

Wachman, Alan: *Why Taiwan? Geostrategic Rationales for China's Territorial Integrity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2007. ISBN: 978-0-8047-5554-2; 253 S.

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Contrary to the expectations the title may raise, this is not a book about Taiwan. It is a study of how the People's Republic of China (PRC) perceives Taiwan and the Taiwan issue. The question that motivates Wachman's study is the following: Why should the PRC be ready to use military force to bring about unification with Taiwan when in a number of other cases it has relinquished territory or solved boundary disputes peacefully (p. 3)? The answer, Wachman argues, lies in the geopolitical and geostrategic features of Taiwan.

In the opening chapter, Wachman sketches the major shifts in Beijing's Taiwan policy from 1949 to the present. For the first three decades of the PRC, the Communist leadership adopted a bellicose stance towards Taiwan, symbolized by the regular shelling of the two islands of Jinmen (Quemoy) and Mazu in the Taiwan Strait between 1958 and 1979. Following the Chinese rapprochement with the U.S. and the beginning of the reform policy initiated by Deng Xiaoping, the PRC leadership tried a softer approach, relying on cross-strait negotiations to bring Taiwan under its influence. When it became clear in the early 1990s that the results fell short of expectations (owing to democratization and the ensuing identity debate on Taiwan), the PRC began to increase pressure on Taiwan. Although it continued to rely in some measure on a strategy of confidence building, especially through economic cooperation, Beijing not only adopted a more militant rhetoric and made legal provisions for a military solution¹, but also strengthened its armed forces so as to make this solution feasible.

In the second chapter, Wachman addresses the logic behind the PRC's shift to a more aggressive strategy towards Taiwan. Brushing aside all narratives of reuniting the Chinese people or of overcoming the trauma of foreign imperialism, he singles out Taiwan's territorial salience as the determining factor. In his

view, the PRC has little interest in the inhabitants of Taiwan, but is bent on controlling the island's territory, which is regarded as a menace when in foreign hands and as an asset when under China's sway. This view is rooted in an „imagined geography“ of Taiwan that is ever shifting and, hence, historically contingent. As a consequence, Wachman devotes chapters three through six to tracing the historical shifts in Taiwan's territorial salience.

According to Wachman, Taiwan entered the „mental map“ of China in the second half of the seventeenth century, when it was first occupied by the Dutch and later by steadfast loyalists of the overthrown Ming dynasty. In 1683, the Kangxi Emperor of the ruling Manchu Qing dynasty decided to annex the island, apparently following the advice of the maritime strategist Shi Lang. Shi had cautioned against relinquishing Taiwan lest it might fall again in Dutch hands. After two hundred years of relatively stable rule, Taiwan became an object of Western and later Japanese imperialism in the late nineteenth century. The Imperial court tried to strengthen the defense of Taiwan by elevating it to provincial status, but after the crushing defeat of 1894/95 China had to cede the island to Japan. Contrary to conventional wisdom, Wachman points out that for nearly half a century, Chinese intellectuals and politicians alike accepted the separation of Taiwan as a matter of fact and ceased to regard Taiwan as part of China.

The Chinese perception of Taiwan underwent a remarkably sudden change in 1942, following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the entry of the U. S. into the Pacific War. The Nationalist Party or Guomindang (GMD) under the leadership of Chiang Kaishek, then in control of the bulk of China's territory, reclaimed Taiwan as a buffer against foreign attacks. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which had long advocated Taiwanese autonomy from Japanese colonial rule rather than unification with Mainland China, followed suit and also included the restoration of Chi-

¹ I am referring here to the Anti-Secession Law passed by the National People's Congress in Beijing in May 2005. Article 8 enables the PRC government to use „non-peaceful means“ if (a) Taiwan declares independence, (b) events that might lead to a secession of Taiwan have taken place or (c) peaceful reunification has become unlikely.

na's unity among its goals. The Communist victory in the Chinese civil war, Chiang Kaishek's withdrawal to Taiwan and the founding of the PRC in 1949 prompted another shift in Taiwan's geostrategic salience. From 1950 onwards, the U. S. guaranteed the security of the GMD government on Taiwan. From the perspective of the PRC, Taiwan has again fallen under the threatening domination of a foreign power. Hence, the Taiwan issue is not a bilateral, but rather an international affair that pits China against those two states on which Taiwan's de facto independence hinges: the U. S. and, to a lesser extent, Japan.

In chapter seven, Wachman examines Taiwan's role in the contemporary „imagined geography“ of the PRC. Analyzing not only the reasoning, but also the imagery used in articles by leading military strategists, Wachman detects a continuity between the present decision-makers and their historical predecessors: Under U. S. influence, Taiwan is imagined as an „unsinkable aircraft carrier“ enabling the superpower to launch attacks on China's mainland. In the context of the PRC's „quest for sea power“ (p. 135), unification with Taiwan fulfils two different strategic objectives: For some analysts, it would provide the PRC with greater „strategic depth“, enabling it to deny potential aggressors access to China's coastal waters. For other commentators, it would enable China to control much of the Western Pacific and protect commercially vital sea lanes. In both strategic visions, failure to recover Taiwan would thwart the PRC's attempts to achieve great power status.

In the concluding section of this section as well as in the concluding chapter, Wachman tries to place his findings in a broader perspective. He argues that in the PRC, the end of the Cold War has led to a new emphasis on geopolitics. Thus he not only answers the question why Taiwan is so important to the PRC, but also why it has become so important only recently. Wachman concedes, however, that there exist in fact different strategic perspectives in the PRC, some of which deny the centrality of Taiwan to China's rise in the international system. And although many military specialists of different experience and status seem unanimous on the pivotal role of Taiwan, it is hard to determine whether

and how their ideas affect political decision-making. Today, the PRC allows more than one voice to be heard, which makes it more difficult to assess which of them expresses the view of the political leadership (p. 159). Yet, Wachman concludes, the very possibility of China's Taiwan policy being driven by geostrategic considerations has far-reaching implications for U. S., Japanese, and Taiwanese policies and should be taken into account accordingly.

Wachman's study employs a cultural-historical approach to shed new light on phenomena of international politics. Yet this approach also raises questions: Are geostrategic rationales and „imagined geography“ shaped by a rational assessment of geopolitical features? Or had we better understand them as products of a discourse governed by rules as to what can be articulated and by whom? This has far-reaching political implications, for in the former case Chinese strategists would be far more susceptible to rational counter-arguments than in the second. On the whole, however, Wachman's concise yet well-informed study provides a persuasive argument and a fresh perspective on the Taiwan issue that goes beyond conventional interpretations.

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