J. Michael Cole

Convergence or Conflict in the Taiwan Strait: The Illusion of Peace?

In Convergence or Conflict in the Taiwan Strait: The Illusion of Peace? J. Michael Cole examines the unequal relations between China and Taiwan. Cole attends to the international community’s wilful ignorance of Taiwan’s remarkable achievements in industrialisation, modernisation, and democratisation. To counter this neglect, Cole first provides an overview of how the networking of intellectual, economic, and political forces not only contributes to the legitimisation of the One China policy, but also creates the illusion of a peaceful reunification of China and Taiwan. Beyond unpacking the risks embedded in the limited international understanding of Taiwan’s struggle, Cole discusses China’s manoeuvres to reunite with, or more accurately annex, Taiwan. Cole warns that the resilience of the people on Taiwan and the Chinese Communist Party’s relentless pursuit of reunification could easily result in a clash. For Cole, an independent and democratic Taiwan plays a key role in sustaining regional stability and peace. He further recommends the Taiwanese people make more effort to counter China’s propaganda narratives that promote Taiwan as an integral part of China and the inevitability of reunification. Specifically, this counterpropaganda strategy should be grounded in the people’s efforts to improve their English communication skills to help the international audience understand the complexities surrounding China–Taiwan relations. It will also promote recognition of Taiwan’s resilience in achieving democracy and forming a national identity. Moreover, the communication strategy ‘should also seek to demonstrate why the continued existence of Taiwan as a sovereign state matters to the international community’ (p. 202). To sustain Taiwan’s de facto sovereignty, Cole further urges Taiwanese people to consolidate their nation-building efforts and employ deterrence measures against China.

Cole identifies himself as an ‘informed and involved’ observer. He ‘chose to engage Taiwan from the perspective of a generalist’ (p. 1) by integrating journalistic reporting and academic analysis of convergence and conflict in the Taiwan Strait. Cole’s overall efforts appear to aim at defending Taiwan’s de facto independence and its continued pursuit of de jure independence. He also offers a critique of academic discourses that render Taiwan a subcomponent of the U.S.–China relationship. Cole recommends ‘Taiwan’s propaganda efforts should aim at convincing Washington that this ambiguity, though it worked well for decades, has outlived its utility and now risks inviting adventurism and miscalculation by Beijing’ (p. 205). However, it is doubtful that Washington
must rely upon Taiwan providing convincing evidence or arguments to commit to safeguarding Taiwan. Cole appears to discount the U.S. role in maintaining the ambiguous status quo in the Taiwan Strait and thereby discouraging Taiwan’s becoming a full-fledged modern nation state. Moreover, Cole endorses the strategy of deterrence. For him, Taiwan’s enhancement of military deterrence against China is the key to maintaining peace in the Taiwan Strait or even to facilitate Taiwan’s pursuit of independence. But it is noted that the U.S. has been responsible for circumscribing Taiwan’s military deterrence against China.

Cole emphasises that the Taiwanese must make more effort to communicate with the international community. However, must Taiwanese people improve their English communication skills to compel the international audience to support their pursuit of independence? Does making effective intelligible speech automatically compel international audiences to listen to the voices of the Taiwanese people? Or should the international audience learn to be a receptive listener, a process that, in turn, will make the speech compelling? In view of the complex relationship between speech, speakers, listeners, and the social milieu, it is clear that compelling speech alone cannot be an effective political action to end oppression. After all, it is doubtful that the international audience must ‘hear’ the Taiwanese people’s voice to be aware of the challenges they face.

Cole is intrigued by the gradual and continuous ‘consolidation of an idiosyncratic Taiwanese consciousness’ (p. 2). For Cole, the formation of a Taiwan-centric identity with ‘liberal-democratic values at its core’ (p. 175) should be celebrated and cherished by the international community. Indeed, democratisation clearly distinguishes Taiwan from China. Corresponding with the rise of China as a global power, ‘Chineseness’ more or less emerged as an alienating force in the formation of Taiwanese identity. It follows that the formation of ‘Taiwanese’ identity is to be separate from, if not in opposition to, the Mainland Chinese. While the majority of Taiwanese people embrace democracy, it is debatable whether Taiwan’s democracy poses an existential threat to China. To a certain degree, the de-Sinisation movement simultaneously elevates and challenges the hegemonic power of China. In fact, the actual content of de-Sinisation remains, and perhaps should remain, unsettled. Nor is it clear what de-Sinisation should and will entail. Might Taiwanese people consciously or subconsciously equate this process with democratisation? Or, might de-Sinisation be a ‘content-less’ political gesture to simply say ‘no’ to hegemonic China? Will de-Sinisation be a nominal pursuit of de jure independence from hegemonic China? Most of all, is de-Sinisation essential to form Taiwan-centric nation identity?