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## **Taiwan: Introspecting on a Democracy at an Existential Crossroad**

*Review Essay by Raviprasad Narayanan, Institute of International Relations, National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan, [raviprasad.narayanan@gmail](mailto:raviprasad.narayanan@gmail.com)*

Dafydd Fell. *Government and Politics in Taiwan*. Abingdon: Routledge. 2012.

Jean-Marc.F. Blanchard & Hickey, Dennis, V. (Eds.). *New Thinking about the Taiwan Issue – Theoretical insights into its origins, dynamics and prospects*. New York: Routledge. 2012.

Taiwan. An island that arrested the imagination of the world during the early days of the Cold War earning the sobriquet of being an ‘unsinkable aircraft carrier’ has for long inspired parallel discourses on matters strategic and political. The ‘strategic’ encompasses discourses envisioning Taiwan and the Taiwan Straits as a zone of contestation involving the United States and China, while the ‘political’ revolves around the dramatic transformation of Taiwan’s political culture from the apogee of authoritarianism, to becoming an exemplar of democratic representation and expression.

Dafydd Fell, in a significant narrative, brings alive the ‘political’ evolution of Taiwan in a comprehensive manner over thirteen chapters in a book that deconstructs Taiwan’s political culture to its very essentials. As a nation-building project, Taiwan went through three experiments in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – by the Japanese into imperial subjects during the colonial period from 1895 to 1945; after 1945 when the Kuomintang (KMT) enforced martial law and fashioned a militaristic form of nation-building; and, during the process of democratization when Taiwanese nationalism was given an indigenous political slant. Fell pitches the argument that Taiwan’s democratization is remarkable since it has not come about through a violent systemic transformation, but rather through an organic process with many formal political institutions existing in Taiwan today originating from the time before the KMT fled (‘relocated’ as some still opine!) to Taiwan (p.4).

Prior to the processes that inaugurated democratization of political space in Taiwan there were several incremental and epochal developments that went into making the political narrative of the island. The “2-28 Incident” for instance, resonates with political voices to date while land reforms introduced in 1953 forced landlords to sell excess land to the government that was distributed to tenant farmers, making Taiwan a society with lesser inequalities in the decades to come in comparison to other countries of the region. The transformation of Taiwan’s political culture from an authoritarian political temperament to a multi-party democratic one was possible owing to high levels of mobilization and commitment shown by the leadership to engage dissent through dialogue. By recruiting intellectuals into the party and make it more responsive to democratic change, the KMT displayed political sagacity. Gradual revisions to the constitution during the period of transition gave the KMT much needed legitimacy. Starting off as a relatively moderate party standing for the promotion of democracy, ethnic justice and Taiwanese self-determination, rather than outright independence, the Democratic People’s Party (DPP), electrified Taiwan’s newly expanded political arena in the 1980s by becoming a genuine people’s movement for democracy, albeit one that evolved later into a vehicle for Taiwanese nationalism (p.38).

Periodic elections and a growing 'normality' in Taiwan's politics – innovative and colorful campaigns, vocal political opposition and legislative inertia – ensure that democracy has become entrenched in Taiwan's body-politic and social realms. Associated imagery of political parties exist with the DPP seen as being pro-reform, pro-Taiwan independence (a declining political variable these days), pro-environment protection and for wider social security, while the KMT is seen as being pro-unification giving priority to economic growth and stability. (p.92). If anything, Taiwan is a living and thriving example of a western style democracy succeeding in a Chinese or Confucian social order.

Dafydd Fell dwells deep into the symbiotic nature of Taiwan's existential relationship with the mainland. There is an element of inevitability to the relationship between either side of the Taiwan strait with economic integration since the 1990s alternately exercising positive and negative influences on Taiwan. Cross-Strait relations have in the past six decades swung both ends of the pendulum with almost four decades of hostility from 1949 to 1987 giving way to a thaw in ties between 1987 to 1994 that in turn led to a phase of economic convergence and political divergence from 1995 to 2008 and a rapid period of cooperation since 2008. Problems do remain and to Beijing the continued existence of the Republic of China (Taiwan) is anathema to the 'One China' *weltanschauung* widely accepted by the rest of the world. The ROC, to Beijing is a reminder that the civil war is not over with 'Taiwan' acting as a propellant encouraging domestic nationalism – mostly state sponsored. Taiwan realizes that even as it gets closer to the mainland (in economic terms) it has to countenance the reality of a China seeking to undermine Taiwan's democratic system. Despite the threat to its very political existence, Taiwan has to preserve cross-Strait peace by delicately balancing Beijing and Washington. A fully-functioning democracy is alive with competitive multi-party politics and pressure groups, and Taiwan is no different with its leadership paying attention to public opinion while framing cross-Strait policy.

In its external relations, Taiwan has had several phases all identifiable to its difficult status in the international system. A 'golden era' existed from 1950 to 1971 when it was recognized by the rest of the world – especially European and North American - as representing China. This phase was quickly followed by one of diplomatic isolation from 1971 to 1988 when it was expelled from international organizations and multilateral institutions. Since 1988, however, Taiwan has practiced, a pragmatic diplomacy tightly geared to maintaining its limited maneuverability (p.153).

The author interrogates in detail two salient issues vital to Taiwan's political sphere – social welfare and corruption. Beginning in a restricted manner, with only pro-KMT occupational groups like the military, civil service, education professionals and state-owned enterprises eligible for social security, the democratization of Taiwan coincided with acceleration in government spending on social welfare. The implementation of the Universal National Health Insurance (UNHI) by the KMT was a response to public pressure and opinion. From a limited and unfair system, Taiwan's welfare system today is extensive and universally lauded with political parties converging on most issues related to welfare. The KMT's insidious record in dealing with corruption paved the way for the DPP to come to power and contributed to a broader awareness of the issue and the need for consensus to introduce anti-corruption measures. In turn the political hubris of the DPP with its image sullied by corruption in high places brought the KMT to power in 2008. Since then, in spite of a huge parliamentary majority, the KMT has not introduced radical reforms to address anomalies in social welfare while it has gone the whole

way at former President Chen Shui-bian for corruption while in office as President from 2000-2008.

Dafydd Fell concludes by listing out several recommendations to correct constitutional weaknesses and praises Taiwan's political parties for establishing democratic stability that reveals adaptability and the highly attuned tendencies displayed by political parties to public perceptions reflected in a policy-making process that has matured in tandem with democracy. Blanchard and Hickey in their edited book adopt an innovative approach by delineating theoretical categories into the academic discourses revolving around the origins, dynamics and prospects of the Taiwan issue. The volume is a compilation of nine outstanding papers from two international conferences – the June 2009 Association of Chinese Political Studies (ACPS) conference co-hosted with the National Chengchi University, Taipei and the conference titled “Taiwan and The Chinese Mainland: Cross-Strait Relations in a Time of Transition” hosted by Missouri State University in October 2009. The laudable effort undertaken by the editors is to tease out the domestic political variables and theories to unravel the multi-layered China-Taiwan relations, especially since a deterministic approach subscribing to realism does have its limits. In the introduction, the editors lay out the seriousness of the theme by highlighting the importance of Taiwan to China not just by its ‘territorial’ appeal, but also by the strategic and economic value-addition features the island possesses and is coveted by Beijing. To Beijing, an ‘independent’ Taiwan has embedded within it seeds of dissent that could unravel the project of a unitary China, or the ‘one China’ so intrinsic to the relentless political spin of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Cross-Strait relations have undergone periods of extreme turbulence in the past that in many ways has acted as a deterrent of sorts and conditioned the ongoing process of *rapprochement* prevalent on either side of the straits today. It could be argued that the new leadership in Beijing is not going to adopt a strategy different from that of Hu Jintao's towards Taiwan. Hu Jintao, scripted Beijing's policy calling for “reunification” within the formula of “one country, two systems” that further evolved into “the peaceful development of relations” and the “maintenance of status quo” (p. 8). Lending credence and ballast to this interpretation has been the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) signed by both the sides in 2010 that introduced an economic integrative aspect to cross-Strait relations.

For Pan Chengxin, in his chapter “Normative convergence and cross-Strait divergence – Westphalian sovereignty as an ideational source of the Taiwan conflict,” the conflict over Taiwan is not merely one about power, but about identity and more precisely, the diverging versions of national identity (p. 28). He takes the position that since cross-Strait interactions operate on the basis of Westphalian sovereignty, the emergence of effective and meaningful solutions is distant. While China is capable of showing flexibility in economic sovereignty, it clashes with Taiwan's conception of sovereignty that has as its sources “the Westphalian nexus between sovereign authority and territorial integrity” and “also on its popular dimension” (pp. 34-35). The dominance of the Westphalian idea is such that sovereignty is seen as a value feature with clear-cut boundaries and exclusive finality of authority, and with these totemic caveats, one side's insistence on territorial integrity can only come about if the other side gives up its claim to self-determination (p. 41).

The integrative aspects of cross-Strait relations have in the past two decades introduced a modicum of ‘stability’ to Taiwan-China relations and Chin-Chang Chen in his chapter titled “Useful adversaries – How to understand the political economy of cross-Strait security” raises valid concerns regarding the pace of the initiatives made so far (p. 48). Economic engagement with the mainland will alter identity politics and pose challenges for Taiwan's security discourse.

As statistics reveal, Taiwan's growing economic dependence on the mainland could end up creating a "hostage effect" with a corollary – the hollowing out of Taiwan's industrial base with firms relocating to the mainland. Those benefitting from this transition could unwittingly end becoming political agents for the mainland. A well-grounded fear is that China could use its immense national power to manipulate trade ties and induce political concessions from Taipei (p. 56).

The ethnic quotient of cross-Strait ties is lucidly argued by Shiping Zheng in his chapter on "Ethnic Peace in the Taiwan Strait" where he argues that "ethnic identity" is to be seen afresh as a 'guarantor' of strategic peace and stability. This may perhaps explain why a full-blown military conflict has not taken place in the Taiwan Strait for close to six decades and the only exceptions have been skirmishes and localized events that invariably reiterated a *status quo* (p. 71).

Have events progressed in cross-Strait relations to a stage where a point of no-return has been reached? Steve Chan in his chapter titled "Unbalanced threat or rising integration? Explaining relations across the Taiwan Strait" argues that civil society initiatives emphasizing broader commercial linkages have led to a *détente* and de facto economic integration with China negating realist prognosis presuming actors preferring national security over economic gains (p. 93). The levels of economic integration achieved so far are perhaps indicative of a commercial logic that does not expect any military tension to undermine investments and profits and also locks in future governments to not be adventurous in attempting to sabotage current agreements and ongoing trends (p. 104). Many scholars in Taiwan subscribe to this notion and add that if current developments within the opposition Democratic People's Party (DPP) are any indication, it appears that Taiwan's China policy is moving into a 'structured neutral zone' where emotive underpinnings are absent.

To decipher the many processes involved in deepening cross-Strait relations, Jorge Tavares da Silva in his paper titled "Informal and nonofficial interactions in the new start of cross-strait relations – The case of Taiwanese businessmen" focuses on the positive effects of 'mediation interaction in transforming relations on either side of the Taiwan strait. He argues that semi-official bodies like the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits (ARATS) and the Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF) have put in place indirect regional processes for dialogue (CSCAP) that have fostered mutual trust, encouraged shared perceptions, and brought about a set of norms and values and increased interdependence (p. 117). This bottom-up strategy aims at building bridges of understanding, increasing confidence and help in changing attitudes. The author adopts John Lederachs "pyramid of peace" to explain the processes at three levels – an 'elite tier' comprising political, academic, economic and military actors; a 'second track' comprising NGOs, religious groups etc. furthering dialogue custom and mediation and the 'bottom tier' represented by civil society advocating closer relations.

Since 2008, the Kuomintang (KMT) led by Ma Ying-jeou has initiated and rapidly introduced integrative policies vis a vis the mainland. An assessment of Ma Ying-jeou's policies forms the crux of the chapter by Wang *et al.* In contrast to his predecessor, Chen Shui-bian who restricted cross-Strait economic policies and encouraged pro-independence policies, Ma Ying-jeou has adopted a policy of engagement with the mainland that encourages cross-Strait exchanges and shelves disagreement over the island's sovereignty (p. 137). Extensive surveys carried out by the authors to justify their main arguments adopt the equiprobability sampling method and come to the conclusion that Ma's policies towards the mainland revolve around shelving "high politics" issues and negotiate with Beijing on "low politics" issues, as also

adopting a “diplomatic truce” and convince Beijing of Taiwan’s need for “meaningful participation” in auxiliary agencies of the UN.

Phillip C. Saunders and Scott L. Kastner in their chapter titled “Envisioning a China-Taiwan Peace Agreement” lay out a roadmap for a potential agreement between the two sides. Should such an agreement involve a pledge from Taipei to not seek *de jure* independence so long as Beijing does not use force, it would impose domestic political and institutional costs. However, such an agreement would also have the effect of reducing uncertainty and create a template for acceptable behavior and facilitate signaling of intentions, thereby bringing benefits to actors on both sides.

Undoubtedly, the rhetoric on both sides of the Taiwan straits is no longer bellicose and unlike the deadlock in political matters, economic aspects of cross-Strait relations are flourishing. To Yuchao Zhu, in his chapter “Democratic peace” or “economic peace”? Theoretical debate and practical implications in new cross-Strait relations” this is a paradox that can be only offset by interdependence between both the sides that has the potential to become an antidote alleviating the uneasy relationship between mainland China and Taiwan (p. 176). In the final chapter by Scott L. Kastner titled “International Relations theory and the relationship across the Taiwan Strait” the author argues that IR Theory when combined with a nuanced understanding of key issues in cross-Strait relations is most useful.

To conclude, Blanchard and Hickey have made a valuable contribution in dissecting through various theoretical premises the intricacies, insecurities and possibilities enriching cross-Strait relations at a time when tectonic changes are taking place in the region in the security and economic realms.