

GEORGE F. WILL

## Time is on Taiwan's side. We should be, too.

TAIPEI, TAIWAN

Now only 15 flags in the Foreign Ministry's foyer represent the nations that have not yet succumbed to Beijing's financial blandishments — targeted at governments and individual politicians — and other pressures to sever diplomatic relations with this island nation. There were 17 flags a few weeks ago.

The last time many Americans thought of the Solomon Islands (population 650,000) was the 1942-1943 Battle of Guadalcanal. It is one of the two Pacific island nations whose flags have recently been removed. The other is Kiribati (population 116,000), site of the Battle of Tarawa. China's growing dominance in the South Pacific is a defeat for an America in retreat: China might now gain access to deep-water ports in the Solomons and to a Kiribati satellite-tracking station that was closed when that nation changed its recognition from China to Taiwan in 2003.

America's flag is not in the ministry's foyer because diplomatic relations with Taiwan ended in 1979, to serve what has become an increasingly untenable fiction: that the Beijing regime that suppresses the mainland's 1.4 billion people is the legitimate government of China, and that Taiwan, although separated by the 110-mile-wide Taiwan Strait and by yawning and widening cultural differences, is somehow part of "one China."

However, the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act obligates the United States to help Taiwan (the Republic of China) maintain its defenses against the People's Republic of China (PRC). Taiwan is as inconvenient to people eager to propitiate Beijing as is America's founding document, which says governments derive "their just powers from the consent of the governed."

When in 1996 Taiwan held its first direct presidential election, Beijing tried intimidation, firing missiles into the strait. Today, Beijing buys influence. The Financial Times' Kathrin Hille describes how mainland money courses through Taiwanese media to support candidates opposed to President Tsai Ing-wen, who is seeking reelection in January and who rejects the "one China, two systems" fudge. Hille says: "Journalists working at the China Times and CTiTV [in Taiwan] told the Financial Times that their editorial managers take instructions directly from the Taiwan Affairs Office, the body in Chinese government that handles Taiwan issues. 'They call every day,' said one China Times reporter." This tactic of tyrannies is not new: Read Alan Furst's novel "Mission to Paris," concerning Germany's prewar

infiltration of French media.

Taiwan — larger than Maryland, more populous than Florida — is crucial to the U.S. presence in the geopolitically crucial Indo-Pacific region. Princeton University's Aaron Friedberg says that what is at stake there "is not only freedom of navigation and open markets, but the continuing security and prosperity of free and open (that is, liberal-democratic) societies along China's maritime periphery." This is hindered by the U.S. president's "reluctance to use the language of principle to describe America's commitments to its allies (or the failings of its authoritarian rivals) and his insistence on discussing alliance relationships primarily in transactional, monetary terms."

On Tuesday, the PRC, meaning the Chinese Communist Party, will conduct compulsory celebrations of mandatory gratitude on the 70th anniversary of the PRC's birth as a Leninist party-state. In 1949, the mainland's regime, victorious in the civil war, and the losing regime, transplanted to this island, were both authoritarian. Now, the latter is robustly democratic. The former, employing privacy-annihilating surveillance by digital technologies, is inflicting totalitarianism of a hitherto impossible intensity. What Vaclav Havel, the dissident and then Czechoslovakia's last president, warned against has come to the mainland: a "world of absolute manipulation."

China's diplomats are, Friedberg says, espousing the theory that "America's commitments are unreliable because it is a declining power, with an increasingly narrow view of its own interests." Policy toward Taiwan can counter this narrative.

Statesmanship sometimes requires calculated obscurity and strategic ambiguity. There are, however, occasions for this rule: Know your own mind *and make sure your adversary knows it, too*. U.S. policy actually is that Taiwan will remain effectively a sovereign nation as long as it wants to. U.S. practices should respond to Beijing's pressure on Taiwan with a reciprocal defiance worthy of a great nation friendly to a small nation that has few friends. For starters, America should encourage senior Taiwanese officials to visit the United States, and senior U.S. officials should travel to Taiwan to cultivate personal relationships with their Taiwanese counterparts.

Every day, week, month and year that passes, the PRC's regime becomes more repulsive and the contrast with Taiwan's democratic identity becomes more dramatically defined. Time is on Taiwan's side, as long as the U.S. Navy is, too.

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