

Calm or Dangerous? The Taiwan Strait

By Helmut Hetzel and Marijke Hetzel



Photo by Andrea Ege.

HELMUT HETZEL is a Foreign Correspondent based in The Hague. He reports to media—TV, Radio, and Newspapers—in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, The Netherlands, and Luxembourg. He was a correspondent in Beijing and visits China, Taiwan, and other Asian countries regularly.

MARIJKE HETZEL, daughter of Helmut, studies Trade Management in Asia and Mandarin at the University of Applied Sciences in Amsterdam. She

just returned from Beijing, where she took a summer course at the Beijing Normal University and received her Diploma in Mandarin. She also visits Taiwan regularly.

Relations between Taiwan (Republic of China-ROC) and China (People's Republic of China-PRC) are dynamic, and Taiwan-US relations in the Asia Pacific are of vital interest for the US.

*When two tigers are fighting in a valley,
it is good to watch them from the top of a hill.*

This Chinese saying reflects at this moment the situation with Taiwan (ROC) and the People's Republic of China (PRC), as the PRC and Japan continue a tough diplomatic struggle about the uninhabited Diaoyu Islands (Japanese name, Sentaku Islands, Taiwanese name, Diàoyútái Islands). The Diaoyu Islands are controlled by Japan in the East China Sea, located east of Mainland China, northeast of Taiwan, west of Okinawa, and north of the Ryukyus.

The Chinese tiger-fight proverb reflects only part of the complex reality in the Taiwan Strait, the East and South China Sea, and the Pacific Ocean. The ROC is in fact fully involved in the conflict between China and Japan about Diaoyu/Senkaku because, according to Taiwan, the ROC legally owns these five uninhabited islands. Japan took over the islands during the first Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), and in 1945, the US assumed administrative control at the conclusion of World War II. According to Taiwan, the US transferred the “administrative rights” to Japan in 1971 but not sovereign control of the islands. Both China and Taiwan claim that the islands have belonged to China since the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), and both the PRC and the ROC claim to be China. Thus, Taipei, as is the case with Beijing and Tokyo, is involved in the dispute.

The Diaoyu/Sentakou conflict, along with conflicting claimants for ownership of the Spratly Islands—including China, Việt Nam, Taiwan, Malaysia, Brunei, and the Philippines—has the potential to destabilize both Southeast and Northeast Asia and worsen the current relatively relaxed PRC-ROC relations. Potentially even worse, the US could get involved in this ongoing struggle regarding who has sovereignty over these two island groups. The stakes are high and include oil and gas resources, important sea-trade routes, rich fishing resources, and geopolitical dominance of this part of the world and the larger Pacific.

The US cannot completely stay out of these two disputes. The region, especially Taiwan, is of vital interest for the US, and the US-Taiwan

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Relations Act obligates the US to provide Taiwan with defensive weapons, if not intervene militarily at the very least, should Beijing attack the ROC. At present this is not likely because Taipei and Beijing are on speaking terms again since the KMT (Kuomintang), the Chinese Nationalist Party, regained power in 2008, and KMT President Ma Ying-jeou was re-elected in 2012. President Ma is actively seeking to improve ROC-PRC relations, mainly by staying with the status quo, thus preserving the excellent relations the two governments currently enjoy. Bilateral trade and economic relations are booming, and Taiwan has invested about US \$250 billion in China. Millions of tourists from the PRC visit Taiwan and vice versa, with hundreds of flights per week between the two countries, including flights from Taipei to various destinations in the PRC. Regular talks between Beijing and Taipei on a variety of issues are also ongoing.

Nevertheless, Beijing asserts that Taiwan is part of China, although there is no legal basis for China's claim, in our opinion. The People's Republic of China was founded on October 1, 1949, while the ROC dates its founding on the mainland to the October 1911 revolution and the official declaration of the Republic of China in early 1912, so Taipei has an older case it is the legal government of China. The PRC's so-called “One-China Policy” includes the positioning of approximately 1,000 missiles pointed directly at Taiwan.

From a geopolitical point of view, it is in the vital interest of the US to guarantee the Taiwan Relations Act and support its allies and friends like Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines if the US wants to continue control of the Pacific. As an emerging superpower, the PRC seems to have this ambition too.

The presence of the US in the Asia-Pacific region and the efforts it has made in the region are important, as they help shape a geopolitical climate and make the US immediately available to respond to its needs

said Wallace Gregson, who served as US assistant secretary of defense for Asia and Pacific security affairs in an international forum in Taipei, hosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies on April 18, 2012.¹ He added:

The US and the world need China to be a successful contributor to the international system, but at the same time the US needs to work with our allies and friends and be there to support their interests.

Currently, in an effort to contain the PRC, the US has established a “cordon sanitaire” around the Pacific coasts of China from Japan via Taiwan to the Philippines. The PRC intends to break through this US barrier eventually by possibly gaining control of Taiwan and most of the other islands in the China Sea.