1976

Cutting the Gordian Knot: Taiwan and U.S. China Relations

Mike Mansfield 1903-2001

Cutting the Gordian Knot:
Taiwan and U.S.-China Relations

By Senator Mike Mansfield

United States relations with China today are on a plateau, reached more than three years ago with the opening of diplomatic liaison offices in Peking and Washington. President Ford has repeatedly stated that the United States is determined "to complete the normalization of relations with the People's Republic of China on the basis of the Shanghai Communique." However, there has been a policy of avoidance. With the principal antagonists in the Chinese civil war now gone, it is time to wipe the slate clean, to fulfill the promise of the Shanghai Communique by completing the process. There is only one obstacle to normalization, the Taiwan issue.

Taiwan is a point of utmost sensitivity in China's new national consciousness. It is the last vestige of China's humiliation at the hands of outside powers. China's position on normalization is unwavering. It expects the United States to sever diplomatic relations with Taiwan, terminate the defense treaty, and withdraw all military forces from the island. This is the Japanese formula as applied to the American situation.

Since 1972, when it severed relations with Taiwan and established diplomatic relations with Peking, Japan's trade

with and investments in Taiwan continue at high levels. Japanese affairs relating to the island are looked after by a quasi-official office called the Japanese Interchange Association. Taiwan maintains a similar non-diplomatic office in Tokyo. Other countries having diplomatic relations with China operate in Taiwan under similar arrangements. So could the United States.

The answer to the Taiwan problem is not to be found in Peking but in Washington. It is a domestic problem for the United States. The fact that must be faced is that the United States cannot have it both ways. We cannot strengthen our ties with a claimant government of China on Taiwan and, at the same time, expect to advance a new relationship with the government of the People's Republic of China. The Shanghai Communique was designed as a transitional arrangement; it did not predicate an indefinite ambivalence in America's China policy. Equivocation over the Taiwan problem has continued far too long. Ambivalence has created a dangerous situation and further delay could bring about serious long-term consequences for American policy in the Pacific area.

Stagnation is the enemy of a sound, constructive foreign policy, and indecision in policy-making about Taiwan is pushing

Americans into choosing sides. There is a hint of a resurgence of the divisiveness of a quarter century ago that led to the current policy dilemma. The internal problems of China in the wake of Mao's departure could create conditions in both countries where the mutual interests now sustaining the relationship will be weakened. Delay may well strengthen the hand of the elements in the Chinese leadership seeking to restore greater comity with the Soviet Union even at the expense of the U.S. relationship. The failure to face up to the Taiwan issue will only make the inevitable decision more difficult, controversial, and divisive.

Although it is unrealistic to expect that the Chinese government will renounce the use of force to regain control of

Taiwan, the Chinese are not likely to rush the process of absorbing Taiwan into the life of the mainland after the normalization of relations between China and the United States. As the Chinese see the problem, acceptance of the principle at stake and the practical incorporation of Taiwan into China's life are two different matters. The Chinese are impatient with regard to unequivocal acceptance of the principle, which stands in the way of complete normalization of relations. But that impatience over principle, however, is tempered by priorities. Concern over the Soviet Union comes first at this time. Insofar as Taiwan is concerned, timing does not appear to be a pressing problem. While the process of absorption is regarded as inevitable it is likely to take many years.

I believe that satisfactory arrangements can be worked out concerning the handling of America's residual relations with Taiwan, as has been the case with Japan and other countries. Moreover, the Chinese know full well that any unprovoked military action in the Western Pacific would be a seriously unsettling event in Asia which could set off grave repercussions in the United States and Japan, to say the least. It would undermine a basic element in present Chinese foreign policy toward the Soviet Union. The peaceful merging of Taiwan with the mainland, therefore, must

be an implicit element in working out diplomatic arrangements between the People's Republic and the United States.

Congressional action may be necessary to arrange for continuation of trade and related ties to Taiwan to accord with a U.S. version of the "Japanese formula". In the spirit of bi-partisanship which has marked support of U.S. China policy since the Shanghai Communique, Congress should be prepared to take such action, as the Senate did in 1971 in approving a resolution giving "....full support to the President (Nixon) in seeking the normalization of relations with the People's Republic of China."

It is important that a dialogue begin without delay between the People's Republic and Taiwan. The Shanghai Communique states that America's goal is "a peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question by the Chinese themselves." Leaders of the People's Republic of China have repeatedly expressed their willingness to engage in peaceful relations with Taiwan and have made gestures to underscore the point.

For more than two decades the United States closed its official mind to China and the channels of effective communication between the two nations were blocked. The consequences of this period of know-nothingism still linger. Miscalculations

about China may well have been the main factor in the involvement of the United States in two major wars in Asia in a single generation. Pressures are at work which could cause another major miscalculation over Taiwan.

America's national interest is deeply involved in moving without further delay to settle the Taiwan problem. Further delay could well prove to be another in the long series of disastrous miscalculations which have afflicted U.S. foreign policy in Asia since World War II. Solving this problem will put the United States in a unique position in the triangular relationship. If it acts more wisely than in the past, the United States will act now, not on the basis of emotional catchphrases, but on the basis of its long-range interests in the Western Pacific. Fundamental to the safeguarding of these interests is an open diplomatic door between the government of what will soon be a billion Chinese and the government of the people of the United States.