

STI COMMENTS ON PUBLIC AFFAIRS

ISRAEL AND TAIWAN AWAIT TOMORROW

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From the beginning of recorded history individuals and nations have sought to predict their tomorrows. Predicting an individual's future has become a cottage industry—fortune tellers and seers of all types, biblical prophets, astrologists, and modern day Merlins.

For nations, the classical spy (Nathan Hale and Mati Hari) has evolved into sophisticated intelligence gathers. In this regard the United States has 16 different intelligence agencies. In predicting the future of nations there have been successes but always with qualifications and disclaimers.

The need to know our tomorrows largely depends on how secure an individual or country feels today. The more secure, the greater is attention on the present, its todays, rather than its tomorrows.

Two countries that are very important to American security and its national interests are Israel and the Republic of China (Taiwan). But in terms of their tomorrows, they are probably the most insecure nations on the planet. Why? Both have large military forces equipped with conventional, mostly state of the art, weapons, and probably rank in the top 25 of the world's best armed nation states. And, in the case of Israel, include a small inventory of atomic weapons. Nor does their insecurity arise for lack of a good standard of living, a lack of democracy in the Western sense, or lack of an ability to make and export things the world wants. Rather it is the lack of *unconditional* friends and allies, ones that can be counted on in the worst of circumstances.

Beyond question the United States does not want the People's Republic of China to dominate the Western Pacific. By most indicators, however, China sees that as its destiny. In this context, Taiwan, no matter its conventional military power, is a pawn of the United States, not a knight, bishop or castle. Its role is not that of an ally of the United States but rather as a

means of maintaining a nebulous balance of power in the region. In this respect, the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, the supposed bedrock on which a free Taiwan rests, is not a mutual defense treaty as in the case of Japan, South Korea and NATO.

Section 3301 is plain in this respect. The future of Taiwan is to be obtained by peaceful means; anything other is of grave concern to the United States. The Act allows the U.S. to provide arms sufficient to maintain a credible defense (against the People's Republic of China). In addition, the United States must maintain the capacity to resist any threat to Taiwan's security. The Congress and President are to determine the response to any threat or danger to Taiwan. *All well sounding but open to interpretation.*

On the economic side, the easing of cross strait relations continued with the signing of an Economic Cooperative Framework Agreement (ECFA) between Taiwan and the PRC in January 2011; an agreement welcomed by President Obama. In the same month, PRC President Hu Jintao made a state visit to the United States while Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates visited China to resume military to military discussions. What was not made public in either case, in unambiguous language, was U.S. concerns about the PRC missile deployment opposite Taiwan; its increased military budget and its military buildup in general. What should be of particular interest is its long-range missile program aimed at neutralizing American carriers should the United States become involved in a Taiwan Strait conflict.

Taiwan's immediate tomorrow concern is replacing its aging fighters, submarines and missile defense system. Its future concern is whether it will remain a pawn or be assigned a major role in containing China's military and political ambitions in the Western Pacific.

Unlike Taiwan, which has but a single possible neighborhood adversary, Israel is surrounded by likely enemies. Military analysts, however, are in near unanimous agreement that Israel's military would prevail in a conventional war should some or all of its contiguous Muslim neighbors mount a concerted attack. One caveat is --- prevail but at what cost? The other--will the United States become Israel's long run "arsenal of democracy?"

Since Israel's inception, the United States has partnered in developing various weapon systems (short range missile defense); selling the nation advanced weapons (F-35 stealth fighter jet) and participating in joint military exercises on a regular basis. Politically, it has protected Israel's flank in the United Nations. But, as in the case of Taiwan, there is no mutual defense treaty, one that would require the United States to militarily intervene should Israel come under attack.

The concept of a mutual defense treaty between the United States and Israel is hardly new, dating back to the early 1950s. The greatest difficulty in forging such an alliance is that both nations are concerned about the constraints such a treaty would impose on their military and political flexibility. From the Israeli point of view their option to launch a pre-emptive military strike or other kinds of retaliatory measures would be compromised, including the use, or threat to use, its nuclear weapons. For its part, the United States is reluctant to be seen as so pro Israel as to put at risk its relations with Arab world.

In more recent times, polarizing differences have arisen between the two countries. Israel has refused to end settlements on lands that the Palestinian Authority considers their national territory. The American position is an end to settlements would significantly move forward a final peace agreement between the two parties, a long sought goal of every recent American president. This standoff has cooled diplomatic relations between the Obama administration and present government of Israel in contrast to the mostly unstated, but real pro Israel policy of the Clinton administration.

Characterizing Israel and Taiwan as pawns of the United States would be vehemently denied by the governments of all three nations despite any facts to the contrary. However, being a present pawn does not foreclose the possibility of being a major player in the future. In this regard, both Israel and Taiwan are in a strong bargaining position. The incorporation of Taiwan as part of mainland China would greatly increase the ability of the PRC to project its naval power, not only in the Western Pacific but the entire Pacific basin. On the other side of the world, the loss of Israel, by whatever means, would diminish, if not end, the role of the United States as power of consequence in the Middle East. The encouragement such a loss would give to Muslim extremist groups in the region would be beyond measure.

To end this conundrum entails risk on all sides. In the case of Taiwan, being a relative large military power among UN members is inconsequential; having a military capability to give pause to PRC ambitions toward Taiwan is another matter. The air defense capability of Taiwan is a case in point. At present, Taiwan's Air Force is composed of F16 A/Bs, its own indigenous fighter, F-5s and some aging Mirage 2000s. Across the Taiwan Strait, the PRC is spending multi-billions of dollars in research and development of its own front line fighter. e.g. the J-20. On the table is whether the Obama Administration will upgrade the F16 A/Bs or grant Taiwan's request for the new F16 C/Ds. It is worth noting that the United States has agreed to sell Israel its newest and best stealth fighter, the F-35 and has encouraged Japan to purchase the F-35. The decision of how to upgrade Taiwan's air fighter capability has been ongoing for the past five years. This equivocation is no better proof that the United States considers Taiwan a pawn on the Western Pacific chessboard not a major player. In this respect it can be said that Taiwan's tomorrow is drawing dangerously close.

Unlike Taiwan, Israel's military is the strongest in the region along with the certainty that it will have access to America's advanced (conventional) military technology in maintaining that superiority. Absent a U.S. – Israel Mutual Defense Treaty, there have been continuing memorandums of understanding (MOUs) dealing with military and political relations between the two nations. While this arrangement is unlikely to change, it still leaves large areas of uncertainty with respect to both parties. From Israel's point of view—what would be the U.S. response to an Israeli pre-emptive strike against Syria or Iran? Or an invasion of Gaza? Or fortifying Jerusalem? If, however, Israel is uncertain with respect to an American response under different scenarios so too are its possible enemies. Like Israel, they are aware of the economic and political constraints the United States must deal with domestically and abroad with respect to the Palestine question. The present U.S. strategy in these circumstances is to

attempt to “manage” this uncertainty—to keep the lid on a boiling pot. In such an environment, Israel can fairly be characterized as a U.S. pawn on the Middle East chess board.

In the world of 2011 and beyond the interest of the United States will be best served by certainty rather than uncertainty with respect to its position (diplomatic and militarily) in the Western Pacific and Middle East. In the case of Taiwan there is ample authority in the Taiwan Relations Act for the United States to arm Taiwan to the extent it can be counted on as a major U.S. ally, together with Japan and South Korea, when the time comes, as it will, to contain PRC ambitions in East Asia.

With respect to the Middle East, the time has also come for both the U.S. and Israel to accept the risk in signing a mutual defense treaty. In the past, a nuclear-armed Iran was not a consideration, nor was the extent of Muslim hatred of the United States and the West by its extreme elements. Nor were the political upheavals taking place in the Arab world where any prediction of an equilibrium is nigh impossible. Logically, it is time for the United States to acknowledge *formally* that Israel is a major ally in the region, not a pawn.