Taiwanese Youth Nationalism and Its Implications for U.S. Foreign Policy

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SUMMARY

Modern youth nationalism in Taiwan is distinct from that of preceding generations in its inclusivity and anti-Chinese orientation. Large protests have demonstrated the strength of Taiwanese nationalism among the student population, while young voters have upset Taiwanese politics. While nationalism has always existed in Taiwan, three factors have altered the recent geopolitical situation: a freer political environment in Taiwan, a stronger China, and a global trend toward separatism. American leaders ought to be prepared for the dilemma they will face should Taiwanese youth push their government to pursue independence.

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The sight of protesting students has become frequent in Taiwan. Late last July, hundreds of young Taiwanese marched on the Ministry of Education in Taipei. Wearing sneakers and backpacks, they overturned steel barricades as they rushed the Ministry courtyard. Police, anxious to avoid an occupation like the one that shut down the national legislature in 2014, quickly cleared the students out. The issues driving students into the streets, however, will take longer to resolve.[1]

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In both cases, the students protested the influence of mainland China in Taiwan. They occupied the legislature to protest a trade bill that pushed their economy closer to the mainland, and they occupied the Ministry of Education to protest textbook changes that emphasized China's role in the history of Taiwan.[2] However, the protests were less about China than they were about the students' own identity as Taiwanese—and about proclaiming that identity to their government and to the world.

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The students' belief in their Taiwanese nationality is more significant than it may seem. Neither the United Nations (UN) nor any country recognizes Taiwan as anything but a province of China; indeed, even the government in Taipei calls itself the "Republic of China." But nationalism and separatism is strong among the youth in Taiwan, and it is growing. A February 2015 poll showed that 79 percent of Taiwanese in their twenties support eventual independence.[3] To these citizens, Taiwan is already a nation in all but name.

While Taiwan has always had separatists, the young generation differs in the inclusivity of its nationalism and in its fear of the mainland. Their predecessors viewed Chiang Kai-shek, and the mainland immigrants he brought with him, as occupiers. Today's nationalists, however, value the descendants of those immigrants as fellow Taiwanese. For them, the great danger to Taiwan is not Chiang's Kuomintang (KMT), but the Communist Party of China (CPC), newly powerful and ready to bring Taiwan back into the fold.

The nationalism of young Taiwanese has brought about not only street protests, but also political change. Young people overwhelmingly support the pro-independence opposition party, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP).[4] This generational shift will produce a contest between nationalists, extreme conservative groups in Taiwan, and the government in Beijing.

For now, those groups are reluctant to overturn the status quo, but fundamental changes in the regional political environment are taking place. The declining influence of the KMT and the United States, the growing power of China, and a global trend toward separatism contribute to instability in Taiwan. It is not hard to imagine the development of a cycle of escalating conflict, both internal and external.

Such a conflict would involve the United States, as the country's economic and political interests in East Asia are well established. While

the United States is anxious to keep an ambiguous stance, it will at some point be forced to choose between supporting an independent Taiwan and accepting its reintegration with the mainland. American leaders, then, ought to understand the development of Taiwanese nationalism and its potential for involving the country in a conflict with China.

MODERN TAIWANESE NATIONALISM

Contradictions have always existed in Taiwanese identity. Although strong Chinese influences exist, the island has had only a tenuous connection to the Chinese mainland for much of its past. For discovered by ancient aborigines, Taiwan endured European colonization in the seventeenth century. Soon afterward, Chinese immigrants came to plant rice, but Taiwan remained on the fringe of "greater China."[5]

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Taiwan came under firmer Chinese control in 1661, when the Ming dynasty refugee, Zheng Chenggong, expelled the Dutch. Control passed to the Qing dynasty several decades later, and Taiwan remained a titular part of China for two hundred years.[6]

However, the Qing authorities neglected the small island, distant as it was from their power base in the north.[7] Taiwan did not receive provincial status until 1885. Consequently, development languished, until the Qing ceded Taiwan to Japan in 1895. The Japanese imposed stricter controls, but they also built railroads, hospitals, and administrative buildings—which still house much of the Taiwanese government. Advocates of Taiwanese independence claim, albeit with rose-tinted glasses, that Japan did more for Taiwan than China ever did.[8]

If Japanese Taiwan was already distinct from the mainland, the arrival of the KMT in 1945 further estranged the Taiwanese from their Chinese cousins. When the KMT accepted Japanese surrender after World War II, many Taiwanese were happy to welcome them, expecting the Chinese to grant the self-government that the Japanese would not.

However, the KMT managed Taiwan poorly. In 1947, the corruption of local officials and abuses of police power provoked nationwide protests known as the "2/28 Incident." The KMT quickly put down the

movement by executing thousands, but martial law remained in effect for forty years. Rightly suspecting that the Japanese occupation had distanced Taiwan from China, the KMT stressed the common Chinese culture of all Taiwan's inhabitants, both ancient and recent. But their authoritarian practices made these claims hollow, and soon the KMT, literally the "party of China," became associated with venality and cruelty in Taiwan.[9]

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After the 2/28 Incident, Taiwan divided itself, culturally and politically, into two camps: native-born (*benshengren*, 本省人) and foreign-born (*waishengren*, 外省人). The former six million, Chinese descendants of Ming and Qing immigrants, had lived there before 1945, while the latter were two million mainland refugees who came with Chiang Kai-shek fleeing the People's Republic of China (PRC). The *waishengren* benefited from the military dictatorship of the KMT, holding higher positions in society and dominating politics. Membership in this group passed to its descendants, as the sons and daughters of the KMT refugees would be known as "second generation *waishengren*." While there was common contact and cooperation between these two groups, this distinction survived even the democratization of the 1980s.[10]

During this period, modern Taiwanese nationalism developed among the *benshengren*. They protested what they considered to be the KMT occupation of their country. From their power base in the south, they called the *waishengren* outsiders, and espoused a Taiwan for Taiwenese. The government responded forcefully, decrying the nationalists as communists and imprisoning or executing many (the exact number is unclear) during Taiwan's "White Terror." Eventually, factors internal and external led the KMT to open the political process, allowing the *benshengren* to form the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in 1986. As the island's major opposition party, the DPP continues its struggle with the KMT today.

Recently, however, nationalism in Taiwan has assumed a different character. Most young people seem less concerned about the distinction between *benshengren* and *waishengren*. To them, it doesn't matter when a person's ancestors came to the island. All are "*Taiwanren.*"

This new generation of Taiwanese nationalism is more inclusive, in part, because many young people share ancestry. It is difficult to speak of *benshengren* and *waishengren* now that seventy years of intermarriage have blurred already hazy bloodlines. Further complicating this picture are the other ethnic groups in Taiwan: the Hakka, aborigines, and growing

numbers of non-Chinese immigrants from Southeast Asia. These groups make their own contributions of genes and culture, leading many young Taiwanese to consider their "mixed blood" *(hunxue,* 混血*)* a significant part of being Taiwanese.[11]

However, more than intermarriage, fear of the Chinese mainland leads young Taiwanese to see past old ethnic divides. The past generation of Taiwanese nationalists considered the KMT to be the agents of Chinese invasion and occupation. But as the power of the mainland has grown, young Taiwanese now view the CPC as the primary threat, and *waishengren* are no longer the fearful oppressors they once were.

Young Taiwanese have watched mainland China assert its authority over its neighbors. They fear becoming a second Tibet, or, as one young person put it, "a second Hong Kong."[12] For these youths, the Hong Kong "Umbrella Revolution" in 2014 demonstrated what a future with China would hold. The revolution began after the Beijing government made an unexpected and unwelcome change to Hong Kong's constitution. Tens of thousands of protesters in the "Special Administrative Region" occupied stretches of Mong Kok, Causeway Bay, and Admiralty. While the Taiwanese media reported only sporadically on the Hong Kong protests, young Taiwanese discussed them frequently. In October 2014, about 5,000 Taipei youths held a sympathy protest.[13]

Many young people recognized the parallels between their country and Hong Kong. Both are island democracies, and each has its own troubled relationship with the mainland. Perhaps the most impressive aspect of the Hong Kong protests was its eventual resolution. The Umbrella protestors left after realizing that Beijing would not budge—or, in some cases, because riot police forced them out. Few in Taiwan expected that they would have more success in dealing with the mainland.

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Fear of the great nation across the strait has led young Taiwanese to define their identity in opposition to China. Some veteran *benshengren* nationalists roll their eyes at this, pointing out that so many youths speak Mandarin, not the native Hokkien, that they have already traded their Taiwanese heritage for Chinese. But many young people would only concede that they are *huaren*:[14] they share a history, culture, and language with those across the strait, but belong to a nation of their own.

RECENT DEMONSTRATIONS OF NATIONALISM

The intensity with which many young Taiwanese experience their nationality has already upset Taiwanese society. Two events from 2014, the Sunflower Movement and the November local elections, presage the consequences of youth nationalism.

On March 18, 2014, a group of students overtook the floor of the Legislative Yuan to protest a bill liberalizing the services trade with China. The students were dissatisfied with the KMT's attempts to push the bill past debate, and occupied the legislature to "control" (*jiandu*, 監督) the government.[15] Taipei police forcefully repelled a subsequent attempt to occupy the Executive Yuan, but could not force the students out of the legislature. Over fifty civic organizations and non-government organizations (NGOs) joined the protest, building a camp in downtown Taipei.[16] The students dubbed themselves "Sunflowers," both because a local florist donated a large number of the flowers, and in reference to earlier youth movements in Taiwan ("Wild Lilies," "Wild Strawberries"). One poll showed that 74 percent of Taiwanese agreed with their demands.[17] The Sunflowers became a painful, though peaceful, headache for the government.

Perhaps to avoid an unfavorable comparison to the PRC's handling of the Tiananmen Square protests, the Ma administration reacted with restraint. The students inside the legislature captured media attention through the innovative use of new and old technology. They raised $210,000 through crowdfunding and used cloud software to administer the protests.[18] They supplemented a full-page ad in the *New York Times* with informational websites like Gov.tw, an "online community that pushes information transparency," which streamed several live feeds of the Legislative chambers during the occupation.[19] The students punctuated their message with snarky witticisms ("我不服," "馬澤東")[20] but mainly cast their movement as a "sun" that would shine light on the opaque political process. "It's 4 am in Taiwan," a campaign website said. "Witness the coming dawn with us."[21]

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The Sunflower movement was both a rebuke of the KMT and an anti-China protest, but it especially represented Taiwanese nationalism. The bill in question, the "Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement" (CSSTA, abbreviated as *fumao*, 服貿), was a rather bland piece of legislation removing certain trade barriers with China. President Ma signed the agreement in

2013, but its implementing legislation withstood a long stalling process by DPP lawmakers. In March 2014, it seemed the KMT had finally overcome opposition to the bill, which they hoped would benefit the Taiwanese economy and improve relations with China. The KMT leadership must have been surprised at the strong reaction the bill provoked, first in students, then in the general population.

For the DPP and its allies, the bill turned the economy into a fifth column for China, undermining Taiwanese nationalism. One politician gave his view of the CSSTA: "It's easier to trick than to bite"—that is, China could exert influence over Taiwan more easily through economic involvement than through direct force.[22] More pointedly, the Academia Sinica researcher Wu Jieh-min emphasized the threat of Chinese investment in Taiwan. Noting that most Chinese corporations are politically well-connected, he believed Chinese investment in Taiwanese telecommunications firms might reduce media freedom in Taiwan.[23]

Though the DPP supported the movement, young nationalists controlled Sunflower. Many young people had practical concerns with the bill. Some simply thought it would hurt their job prospects, which they, like many college graduates, viewed as poor. But others, the stronger voices, accused Ma of "selling out" (*chumai*, 出賣) Taiwan.[24] They called the bill a "black box" (*heixiang*, 黑箱) whose contents were hidden from the public. This interpretation caught on, and events quickly cascaded. Opposition to the CSSTA, President Ma, the KMT, and China became a sign of one's identity as Taiwanese. And because the protestors were young, they were blunt: Sunflower leader Chen Wei-ting wore a t-shirt whose chest simply proclaimed, "F— THE GOVERNMENT."[25]

Some older Taiwanese viewed the students with scorn, recalling the numerous exasperating protests of the DPP in the 1980s. An older man dismissed the students as kids seeking attention,[26] while another criticized the "violent" attempt to occupy the Executive Yuan.[27] Even one of the participants acknowledged its illegality.[28] President Ma called the Sunflower movement "undemocratic behavior" that "has generated needless conflict."[29] But support for the protestors was surprisingly broad. 81 percent of respondents to a March 2014 poll supported the "black box" characterization of the bill, saying they lacked sufficient knowledge of it.[30] A week after the occupation, 350,000 people—a significant proportion of the population—marched in support of the students.

Eventually, the KMT Speaker of the Legislature, Wang Jin-pyng, took an opportunity to embarrass President Ma, his political rival. He told the students that the legislature would resume debating the CSSTA. The

protesters duly went home, after taking a few days to put the furniture back in place.[31]

The protests may not have achieved their direct goal. The government indicted over a hundred Sunflower participants in February 2015,[32] while the CSSTA may pass despite the protests. Regardless, the movement underscores Taiwanese nationalism. Many young Taiwanese will remember Sunflower as a watershed in their country's history. Moreover, the surprising result of the local elections that followed Sunflower indicate that the movement has at least temporarily affected voters.

The night of November 29, 2014 was rough for the KMT. The "nine in one" elections held that day, which determined the leadership of counties and cities in Taiwan, went horribly for the party. The DPP beat the KMT by seven percentage points in the popular vote to elect magistrates and mayors. Of the six largest cities, only one had a KMT mayor. An unaffiliated politician, Ko Wen-Je, won the mayoral seat to Taipei City. While he claimed to view the capital as a political "demilitarized zone," he had beaten the KMT candidate, Sean Lien, with the eager backing of the DPP.[33]

Perhaps the elections were decided because the DPP made bigger promises for public housing, or because the KMT suffered from their handling of a food safety scandal.[34] But the youth vote also played a role in the KMT's defeat, with 70 percent of those in their twenties going to the polls.[35] For these voters, the elections were a referendum on President Ma and the KMT.

After last year, Taiwanese politicians will likely take young voters into greater account. Eric Chu, the new KMT chairperson (who is also relatively young at 53), claims to recognize the youth vote as extremely important.[36] Mr. Ko courted young voters successfully in his own election, and urged them—perhaps less successfully—to convince their parents to vote for him as well.[37]

The presidential elections remain weeks away, and the KMT still controls the legislature. But the results of last November have confirmed and extended the legacy of the Sunflower movement. The youth of Taiwan, proud of their Taiwanese identity, want a Taiwanese party. Absent a powerful distraction, the party platforms will probably comport themselves to attract these voters, and it may be that the party that best seems to be the "Party of Taiwan" will win in 2016.

CYCLE OF CONFLICT

As youth-driven nationalism grows in Taiwan, two groups will oppose it: conservative Taiwanese and the Beijing government, both of whom want

unification. The contest between nationalists, conservatives, and the mainland has existed for sixty years, but recent changes in the political environment have made competition for Taiwan's future likely to intensify. A cycle of action and reaction could break out, ending the truce in the Taiwan Strait and presenting the United States with a serious policy problem.

The KMT is a conservative party in the sense that it supports eventual unification with China, but smaller groups like the New Party are more extreme. Conservative members of the KMT broke off to form the New Party in 1993 to express their dissatisfaction with President Lee Teng-Hui's pro-independence policy. Their opinion of Taiwanese political culture has not improved since then. The far-right of Taiwanese politics presents the greatest risk of conflict with youth nationalism.

In September 2014, representatives from the New Party and about twenty similar groups traveled to Beijing to visit President Xi Jinping. The meeting was the first ever to take place between a PRC leader and pro-unification activists.[38] President Xi had assumed his position as head of the Chinese government the year prior, and was still defining his foreign policy. As demonstrators packed the streets in Hong Kong, President Xi told his visitors that he believed a "one country, two systems" policy was best for Taiwan's future. Perhaps, like his guests, President Xi thought the KMT was a lost cause—the KMT chairman, President Ma, was not present at the meeting.

Some conservative activists in Taiwan have dark pasts. One of these is Chang An-Lo, a gangster styled "The White Wolf." Mr. Chang, whose "Bamboo Union" gang flourished when the KMT had closer ties to organized crime, fled to the mainland after Taiwan democratized in 1996.[39] He returned in 2014, ostensibly reformed, to head the Unionist Party. Mr. Chang perhaps thinks his prospects in Taiwan are better after unification.

In support of this agenda, he led a counter demonstration of several hundred during the Sunflower protests. He harangued the students, "You are all f—ing offspring of China, but do not deserve to be Chinese." Although police attempted to keep the groups separate, video shows Mr. Chang's demonstrators beating a student.[40] Mr. Chang's methods, and his connection to organized crime, recall similar tactics that disrupted the Hong Kong protests. There, paid counter demonstrators were solicited over WhatsApp to cause trouble with peaceful protestors.[41]

The actions of extreme conservative groups are similar to those of the KMT during the authoritarian period, when it relied on intimidation and threats to suppress nationalism. In March 2015, as a response to the official memorial ceremonies of the 2/28 Incident, the "Concentric Patriotism

Association," a pro-unification group, led its own demonstration at the 2/28 Memorial Museum. The museum, located in central Taipei, exists to commemorate those killed during the uprising. Four protesters displayed banners calling 2/28 victims "murderers and rapists," and painted the door of the museum red. Though police quickly arrested these individuals, such incidents may become more frequent in response to growing nationalism.[42]

The third actor in this environment is the mainland Chinese government, which has been anxious to reclaim Taiwan ever since Chiang fled there sixty years ago. It has been successful, too—at least with regard to the economy. The PRC replaced the United States as Taiwan's largest trading partner in 2004, and Taiwanese businesses hold extensive investments on the mainland, employing 15 million Chinese.[43] Taiwan and the mainland are more closely linked now than at any time since 1895.

But Beijing has been clear that closer ties do not mean it will allow an independent Taiwan. Since the end of martial law allowed Taiwanese citizens to openly discuss independence, the PRC has been quick to react. When President Lee Teng-Hui visited the United States (as a private citizen, and contrary to the wishes of the Clinton administration), the PRC response instigated the 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis. In 2005, when Taiwanese voters re-elected DPP President Chen, the PRC passed the Anti-Secession Law, promising force should Taiwan declare independence.

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Paradoxically, the closer Taiwan and the mainland become, the more young Taiwanese view China with suspicion.[44] This is probably curious to leaders in China, who believe Taiwan has everything to gain from unification, including further access to mainland markets. So far, this reasoning has failed to convince young Taiwanese.

Since Taiwan's modern era, which began after World War II, the contest between nationalists, conservatives, and the mainland has balanced into today's status quo: surprisingly stable, but nevertheless, fragile. However, the environment has changed. The KMT is less able to restrain Taiwanese nationalism, the Chinese are replacing the United States as the major power in East Asia, and separatism is experiencing global popularity. The status quo seems much less tenable now than it did thirty years ago.

Though the KMT was a bitter enemy of the Beijing government, they were anti-communist, not anti-Chinese. The party held nationalism in check during its authoritarian period. However, the arrival of liberal

democracy in the 1980s allowed nationalists to express their views and win office, a frightening prospect for Chinese leaders on both sides of the Strait. Beijing prefers that its old enemy, the KMT, retains power. They treat sitting President Ma much more kindly than they treated his predecessor, the DPP President Chen. As the KMT suffers in elections, Beijing will feel compelled to act on its own to keep Taiwan in its place.

Unfortunately for Taiwan, the mainland is more capable than ever to make good on its threats. For several decades, the U.S. alliance with Chiang protected Taiwan from the mainland. But the American "de-recognition" of the ROC in 1979, and the termination of the Sino-American mutual defense treaty, marked the beginning of a power shift in East Asia. Though American presidents have continued to support Taiwan, they can no longer do so without regard to Beijing's opinions—and they are no longer legally obligated to enter the Taiwan Strait in case of attack. China has moved, albeit slowly, to take advantage of its new power. It has declared an Air Defense Identification Zone in the East China Sea, and built bases in the contested Spratly islands. It is against this backdrop of declining American power, and a rising China, that Taiwanese nationalism is developing.

A third change is not regional, but global, as separatism becomes popular worldwide. While there have always been "breakaway" places, the idea of popular sovereignty seems more compelling now than at any point since the phrase was coined. For young nationalists in Taiwan, the important examples are not the ethnic Russian enclaves, but the 2014 referenda in Catalonia and Scotland. Regardless of their outcomes, that such processes can take place is heartening for the liberal young activists. They know that a referendum in Taiwan would incite China to war, but continue to hope that the international community would come to the aid of a prosperous, peaceful, and democratic state.[45]

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The risks of such a gamble are well known to Taiwan's leaders. The DPP presidential candidate, Tsai Ing-Wen, has stayed away from the issue of independence.[46] But the emotions of Taiwanese youth make the situation in the Strait volatile. Now that the restraining forces of the KMT and the United States are weaker, things could quickly get out of hand. A trigger, such as an errant comment by a Chinese official, or local policy that could be considered pro-China, may lead young Taiwanese into the streets to guard their independence. A reaction could make the demonstrations

worse. There may be violence between nationalist and conservative protestors, or between protestors and police. Beijing may try to influence the situation by making military threats, which would only steel the resolve of the nationalists. It would not be the first time that relatively small actions have led to impasse in Taiwan. The 2/28 incident, which paralyzed Taiwan for months, was sparked by overzealous enforcement of tobacco regulation.

Should the Taiwanese government fail to suppress nationalist protestors, or if a sympathetic administration backs their calls for referendum, the PRC would be compelled to make good its promise to intervene. Only the United States could stop the PRC, which dwarfs Taiwan in military power.

The hard reality facing Taiwanese nationalists is that the question of their sovereignty is not answered by international law, nor even by the will of their own people. The future of Taiwan depends mainly on the policy of the United States.

POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES FOR THE UNITED STATES

Until now, the United States has been able to enjoy the benefits of a trading relationship with both sides of the Taiwan Strait. Its relative power in the region has allowed it to keep Taiwan in step with its policy objectives, while deterring Chinese hegemony over the island. American economic power is such that the mainland has continued to trade with the United States, even as American arms are still sold to Taiwan. However, in a confrontation involving the fatal word, "independence," the United States would have to fish or cut bait.

If the United States responded to a conflict by guaranteeing Taiwanese independence, this would probably mean a distant war with a powerful state over a core issue. The PRC has written itself into a corner by vocally opposing Taiwanese independence, and shrinking from this fight would hamper its assertive foreign policy goals. The United States might preserve Taiwan by committing its military to the island pre-emptively, increasing the costs of a Chinese intervention, as long as it also promised to get Taiwanese protestors to go home. But it would be hard to justify a costly effort to save Taiwan, given that neither American lives nor property would be threatened, and that neither international nor domestic law compel the United States to act.

Still, if the United States allowed China to retake Taiwan, it would not do so without consequences. President Obama survived the retrocession of Crimea to Russia, but Taiwan is a historic U.S. ally, and the sitting

president would face domestic criticism of "losing China" a second time. Economically, the United States would miss a valuable trading partner in Taiwan. Still, the greatest impact would be to the international order that the United States strives to preserve.

China's assertion of power over Taiwan would signal a sea change. America's friends in the Pacific would need (now less credible) reassurance. Non-aligned nations may side with the PRC in future conflicts, as "Reputation of power is power; because it draweth with it the adherence of those that need protection."[47] The failure to protect Taiwan, a nation that plays by the rules America laid out, would have serious second order effects for the United States in East Asia.

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The most dangerous choice the United States can make is to make no choice at all. There may be no conflict over Taiwan in the next four years, but the situation is becoming more contentious, not less so. Though they not need telegraph their intent, American leaders must have a plan for Taiwan, understanding the depth and trend of Taiwanese nationalism. Otherwise, the American response will be reactive and necessarily shortsighted. When this happened in Korea, which the United States decided first to abandon and then to save, the result was a bloody, unexpected, and still unresolved war.

CONCLUSION

The youth in Taiwan are, like all youth, ambivalent about their future. They generally believe their government unequal to the task ahead of it. China casts a large shadow across the Strait, just as it did in 1949 and 1683. The United States, Japan, and Europe, whom the young cherish as sources of ideas and inspiration, seem frustratingly unwilling to support them.

As the question of their sovereignty awaits its resolution, the young in Taiwan have assumed that they live in a state, not a contested area on a map. They accumulate college degrees, start bands, and watch foreign television. They skateboard and spray paint. They debate politics in increasingly sophisticated coffee shops and hold demonstrations when necessary, and are otherwise content to enjoy the open culture and democratic government they have inherited, while it lasts. ***f***

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