

TAIWAN'S EXCLUSION FROM UN: UNJUST AND PERILOUS

By Don Feder

For the 12th consecutive year, Taiwan will apply for membership in the United Nations. If matters follow the usual course, the application will be rejected without serious consideration.

But Taiwan's attempt to achieve standing in the international community isn't just a matter of basic fairness for its 23 million people. The island's continuing isolation is the greatest threat to peace and stability in East Asia.

The committee that determines the agenda for the UN General Assembly will meet on September 15th. Taiwan's allies will press to include an item for its readmission to the world body. The People's Republic of China will do its Incredible-Hulk-on-a-bad-hair-day routine, and the chairman will declare that, there being no consensus, Taiwan's membership bid will be ignored for yet another year.

Ironically, the Republic of China on Taiwan was a founding member of the United Nations in 1945, and an original member of the UN Security

Council. In 1971, Taipei was expelled from the bastion of international harmony – its membership and Security Council seat bestowed on the PRC.

For the past 33 years, it's as if Taiwan didn't exist, as far as the United Nations is concerned. Most countries take their cue from the UN. While almost all trade with the ROC (Taiwan imports more American products than does China – with its 1.3 billion people) only a handful recognize the Taipei government.

On the surface, Taiwan's exclusion from the world organization makes no sense. It's more populous than 60 percent of UN members, and has the world's 18th largest economy.

Postage-stamp sized states (and those whose foreign exchange is derived primarily from the sale of commemorative stamps) are members in good standing. Taiwan -- a major player in the world economy as well as a model of democratic development -- is treated as a nonentity.

That's because China's communist rulers (who've never ruled the island for a single day) claim to speak for the Taiwanese – which is akin to Mexico City designating California, Texas and the Southwest “rebel provinces” which must submit or face annihilation.

Still, China has the clout to get the most of the international community to go along with a manifest absurdity.

The mainland is obsessed with Taiwan. For at least a decade, Beijing has issued periodic threats to take the island by force, if its people don't agree to being absorbed a la Hong Kong. During Taiwan's 1996 presidential election, the PRC fired missiles toward the island, an act of aggression it repeated in 1999.

China's saber-rattling rises to a crescendo at any hint of a declaration of independence by Taipei. "We totally have the determination and the ability to crush any attempt to separate Taiwan from China," announced Communist party Chief Hu Jintao in late August.

In July, the People's Liberation Army conducted war games that simulated an invasion of Taiwan. More than 18,000 troops were involved in the exercise. Beijing currently has 500 medium-range missiles targeting Taiwan, a number expected to rise to 800 by the end of 2005.

Things have gotten so out-of-hand that just weeks ago, Washington sent Admiral Thomas Fargo (commander of US military forces in Asia and the Pacific) to Beijing with a warning: Despite our deployments in the Middle East and Afghanistan, America has both the means and the determination to prevent the PRC from using force against Taiwan.

Ending Taiwan's diplomatic isolation is the surest way to prevent another war in Asia. As long as the ROC remains a phantom on the

international scene, China will be encouraged in the deluded belief that the fate of Taiwan is an “internal matter,” which the PRC can resolve at a time, and in a way, of its choosing.

While most Taiwanese favor a continuation of the status quo over a formal declaration of independence (why state the obvious?), they will never willingly submit to control by the mainland.

China remains mired in a system that’s grafted capitalistic elements onto a totalitarian stock. Taiwan is a genuine democracy, with human rights, a free press and popular sovereignty. (In March, Taiwan held its third direct election of a president.) Freedom House rates it one of the two freest nations in Asia.

Friends of freedom and democracy must continue to press for Taiwan’s membership in the United Nations.

It’s more than a matter of equity. For Taiwan’s 23 million citizens, it could have a profound impact on their survival as a free people.