

The PLA, Chen Shui-Bian, and the Referenda: The War Dogs That Didn't Bark

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Introduction

In the fall of 2003, Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian put forward a series of controversial proposals, including calls for referenda on various sensitive issues and reform of the 1947 constitution. This program sent immediate shock waves through the Taiwan presidential election campaign and roiled the policy establishments in Beijing and Washington. After repeated warnings to Chen through diplomatic channels and a personal envoy, President Bush, with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao at his side, took a dramatic step toward clarifying long-standing strategic ambiguity by declaring that the United States was opposed to unilateral attempts by either Beijing or Taipei to alter the status quo. Furthermore, a senior official on background stated later in the day that the United States would respond militarily to any Chinese use of force against Taiwan.¹

On the Chinese side, the escalation in cross-Strait tensions elicited strongly worded condemnations of Chen's behavior and the seeming complicity of certain U.S. officials in his actions, but also highlighted some important changes in strategy and tactics, particularly with respect to the role of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) propaganda apparatus. The most important shift was that the verbal attacks came almost exclusively from the civilian governmental and party channels, as well as unofficial military voices, with senior military officials and the military propaganda apparatus notable in their relative silence. This new posture can be starkly contrasted with the 1995–96 and even 2000 crises, when official and unofficial PLA voices were among the most aggressive and threatening. An optimist would regard this change as evidence of learning from past mistakes, since most outside analysts would agree that PLA bellicosity and saber rattling in 1996 and 2000 produced the opposite of the intended results from Beijing's perspective, increasing the winning vote shares for Lee Teng-hui and Chen Shui-bian, respectively. Indeed, this obviously subtler, nuanced strategy tracks with broader evidence of China's "new diplomacy" in the region, which seeks to achieve security goals with a more indirect approach.²

This report analyzes the content and frequency of Chinese military media commentary on Taiwan from November 2003 to March 2004. The evidence suggests that the PLA was relatively muted during this crisis, which is consistent with the lack of evidence in open sources of troop movements, exercises, or other escalatory behavior. Moreover, it is consistent with Chinese strategy since the 2000 presidential election, which has emphasized the twin pillars of economic inducement and united front with the opposition while avoiding public displays of military coercion in favor of the quiet, serious preparation of military hedging options. Particularly noteworthy was the lack of any bellicose statements in the media by senior military leaders, a regular staple of

previous cross-Strait imbroglios. The PLA's only forays into the crisis were indirect. Former major general Wang Zaixi's threatening comments in late November and early December served to inject a "militarized" element into Beijing's cross-Strait policy, though the impact was softened by the fact that he was speaking in his official capacity in the State Council's Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) and not as a representative of the PLA. Another set of widely cited articles by Major General Peng Guangqian and Senior Colonel Luo Yuan appeared in a semiofficial journal, though their academic stature gave the message less heft than if it had come from a standing member of the Central Military Commission (CMC). Instead, most of the important signals appeared in civilian media, and the Beijing leadership largely appeared to favor diplomatic channels for communications over saber rattling, preferring to leverage U.S.-China relations to force Washington to rein in Taipei.

A War of Words

The first significant response to Chen's proposal for referenda and constitutional reform was delivered by State Council Taiwan Deputy Director Wang Zaixi.³ In his speech, Wang declared that "holding a referendum on reforming the constitution is an extremely dangerous move," asserted that Chen was "playing with fire," and warned that his actions "mean that the fruits of the Taiwan compatriots' toil over many years will be destroyed in a day."⁴ In the official Chinese media, particular attention was drawn to this quotation:

[I]f the Taiwan authorities collude with all splittist forces to openly engage in pro-independence activities and challenge the mainland and the one China principle, the use of force may become unavoidable. This is what we mean by "Taiwan independence means war" [*Taidu jiushi zhanzheng ye jiushi zhege daoli*].⁵

Wang had a similarly harsh message for Washington, calling U.S. support for Taiwan independence "a very naive and extremely dangerous idea" and concluding that "the Americans will protect their own national interests but are expected to neither protect Taiwan independence nor shed blood for independence." With these mentions of the use of military force and the shedding of blood, Wang's comments represented a remilitarization of the cross-Strait dispute after a long period of emphasis on economic and political inducements.⁶

The choice of Wang as the public voice for Beijing's reaction could be interpreted in a variety of ways. By virtue of his official position, there was more than sufficient ex officio rationale for his high profile. Extrapolating from the fact that Wang had served as a major general in the PLA before retiring to the TAO, however, some outside observers interpreted his hard-line views as representing the military's internal view of the situation by direct proxy. Yet, a subtler dynamic might be at play. Using Wang, especially given his military background, allowed Beijing to walk a couple steps up the escalatory ladder without involving more-official military leaders and thus perhaps provoking an unwanted

military reaction from the United States, such as the deployment of U.S. ships or planes to the area. In this way, Beijing was able to communicate its heightened concern without actually undermining its cause.

To buttress the Taiwan Affairs Office view of the situation, additional indirect military critiques of Chen, with accompanying threats to both Taiwan and the United States, began to appear in one of the standard semiofficial journals used by Beijing to signal/deceive the outside world. In a December 3, 2003, issue of *Liaowang* (Outlook), Senior Colonel Luo Yuan, a noted hard-liner and head of the Strategy Department of the Academy of Military Sciences, asserted that Chen had touched Beijing's red line, and was therefore "playing with fire,"⁷ a Chinese phrase that in the past has been correlated with the outbreak of military conflict. Luo further argued that it was "dangerous" and "immoral" for Chen and his predecessor Lee Teng-hui to "take the restraint and tolerance of the mainland as a sign of weakness."⁸

In the same issue of *Liaowang*, Major General Peng Guangqian of the Academy of Military Sciences' Strategy Department tried to undermine some of the comfortable assumptions of foreign strategists regarding possible constraints on Chinese freedom of action. In particular, Peng sought to raise questions about some of the core elements of the argument that China's economic interdependence reduced its ability to wage war with Taiwan and/or the United States. He asserted that China was not concerned about possible drops in foreign direct investment, economic downturn, or the potential negative consequences of war for Beijing's regional neighbors. In particular, Peng sought to deflate the commonly held belief that China's hosting of the 2008 Olympics would deter conflict, since Beijing would not want a repeat of the U.S. boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics over the invasion of Afghanistan, arguing:

The Taiwan authorities say that because of the Olympics, we won't make a move. But if you compare the Olympics and the sovereignty of our country's territory, sovereign territory will always take precedence. . . . The price for reunification will be paid if necessary. We're prepared, and we can pay it. . . . The Olympics are like adding flowers to a brocade, but if the brocade is ruined . . . what use is there adding any flowers?⁹

He closed with a message for independence forces on Taiwan as well as the United States, warning "if the Taiwan splittists want to make a wager, if the international anti-China forces want to make a wager, then they inevitably will pay a heavy price."¹⁰

The tenor of official PLA commentary changed in important ways after President Bush's December 9, 2003, meeting with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, in which the former declared his opposition to unilateral moves to change the status quo by either Beijing or Taipei. The Beijing authority was clearly pleased by the move, going so far as to express its formal appreciation for Bush's remarks.¹¹ Not surprisingly, subsequent comments by senior Chinese military leaders were not marked by fiery rhetoric or threats, but instead highlighted the common interests of the United States and China, implicitly suggesting that both sides were unified in their dissatisfaction with Chen's recent

behavior. In a meeting on January 7, 2004, with former U.S. national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, Central Military Commission member and Chief of the General Staff Liang Guanglie emphasized the attractiveness of China's "one country, two systems" model and hoped that the United States and China could handle the Taiwan question "prudently and properly."¹² In a January 14 meeting with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Myers, Liang again emphasized the positive, focusing on the "good momentum" of Sino-U.S. relations and simply "enunciating China's principled stance on the Taiwan issue" without making any threats.¹³ While calling splittist activities on Taiwan "unbearable," the public reporting of CMC Vice Chairs Guo Boxiong and Cao Gangchuan's meeting with Myers focused on common interests in the bilateral relationship,¹⁴ as did the reporting on Cao's January 30 meeting with Deputy Secretary of State Armitage¹⁵ and his February 10 meeting with Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Feith in the Defense Consultative Talks.¹⁶ Even the National People's Congress meetings on the eve of the March election in Taiwan did not yield any significant PLA commentary on Chen and cross-Strait relations, despite a past record of serving as a channel for articulation of military views on foreign policy. Indeed, there was no mention of Taiwan at all in the speeches of the CMC members and heads of the general departments, leaving only the civilians, notably Premier Wen Jiabao, to reiterate the message that China "will never allow anyone to split Taiwan from the mainland."¹⁷

Conclusion

By the evening of March 20, 2004, the crisis over the contested election of Chen Shui-bian had begun, but one thing was clear. Despite an 80 percent turnout, only 45 percent of voters cast a ballot for the referenda, failing to meet the operative threshold of 50 percent. Given the stakes involved and Chen's prevote comments about the value of the referenda as a message to China, the Beijing authority was naturally pleased by the failure, crowing:

On March 20, the Taiwan authorities willfully held the so-called peace referendum in a provocative attempt to undermine cross-Strait relations and split the motherland. The referendum turned out to be invalid. Facts have proven that this illegal act goes against the will of the people. Any attempt to separate Taiwan from China is doomed to failure.¹⁸

True to form, the military media's response was simply to print a truncated version of the Xinhua News Agency piece with no additional commentary of their own.¹⁹ The lesson seemed clear: leveraging Sino-U.S. relations to pressure the island, combined with a lack of clumsy saber rattling, had finally produced success in affecting Taiwanese political developments, thus validating the PLA propaganda strategy since November 2003. Yet, the implications of this sequence for future crises are equally profound, since official bellicosity in the military media, particularly statements by senior military leaders, would therefore represent an escalation of rhetoric, perhaps signaling imminent military action.

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Notes

¹ The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own, and do not represent the views of the RAND Corporation or any of its wise and generous sponsors.

² Evan Medeiros and Taylor Fravel, "China's 'New Diplomacy,'" *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2003.

³ "Deputy Director of State Council Taiwan Affairs Office Wang Zaixi: 'Taiwan Independence' Is the Bottom Line," *Zhongguo xinwen she*, November 18, 2003; Liao Yi, "Wang Zaixi Points Out: 'Holding a Referendum for Reforming the Constitution' Is an Extremely Dangerous Move," Xinhua News Agency, November 18, 2003; "Chen Shui-bian's Independence Stance May Trigger War," *People's Daily*, November 20, 2003; and "Independence Declaration Leads to War," *China Daily*, November 19, 2003.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ John Pomfret, "China Warns Taiwan That Attack May Be 'Unavoidable'; General Condemns President's Moves Towards Independence," *Washington Post*, November 19, 2003.

⁷ Quoted in "Chen Shui-bian Is to Blame If War Breaks Out," *People's Daily*, December 3, 2003.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ John Pomfret, "China Lauds Bush for Comments on Taiwan," *Washington Post*, December 11, 2003.

¹² Li Shijia, "Liang Guanglie Meets American Guest," *PLA Daily*, January 7, 2004.

¹³ Tan Jingjing, "Liang Guanglie Meets U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff," Xinhua Asia-Pacific Service, January 14, 2004.

¹⁴ "Chinese Leaders Meet Top U.S. General," Xinhua News Agency, January 14, 2004.

¹⁵ Lu Chuangzhong, "Cao Gangchuan Meets American Visitors," Xinhua News Agency, January 30, 2004.

¹⁶ "Chinese Defense Minister Meets U.S. Undersecretary of Defense," Xinhua News Agency, February 10, 2004.

¹⁷ "China Will Never Allow Anyone to Split Taiwan," Xinhua News Agency, March 14, 2004.

¹⁸ "'Taiwan Referendum' Vetoed by the People," *People's Daily*, March 21, 2004.

¹⁹ Chen Binhua and Zhang Yong, "Party and State Council Taiwan Affairs Offices Publish Statement on the Defeat of the Taiwan 'Referendum,'" Xinhua News Agency, March 20, 2004.