

China's Real Goal May Be Oil

Los Angeles Times

By F. Andy Messing Jr. and John M. Wohlfarth

March 17, 2000

China again has successfully deceived American policymakers.

As Saturday's election in Taiwan approaches, Beijing has threatened war should Taiwan favor independence over unification. Furthermore, a "white paper" issued Feb. 21 by the mainland warned that the use of force against Taiwan remains a viable option. These statements appeared despite Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott's assurances that the U.S. would block further arms shipments to Taiwan and protect China's entry into the World Trade Organization.

These tactics have shifted U.S. attention away from one of the key issues: energy.

After a late-1990s economic slowdown, Asia remains heavily dependent on oil transported via tanker from the Persian Gulf. According to data from Pacific Energy Outlook, East Asia imports twice as much oil as the region produces. In addition, projections suggest that Asian demand for oil will double by 2010. To become a superpower, China must resolve its energy concerns. By threatening Taiwan, the Chinese divert Washington from their actual objective.

To understand China's current tactics, examine the philosophy of Chinese militarist Sun Tzu: "He who excels at employing the military subjugates other people's armies without engaging in battle and captures other people's cities without attacking them." From a Chinese military perspective, attacking a well-fortified position like Taiwan is the least attractive alternative, especially when psychological tactics can achieve the same objective.

While reunifying Taiwan with China appeals to many on the mainland, a physical attack would prove unsuccessful for a variety of reasons. From an economic standpoint, Taiwan has been partially incorporated into China's sphere of influence. The U.S. Commerce Department reports that China enjoys a \$3.25-billion trade advantage with Taiwan as of 1998. In addition, the wealthy elites of Taiwan have invested an additional \$30 billion into various Chinese businesses and industries. Any attack on Taiwan would disrupt the highly profitable Taipei-Hong Kong-Shanghai banking nexus, which fuels Chinese growth and future prosperity.

A mainland attack also would prove damaging from a sociopolitical angle. While a measure of mistrust remains between the two Chinas, relations at the grass-roots level have improved over the past 50 years. Travel between China and Taiwan continues to grow, and currently one-third of

Taiwan's long-distance calls go to the mainland. Even the presence of Taipei's National Museum discourages Chinese military aggression: The Chinese would strongly resist endangering more than 4,000 years of their cultural heritage, absconded by the Nationalists in the late 1940s.

From a military point of view, China could attack and invade the island of Taiwan. Yet the costs involved suggest the Chinese would avoid this choice unless given no alternative. Even without American support, Taiwan maintains a robust defense-oriented military complex, combining adequate modernized air and naval programs. China could only capture the island of 22 million people by crushing it, mutilating the prize in the process.

Leaders in Beijing and Taipei are playing an elaborate Chinese chess game, with the United States trapped in the middle. Mainland China has correctly interpreted Washington's knee-jerk response to Taiwan and now uses the issue as leverage for other activities. Continued arms buildup and increased defense spending reflects Beijing's desire to dominate the Pacific Rim. In a juxtaposed manner, Taipei continues to use the U.S. to achieve a stronger bargaining position for the future "one China" relationship. After seeing Hong Kong's difficult assimilation, the Taiwanese are buying time to secure the liberal principles of government their people have come to cherish.

Chinese doctrine frequently has used diversions and feints to promote its foreign policy agenda. China's own economic security is best served by controlling strategic chokepoints in the South China Sea and completing its seizure of energy sources like the contested Spratly Islands, in the strategic navigation route linking the Indian and Pacific oceans. The U.S. should view Chinese activity involving Taiwan cautiously but remain watchful of other regional security issues.

Nine years ago, the U.S. went to war to protect its oil supplies from a hostile power. American policymakers must recognize that China now is willing to do the same.