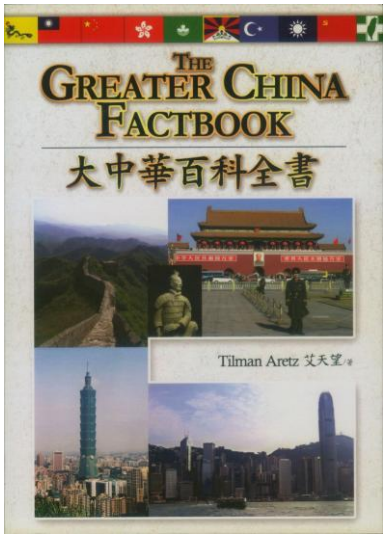
Greater China = pro-unification?

The use of the term "Greater China" is often mistakenly regarded as an equivalent to a pro-China stance, to favouring unification of China and Taiwan. Because the title of my book is "The Greater China Factbook" and the book includes information about Taiwan, I discovered some people believed I am supporting an annexation of Taiwan by the People's Republic of China (PRC) and oppose Taiwan independence. I therefore see the urgent need to clarify my position.



First of all, when I was a student in the 1980s and 1990s, Taiwan studies were naturally regarded an integral part of sinology, there was no shred of doubt about it. This was based on the fact that the majority of the people living in Taiwan today are ethnic Han Chinese, speak Mandarin or the southern Fujian dialect and observe Chinese customs and holidays. Their ancestors may have come to Taiwan many generations ago, some as early as the 17th century, and many of them interbred with Taiwan's indigenous people so that most Taiwanese today have mixed DNA, but yet they raised their offspring as Chinese. Culturally, these descendants are definitely not aborigines but Chinese. At the beginning of the 21st century, less than three percent of Taiwan's population are officially categorized as aborigines (= members of one of the 14 indigenous groups officially recognized by the ROC government), more than 90 percent are ethnic Han Chinese, subdivided into "Taiwanese" (*Taiwanren* or *benshengren* [literally "people from this province"], i. e. descendants of early immigrants who arrived in Taiwan centuries ago, including the Hakkas who make up at least 15 percent of Taiwan's total population) and "mainlanders" (*waishengren* [literally "people from outer provinces"], i. e. Chinese from the mainland who moved to Taiwan after 1945).

So, making Taiwan studies a part of China studies was purely for cultural reasons and had nothing to do with the question unification of China or Taiwan independence. Many sinologists like myself chose to come to Taiwan to learn Mandarin. I maintain that Taiwan today is culturally a part of Greater China. It is, however, not a province of the PRC either, and that, in my opinion, is a good thing.

Taiwan has left the time of authoritarian rule and bloody repression under dictator Chiang Kai-shek behind and evolved to a pluralistic democracy. Although Taiwan is a young democracy (martial law was lifted less than a quarter of a century ago in 1987) and its political system still has some way to go before it can be called a mature democracy, but nevertheless the differences to the conditions in the PRC are striking. Taiwan has freedom of speech and religion, there are no political prisoners, the government can be scathingly criticized without fear of persecution, there are more than 100 political parties, the media and the judiciary are free of state intervention, and so on. None of that is the case in the PRC.

Should China and Taiwan politically unite? Under the present circumstances I can only express a strong warning against such a step. An immediate unification with the PRC we know now would require Taiwan to give up its freedoms and surrender to CCP rule. Unification according to the

terms of Hong Kong's "one country, two systems" (*yiguo liangzhi*) as proposed by the PRC would label Taiwan's democracy with an expiration date of fifty years. It would be tantamount to suicide—who could imagine that the CCP would tolerate free elections of Taiwan's leaders, judges who make their decisions according to the law instead of obeying CCP orders, outspoken opposition parties and free media? So far this is still unthinkable.

So what about Taiwan independence? Face it—Taiwan has been de facto independent since 1949. Declaring independence (changing the official name of the state from "Republic of China" to "Republic of Taiwan", that is) would merely be a formalization of the Status Quo, but doing it right now would be outright disastrous since the Communist regime of the PRC has reiterated over and over its threat to attack Taiwan and unite it with the PRC by force if Taiwan's leaders declare formal independence. Such an attack would inevitably lead to Taiwan's destruction, and the US would probably not come to Taiwan's help, since Washington could claim Beijing's attack was not unprovoked. But even in the unlikely case that the PRC did not react violently to a Taiwanese declaration of independence, the PRC would still step up its diplomatic pressure against Taiwan. There would be strong objection by a large part of the international community, fearing that the situation across the Taiwan Strait could get out of control. Taiwan would certainly not gain anything, at least not more diplomatic recognition than it has now. Personally I believe formal independence (i. e. Status Quo plus new name and recognition by the international community, including the PRC) would clearly be best for Taiwan, at least in the long run, but it cannot be realized without Beijing's approval.

What are the options? I believe the best approach would be maintaining the Status Quo—for now. Certainly that is not an ideal solution, but Taiwan has done fairly well in the last decade despite its frequent diplomatic setbacks, isolation in the international arena and exclusion from important international organizations as the UN and the WHO thanks to pressure from Beijing. While keeping the name "Republic of China" seems to be hard to stomach for independence activists who associate the ROC with Chiang Kai-shek's regime, it should be considered that the ROC has changed dramatically and the KMT in the 21st century is not the KMT of Chiang Kai-shek any more. More important than the official name of the state is which kind of freedoms the state can provide and whether its citizens can live the life they want. Not the label matters but what's inside the bottle.

Despite the huge differences of the respective political systems I still favour steps to improve the relations across the Taiwan Strait. The strict anti-China policy of Taiwan's DPP-led government between 2000 and 2008 might be interpreted as an understandable reaction to continuous threats, diplomatic pressure, military buildup by the PRC and more than 1,000 missiles pointed on targets on the island, but it yielded no results other than increased tensions and alienation from important partners like the US. If the thorny sovereignty issue is temporarily set aside, the results of resuming direct talks could lead to valuable improvements like the three links, including regular direct cross-strait flights. The enthusiasm caused by direct charter flights during the Chinese New Year holidays in 2005 proves that the people both in Taiwan and China welcome closer ties. The formula "one China, respective interpretations" (*yizhong gebiao*) offers the chance for positive development of China-Taiwan relations.

While striving for better relations with China, Taiwan still needs to be on its guard. Although the PRC has sort of softened its rhetoric slightly ahead of the 2008 Beijing Olympics and now calls for peaceful unification, and it has shown a bit more openness of the media in the wake of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake compared to the information policy during the 2003 SARS crisis, but

the PRC's crackdown against separatists in Tibet is a clear sign that the PRC will not hesitate to use force if the CCP leadership believes the "integrity of the motherland" is threatened by "splittists".

Today, it is impossible to predict whether the further development will eventually lead to unification or Taiwan independence. But no matter which one it is going to be, it must be approved by the majority of Taiwan's population through referendum because it is the Taiwanese who will be affected most by a change of the circumstances. Taiwan independence is possible if a majority of Taiwanese wants it and the PRC drops its threat of violence. If China and the international community approve Taiwan independence and the people on the island want it, what would be wrong with it? China and Taiwan could thus develop close and excellent relations and might even form a federation of two sovereign and independent states, which would be a win-win situation. On the other hand, if China opens up, becomes a full-fledged democracy and accepts the values of freedom that have already been adopted in Taiwan, unification could be perfectly possible as well if the Taiwanese people want it and both sides can agree on terms of how the unification is realized. In any case the key for a peaceful solution lies in Beijing, like it or not.

[By Tilman Aretz—May 31, 2008]