

CHINA FEARS TAIWAN AND DEMOCRACY

By Don Feder

On Thursday (April 20), Hu Jintao will visit the White House for the first time as China's leader. Hu wants to talk trade. President Bush will seek more (any?) cooperation from the People's Republic in reining in rogue states like Iran and North Korea.

Taiwan should also be discussed, along with China's rapid militarization. The two are intimately connected.

China poses the principal military challenge to the United States, now and in the foreseeable future. The communists' obsession with free, democratic Taiwan is the principal source of instability in East Asia.

For an apparchik, Hu is not completely devoid of pr finesse. To pave the way for his visit, China's president dispatched a delegation to America to purchase an estimated \$16.2 billion in aircraft, farm goods, computer software, auto parts and telecommunications equipment.

This trip to the mall is supposed to allay American anxiety over our burgeoning trade deficit with China – a record \$203 billion last year.

Of more concern to the security-conscious is what China's doing with at least part of that windfall. The People's Liberation Army has been on a 15-year buying spree of its own.

On a trip to Asia and Australia last month, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice expressed that apprehension in the strongest terms diplomats employ: "We've said we have concerns about the Chinese military build-up. We've told the Chinese that they need to be transparent," Rice told reporters prior to meeting with Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer.

Our secretary of state added: "I heard there's going to be a 14% increase in the Chinese defense budget – that's a lot – and China should be transparent about what it means." Actually, China's military budget is scheduled to rise 14.7% this year (at least, that's what the PRC admits to) – the latest in a series of double-digit increases going back to the early 1990s.

Japan's Foreign Minister was more blunt. Speaking at a press conference in December, 2005, Foreign Minister Taro Aso called China a "considerable threat." He described the People's Republic as "a neighboring country with 1 billion people and nuclear bombs whose military spending has been growing by two digits for 17 consecutive years." It takes a lot to drive the normally guarded Japanese (who have heavy trade with and investments in the mainland) to public pronouncements of this sort.

And, in February, the Defense Department released its latest “Quadrennial Defense Review,” which describes the dragon this way: “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 US military advantages absent US counter strategies.”

Oh, hell, why doesn’t someone just say it: China is arming for war. Its first objective is Taiwan. The People’s Republic is the largest nation on earth (with almost four times our population), whose booming economy is harnessed to a rigidly totalitarian state.

When it comes to Taiwan, China’s rulers become totally unhinged. China has close to 800 missiles aimed at Taiwan, a force that grows on an almost monthly basis – to what end? (Hint: this awesome arsenal is not intended to deter a Taiwanese invasion of the mainland.)

A decade ago, Beijing was “test-firing” missiles toward Taiwan, to intimidate its 23 million citizens as they went to the polls to elect their president for the first time.

A year ago, Beijing passed its notorious Anti-Succession Law, creating a legal pretext for a future invasion. If Taipei takes unspecified steps toward “independence,” China’s rulers gave themselves the authority to respond with “non-peaceable” means.

What constitutes a move toward independence? Whatever Beijing doesn’t like. In 2004, China decided that a referendum on whether the people of Taiwan wanted the PRC to remove its missiles was such a move. Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian’s announcement that his government hopes to draft a new constitution for the island is another intolerable affront.

The latest provocation (from Beijing’s perspective) was Chen’s February decision to disband the National Unification Council, whose job was to issue hypothetical guidelines for a theoretical reunification of the two Chinas. Hu will press Bush to specifically denounce this move, when he visits the White House on Thursday.

The Council had no earthly purpose. There are no negotiations underway. China hasn’t deigned to talk to Taiwan in a decade – other than issuing threats.

In what was supposed to be a magnanimous move, in March, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao proposed talks with the ruling Democratic Progressive Party, if the DPP renounces its pro-independence stance in advance. To this, DPP Secretary-General Lin Chia-lung replied that the communists “have no idea what democracy is.” In a democracy, parties don’t change their platforms in response to threats or bribes.

By the way, Beijing will only negotiate with Taiwanese political parties – rather like Iran saying it will deal with the GOP, but not the Bush administration. To talk to

officials of Taiwan's democratically elected government would be a tacit admission that there is a government in Taipei, something Beijing will never do.

The communists seized power in 1949. The government of China is a self-perpetuating oligarchy. But the communists consider themselves the rightful rulers of all of China, while the government of Taiwan, chosen by the island's 23 million people for over a decade, has no legitimacy in Beijing's eyes.

It is precisely Taiwan's democracy which presents an intolerable challenge to the mainland. Beijing really didn't care about Taiwan when the island was under martial law – for all of the years Taiwan was ruled by a fossilized parliament elected by mainland constituencies prior to the civil war.

The fixation of Hu and his predecessors began when the people of Taiwan started to have a say in their government. The Taiwanese have eloquently refuted the myth that democracy is somehow incompatible with Chinese society. In fact, the Taiwanese have taken to self-government the way they've embraced capitalism.

Beijing doesn't care if its subjects make money, accumulate property and acquire middle-class trappings. In fact, it understands the wealth being generated by the hard-work and entrepreneurial abilities of the Chinese people can be used to increase the regime's power (witness that \$203 billion trade surplus and those double-digit annual increases in military spending).

What absolutely terrifies it is the prospect of 1 billion Chinese getting ideas about basic human rights and self-government.

As the foreign-policy soft-line New York Times explains in an April 16th article, Hu “governs sternly and secretly, almost never grants interviews, and has overseen an unrelenting crackdown on journalists, lawyers, and religious leaders who defy one-party rule.”

The administration must confront Beijing's paranoia, instead of trying to gloss over our differences with the Marxist mandarins by endlessly paying obeisance to the obsolete One-China policy, and calling for maintenance of the status-quo in the Taiwan Straits – whatever that is.

Bush should tell Hu Jintao that opening his country to democratic reform would go further toward deflecting the collision course our countries are on than opening his checkbook to US exports.

For most Americans, Taiwan's freedom is an issue that transcends exchange rates and bilateral trade.