

WHEN HU MET BUSH, TAIWAN WAS THE UNINVITED GUEST

By Don Feder

When the president of the world's largest democracy met with the leader of the world's largest police state, the fate of a small nation was on their minds.

Hu Jintao was at the White House yesterday for his first visit as China's president. Reflecting the gulf that separates them, the two sides couldn't even agree on what to call the meeting. Face-conscious Beijing wanted it to be designated a state visit.

Wary of empty summitry, the administration preferred to call it a "working visit." So, Hu got a White House lunch, but no state dinner.

Trade was discussed, in light of China's huge bi-lateral surplus (\$203 billion this year), as well as strategic cooperation -- not that we get much from the People's Republic.

While the meeting was underway, a coalition of 17 Taiwanese-American groups demonstrated in Lafayette Park, north of the White House. The demonstrators pointed to 800 Chinese missiles targeted on Taiwan as evidence of the PRC's less-than-peaceful intentions.

Actually, Taiwan plays a large (but not exclusive) role in Chinese military expansion. Of course, Beijing wants to dominate Asia, militarily as well as economically, and to increasingly limit U.S. influence. For that, it needs a super-power sized military.

For almost 20 years, Beijing has posted annual double-digit increases in military spending (14.7% this year alone).

Speaking in Australia last month, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice expressed “concern” over the People’s Liberation Army’s buying spree. Late last year, Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Aso was more blunt, when he called the China “a considerable threat.”

And in its *Quadrennial Defense Review*, released in February, the Defense Department observed, “Of the major and emerging powers, China has the greatest potential to compete militarily with the United States and field disruptive military technologies that over time offset traditional military advantages absent counter US strategies.”

Which brings us back to Taiwan. The United States is pledged to assist in the defense of the island. While adhering to the so-called One China policy, Washington has consistently maintained that differences between Beijing and Taipei must be settled peacefully.

Practically, America can not allow its totalitarian rival to conquer a democratic state that historically was a U.S. ally. China understands this, and thus is preparing for a show-down.

Why Taiwan? Forget the usual explanations – wounded national pride from an era when the great powers pushed China around, or the drive to recover lost territory. In the last century, Taiwan was ruled by the mainland for exactly 4 years, and then by a nationalist, not a communist, government.

Mao never emphasized the need for reunification. For all the years Taiwan was ruled by martial law, Beijing was willing to let the island alone. Despite the historic rivalry between the nationalists of Chiang kai-Shek and the communists, there was a type of détente between the dictatorships of right and left.

It's only since Taiwan embraced democracy that China has decided reunification is a national imperative. How do you scare a dragon? Have an election.

In 1996, the first time Taiwanese went to the polls to elect a president, Beijing "test-fired" missiles within 100 nautical miles of the island, as a scare tactic.

Last year, the People's Republic passed its Anti-Succession Act, authorizing itself to employ force in the event of unspecified moves toward Taiwan's independence. This came on the heels of the reelection of Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian, who China absolutely despises. (Not only does Chen favor independence, he was actually a dissident imprisoned under the old regime.)

It's more than coincidence that China always gets agitated when the people of Taiwan go to the polls or otherwise demonstrate the island's commitment to popular sovereignty.

On a trip to Japan last year, President Bush held up Taiwan as a model for China. "Modern Taiwan is free and democratic and prosperous," Mr. Bush observed. "By embracing freedom at all levels, Taiwan has delivered prosperity to its people and created a free and democratic society."

Prosperity they'll take. But freedom and democracy are the last things China's rulers want. In his brief rule, Hu has relentlessly cracked down on anyone who would challenge the communist oligarchy. By encouraging these aspirations (if only by example), Taiwan presents an intolerable challenge. The People's Republic views the island not as a model, but a menace, and so it arms for reunification.

When China makes its first move toward a free society, on that day its obsession with Taiwan will end.