

(Synopsis: The ongoing diplomatic isolation of Taiwan encourages aggression and thus is a threat to peace.)

WHEN BUSH ADDRESSED THE UN, WHERE WAS TAIWAN?

By Don Feder

When President Bush addressed the United Nations General Assembly last week, he noted that both our Declaration of Independence and the UN's Declaration of Human Rights emphasize the innate dignity and inalienable rights of the individual.

Bush then observed: "That dignity is honored by the rule of law, limits on the power of the state, respect for women, protection of private property, free speech, equal justice and religious tolerance. That dignity is dishonored by oppression, corruption, tyranny, bigotry, terrorism and all violence against the innocent."

The president's remarks were heard by representatives of the U.N.'s 171 member-states. One nation was conspicuous by its absence. Ironically, it's the one that has come the furthest (over the past 15 years) in realizing the democratic ideals outlined in the president's speech.

It's a nation in which the rule of law, religious tolerance, popular sovereignty and respect for human rights aren't goals to be attained in an indefinite future, but present realities.

The phantom country, the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan, also happens to be more populous than over 60% of UN member states and boasts the world's 18th largest economy.

Less than a week before Bush's speech, Taiwan's bid for UN membership was rejected – for the 12th consecutive year. After more than 90 speeches on the matter (most against recognizing a manifest reality), representation for the 23 million people of Taiwan was tabled for another year. Taiwan's president, Chen Shui-bian, called the move a continuation of "political apartheid."

In an organization composed mostly of dictatorships, a country that's a model of democratic reform in the developing world is UN-welcome. At the same time, the principal obstacle to Taiwan's membership totally rejects the values touted by Bush in New York.

There's no question that except for the intransigent opposition of the People's Republic of China, all diplomatic doors would be open to Taiwan. The island has become Beijing's special obsession. China bends every effort to keep Taiwan an outcast in the international community.

In the past few months, the PRC has intensified its war of words on its neighbor across the Taiwan Strait.

- China's UN ambassador, Wang Guangya, told the UN's General Committee that Taiwan's bid for membership was "a brazen challenge to the one-China principle."
- Later in September, China's Taiwan Affairs Office accused Chen of escalating separatist activities since his reelection in March, and declared, "Solving the Taiwan question and realizing the complete reunification of the country is a sacred task for the (Communist) party."
- When Chen suggested using the designation Taiwan more often (instead of his government's official name: the Republic of China), Mainland spokesmen charged him with employing "unscrupulous divisive tactics," which are "pushing Taiwanese compatriots towards a dangerous abyss."
- In August, Chinese leader Hu Jintao warned, "We totally have the determination and the ability to crush any attempt to separate Taiwan from China."
- China regularly blasts Chen for what it calls "splitism" -- which has nothing to do with bananas and ice cream but instead is meant to describe his evil designs to divide the island from the Mainland.

For everyone except Communist party functionaries, that division has long been a reality. Taiwan is a full-fledged democracy; China is ruled by an elite. Taiwan recognizes human rights; China regularly abuses them. Taiwan has a market economy. China's economy is a weird combination of capitalistic elements grafted onto a collectivist stock.

Taiwan was controlled by Beijing for only four of the past 100 years. It has never been ruled by the regime in power since 1949.

While they are proud of their Chinese heritage, the Taiwanese increasingly have come to think of themselves as a separate and distinct people, whose national consciousness was shaped by their unique history and culture. In a political sense, they are no more Chinese than Canadians are American.

Still, China's efforts at "reunification" -- by any means necessary -- proceed apace.

In July, the People's Liberation Army staged an 18,000-man mock invasion of Taiwan, on the beaches of Dongshan Island, 240 kilometers from its target. Sukhoi SU27 fighter jets, outfitted with guided air-to-surface missiles, provided cover for tank brigades.

About the same time, Beijing test-fired a new land-attack cruise missile, the Dong Hai-10, with a 1,500km range – more than three times the range of its standard Ying Ji-63 missiles. Beijing currently has 600 of the latter targeted on Taiwan, a number projected to rise to 800 by the end of 2006. FYI: Their purpose is not to deter an invasion of Mainland China by the ghost of Chaing Kai-shek.

According to a report released this month, Taiwan's Ministry of Defense believes China is planning an invasion of the island around 2012. By then, the growing power of China's military (spending on which increased 11.6% this year alone), enhanced by its burgeoning economy, could put it in a position to both conquer Taiwan and counter any US response, short of a nuclear exchange.

A key component of this strategy is the increasing diplomatic isolation of Taiwan. An August 28th story in The New York Times (“Across Asia, Beijing's Star Is in Ascendance”) reported: “More and more, China is leveraging its economic clout to support its political preferences.” Trade too is a weapon in the war for Taiwan.

The article noted that just before his inauguration in August, Singapore's new prime minister, Lee Hsien Loong, was publicly reprimanded by Beijing for a recent trip to Taiwan. Properly chastened, in his first major address as prime minister, Lee kowtowed to the one-China principle.

Then, Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said his country – which has steadfastly backed America in Iraq – would have serious reservations about standing with us in a conflict over Taiwan. Not coincidentally, Chinese companies are busy extracting Australia's mineral wealth.

Prime Minister John Howard quickly moved to repair the damage, saying Downer's remarks were “completely hypothetical.” But the affair is a sign of a perilous international drift. The scent of appeasement always whets the appetites of would-be aggressors.

Unfortunately, there's little consistency in America's posture toward Taiwan – due to our own one-China policy. For instance, while backing the ROC's bid for membership in the World Health Organization, Washington has never supported its attempt to rejoin the United Nations.

On the other hand, this summer, the Bush administration sent Admiral Thomas Fargo (commander of all US forces in Asia and the Pacific) to Beijing,

with a stern warning: Despite the war on terrorism, America has the ability and the resolve to stop any attempted takeover of Taiwan.

Still, the danger is this: The more Taiwan is treated as a nonentity by the international community (only 26 nations have diplomatic ties with the island – a number which continues to dwindle), the more it encourages China's fantasy that Taiwan is a "rebel province" whose "reunification" is inevitable and whose fate is its "internal affair."

In his third address to the UN, Bush told the assembly of nations: "Because we believe in human dignity, peaceful nations must stand for the advance of democracy. No other system of government has done more to protect minorities, secure the rights of labor, raise the status of women, or channel human energy to the pursuits of peace."

True enough. But if this leads us to spend our blood to establish democracy in Iraq, why not fully support a fully functioning democracy in Taiwan – one of the few in Asia? Why not risk China's wrath and declare once and for all that one-China is a myth – that Taiwan isn't China.

America's interest in cultivating democracy, defending human rights and supporting self-determination should not be limited to the Moslem world. While saving the world from terrorism, it would be the height of folly to ignore another totalitarian threat – one that treats the free people of a democratic state as its subjects, to be disposed of as it chooses.