department and Congress off against the executive branch. Nevertheless, there is virtually no chance of seeing any future US government abandoning its “one China policy”. On the contrary, it can be expected that it will constrain Chen or his successor more tightly to stick to the “five no’s” formulated in May 2000, with all the logical implications regarding constitutional change or future referenda that we can imagine. It is no coincidence that Chen repeated this pledge quite emphatically when he officially announced the two questions submitted to referendum in mid-January 2004. And if the PRC does not push its military pressure too hard, Washington may be tempted, in a more “speculative future”, to twist Taipei’s arm and force it to negotiate some kind of settlement with Beijing in order to avoid a war that Taiwan seems too often neither ready nor willing to fight.

**Conclusion: Taiwan—neither pawn nor pivot?**

September 11th therefore has not modified the basic equation in the Taiwan Strait. Neither has it diminished US’s commitment to Taiwan’s security and de facto independence, nor it has simplified the complexity of the triangular relationship between Peking, Washington and Taipei. If the war against terrorism, the US management of post-Saddam Hussein’s Iraq and the intricacies of the nuclear crisis with North Korea have had any impact on the Taiwan issue, it has been to reinforce in the US the feeling that, for some time to come, a good working relation with China—a “partnership” (huoban) would sing in tune Hu Jintao and G. W. Bush—is required. These new threats and international issues have also contributed to turn China into a “gentle revisionist” power with which some (provisional) accommodation could be worked out. In such an environment, as in the early 1970s, when the US was obsessed with the Soviet Union (and Vietnam), US-China relations can but improve and, by the same token, the Taiwan issue loses some of its importance. In other words, not only Taiwan is not any more a pawn that some US strategists were tempted, in the 1990s, to instrumentalize against a hostile China, ironically providing the Taiwanese military an additional security guarantee; but also Taiwan does not seem, in Peking’s eyes, to be any more the pivot of its rise for power and influence in the Asia-Pacific region. Since the early 2000s, China is apparently ready to freeze and dodge for some time the Taiwan issue as long as the status quo is not threatened.

However, this assumption should not lead us to the conclusion that the PRC has abandoned its unification plan or its intention to alter the military balance in the Strait in
its favor nor Taiwan its nation-building process and its ambition to become a normal state. Sandwiched between these conflicting objectives, Washington will probably have to continue to deter both Peking and Taipei from achieving their dream. And in the longer run, it will probably have no other choice than to convince, probably with more energy and arm-twisting, both capitals that the ROC is already part of the Chinese nation all the while it should remain separate and independent of the PRC.