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This is a weighty addition to the collection of books dealing with Washington-Taipei ties as well as relations across the Taiwan Strait. Not because of its size, though: its 280 pages of text, albeit dense, make for an agreeable read. With more than 50 pages of notes and an extensive bibliography, Nancy Tucker's work makes a decisive contribution to understanding the complex and often conflicting relations between the United States and Taiwan since 1971, when Nixon and Kissinger decided to "sacrifice" Taiwan on the altar of rapprochement and gradual normalisation with the People's Republic of China. It also facilitates a better appreciation of the no less complex interaction between this persisting resentment on the one hand and Washington-Beijing and Taipei-Beijing relations on the other – in short, the factors governing and affecting the triangle in question.

Focusing on crucial moments that have marked the last 40 years of US-Taiwan relations, the book complements the luminous analysis by Richard Bush (*At Cross Purposes*, Armonk, New York, M.E. Sharpe, 2004), who had both the advantage and the drawback of being one of the key actors during this period (or at least the last two decades). While Tucker is personally acquainted with and interviewed nearly all of the Americans and Taiwanese who played a role in this veritable diplomatic-strategic "saga," she has maintained a certain distance from the subject, thereby strengthening her argument.

What is Tucker's thesis? At first glance it seems simple: the interests defended and priority objectives pursued by Washington and Taipei have most often been different and sometimes openly contradictory, leading to much friction. Other authors have dealt with this reality, but Tucker's book explains it much more completely and is well documented, which makes it particularly nuanced and convincing.

First of all, Tucker reminds and persuades us that history is written by men and women in situations in which they can make choices and take decisions. Nothing was predetermined in the Washington-Taipei-Beijing triangle. For instance, Kissinger's notorious capitulation in the face of Zhou Enlai's craftiness on Taiwan in 1971 (pp. 41-43) was one man's doing rather than that of the administration, which at that time still officially favoured the two-China policy vigorously defend-

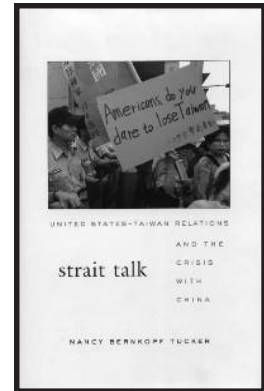
ed by George H.W. Bush as US permanent representative to the United Nations...

Tucker then shows how Taiwan's democratisation altered the nature of the triangle, just as the world emerged from the Cold War: long underestimated by the American establishment, this fundamental change obliged the United States to begin treating China and Taiwan on terms of formal equality: henceforth no decision on Taiwan's future could be taken without assent from the majority of Taiwanese, as Bill Clinton had to finally concede in 2000, four days after Beijing published a white paper pointedly threatening Taiwan (p. 249).

What is most striking, however, is the multiplicity of forces in the United States seeking to influence this relationship (which is known) and the resulting hesitation (less well known) at the top of the ruling establishment: defence circles, diplomats, business lobbies, and of course Congress. If Taiwan has long taken advantage of this situation, resorting to a public relations firm to facilitate Lee Teng-hui's visit to Cornell University in 1995, for instance, China has also learned to activate lobbying that could well lead to weakening US security commitments with regard to Taiwan in the long run.

Tucker notes that these commitments remain strong and cannot be easily changed, as that could call into question the US presence and role in the Asia-Pacific region as a whole. She points out clearly to what extent Washington's application of the third Sino-US communiqué of August 1982, endorsing a gradual reduction of American arms sales to Taiwan, remains linked to the demilitarisation of the Taiwan Strait and Beijing's adoption of an *exclusively* peaceful reunification policy. Her detailed analysis of the build-up to the 1995-1996 missile crisis is illuminating in this regard.

Given all this, it might be pertinent to ask whether the global war against terrorism might not have greatly eclipsed the continuing risks, despite the current détente, posed by the cross-strait confrontation, which might well be the only conflict with the potential to provoke a nuclear confrontation between the United States and China. That is why, as Tucker demonstrates repeatedly, any



Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, Strait Talk: United States-Taiwan Relations and The Crisis with China, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2009, xiv, 390 pp.

show of weakness or even a diplomatic “mini-withdrawal” by Washington on the Taiwan issue leads to Beijing pushing its advantage as well as to increased risk. Such was the case, for instance, with the confidential letter setting out the US “three nos” policy (no Taiwan independence, no one-China-one-Taiwan, and no Taiwan entry into any inter-state international organisations) that Clinton sent to Jiang Zemin in August 1995 to reassure him of American intentions: instead of calming the waters, this written assurance emboldened Jiang to move ahead with even more threatening and dangerous missile launches in March 1996. As we know, this obliged the United States to send two aircraft carrier fleets to the Strait area to ensure that Taiwan’s presidential elections could take place smoothly (pp. 217-218). Clearly, Washington-Taipei ties have always been complicated and, moreover, subservient to US national interests, including the need to maintain a stable relationship with Beijing. As is well known, Chen Shui-bian got a taste of this by managing to alienate the Bush II administration, a feat worthy of mention in a Guinness book of diplomatic records. More generally, the Americans want the Taiwanese to take their defence needs seriously but at the same time want to remain fully in control of operations in the event of a cross-Strait conflict. However, as the gap with the People’s Liberation Army has widened, Taipei has balked at investing too much in its security, preferring to pursue contacts with Beijing so as to contain crises and avoid war. Developments the book deals with regarding secret contacts made by Lee Teng-hui as well as Chen Shui-bian in times of tension (over the missile crisis and the two-state theory in 1999 and 2002), often behind American backs, reveal the level of trust between Washington and Taipei. Witness the weird tango in which they find themselves now, with the Americans offering a security umbrella that some in the Kuomintang think Taiwan no longer needs. This points to a caveat: rather than *mistrust*, it is quite simply divergent interests that explain the “dysfunction” in the relations between the United States, Taiwan, and China. Certainly, Tucker’s call for higher-level communication between Washington and Taipei could help, but better communication (or in her words, *strait* talk) cannot “move mountains,” especially as the Chinese mountain is growing, Taiwan’s is diminishing, and the US mountain has a good chance of projecting its shadow for a long time yet over the Taiwan Strait. Above all, the current Taipei-Beijing détente

can hardly overcome the basic factor that the author has vividly exposed: Taiwan is a state largely dependent on the United States for survival. If Taiwan, as a state, defends its national interests, it cannot let ties with its sole protector loosen too much.

Which is why Tucker’s conclusion is inescapable: given the US contribution to Taiwan’s security and to cross-Strait peace, it is difficult to conceive of Washington being excluded from any Beijing-Taipei negotiations on their future relations. •

• Translated by N. Jayaram