

A debate over ties to Taiwan and Peking

by Gregory F. Buhyoff

The Reagan administration is caught up in a debate on whether or not to seek a "face-saving subterfuge" which would allow the United States to bow out of its commitments to Taiwan, in order to salvage its dwindling hopes of an anti-Soviet "strategic alliance" with the Peking regime.

Sources close to the administration complain that President Reagan is being urged into "mediating" a reconciliation between Peking and Taipei on the former's terms. The advocates of that policy include Secretary of State Haig, Vice-President Bush, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian Affairs John Holdridge, and neo-conservatives close to U.N. Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick. This group is also advising Reagan to give Peking some assurance that arms sales to Taiwan will not continue indefinitely.

Among those resisting this line, the sources say, are the President himself, National Security Adviser William Clark, and NSC deputy Robert MacFarlane, the latter despite a past affinity to Kissingerian policies. The recent appointment of Gaston Sigur, director of George Washington University's Sino-Soviet Institute, to head the Asia desk at the NSC adds to the list of officials who, while amenable to using China against Moscow, are unwilling to sacrifice all other American interests in Asia to this end.

It appears that the Haig-Bush-Holdridge group won a victory when the Vice-President went to China in early May. They warned Reagan of increasingly tough Chinese threats over the Taiwan issue, and of the undesirable message that might be conveyed to Moscow if Bush's tour of Asia did not include a stop in Peking. Reagan finally agreed to cajole Peking into allowing Bush to visit China by sending him with a "new package." The Chinese Foreign Ministry claims this included a promise that U.S. arms to Taiwan would end at some point.

If the Foreign Ministry's claim is true, it is believed that Bush went beyond the President's wishes. Bush has declined comment.

Mr. Reagan allowed his name to be appear on three letters carried by Bush to Chinese leaders, one of which stated "we welcome your nine-point initiative [referring to a proposal for "peaceful reunification" issued by

Chinese leader Ye Jianying last fall—G.B.] and adding that "in the context of progress toward a peaceful solution there would naturally be a decrease in the need for arms by Taiwan." Both formulations are unprecedented for Reagan, and they shocked Taiwanese officials, who had been kept totally in the dark. Many are interpreting these passages as the first sign of pressure from Washington for Taipei to begin to talk with Peking.

Washington sources report that Haig has been urging Reagan to initiate U.S. "mediation" between Taiwan and Peking. NSC head Clark and Reagan personally have opposed this. However, the public release of the letters is in itself now seen as a form of pressure on Taiwan to enter talks.

Nonetheless, Taiwanese officials agree that as long as Ronald Reagan is President, U.S. commitments to Taiwan will at least minimally be honored.

However, Taiwan is hedging against the 1984 presidency. The prospects of a Bush-versus-Mondale candidacy do not bode well for Taiwan, given the strong China Card orientation of both men.

According to *Aviation Week*, Taiwan is planning major investment in the production of its own advanced fighter aircraft and weapons technology. That report was corroborated by Lt.-Gen. Tang Chun-po, director of Taiwan's Chung Shan Institute of Science and Technology in a message he delivered to the Society of Strategic Studies. Taipei is currently scouting international markets for military hardware and is known to be interested in France's Mirage fighter jet. Should Paris balk at arms sales to Taiwan in favor of its relations with Peking, a likely substitute could be the Israeli-made Dagger jet, a copy of the Mirage which, because it has no U.S. components, does not need Washington's approval for export.

While the Taiwanese would rather not go elsewhere for their defense needs, all options are being considered, and if the U.S. "washes its hands of us," as one Taiwanese source put it, "we'll manage to survive." Some sources suggest that circles in the administration may be subtly encouraging Taipei to go this route in order to justify ending arms sales to Taiwan on the basis that they are no longer needed.

While such arrangements may buy more time for China Card advocates, those in the administration who fixate on Taiwan as the fundamental obstacle to desired relations with Peking may find that they come up empty handed. Recent shifts in Chinese foreign policy, i.e., a toned-down anti-Sovietism and a more pro-Third World stance, suggest that there is much more dividing Washington and Peking than Taiwan. Instead of obtaining a "strategic alliance" with Peking in exchange for Taiwan, and for just about all that is left of U.S. credibility with respect to its commitment to traditional friends, if the United States succeeds in pressuring Taiwan into "reunification" talks, Peking may get Taiwan for nothing.