

As a nation that touts democracy as one of its chief values, the US has always suffered from a slow learning curve on nationalistic self-determination and democratic development in Asia, particularly in Taiwan. As T.S. Eliot said in his poem *The Hollow Men*: “Between the idea and the reality, between the motion and the act, falls the shadow.”

Why? The quick and obvious excuse is that the US began as eurocentric. In its early, formative history, all settlements and subsequent colonies were on its east coast, and settlers and later immigrants came primarily from European nations, eg. England, France, Spain, Germany and the Netherlands.

In addition, the US had achieved its democratic independence from Britain, albeit with the notable help of France. Thus, the developing imagined community of immigrants carried with them all their past national histories, conflicts and biases. From this background two polar positions developed: The US could either be sympathetic interventionists or isolationists with a eurocentric bent that has predominated to this day, and it still remains so in many ways.

True, US whaling and trade ships did ply Asian waters, and there might have been later great plans developed on how to guard the Pacific as put forth in Michael Greene's book *By More than Providence*, but the US government still lacked any clear sense or rationale of nationalistic history and developments in Asia. It was thus when it was caught flat-footed and Pearl Harbor happened.

That attack ended US isolationism; a new required serious involvement in Asia became inevitable and unavoidable. The US could no longer remain in the shadows. From then on, the US has been playing catch-up in gaining in-depth historical perspectives on Asian nations, even as the world moved on to become the current global village that it is.

Questions naturally followed: Should democracy be promoted or supported in Asia? Should the US intervene or try to remain isolationist? And if it were to intervene, which side should it choose?

Hindsight too often proves painstakingly informative, especially after trying to see the world

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Written by Jerome Keating

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through the eyes of developing national narratives. Korea was clearly a learning experience for the US and afterward came Vietnam, which the US unfortunately saw more through French colonial eyes.

Did the US really set out to oppose communism or nationalism in Vietnam? The US' lack of Asian history played against it there. Beneath the surface of the US' 20 years of involvement in Vietnam was the Cold War paradigm of the "domino theory."

Then-US president Dwight Eisenhower expressed it in 1954 when he stated: "Indochina is the first in a row of dominoes."

If it went, then all of Asia would allegedly follow suit.

Asia did not, of course. Few Americans were even aware that in the early 1920s, Ho Chi Minh, founder of the Vietnamese nationalist movement, was an admirer of US national independence and how it threw off British colonial rule. As a student in France after World War I, Ho even tried to get an audience with visiting then-US president Woodrow Wilson, but obviously failed.

During World War II, the US Office of Strategic Services, the predecessor of the CIA, did help in arming Ho Chi Minh's forces as they sought to throw off Japanese rule, but it did not clearly see this as supporting nationalism.

The double irony that came about is how in the 1960s and 1970s, the People's Republic of China (PRC) backed North Vietnam against US forces in South Vietnam, but now it is the US that is helping Vietnam against Chinese economic incursions.

This brings us to Taiwan, and here, the US unfortunately has not fared much better. Early US propaganda films of the 1960s portrayed Taiwan/Formosa as "Free China," although if one had a proper perspective it was neither free nor Chinese, except perhaps for those that fled with Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石) after he lost the Civil War in China in 1949.

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Ironically, it was also the Korean “police action” that forced the US to put its fleet in the Taiwan Strait and indirectly preserve Taiwan. Yet, the US still did not see the light or have hope for any developing Taiwanese nationalism. For the longest time it supported the one-party state of the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) and did so because the KMT was allegedly pro-democracy.

The past is past. Taiwan did finally become a model democracy, although it was more in spite of the KMT than because of it; that is a story that still needs to be told.

Now, however, the struggle is no longer the ideological one of the Cold War. Communism is not the threat. There are no dominoes to fall. China is more capitalist, and Washington and Beijing are in a totally different economic power struggle where China’s regional hegemonic territorial aims also threaten Asia.

This creates a new chance at history between the US, Taiwan, China and the world. What new attitudes are required?

Clearly, Cold War or not, whatever way you cut it, Asia and the world need a free and democratic Taiwan. Taiwan holds a key “Gibraltar of the East” position geographically, democratically and even economically, with its dominance in the semiconductor industry. Medically, it has also demonstrated its worth with its strong containment of COVID-19, which originated in China.

If Beijing were to attack Taiwan, and try to subdue and control it, it would not be just Taiwan’s 23 million people who would suffer or be impacted; Asia and the world also would.

For the US, it has been more than 75 years since the end of World War II and yet this pro-democracy leader still finds itself caught in the past shadow of being “undecided” on Taiwan. What should be done?

Awareness of how the game has changed is the first step, followed by common sense positions. There is no need for any great, elaborate plans. Such plans look good on paper and suggest concern, but in reality they too often fall short.

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Past empire researchers tout how the Qing Dynasty had developed great economic plans for the half of Taiwan that it controlled, yet the reality was that they were never carried out. No Manchu government official worth his salt, and with a sense of career advancement, wanted to live in Taiwan. The Manchu court in Beijing was where the action was.

For this reason, China's past alleged "Manchu" claims on Taiwan are easily revealed as bogus; Japan was the first nation to control the whole island, and that was before the demise and split of all the territories that the Manchus had conquered.

So for the US, in the new economic game, it just needs a few simple actions, ones that are easy, understandable, and change the discourse. Taiwanese nationalism will support them, and other nations will also come to realize that they need not follow the PRC's gambits.

For starters, the US should follow up on the recent remarks by former US secretary of state Mike Pompeo, who bluntly said: "Taiwan has not been part of China."

This brief statement finally brought the ambiguity of the San Francisco Peace Treaty to an end. Surprisingly, the heavens did not fall or the skies come crashing down once it was uttered.

If anyone missed the nuances involved, he said it even though the US professes a "one China policy." There is no shadow here. "Taiwan has not been part of China." Spelled out, it means a nation can hold a "one China policy" and in the same breath state that Taiwan is not part of China. I have explained the difference between a "one China policy" and the "one China principle" too often to repeat it here.

This opens the door for much higher-level US visits to Taiwan, as well as naval vessels stopping at the Port of Kaohsiung. Why go through the Taiwan Strait without a visit?

Another step, as American Institute in Taiwan Director Brent Christiansen recommended, is to replace China's propagandistic Confucius Institutes in the US with what could be called

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“Taiwan Democracy Institutes.”

There the Mandarin language can be taught along with the history of Taiwan’s democracy. Some Fulbright programs have started this, but any reputable university could do the same. You do not have to be Chinese to teach Mandarin. Taiwanese can do it quite well and also explain how Taiwan became an independent democratic nation.

Next, international media outlets need to up their discourse game. When speaking of Taiwan they often follow it with the same hackneyed meme, “which China considers a breakaway province.”

That could easily be followed with a countering second meme: “However, those who know the history of Taiwan scoff at the absurdity of such a claim.” Or “However, Taiwan stands as an independent model democracy from which all can learn.”

In this new economic game the Chinese emperor has no clothes. The first steps just involve simple discourse and action rectification. And yes, do not worry, the heavens will not fall.

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