

## Getting Real About Taiwan

Written by James Holmes & Toshi Yoshihara  
Tuesday, 08 March 2011 09:22

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### **Bartering Taiwan for better ties with China is a mistake. Ambitious powers see such concessions as an appetizer, not dessert.**

Writing off Taiwan for the sake of Sino-American amity probably qualifies as optimism of a kind—unless you have the misfortune to actually live on the island. Writing in the [latest issue](#) of

*Foreign Affairs*

, George Washington University Prof. Charles Glaser maintains that to date, ‘the China debate among international relations theorists has pitted optimistic liberals against pessimistic realists.’ The former, he says, believe today’s liberal international order can accommodate China’s rise, building on economic interdependence. The latter point to China’s mounting economic and military strength, prophesying that power will impel Beijing ‘to pursue its interests more assertively, which will in turn lead the United States and other countries to balance against it.’

For realists of such leanings, this cycle of action and reaction is apparently apt to produce ‘at least a parallel to the Cold War standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union, and perhaps even a hegemonic war.’ Times of transition bring established powers intent on preserving their privileged positions into conflict with rising powers determined to remake the system to suit themselves.

What should be done? Glaser claims there’s a third way, namely a ‘realist optimism’ in which power politics makes not for conflict and war, but for a manageable peace—the established power should give up things that are of secondary value in order to satisfy a rising power that places inordinate value on these things. But this vision has a disturbingly 19<sup>th</sup> century ring to it. In effect, Glaser would abandon Taiwan, a secondary object for the United States, to China while reaffirming the alliances with Japan and South Korea. But buying peace with land has been tried many times before—with ephemeral results at best.

So how would this work? Glaser maintains that ‘structural forces’ aren’t propelling the Asia-Pacific heavyweights inexorably into combat. Now (as always) the vast emptiness of the Pacific Ocean separates the two main antagonists, limiting frictions while making it hard for them to get at each other militarily. And US nuclear superiority remains unchallengeable. Such structural factors apply a damper to transpacific competition while imposing restraint on Chinese actions. By this logic, Washington and Beijing should be able to fashion an arrangement through mutual concessions, fending off war. So far, so good. The United States

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should make every effort to enlist China as co-guarantor of the international system over which it has presided since 1945—a system that benefits all stakeholders in globalization, including China and fellow Asian nations. But with apologies to President John F. Kennedy, Washington can't pay *any* price for an Asia-Pacific entente.

Glaser apparently would. He terms Taiwan a 'less-than-vital' US interest. In international relations-speak, that means an interest for which the United States shouldn't fight. The island and its residents—US friends of long standing—would be the most obvious casualty of this effort to create a new normal in East Asia. The author admits Americans will find this 'disagreeable.' But sympathy for stricken friends is not the only thing at stake for the United States. It's far from clear that trading the island away would stabilize broader Sino-US relations or Asian security.

During World War II, Adm. Ernest King aptly portrayed Formosa as the 'cork' in the 'bottle' of the South China Sea—as a base from which naval and air forces could seal off imperial Japan's Southern Resource Area. Similarly, Taiwan has long served as a literal and figurative cork in China's bottle, riveting Beijing's attention on the cross-strait stalemate while complicating north-south movement along the Asian seaboard and access to the Western Pacific.

Uncorking the bottle would, in effect, free up resources for China to pursue broader regional aims. For example, Japan and South Korea would feel the effects once Beijing stationed naval and air forces on the island, turning their southern flank and imposing control of adjacent seas and skies. All Northeast Asian nations depend on the seas to convey imports and exports to and from their seaports. As we can infer from Adm. King's words, absolute control of China's economic lifelines equates to a stranglehold over the maritime-dependent Japanese and Korean economies. This fact isn't lost on Chinese strategists. In this brave new world, Tokyo and Seoul would find little solace in US nuclear guarantees or assurances of future support, and would have little choice but to provide for their own defence. The modest arms race already underway would accelerate.

Beware of unintended consequences. As Glaser frames it, optimistic realism serves neither US interests nor American ideals in the Far East.

Nor does history provide much sustenance for strategies aimed at bartering territory for great power concord. Another optimistic realist, Henry Kissinger, has noted that German unification

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left the 19<sup>th</sup> century system of European power politics brittle. The time-honoured way by which European powers resolved their grievances was to parcel out bits and pieces of territory. They appeased one another—for a time—by broadening the monarchs' geographic sway and gratifying their vanity. Kissinger seemingly approves of this method of easing tensions, judging from his praise of the Concert of Europe, an arrangement instituted at the 1815 Congress of Vienna to manage great-power relations. And indeed, the congress system preserved peace for decades, as its founders intended.

The lands used to mollify European rulers came largely from Germany, which remained fragmented into many small kingdoms and principalities and powerless to resist such agreements. Forestalling a general war, then, came at a steep cost to the inhabitants of German states shuttled from ruler to ruler without their consent. This is hardly a precedent worth emulating today. Moral qualms aside, the techniques employed by the concert ceased working after German unification in 1871. Once Otto von Bismarck had forged a muscle-bound German Reich, there were no more territories to shift around to appease the great powers in times of strife. As Kissinger notes, the flexibility went out of the concert system. Suspicions and animosities mounted late in the century, marching the continent toward the precipice of World War I. As it turned out, paying off governments with land was a tactical measure, not a way to bring about enduring peace. Payoffs don't beget goodwill, while their pacifying effect is fleeting. So much for land-for-peace diplomacy in post-Napoleonic Europe.

Or look at 19th century China. Imperial powers plucked away seaports along the Chinese coast and imposed 'unequal treaties' while asserting spheres of primacy throughout the country. A decaying Qing Dynasty could offer only feeble resistance. [Capt. Alfred Thayer Mahan](#) likened this spectacle to imperial 'eagles' descending on the 'carcass' of a debilitated China. Alarmed that Europeans might dismember China, US Secretary of State John Hay circulated 'Open Door' notes among European capitals in 1900, pleading for equal access to the country. And yet no amount of East Asian colonies or spheres of interest managed to avert World War I, which broke out scant years after the Open Door circulars made the rounds. Overseas acquisitions satisfied the great powers' appetites only temporarily.

And finally, the fact is that history amply demonstrates that new territorial acquisitions encourage statesmen to seek forward defences for their valuable new holdings. The quest for a defensive buffer for India, the jewel in the crown of the British Empire, drove British policy in Central Asia during the 'Great Game' with imperial Russia. And after its triumph in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905, Tokyo almost instantly set out to mount a forward defence of Korea, its principal gain from the conflict. Japanese pursuit of security on the Asian mainland ultimately led Tokyo to invade first Manchuria, then China proper.

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To be sure, obtaining the Korean Peninsula and the southern half of Sakhalin Island in the peace settlement satiated perceived Japanese security needs and steadied the regional balance of power—briefly. But the ensuing strategic equilibrium bought Britain and the United States too little time to respond adequately to Japan's eventual, forcible reordering of the Asian hierarchy. British leaders had struck up an alliance with Tokyo in 1902 in hopes that Japan would become a responsible stakeholder in its own backyard—managing East Asian affairs while permitting Britain to withdraw its fleet to tend to the growing, and more pressing, rivalry with Imperial Germany and its High Seas Fleet. This 'realist' calculus shattered during the opening phases of the Pacific War, when Japanese forces launched a blitzkrieg that dismantled the British Empire's Far East holdings. Ambitious great powers tend to devour territorial concessions as appetizers—not dessert.

The bottom line is that ceding territory to land-hungry powers is a morally bankrupt enterprise that applies only a temporary fix for international quarrels—briefly papering over fundamental, nonnegotiable disagreements about the existing order. And this approach emboldens recipients of new land in the process. Why would things be different this time? Prof. Glaser says he offers an optimistic vision. Maybe. It's certainly not a very realistic one.

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