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A TALE OF TWO NATIONALISMS

THE RECENT JOINT American–Japanese declaration of common concern over ‘security’ in the Taiwan Strait, marking the resolve of Tokyo to return to the scene of former colonial operations in the South China Sea, has drawn international attention to the future of Taiwan once again. Many fear that a major military conflict between China and the United States—perhaps now joined by Japan—may break out over this issue in the coming years. Political developments within the island itself have attracted much less discussion, though last year’s presidential and legislative elections were followed more closely than such contests in the past. The presidential poll saw a narrow victory by the incumbent leader from the Democratic Progressive Party, Chen Shui-bian, for the Green camp; in the subsequent legislative elections, the Blue camp of the old Chinese Nationalist Party, the Kuomintang and its allies, prevailed. The recent round-table in *NLR*, in which distinguished Taiwanese artists and intellectuals reflected critically on the current scene,¹ is a hopeful sign that the rich debates within Taiwan may become more widely known abroad, where perceptions have tended to be shaped mainly by commentaries centred on the positions of the us and China, not the island itself.

Moving in the other direction, foreign scholars and their ideas have begun to play a part in local discussions about the past and future of Taiwan. A notable example has been Benedict Anderson’s address—given in Taipei in 2000, and published in *NLR* the following year—which offered a broad comparative framework for understanding the rise of Taiwanese nationalism. Developing out of his famous work *Imagined Communities*, this was an analysis that raised the question of whether

the Taiwanese should be regarded as a classic 'creole' community.² The forthcoming work on the historical origins of Taiwanese nationalism under Japanese imperial rule by Rwei-Ren Wu, a landmark in the field, is a major response, also set in a comparative perspective that includes Korea, Okinawa and the Kuriles, as well as East European experiences.³

In these debates, mainland scholars have hitherto played little part. Political conditions there have made independent contributions to thinking about Taiwan scarcely audible amid the high-pitched volume of official ideology, though eventually serious interlocutors are likely to emerge, as they have done on Tibet.⁴ The sooner this happens, the better for the communities on both sides of the Strait. In England an attempt to look at the problem of Taiwan in bi-focal fashion, taking considerations in both Beijing and Taipei into account, was made by Perry Anderson in an article written soon after the controversy over the results of the presidential election last year.⁵ Since then, however, the politics of the island have moved on. The year-end legislative elections saw, alongside the retention by the Blue camp of its parliamentary majority, a sharp drop in voter turnout, from slightly above 80 per cent in March to under 60 per cent in December: a low-water mark in Taiwan's short history of democracy, indicating a measure of disillusionment with the quality of domestic politics. But the tide of Taiwanese nationalism shows no sign of ebbing.⁶

How should we view these historical phenomena? A good starting-point is Benedict Anderson's address on Asian nationalism. In it he argues that Taiwanese nationalism can be viewed as a contemporary manifestation of a familiar form of overseas settler nationalism, which nurtures

¹ Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Chu Tien-hsin, Tang Nuo and Hsia Chu-joe, 'Tensions in Taiwan', NLR 28, July–August 2004, pp. 19–42.

² 'Western Nationalism and Eastern Nationalism. Is There a Difference that Matters?', NLR 9, May–June 2001, pp. 31–42.

³ 'The Formosan Ideology: Oriental Colonialism and the Rise of Taiwanese Nationalism, 1895–1945', Dissertation, University of Chicago, 2003.

⁴ See Wang Lixiong, 'Reflections on Tibet', NLR 14, March–April 2002, pp. 79–111, and the reply by Tsering Shakya, 'Blood in the Snows', NLR 15, May–June 2002, pp. 39–60.

⁵ Perry Anderson, 'Stand-Off in Taiwan', *London Review of Books*, 3 June 2004.

⁶ I would like to thank *Taiwan shehui yenchiu chik'an* [Taiwan: A Radical Quarterly in Social Studies], and Sechin Yung-hsiang Chien in particular, for inviting me to set down an earlier version of these thoughts, 'Kuotzu chuyi tzai Taiwan', in the December 2004 issue of the journal.

a distinctive self-identity and seeks separation from the metropolitan empire, as the Thirteen Colonies did from England in the eighteenth century, the Latin American nations from Spain and Portugal in the early nineteenth century, and the Dominions from Britain in the late nineteenth century. The legitimacy of this kind of nationalism, he argues, did not in the past require any claims of ethnic or linguistic difference, and need not do so today. If Taiwanese identity is a late twentieth-century variant of the same pattern, what then of Chinese nationalism? From the time of Sun Yat-sen onwards, he suggests, it combined the impulses of a 'popular nationalism', resisting Western and Japanese penetration of the mainland, with strands of an 'official nationalism' derived from the claims of the Qing state, itself an inland empire. The former emerged within a set of worldwide anti-imperialist movements that fought to liberate subjugated peoples, inspiring them to create a vision of their own independent future. The latter aimed at control of territory and restoration of power in the name of pre-modern traditions and past conquests, like the Young Turks in the Ottoman Empire.⁷ In the history of the twentieth century, he points out, these two forms of nationalism have often overlapped and coexisted within a single nation, but he believes it essential to be vigilant and not to confuse them.

Nationalism's variations

We can also, however, look more closely at the ways in which discourses of national legitimacy have varied according to different world-historical conditions. For these do not come in homogeneous packages. They typically form a combination, in which differing appeals acquire different weights in successive ideological constructions. Democratic, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, social or economic appeals gain priority, or become subordinate, in contrasting rank-orders according to the period in question. The following is a rough sketch of the main sequence of these.

First, there was settler nationalism, entering world history with the American Revolution and targeting the existing order of colonial imperialism, as famously shown in *Imagined Communities*. For this type of nationalism, vigorous construction of local identity tended to be mainly

⁷ 'Western Nationalism, Eastern Nationalism' treats the varieties of Chinese nationalism as just one case in a much wider optic, which includes—among others—Russian, Ethiopian, Japanese, British, Korean and Indian versions as well.

based on demands for proto-democratic rights, which then lent powerful support to economic and other political rights. The priority order would be: proto-democratic claims ('no taxation without representation'), and then political and economic rights to sovereignty. Ethnic claims did not feature at all. Second came romantic nationalism, appealing to ethnic and linguistic particularities, which emerged as dynastic states such as the Habsburg or Ottoman empires started to break down. In direct contrast to the old order in these states, cultural similarity between rulers and ruled now became a requirement of political legitimacy, as many authors have stressed. Democratic demands as such were less salient among the movements fighting for national unity or independence in this period. The rank-order now became: ethnicity, language, culture, followed by political rights—usually conceived in a more collective than individual way—or social reforms.

If this romantic nationalism originated in Europe, its themes had spread well beyond it by the time of the First World War. In the next phase, Wilsonian doctrine married its legacy to conceptions derived from American experience, taking the United States as the ideal society for global imitation, proclaiming national self-determination and democracy as interlinked principles. In practice, however, the new states created in Central and Eastern Europe after 1918 were rarely democratic, and self-determination was granted little sufferance outside Europe. The Versailles Treaty even extended Western colonialism into the Middle East, and had no time for the national protests of March First in Korea or May Fourth in China, in keeping with Wilson's own practices in the Caribbean and Latin America. 'Wilsonian' discourse thus had severe limitations. It was uneven and evasive in application, for the most part gave only lip-service to democracy, and had no hesitation in repressing people's rights to revolution. Its rank-order was: first, sovereignty, based—selectively—on ethnic, linguistic and cultural criteria, and a long way after that, talk of political democracy.

Parallel to Wilsonian doctrines, there developed in the same period a rival Leninist discourse, whose appeal was based on the Russian rather than the American Revolution. Its impact was worldwide—though its greatest effect was felt outside Europe—and reached its peak during and after the Second World War. This position held that while national struggles against imperialism were vital, they were to be subsumed by political and economic struggles between socialism and capitalism,

which was the quintessential conflict driving modern historical development. The key questions of state and revolution could thus not be posed in terms of building up a standard nation-state. After the split of East and West Germany, it was West Germany that demanded reunification, which was coolly rejected by the East for forty years, in the name of Leninist ideology. The same understanding gave rise to the construction of multi-national federations in the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia.

When the Cold War became a hot war in the Korean Peninsula, the 'free world' mantras of the capitalist powers were very similar to the Leninist slogans of their communist counterparts in downplaying ethno-national factors in world politics, which risked endangering their control of previously acquired colonies. It was during this period that many Asian and African countries won their independence, in the high tide of anti-imperialist struggles of the 1950s and 1960s. Rarely did these new states confine themselves to ethno-linguistic boundaries. More often than not their new frontier lines were drawn by colonial history rather than ethnic divisions. For these countries, ethnic difference was a historical given, whereas what really mattered was the winning of political sovereignty, which possessed clear-cut priority over linguistic or cultural demands. In cases where the nation was ethnically or linguistically more or less homogeneous, the battle to define it was typically a function of the Cold War. When Korea and Vietnam were divided, it was always the North, under a communist regime, that demanded reunification, believing that the truncation of the country was due to imperialist manipulation, while the South, backed by American power, resisted negotiations over national unity—substantially the opposite of the situation in Germany, indicating the greater significance of national demands for the Leninist movements in Asia. Overall, the rank-order of Leninist demands after the Second World War was usually: anti-capitalist revolution first, to build political and economic sovereignty, and then national unity.

Finally, since the 1990s discourses of nationalism and independence have changed course more than once again, under the historical conditions of capitalist globalization. One symptom of this has been the emergence of what Benedict Anderson has termed 'long-distance nationalism', in which many of the firmest nationalists from developing countries often reside in Europe or America and have no intention of returning home, yet remain politically active as patriotic champions of their ancestral land. In addition, three other aspects of the contemporary

period should be noted. The first is the series of upheavals in the Soviet bloc, starting with changes in Poland in early 1989. To begin with, interpretations of these focused on local pressures for democratization and economic demands for liberal market reforms. Yet once the USSR withdrew its troops from Eastern Europe and the small Baltic nations regained independence, Leninist assertions could no longer preserve the integrity of the Soviet Union itself, which broke up into a Russian core flanked by an arc of new states along its southern borders. From the Caucasus to Central Asia, ethnic-nationalist discourses increasingly became the principal, or even sole, basis of legitimacy of the resulting regimes. In Central and Eastern Europe, on the other hand, most of the former satellite countries expressed national aspirations to liberal democracy and a market economy. There was little of the self-reliance or solidarity among them that marked newly emergent nations of the Third World in the 1950s; all rather sought to join an expanding European Union as quickly as possible. Generally speaking, the rank-order here was: first democratic demands, then economic and ethnic ones.

By the time of the disintegration of Yugoslavia, however, the discourse of democracy was fading. In the Balkans and elsewhere, ethnic claims became the basis for bloody struggles between rival communities. Through both wars and so-called humanitarian interventions, linguistic, cultural and religious differences were amplified to a point where they seemed all but irreconcilable. External diplomatic and military interventions by the West were rarely concerned with questions of democracy. Meanwhile, the worldwide recession into which leftist politics went after the collapse of the Soviet bloc meant there were few or no alternative constructions for national aspirations at the time. It is probably no accident that many of the most severe ethnic conflicts in the modern history of Africa exploded during this period, even if their origins can often be traced back to the deliberate fostering of tribal or other tensions by the colonial powers, or great-power manipulations of the Cold War period.

Meanwhile, the development of capitalist globalization was generating new discourses of imperial power. The creation of NAFTA and the WTO, continual policy interventions by the IMF, and effortless demonstrations of American military power in the Gulf and the Balkans—eventually leading to mass reactions, from Seattle onwards—all contributed to ideas of a new empire. Then the US, lashing out after the September 11

attacks, launched invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. The visible reality of empire has since produced many efforts to conceptualize the shape of a new imperial order. Through this lens of world power relations, it becomes more and more difficult to comprehend armed ethnic conflicts in Africa. With the overwhelming emphasis on anti-terrorist war, 'security' and 'stability' have become the top priorities. The result is that under American dominion, 'regime change' has become steadily more conceivable, whereas independent aspirations to nationhood have faded away considerably.⁸ This context has deeply marked national movements in the present phase, bending some towards a willing or unwilling 'client nationalism'. For many Bosniaks, Kosovars, Kurds and others, including Lebanese at the recent anti-Syria demonstrations in Beirut, the order of priorities has become: protection by the empire through humanitarian-military intervention, economic prosperity through marketization, then political rights to freedom and democracy.

Chinese legacies

This is the general background against which we should consider the growth of an intense local consciousness and sense of collective identity in Taiwan. These are rooted in a set of historical conditions in which a number of experiences have left their mark. The settlement of the island by migrants from the mainland in Ming–Qing times created some of the premises for a delayed 'creole' nationalism. Fifty years of Japanese occupation, widening the cultural distance between the communities on either side of the Strait, brought the Taiwanese under the grip of a modernizing colonialism whose administration was much more advanced than that of the European powers, arousing elements of an 'anti-imperialist' nationalism.⁹ American military and diplomatic guardianship since the 1950s, and the dependencies it involves, have fostered elements of a 'client' nationalism. To understand how these can interact within the island, it is necessary to look first of all, however, at the legitimating discourses of the two Chinese states, the PRC and the ROC.

The newly founded People's Republic, based on a mass revolutionary movement led by the Chinese Communist Party that had triumphed

⁸ East Timor forms the shining exception in this period. More typical have been the fates of Western Sahara and Chechnya.

⁹ For this fascinating, if truncated development, see Rwei-Ren Wu's 'Formosan Ideology', Chapters Three and Four.

in a civil war, conceived itself in classical Leninist terms. Before 1945 cCP leaders did not reject, and even encouraged, the possibility that the people of Taiwan might throw off Japanese rule in search of their own independence. After 1949, the cCP still defined its task as 'liberating the oppressed people' of the island. For the moment American imperialist intervention prevented the People's Liberation Army from doing so. But this remained the long-term goal, consistent with a Leninist subordination of national questions to a revolutionary social and economic agenda. Diplomatically, Beijing demonstrated considerable flexibility over Taiwan for some two decades after 1949.¹⁰ Even after the PRC gained China's seat at the Security Council in 1971, its stance did not change dramatically. Starting from Nixon's China visit in the early 1970s, sealed by Deng Xiaoping's American tour and China's ensuing attack on Vietnam in 1979, the PRC did not let the 'Taiwan Question' stand in the way of more important objectives. It did not make American withdrawal from Taiwan, still a major military and intelligence base for Washington, a condition for establishing relations with the United States, and accepted the continuation of a de facto US protectorate over the island. The 1980s were a time when the cCP turned away from the domestic extremism of the Cultural Revolution, and sought to regain popular support with more flexible and tolerant policies. Taiwan also moved up the agenda. Confident in its 'open up and reform' programme, the cCP embarked on a strategy of 'peaceful competition' with the KMT, holding its old rival in Taipei solely responsible for blocking reunification. Declaring it would 'place its hope in the Taiwanese people', Beijing encouraged Taiwan's democratization and promoted multi-level cross-Strait exchanges.

In the years when it held power on the mainland, the KMT had for its part propagated an official Chinese nationalism to counter the socialist and class-struggle position of the cCP. Taking the slogan of 'one nation, one ideology and one leader' under Chiang Kai-shek as its basis of legitimacy, the ROC government poured huge resources into military campaigns of annihilation against the communists. After the KMT regime fled to Taiwan in 1949, both the senior and the junior Chiangs insisted that the ROC government in Taipei represented the entirety of the former Qing empire, including even the People's Republic of Mongolia, an

¹⁰ Before 1971, the PRC did not seek to supplant the ROC in each and every one of its efforts to break through diplomatic isolation. It maintained this approach for many years even after 1971.

independent state since 1921.¹¹ Under KMT rule, Taiwan was in theory treated as only one of twenty-odd Chinese provinces over which it claimed sovereignty, and which were nominally—and predominantly—represented in its political institutions. The so-called ‘eternal deputies’ (*wan nien kuo tai*)—KMT geriatrics dating from the National Assembly of 1947—kept their seats as representatives of mainland provinces until the early 1990s. For forty years, it was they who formally ‘elected’ the two Chiangs to the Presidency of the ROC. In terms of cross-Strait relations, it was the KMT regime in Taipei that rejected out of hand any talks between the two governments, adamantly repeating its ‘Three Nos’—no contacts, no negotiations and no concessions. The two Chiangs backed this position with plans for reclaiming the mainland with American military assistance—ROC aircraft launching clandestine sabotage drops against the PRC well into the early 1960s. Inside the island, the mainlanders who arrived in Taiwan after Chiang Kai-shek’s defeat in 1949 were always a minority, making up at most a sixth of the population. But within the constitutional structure of the ROC they were supposed to embody the whole of continental China, with its enormously much larger population than that of the island. Dominating the political system, they also enjoyed many other advantages in employment and social mobility.

In a sense, then, the KMT ruled Taiwan as an outside force—in this, not entirely unlike Tokyo between 1895 and 1945. While outwardly the state maintained a modern nationalist discourse, inwardly the basis of its power rested on a marked cultural and social difference between itself and the local people, and tight control over direct political participation by the islanders. A symptom of this system was the imposition of Mandarin as a required ‘national speech’, which effectively discriminated against the native majority of the population, which spoke Holo (a Fujianese dialect also known as Minnan, not mutually comprehensible with Mandarin). In reality, the newcomers themselves spoke this supposedly uniform language in the myriad accents of their towns or villages of origin in every possible province or even county of the mainland. Their

¹¹ The US ran into trouble with the elder Chiang when it wanted to make a deal with the USSR to admit both Mongolia and Mauritania into the UN in 1960. Chiang insisted he would again veto this in the Security Council, as he had in 1955, and gave up the fight only after complicated pressures by the US. The two countries eventually entered the UN in 1961. The ROC eliminated Mongolia from its official map of the territory over which it claims sovereignty in 2002, ‘out of practical considerations’ only, not yet as a constitutional amendment.

consciousness of being 'Chinese'—in this not unlike the way in which a layer of privileged older Taiwanese 'felt more Japanese than Chinese'—reflects in part the social stratification within the island over the past half-century, and is probably not just a pure longing for the rich cultural traditions of China.

From the early 1970s onwards, the KMT faced two growing threats to its position. Domestically, fast economic development had greatly increased the urban population, multiplying the numbers of students and the educated middle class in general, increasingly restive under its dictatorship. Demands for democratization were rising throughout Taiwanese society. At the same time, increasingly close relations between the US and the PRC threatened the regime with loss of its external guarantee of security, and possible abandonment by Washington. Despite brutal repression before and after the elder Chiang died in 1975, a broadening opposition emerged in the 1970s, and gathered pace in the 1980s. Before his death in 1988, Chiang Ching-kuo moved to re-legitimize the KMT's rule by lifting martial law at home and relaxing the regime's refusal to have any dealings with the mainland. With tacit encouragement from political authorities on both sides of the Strait, Taiwanese firms had already started to invest in coastal regions of the mainland. In Beijing, Deng Xiaoping is said to have recalled comradely relations between the CCP and KMT in the early 1920s, and put out secret feelers for some kind of an understanding with Chiang Ching-kuo.

Thus, in the spring of 1989 many Taiwanese journalists were in Beijing, not because they anticipated mass demonstrations in Tian'anmen Square, but for the historic occasion of the first visit by a high-ranking official from Taipei to the capital of the PRC—when the then Finance Minister Shirley Kuo arrived to attend the annual meeting of the Asian Development Bank—and the first game played by a Taiwanese sports team on the mainland. The massacre of June 4 shocked public opinion in Taiwan as much as anywhere else. Ironically, opinion polls conducted inside Taiwan before and after June 4, 1989, saw growing support not only for freedom and democracy, but also for reunification with China, along the exact opposite line to the KMT's official position at the time. In Taiwan, the democratic movement that flowered in the 'wild azalea' student demonstrations of early 1990, backed by large-scale labour unrest in the towns and the countryside, broke through the crust of the KMT's old regime. Rather than lose control of the situation, the

government of Lee Teng-hui—who had succeeded Chiang Ching-kuo in 1988—responded to pressures from below by seeking to regain the initiative in institutional reform, and take the credit for it. The result was a dismantling of police and censorship controls, abolition of ‘eternal deputies’ in the National Assembly, winding up of the ‘mobilization and elimination of rebels’ (*tung yuan kan luan*) system in the island, and an announcement of the end of hostilities against the PRC. For a while it seemed Taipei had the upper hand in the war of words over future reunification, since it had ‘democracy’ on its side.

Meanwhile Beijing, encountering international sanctions in the aftermath of the massacre, made special efforts to attract Taiwanese capital to the mainland. In this situation, Taipei took the initiative in setting up an ostensibly unofficial Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF) for the purpose of managing practical matters of trade and travel. To this Beijing responded by creating a counterpart Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait (ARATS). A meeting between the heads of the two organizations was held in Singapore, followed by the visit of the deputy head of the ARATS, Tang Shubei, to Taiwan. These developments, encouraging unionists on both sides, provided Beijing with urgently needed political and economic breathing space after 1989. But the hopes the CCP had entertained that Taiwan could be reintegrated into the PRC by cutting a deal with top KMT leaders, which would give them the kind of honorific status that leading warlords and generals who submitted to Beijing after the civil war had received, were illusory. By late 1991 Beijing had been told by Taipei that ‘secret deals’ were no longer possible after democratization in the island.

Mainland empire-building

At the same time, the legitimacy basis of the CCP’s rule was changing. By now, Maoist denunciation of the dangers of a ‘peaceful evolution’ to capitalism were a thing of the past. After Deng’s tour of the south in 1992, all-out marketization was unleashed, with rampant capitalist development, very fast rates of growth and rising inequality. Official claims that this was still a ‘socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics’ resembled, in the Chinese phrase, a new firm being floated under the name of an old established company (*jie ke shang shi*). The new, uneven prosperity considerably eased the serious crisis of political legitimacy that overtook the regime after the Tian’anmen massacre. But the contradiction

between fading invocations of socialism and the realities of a runaway capitalism still left an acute moral and ideological vacuum. To fill it, the CCP turned increasingly to nationalist appeals. Its fears were intensified by the spectacle of the disintegration of the USSR and Yugoslavia, which some of its think-tanks as well as observers abroad warned might have a bearing on its own future. ‘Stability’ and ‘security’ had been the watchwords for Beijing since the Tian’anmen crackdown of 1989. Now they gained new force in the name of national interest. The 1990s saw the steady rise of an official variety of nationalism, based on territorial claims derived from old dynastic imperial conquests, and expansion of the wealth and power of the central state. The general ideological shift of the CCP was formalized in 2000 with the official adoption of the doctrine of the ‘three representatives’; the Party no longer stood for socialist revolution, but simply for ‘the most advanced forces of production’ and ‘most advanced culture’, without any reference to class, and the ‘greatest interest of the Chinese nation’, without any ethnic particulars.

At home, the significance of the turn has been pronounced in Beijing’s changing approach towards Tibet and the peoples of Xinjiang: from the mid 1990s onwards, its general nationality policies acquired a marked Great-Han chauvinist cast. Han immigration and economic expansion into both regions, especially Xinjiang where less acclimatization is needed, have been growing at an alarming pace, upsetting population balances and aggravating ethnic tensions, leading in turn to an escalation of repression. Abroad, far from standing up for anti-imperialism, let alone socialism, the PRC has sought to join the ranks of the big powers on their own terms. At a time when American military expansionism is at a peak, Beijing has assisted the US invasion of Afghanistan, approved the US occupation of Iraq in the Security Council, and endorsed the US coup in Haiti. Meek towards the strong, it is bullying towards the weak, disregarding the conflicts and sufferings of ordinary peoples, with its heavy investment schemes in Sudan and indifference to famine in North Korea. The objective of the new official nationalism—which, as in Europe before the First World War, can stir up popular feelings it does not always control¹²—is to project China into the club of the Great

¹² Examples of this dynamic are the spate of ‘China Can Say No’ literature in the 1990s, inspired by Tokyo governor Ishihara’s *Japan Can Say No*, and repeated internet outbursts against Japanese investments in China. The protests against the US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999, which also got out of hand in the view of the authorities, were more genuinely reminiscent of the anti-imperialist popular nationalism of an earlier period.

Powers. With continuing economic growth, its think-tanks are fashioning schemes for a multi-centred imperial world order in which China will punch its weight with other mega-states like the US and EU, in the fight for market shares and spheres of influence.

Beijing's policies towards Taiwan have changed correspondingly. After 1992, Lee Teng-hui's insistence that the ROC was a state on an equal footing with the PRC and his efforts to secure an international breakthrough for Taiwan, including attempts starting in 1994 to re-enter the UN, did not draw immediate attacks from Beijing. The Standing Committee of the CCP was presumably studying what response to make to the prospect of a move on the island towards independence. By 1995, however, it had made up its mind, threatening to use force against any change in the island's status. Test missiles were fired into the Strait for the first time in 1995, on the rather trivial occasion of Lee's visit to his alma mater Cornell in the United States. Since then further launching-sites have been installed in Fujian and Guangdong, and submarine patrols increased in the South China Sea. Whereas in the 1980s the two sides explored various ways to co-exist in international arenas, now Beijing steadily tightened its diplomatic blockade of Taipei, denying it any chance to play an international role¹³ and leaving it with the recognition of only a handful of Central American and small Pacific island states whose calculations were not affected by the end of the Cold War.

Exploiting the rapid growth in its power and status, Beijing loses no opportunity to penalize even the most peaceful, non-governmental activities by young people from Taiwan in international forums.¹⁴ The Chinese media bristle with denunciations of leading Taiwanese politicians, and a draft law against secession, aimed solely at Taiwan, was passed by the National People's Congress in March 2005. The stick of intermittent military threats and continual propaganda attacks is accompanied by the

¹³ In the 1990s, the PRC vetoed UN acceptance of Taiwanese offers to contribute to peacekeeping missions in Macedonia and Guatemala.

¹⁴ Recent examples of such pettiness include the fate of a painting by an eleven-year-old Taiwanese boy, initially chosen in a UN-sponsored competition for world peace in the summer of 2004. He was prevented from travelling to Geneva to participate in the final exhibition, and his candidacy was rescinded, because PRC representatives lodged a strong protest against the painting, on the grounds that it included, among a few dozen national flags, that of the ROC. A few months later, a Japanese-organized ship of peace docked in New York, where all its members were allowed to speak inside the UN headquarters except a Taiwanese post-graduate.

carrot of lucrative opportunities for Taiwanese manufacturers and developers in China's booming urban markets, and proposals for easier and freer travel between the island and the mainland.

Island consciousness

If this mixture of menaces and enticements has certainly worked on Taiwanese politicians and public, the result has not always been what Beijing intended. In the newly democratized political environment of Taiwan the opposition DPP, which had been the political spearhead of the struggles against the Martial Law regime, rapidly gained in strength. It had traditionally stood for Taiwanese independence, and as democracy was consolidated, the national side of its demands came increasingly to the fore. Given the long-standing disadvantages the local population had suffered under the ex-mainlander KMT regime, it was natural that its appeal should acquire a certain 'ethnic' edge. The international conjuncture probably also had something to do with this. When the Balkan conflicts exploded and ethnic rivalries gained discursive prominence globally, it was tempting for politicians in Taiwan to use what seemed the popular ideology of the moment to spell out 'essential' differences between mainland China and Taiwan. Since every time Beijing issued some threats, popular resentment mounted among Taiwanese voters, a fundamentalist wing in the Green camp started to argue that the Taiwanese were not really Han at all, but racially distinct descendants of a fusion between settlers from the mainland and the aboriginal Malay-Polynesian inhabitants of the island.

Though such claims remained on the political fringe, it was clear that a popular nationalism was on the rise in Taiwan. But the order of its agenda was also clear: the claims of democracy came first, those of the culturally or ethnically defined nation still a considerable way behind. In the 1994 provincial governor and mayoral elections, and the 1996 presidential election, ethnic appeals were not the most effective campaign topic and successful candidates were not outright supporters of Taiwan independence.

Over time, however, as the hold of the KMT weakened—in 2000 the Blue forces split, Lee Teng-hui himself subsequently moving into the Green camp—and the DPP won control of the Presidency, the balance inevitably shifted. Democracy remained the primary marker of Taiwanese

consciousness, as the proud achievement of the island community, distinguishing it from conditions on the mainland. But once established, just as in many other parts of today's world, it no longer supplied a dynamic to political competition in Taiwan. In bidding for electoral support, nationalist appeals became more powerful and identity politics became the mainstay. KMT candidates also wooed voters with freshly acquired Holo utterances, and declarations that 'we are all new Taiwanese'. The ROC's claim to rule the whole of continental China disappeared from the platforms of all parties. Equally the DPP dropped its open commitment to Taiwanese independence. The Green camp, warning voters to be vigilant against communist fellow-travellers, made its central pitch the defence of Taiwanese interests against mainland China's expansionism. Not to be outdone, the Blue camp claimed the Taiwanese people's ultimate concern was a peaceful existence, which should not be endangered by recklessly provoking Beijing into war through any fundamentalist push for independence.

For its part, once Beijing realized that democracy on the island did not mean that its people would choose between the CCP and the KMT, but rather between a Green camp that was strongly pro-independence and a Blue camp that was now only nominally pro-reunification, its alarm and hostility started to grow considerably. With no sense of irony, it now complained that the Taiwanese masses were under the sway of mendacious politicians and biased media. To adjust to the new situation, Beijing started increasingly to play an American card in dealing with Taiwan. After extracting reiterated assurances from Clinton during his state visit to the PRC in July 1998 that the US stood by the principle of 'one China', Jiang Zemin and other CCP dignitaries received the head of the Taiwanese SEF in Beijing three months later. Rumours spread that Jiang entertained the fancy of meeting Lee in person, amid declarations of an end to mutual hostility, and garnering a joint Nobel Peace Prize before his forthcoming retirement. Since all this remained within the framework of the 'one China' principle, Lee naturally showed no enthusiasm for Beijing's overture, and nothing came of it. But Taiwanese politicians from both camps took note of the PRC's rapprochement with the US, and now competed nervously for Washington's favours. Worrying that one day America might sacrifice its strategic grip on the island for still closer economic or political relations with the mainland, all redoubled their efforts to pacify or please it in the present. The result inevitably lends an

element of 'client nationalism', in keeping with the times, to the complex realities of a still understandably insecure Taiwanese identity.

Cold War contradictions

Under these conditions, while Taiwanese consciousness has grown, so has a certain amount of disillusionment in the Taiwanese electorate. At the basis of both is the insoluble strain that the juridical framework of the ROC imposes on the democratization that has emerged within it. The roots of this problem lie in the whole history of the Cold War. They can be compared with the fate that divided Germany, Korea and Vietnam in the aftermath of the Second World War. In each of these cases, two separate state apparatuses and political structures existed that were completely distinct from each other, one capitalist and one communist, with no overlapping political or administrative functions.

The separation of China and Taiwan belongs to this determining context. What made it different was mainly the fact that the ROC was formally one of the Allies in the Second World War, and thanks to American manoeuvres, became not only one of the founding member-states of the UN, but gained a permanent seat, with veto powers, in the Security Council. Germany, of course, as one of the defeated Axis powers, was divided between the West and the Soviet Union. But in all the other three cases, a communist side backed by the USSR launched a war of revolutionary liberation against a capitalist side backed by the United States, which had the power to block the complete defeat of its protégés and force a separation between the two: dividing China between the ROC and the new-born PRC in 1949, re-dividing Korea in the war that ended at Panmunjon in 1953, and dividing Vietnam after the fall of Dien Bien Phu at Geneva in 1954. Each of the resulting ceasefires, de facto or de jure, created two rival states claiming legitimacy as an expression of the nation as a whole. However, the ROC alone was admitted to the UN. The PRC, the two Germanies, the two Koreas, and the two Vietnams were kept out. The ROC held China's seat in the Security Council for another two decades, thanks to American power over the UN. When Washington eventually decided to drop it, and allow the will of the General Assembly to prevail, Chiang Kai-shek's regime, still claiming to represent the whole of China, was ousted from the UN altogether. It had insisted on exclusive representation, and was now itself permanently excluded.

If the dispute over Taiwan remains unresolved to this day, what of the comparable cases? With Nixon's turn to China and Mao's feud with the USSR, the Cold War stand-off altered. With Beijing playing a largely passive role in the Security Council, the two Germanies were granted admission to the UN in 1973 as part of the *détente* between the US and the USSR. Reunification came eighteen years later, after the collapse of the GDR, leaving the Federal Republic as the sole German state in the UN today. In Southeast Asia, when the US finally withdrew its military forces from South Vietnam in 1973, the regime it had maintained there was rapidly swept away by the DRV, and in 1977 the Socialist Republic of Vietnam entered the UN. The two Koreas, on the other hand, were admitted to the UN as separate states in 1991, in the wake of the ending of the Cold War. Both express a keen desire for reunification, but this has not yet come to pass.

This historical cycle has left the ROC and so Taiwan in limbo. In Germany, Korea and Vietnam, a country that had long existed as a single territorial whole was divided by the Great Powers. In the case of Taiwan, the Great Powers did the opposite. The end of the Second World War reunited Taiwan, which had been separated from the mainland for fifty years, with China. In the first cases, homogeneous nations were split; in the second, an island that had in many ways diverged from the mainland was restored to it. Now, when Germany and Vietnam are reunited, and the two Koreas are seeking accommodation with each other, Taiwan is still locked in potential military hostilities with Beijing, which insists that the People's Liberation Army will—not 'liberate the Taiwanese people', in the revolutionary language of yesterday but, in the vocabulary of today—bring about 'national unity', by force if necessary.

Historical irony comes full circle in the role, past and present, of the protectorate of the United States over the island that is the obverse of the PRC's threats to it. For here too there is a basic contradiction: the degree of *de facto* independence from China that Taiwan enjoys, and which has allowed its peaceful democratization since the 1980s, is paid for in *de facto* dependence on the US. Indeed, as Beijing has abandoned any revolutionary aspirations and developed ever closer ties with Washington, the US has become the effective arbiter of cross-Strait tensions, a fact that neither Beijing nor Taipei like to acknowledge.

In other words, the key problem for Taiwan in handling cross-Strait relations, as well as in its domestic politics after democratization, has been the paralysing legacy of its continuing definition as the ‘Republic of China’, and the dependence on American guardianship that has gone with it. When constitutional reform brought the removal of Taiwan provincial government in 1996, the then governor James Soong protested strongly, saying that what should be eliminated was the ‘central government’, rather than the ‘provincial’ one. He could not have spoken more truly. The ROC is an absurd fiction, but a democratized Taiwan remains trapped within it. For if it attempts to change its nomenclature, it risks both offending its American overlord, and provoking an attack by the PRC for seeking to set up an independent state, without connection to China. So, unable to settle for a modest reality—just the island of Taiwan—it is forced to go on supporting the unwanted fiction that it is sovereign over more than a billion people and a territory extending to the borders of India and Kazakhstan, thus prolonging continual tension with the mainland.

Registering reality

Therefore, the current situation is not one in which Taiwan is moving towards ‘secession’ from a ‘standard nation-state’. Rather, the reality is that the ROC and the PRC have lived in separation for many years and what Taiwan truly needs is a registration of this reality. Such a registration would not cancel the possibility of future reunification, any more than it has done in the case of the two Koreas: it would simply allow a more normal environment in which different possible scenarios for the island could be honestly discussed by the peoples of Taiwan and China, be it reunification or Taiwanese independence. Only such a formal registration of Taiwan’s de facto separation from the PRC could form the basis for calm and rational negotiations over the future of its 23 million citizens, with respect to their democratic rights. Confusing such a prospect with the issue of Taiwanese independence has been a widespread error in recent years. It would not represent a covert form of it, but an acknowledgment that what is—or should be—really at stake in the new Taiwanese self-consciousness is the legitimate desire for equal standing in any political negotiations with the central government in Beijing, and for these to be handled in a democratic way, free of military threats, and without preconditions over definite reunification in the future. In other words, if Taiwanese voters so desire, they should be given the option of independence, just as they should that of reunifying with the mainland.

Such a *modus vivendi* internationally would put pressure on Beijing to stop claiming that the ROC in Taiwan is part of the PRC, creating the necessary atmosphere for both sides formally to end mutual hostility and renounce the use of non-peaceful means against each other. It would ease the anxiety among many Taiwanese over the anti-secession law passed by the National People's Congress in Beijing on 14 March this year, which essentially targets Taiwanese voters—inviting compliance from many while intimidating others—and could easily be applied against Taiwanese individuals travelling to the mainland.¹⁵ Moreover, such an international recognition would also help to clear the air of domestic political debate in Taiwan. Today's Taiwan remains confined within the discursive prison of 'one China', a borrowed shell covering the actual entity it constitutes. This contradiction, which can neither be exorcised nor honestly discussed on the island, is imposed on it as much by the United States as by China, since Washington is no less opposed to any change in the imaginary status quo. In these conditions, neither reunification nor independence (from either, or both, China and the US) can become normal or legitimate propositions in the public arena, distorting political debates on the island.

The sense of powerlessness created among voters by the contradictions in its present situation has been exploited by politicians on the island, amid a shouting competition as to who loves Taiwan better, and has given rise to any number of manipulative moves and tactics of self-promotion.¹⁶ The referendum asking voters whether they wanted stronger military defences, timed for the presidential election last year as a way of boosting

¹⁵ As one commentator has pointed out, to consolidate its democracy in the face of Beijing's soft-bomb offensive, Taiwan could hold a non-binding consultative referendum, as an official opinion poll of the electorate, over its political future, with the options of 'future independence', 'future reunification', 'one country, two systems' and 'one country, three systems' from which to choose. And, in order for it to be purely consultative, political campaigning for any of the options prior to the referendum should be banned by the Central Election Commission, which would be responsible for conducting the vote.

¹⁶ Taiwan is one of the few countries in the world to issue a new set of stamps after every direct presidential election since 1996, featuring colourful portraits of the winning candidates for both President and Vice President. If this might be understood as a way of celebrating the great achievement of Taiwanese democratization in 1996, the same could hardly be said for 2000 or 2004, let alone this year when the practice of adorning postage stamps with the image of current office-holders spread to the Premiership and even the mayoralty of Taipei.

the chances of the incumbent, and successfully boycotted by the opposition, is a recent example. It went through ten rounds of public debate beforehand, as stipulated by the newly passed Referendum Law. Its opponents from the Blue camp, in addition to emphasizing procedural flaws, invariably hinted at how annoyed Taiwan's honoured American protectors had been by the idea of holding a referendum, and how dangerous it would be to provoke Beijing into a war game by holding one on any topic; while its proponents from the Green camp gave cynical voice to something like a local version of 'official nationalism'. Had citizens been asked instead simply to express their unwillingness to be conquered by military force, genuine political consciousness could have been raised, and Taiwan's non-governmental anti-war movement strengthened.

Such trends promise to suffocate, rather than inspire active political participation. They are reinforced by the general conditions of capitalist globalization in which Taiwan finds itself. Democratization in the island came after very rapid economic growth had created a burgeoning, dominating middle class enjoying fairly high incomes for the region. Its business class has for some time been investing heavily in mainland China, South-East Asia and elsewhere. Economically, Taiwan lives by trading with others, including trading its capital for others' labour. This is a setting that goes some way to explaining the absence of any significant social agenda in either Blue or Green camps. But fixation on the national question is undoubtedly another reason for a common programmatic emptiness here. Originally, when it was in opposition, the DPP contained radical impulses. But the primacy of identity politics has since driven redistributive concerns out of the political arena. In this sense, Taiwanese nationalism—in which democratic discourse still predominates over the ethnic or clientelistic—also lacks drive for social reform.

To free the population from a sense of political impotence, unleash active civic participation and ignite the inspirational force of social movements, ought to be the goals of a Left on the island today. Taiwan is seeing the growth of non-governmental organizations engaging in activities of a charitable nature or cross-Strait cultural exchanges. These in themselves are highly commendable. But it is in the nature of such enterprises that the target groups are rarely thought of as political forces. Similarly, the attempt last year to muster a 'million invalid votes' in protest against the narrowing of political options in the system, though it sought the formidable moral strength of a radical platform, risked encouraging citizens

away from political involvement or debates altogether. As such, it may not have been the best cure for a widespread sense of powerlessness. A real social movement should not confine itself within the sphere of welfare, still less run away from electoral participation. Otherwise, the long-term fate and future of the people of Taiwan will continue to be twisted by manipulative great powers and murky local politics.