

## "Towards China's Reunification?"

On January 15, 2005, representatives of the government of China and of the authorities on Taiwan held a meeting in Macao, which has been described as "historic." They agreed that, for the first time since 1949, there would be direct flights from mainland China to Taiwan. True, this agreement was for three weeks only, beginning January 29. And true, the flights were restricted to persons domiciled in Taiwan who were temporarily located on the mainland, to permit them to return to see families during the Chinese New Year. Who were these people permitted to take the flights? They were Taiwanese residents who are conducting business on the mainland. There are between 700,000 and 1 million such people, and their number is growing steadily. Given the recent exchange of harsh rhetoric between Beijing and Taipei, the agreement was quite unexpected and sets an important precedent.

One must appreciate the historical background to assess its importance. We speak of the continuity of Chinese civilization over 5000 years. But if one looks closely at the history of China, there were a series of empires which lasted a certain time followed almost always by periods of breakdown of a central authority. The political history of China has been a continuous attempt to maintain or restore the unity of the country.

In the nineteenth century, the Chinese empire was under assault from outside imperialist powers. The weakening of the imperial power made possible the Chinese revolution of 1911, which ended the imperial dynasty. But from 1911 on, China was beset by regionalisms and civil war, until finally in 1949 the Chinese Communist Party and its army entered Shanghai and proclaimed the People's Republic of China. Unity restored, or almost.

What happened, as we know, is that the previous government of China, that of Chiang Kai-Shek and the Kuomintang party retreated with part of their army to the island of Taiwan and continued to argue that it was the government of China, with the support of the U.S. government. The world then was required to choose between two alternate claimants to being the legitimate government of "one China" - that on the mainland and that on Taiwan. Since the key difference between the two governments was political, the rest of the world chose sides largely in terms of their position on the Cold War conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. This meant that the Taiwan-based government kept for a long time the seat of China in the United Nations.

Bit by bit, however, various countries changed their position and the number of countries recognizing Beijing grew steadily. In July 1971, Henry Kissinger made a secret visit to Beijing, to prepare a later visit by President Nixon. In October of that year, the annual resolution to recognize the Chinese government in Beijing as the legitimate holder of the U.N. seat was finally adopted by the U.N. General Assembly. In February, 1972, Nixon came to Beijing to meet with Mao Zedong. At the end of this encounter, the U.S. and China signed on Feb. 28, 1972 the Shanghai Communiqué, in which it is said: "The United States acknowledges that all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain that there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China. The United States government does not challenge that position."

In 1979, the U.S. and the Beijing government established diplomatic relations. The U.S. cut such relations with the Taiwan government and abrogated the U.S.-China Defense pact. But of course, the Taiwan government remained in place. There now began, however, an

evolution of the dispute. Originally, in 1949, the dispute was exclusively about politics and the Cold War. But in the 1980s the group on Taiwan who stood for the idea of Taiwanese independence began to gain strength. There was now a second issue, quite different from the first. As the Cold War issue waned (and largely disappeared in the 1990s), the issue of secession came to the fore.

China calls for the reintegration of Taiwan into the political framework of the country. Those on Taiwan who resist this do so for two different reasons - discomfort with the nature of the political system of the People's Republic of China, and belief in the right of the Taiwanese to secede. Of course China, like most countries in the world faced with the problem of multiple ethnic groups within their boundaries, stands firmly against secession. See similar positions taken these days by Canada, Spain, France, Russia, Georgia, Turkey, Sudan, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia among others.

There developed one other important change in the situation of China's relation with Taiwan. Beginning in the 1960s, Taiwan grew in economic strength and wealth. It became an important locus of capital accumulation. However, beginning in the 1980s, the change in economic policy in the People's Republic of China led it too to grow in economic strength and wealth. There came a point where Taiwan's prosperity was being threatened by the competition that was coming from mainland China. One consequence of this was the desire of businessmen located in Taiwan to move some of their economic investment to the mainland. This accounts for the almost one million Taiwanese residents who are now working on the mainland. In the long run, this group has everything to gain from further economic ties between the mainland and Taiwan. And this may require closer political ties. We may have now, for the first time, a powerful political group within Taiwan who are actively interested in reunification.

There is another factor playing here. It is the changing geopolitical scene - the decline of U.S. power worldwide and the growing geopolitical strength of China. This cannot help but stir a combination of increased Chinese nationalism among Taiwan residents and self-interested desire to flow with the geopolitical tide.

Is this enough to bring about reunification in a near future? It depends on many things: the degree to which isolationism takes hold in the U.S.; the degree to which the political relations of Japan and China improve; the degree to which there are serious moves toward Korean reunification. All of this can tilt the political atmosphere in important ways, and change the dynamics of China-Taiwan relations. If ten or twenty years from now, there is a serious East Asian regional bloc of China, Korea, and Japan, Taiwan will not want to be outside it.

by Immanuel Wallerstein