

EDITORIAL

Taiwan key in Sino-US conflict

Never say 'never again,' especially for nuclear disasters

We all do stupid things all the time, so the chances of one person doing something just as stupid as you are rather great. Perhaps you are so intelligent as to never make mistakes, and we want to encourage you to keep up the good work, while reminding the rest of us to never say "never again," in the face of disasters like the Chernobyl Incident of April 26, 1986.

The significance of these nuclear disasters is that we are reminded yet again of the dangers of aging nuclear reactors and the reality that similar accidents could possibly happen again, anywhere, any time. Whether it's due to human errors or natural disasters, millions of people living near the world's 436 nuclear reactors are at risk for many, many years to come.

In the meantime, there remains a lot of dispute and debate over the measurability of deaths and those who were affected by these nuclear disasters. In 2005, a report by the Chernobyl Forum suggested that fewer than 50 people had died due to exposure to radiation, with the majority of them being workers who were killed immediately following the accident.

The Fukushima Disaster has for sure elicited much debate in Taiwan regarding nuclear power, bringing about protests that call for the phasing out of nuclear energy and an end to the construction of the Fourth Nuclear Power Plant in Lungmen. Those against the project argue that Taiwan sits on a highly active seismic area that is vulnerable to natural disasters, making it unsafe and unfit for nuclear power plants.



Special to The China Post MARTIN WAGENER

The Republic of China (R.O.C.) is party to the conflicts in the Taiwan Strait and the East and South China Seas. Should the military competition between the United States and China lead to war, Taiwan will be part of it. Time to reconsider the strategic importance of a tiny island only 130 kilometers away from the mainland.

The main hot spot in Far Eastern power politics is the situation in the Taiwan Strait, simply because the People's Liberation Army (PLA) focuses on a military contingency involving Taipei's "separatist forces." China continues to pursue Taiwan's reintegration without room for compromise. Since the beginning of the Ma Ying-jeou presidency in 2008, however, there has been a noticeable rapprochement between the two sides.

Nevertheless, China remains prepared to pursue its goals with military force if need be. Up to 1,400 short-range ballistic missiles remain aimed at Taiwan, which itself is preparing for asymmetric warfare against its bigger neighbor. According to the 2015 National Defense Report, time is not on Taipei's side.

The inauguration of President-elect Tsai Ing-wen on May 20, 2016 will be a watershed moment for strategic stability. The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) continues to reject the "1992 Consensus," in which Beijing and Taipei declared there is only one China, while each side was left to define what that meant.

Beijing taking over the "renegade province" would have enormous strategic consequences for the Far East. From Taiwan's eastern shore, China could not only directly threaten Japanese sea lanes of communication. It would also have the long-sought direct access to the western Pacific.

Like China and Japan, Taiwan has staked out claims in the East China Sea, calling the islands "Diaoyutai." However, Taipei acts much more defensively, owing to the power differential. It cannot compete with Beijing or Tokyo militarily, and, given the precarious situation in the Taiwan Strait, has other priorities.

Speaking in Germany on Sunday, U.S. President Barack Obama urged the two sides to push for a final deal by the end of the year, as his eight years in the White House wrap up.

But the UK's focus has now become its spat with the 28-member EU as the country plunges into a heavily politicized domestic fight over pulling out.

"If British people vote to leave the EU, it will put the TTIP talks in shambles," said Gary Hufbauer, a former U.S. Treasury official now with the Peterson Institute for International Economics in Washington.

Edward Alden, a trade expert at the Council on Foreign Relations, says a British exit would throw the whole TTIP project "into the air" as the European Union and the UK struggle to adjust.

"Conclusion of the TTIP would fall down on the agenda," he said. "Everybody would be scrambling to try to figure out what is the new relationship between Great Britain and Europe."

Stimulus for Negotiators?

Paradoxically, the Brexit threat could push negotiators to accelerate. Former senior U.S. diplomat Daniel Hamilton, director of the Center for Transatlantic Relations at Johns Hopkins University, said that a solid message from the talks that TTIP is moving ahead could remind the British that they will miss out if they exit the EU.

The two sides' negotiators "will want to go faster to try to influence the public debate in Britain," he said. Hufbauer agreed. "It could be used as an argument to help the 'Remain' camp to prevail in the Brexit vote," he said.

Obama, a key driver behind the TTIP pact, accented just that point in speeches in the UK and Germany last week. If Britain quits the European Union, he warned in London Friday, it would be left behind as EU-U.S. trade relations get a boost from the treaty.

April 2013 fisheries agreement with Japan as a success of this policy.

Yet Taiwan could still contribute to the escalation of this island dispute, as evidenced by events in September 2012. Several dozen Taiwanese fishing vessels and patrol boats sailed to the contested part of the East China Sea to underscore Taipei's claim to the Diaoyutai Islands.

Taiwan is a party to the South China Sea conflict, claiming the area in China's nine-dash line. With Taiping Island (Itu Aba), the R.O.C. holds the largest of the Spratly Islands. As in the East China Sea, Taiwan is acting more defensively than China in this territorial dispute.

One reason for this military restraint is the fact that the R.O.C. Armed Forces cannot defend Taiping Island. In a military crisis, they would have to bridge 1,500 kilometers to the center of the Spratly Islands, a time-consuming logistical challenge.

The situation has been deteriorating since the end of 2013, when China started to reclaim land around the Taiwanese islet. For example, Fiery Cross Reef with its more than 3,000 meters long airstrip is less than 200 kilometers away from Taiping Island.

Fiery Cross Reef: An Unsinkable Aircraft Carrier

The more the R.O.C. is able to defend itself (Taiwan Strait) and the more it is able to show restraint (East and South China Seas), the better for the security architecture of East Asia. The United States is essential for the survival of Taiwan. But Europe should have an interest in the situation as well.

War would have dramatic consequences, especially in the economic realm. More than 30 percent of European Union (EU) states' total trade in 2015 went to Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia and Australasia. It is at this point that Brussels should reconsider its current policy of strategic passivity

A conflict could also occur elsewhere, as the Guang Da Xing No. 28 incident — named after the attacked vessel — illustrated. On May 9, 2013, Manila's coast guard opened fire on a Taiwanese fishing boat in the area where the Exclusive Economic Zones of Taiwan and the Philippines overlap.

A Theater of War

These examples show that if it comes to an open conflict between Washington and Beijing, the R.O.C. would in all likelihood be a theater of war. The United States is an unofficial ally of Taiwan; it is a treaty ally of Japan and the Philippines; and it stresses its interest in open sea lanes of communication in the South China Sea with ongoing freedom of navigation operations close to the artificial islands.

Additionally, the power imbalance in the Taiwan Strait itself could be a cause for war. This view is supported by offense-defense theory, according to which wars become more likely as attacks become easier and vice versa.

EU Should Be More Active in Affairs of Taiwan, Region

Against this backdrop, one can arrive at the following conclusion: The more the R.O.C. is able to defend itself (Taiwan Strait) and the more it is able to show restraint (East and South China Seas), the better for the security architecture of East Asia.

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towards Taiwan and the region. While the EU has delayed the PLA's arms procurement and production through the arms embargo imposed against China in 1989 which continues to be in force, Brussels has of course not prevented Beijing from improving its military capabilities. Indeed, France sold 60 Mirage 2000-5 fighter jets to Taiwan in the 1990s. Taipei thereby expanded its freedom of maneuver vis-a-vis Beijing — at least for a couple of years.

European states could build on these examples, and e.g. support Taiwan in building a small submarine fleet by supplying the required technology. This would improve the deterrence capabilities of the R.O.C. Armed Forces in the Taiwan Strait, and it would not be a contradiction to Europe's "one China" policy, as U.S. Taiwan policy demonstrates. During the Obama presidency alone, arms exports worth more than US\$14 billion have been promised to Taipei.

Will the European Union react to the security dilemma in East Asia? It is very likely that the "old continent" continues to ignore the strategic importance of Taiwan. Unfortunately, the strategic outlook of most European states ends east of Afghanistan, and has become even narrower given multiple crises within Europe and on its periphery.

On the one hand are Taiwan and the fragile East Asian security architecture. On the other hand are the EU's worries over the future of the European project. The occupation of Crimea, war in eastern Ukraine, the "Grexit" and Euro debate, the refugee and migration crisis, the "Islamic State," the Paris and Brussels terror attacks and a possible withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU ("Brexit") after the referendum in June 2016: In times like these, Taiwan should not bet on Europe. It can only count on the United States.

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Brexit is a new threat to TTIP transatlantic US-EU free trade pact

WASHINGTON, AFP It's hard enough for the leaders of the United States and the European Union to muster public support for the ambitious TTIP transatlantic trade talks. Now they have the threat of Brexit.

The British will vote in a referendum on exiting the EU in June, raising a huge question mark over talks on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership.

That is placing ever heavier pressure on the TTIP negotiators, who just opened their 13th round of talks in New York on Monday.

As one of the largest trading economies of the European Union, the UK would play a major role in TTIP, which would create the world's largest free-trade zone.

TTIP aims to ease non-trade barriers and harmonize bureaucratic rules that impede commerce and investment between the European Union and the United States.

Speaking in Germany on Sunday, U.S. President Barack Obama urged the two sides to push for a final deal by the end of the year, as his eight years in the White House wrap up.

But the UK's focus has now become its spat with the 28-member EU as the country plunges into a heavily politicized domestic fight over pulling out.

The June 23 vote does not change the goal of the talks, which have been going on for three years. But for some experts, a British split from the EU could be devastating to TTIP prospects.

"If British people vote to leave the EU, it will put the TTIP talks in shambles," said Gary Hufbauer, a former U.S. Treasury official now with the Peterson Institute for International Economics in Washington.

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Turkey President Erdogan chases critics, both at home and abroad

By DOMINIQUE SOGUEL AND SUZAN FRASER ISTANBUL, AP Ebru Umar was sleeping in her summer residence on Turkey's Aegean coast when police arrived at her door and took her away for questioning about two of her tweets that were deemed offensive to Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

The Dutch-Turkish journalist, a columnist for The Netherlands' Metro newspaper, was released the next day but has been barred from leaving Turkey as authorities continue to investigate whether she should be charged for insulting the Turkish leader.

"I thought it was a joke," said Umar, who tweets so frequently she wasn't even clear which of her missives caused offense. "I saw three police stations in one night. It's stupid. This is just intimidation."

Umar is not alone. There are nearly 2,000 cases open in Turkey against individuals, including celebrities and schoolchildren, accused of insulting the president, whose zero tolerance for criticism is the subject of a growing litany of zingers in Western mainstream media and comedy shows.

Turkey's independent media landscape is rapidly shrinking as a result of government-sanctioned takeovers and forced closure.

Journalists have lost their jobs for critical tweets and retweets. Others are on trial on charges ranging from espionage to making terrorism propaganda. Gag orders are common.

Erdogan, who became Turkey's first directly elected president in 2014 after serving 11 years as prime minister, was once hailed as a reformist. In the eyes of supporters, he had done more than any other leader in advancing Turkey's bid to join the European Union, injected new life into the economy and came closest to resolving a decades-long conflict with Kurdish militants.

But as he has consolidated power with successive electoral victories, the Turkish leader has backtracked on many of the EU-oriented reforms and is taking increasingly drastic measures to safeguard his reputation, which has taken a hit with a corruption scandal ensnaring people close to him in 2013 and with his progressively authoritarian style of governing.

The judiciary has been a key instrument in the crackdown on dissent, with Erdogan prosecuting critics not only at home but also abroad. Press freedom defenders say Erdogan himself triggered this downward spiral. The Turkish president has ad-

vocated loosening the legal definitions of "terror" and "terrorism" to include anyone — including journalists, legislators and scholars — who voices support for "terrorism."

Turkey's war on terrorism encompasses three fronts. While being part of the international coalition against the Islamic State group, Ankara has domestic foes of equal concern — Kurdish militants waging a renewed insurgency in the southeast and loyalists of a U.S.-based cleric opposed to Erdogan, who are not known to have used violence at all.

Umar is one of many journalists — local and foreign — facing problems for tackling such issues critically or using social media in a manner that offends the authorities. "You can't investigate people for doing their job," Umar said. "If people feel offended, it's their problem. Get a life! Get a skin!"

In a recent column, Umar lambasted an appeal sent by Turkey's consulate in Rotterdam urging Turks in the Netherlands to report cases of people insulting Turkey or its leader.

Her case is one of many to strain EU-Turkey relations, but concern over freedom of expression is only one of the issues shaping the way Turkey and EU countries deal with each other.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel triggered an uproar when, on the basis of an archaic law that criminalizes insulting foreign heads of state, she allowed prosecutors to consider charging a German comedian who mocked Erdogan in a profanity-packed poem.

'I would be in a maximum-security prison right now'

"I am very glad America doesn't have a similar law or I would be in a maximum-security prison right now," British comedian John Oliver, the host of HBO's Last Week Tonight, joked. Britain's Spectator magazine responded to the diplomatic fiasco by setting up an "Insult Erdogan" contest.

Critics saw Merkel's concession as evidence the European Union is willing to overlook rights abuses in Turkey as long as it helps address the migrant crisis. While representatives of rights groups and even diplomats have shown up at controversial legal proceedings in Turkey — a move that has earned the foreign envoys public rebuke from Turkish officials — European leaders have largely pulled their punches when tackling the topic of press freedom in Turkey.

European leaders should stop making the migrant issue their priority

"because it is really dangerous for Europe itself if Turkey becomes a country where democracy step by step disappears," said Reporters Without Borders Secretary-General Christophe Deloire.

"In the long-term, it is really dangerous to have a country, with so many crises — migrants, Islamic jihadism, terrorism — so close to the borders where independent journalism would be impossible," he added.

On Saturday, EU Council President Donald Tusk was walking on eggshells, trying not to offend his Turkish hosts while at the same time condemning moves to prosecute the German comedian. Tusk said that as a former Polish prime minister he had himself "learned and accepted to have a thick skin."

"The line between criticism, insult and defamation is very thin," Tusk added. "The moment politicians decide which is which can mean the end of freedom of expression."

U.S. President Barack Obama, in contrast, has been more outspoken. On April 1, Obama said he had told Erdogan directly that Turkey's approach toward press freedom could take the country down a "very troubling" path.

Turkish officials insist that no journalist is in prison for their work, but they have been arrested for other criminal activities, such as links to the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK.

Others, like German magazine Der Spiegel correspondent Hasnain Kazim, have been denied renewal of their accreditation or, like U.S. journalist David Lepeska, refused entry at the airport.

The government denies shortfalls in freedom of expression or that it is clamping down on the free media. Erdogan has famously said the fact that the media is "full of insults" to him and his family is proof that the press is free.

At the joint news conference with visiting EU leaders on Saturday, Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu said: "Democracy, press freedoms are our rising values. We respect them and will continue to do so."

He questioned, however, whether insulting Erdogan can be considered a freedom. "Press freedom should not ignore human rights and respect to a person's honor," Davutoglu said. "We need to be able to debate whether strong insults to the president of a nation can be assessed as press freedoms."

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