

Beijing Signals New Flexibility on Taiwan Comments Appear Aimed at Bush

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BEIJING, Jan. 4 -- China's top foreign policy official, Deputy Prime Minister Qian Qichen, signaled today that his country is willing to be more flexible on Taiwan and urged the incoming Bush administration not to view Beijing as a "strategic competitor."

In an interview timed to coincide with the formation of a new U.S. government, Qian said China's emergence as a regional Asian power is "irresistible" and warned that a U.S. decision to sell advanced Aegis radars to Taiwan would harm bilateral relations. But he also declared that "China and the United States have no need to begin a war against each other" over Taiwan despite a U.S. commitment to help defend the island.

Qian, a 72-year-old Politburo member considered China's eminence grise on foreign relations, made his comments within the confines of Zhongnanhai, the walled Communist Party leadership compound in central Beijing. They seemed calculated to counter warnings from several Republican-oriented analysts in Washington that tension over Taiwan could bring an early test of President-elect George W. Bush's foreign policy leadership.

Asked if China would be willing to accept a loose confederation with the island of 23 million people, something Chinese officials ruled out years ago, Qian said: "Anything can be discussed." He went on to say that China has adopted a "pragmatic and more inclusive" version of its long-standing one-China policy, which holds there is only one China and Taiwan is part of it.

To outsiders, much of the one-China debate appears to involve semantics of little consequence. But here any shift in meaning could ease tensions in the 100-mile Taiwan Strait that is one of the world's potential hot spots given China's often-declared resolve to recover the island, by force if necessary.

The root question is whether China can provide Taiwan with enough breathing space to accept the idea of eventual reunification, leading to a peaceful solution.

The two sides, while having much in common culturally, have grown far apart politically and economically since 1895, the last time China controlled Taiwan for any meaningful period. To bridge this divide, analysts have said, China must expand the definition of "one China," making it bigger than Communist China and bigger than China's one-party system and turning it into more of a grouping of culturally linked peoples than a tightly knit state.

In the past, Chinese officials said "one China" meant Communist China, that Taiwan was a breakaway province and the Beijing government was the only legal government. Qian said during this time, when Taiwan's leaders thought of one China, "they were trapped."

"In order to ease their doubts," he added, "we said 'one China' not only includes the mainland, but also Taiwan. We think of this China as an integral whole which can't be separated in sovereignty or territory. This is the true meaning of 'one China.'

"And they had another doubt. . . . They think that Taiwan being part of Chinese territory means Taiwan and China are not equal. . . . To ease this doubt, we said the mainland and Taiwan belong to the same one China. At least, it shows some kind of equality. I think it can help ease their doubt."

Qian also acknowledged that China's other main formulation for its ties to Taiwan -- "one country, two systems" -- faces opposition on the island. One of the reasons is that China used this formula when it reasserted control over the former colonies of Hong Kong and Macao. Taiwanese do not view their island as anyone's colony and resent the parallel.

"There is much room [for negotiations] on this problem," he said.

Bush's top foreign policy advisers declined to comment on Qian's remarks. But Douglas Paal, president of the Asia Pacific Policy Center and a member of the National Security Council in the last Bush administration, said Qian's comments were "clearly aimed at the incoming administration. They are sending signals that they are prepared to work with the administration and not make unreasonable demands."

Paal, who saw Qian on a trip to China recently, said Beijing's approach contrasted with threats issued to the incoming administrations of Presidents Reagan and Clinton. He said China's position was partly "tactical" to establish good relations with the new administration before the annual April decision on what arms to sell to Taiwan.

China's newly flexible stance on Taiwan has been noted and welcomed by Clinton administration officials in recent weeks, who hope that it will help reduce tensions across the Taiwan Strait. Taiwan is an important issue to the United States because following the U.S. decision to recognize Beijing and break relations with Taipei in 1979, Washington committed itself, albeit somewhat vaguely, to Taiwan's defense.

Top Chinese officials rarely acknowledge policy changes because it is considered a sign of weakness, and today's interview was no exception. "Our policy of 'one China' has never changed," Qian said, "but to make it more accommodating, easier for them to understand, we made a clearer explanation."

But Qian's comments indicated that Beijing has modified the way it portrays its stand on the bustling democracy 100 miles off its east coast. The impression of a shift was reinforced by a Chinese official involved in Taiwan policy who, in another interview,

stated that China has significantly softened the policy, and no longer views Taiwan as a renegade province.

"Once we said we would liberate Taiwan, then we said Taiwan was just a province of China, now we are saying Taiwan can be our equal," the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity. "For the mainland to make these kinds of adjustments in policy is not an easy thing.

"We have people who fought and defeated the Nationalists and sent them running to Taiwan," he said, referring to the 1949 civil war that was won by China's Communists and sent Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists fleeing to the island. "For these old cadres, treating Taiwan as an equal is a very difficult thing to accept. They think, 'You lost the war, how can you be my equal?'"

Qian today reiterated China's new vow that it would "hold discussions on an equal footing" with Taiwan over reunification. He repeated China's new formula that "both the mainland and Taiwan belong to one China," adding that it was "pragmatic and more inclusive" than previous formulations. Qian's remarks, the Chinese official contended, marked a departure from Beijing's old conception of the "one China" principle.

"This is a broader understanding of China," the official said. "This means there is much more space to define China. We have all said there is not much of a big change, but for me -- I was in the room when Qian said this a few months ago -- it was a great shock."

China's policy began to shift last March after Chen Shui-bian became the first opposition member to win the presidency in Taiwan, breaking 55 years of Nationalist control. Chen is a member of the Democratic Progressive Party, which has in the past advocated independence for Taiwan. China has vowed to attack Taiwan if it declares independence.

Chen's victory was seen here as a defeat of the saber-rattling and threats that had constituted a mainstay of Beijing's Taiwan policy before Chen's victory. Since then China has launched a veritable charm offensive with Taiwan. It has continued to insist that Chen must accept the "one China" principle as a condition for any talks. But at the same time, China's definition of what "one China" means has broadened to make it more acceptable to Taiwan.

Anti-Taiwan articles have almost vanished from China's press. China's government has begun to court members of Taiwan's opposition parties to pressure Chen into improving ties. As part of that plan, a delegation of lawmakers from Taiwan arrived in Beijing today to begin discussions for the opening of full direct links between the two sides.

And China has quietly gone along with several of Chen's initiatives for better ties, such as allowing Chinese journalists to open up bureaus on Taiwan and Chen's plan, which started Tuesday, to permit several Taiwanese islands near China to open direct transportation and trade channels with the mainland.

More broadly, a sense of urgency that was evident last year at this time about reunification with Taiwan has dissipated. Some U.S. security experts who speak regularly with Chinese military and security officials say the risks of war between the United States and China over Taiwan remain high. But the sense in Beijing among a wide array of officials is that, right now at least, a military conflict over Taiwan is unlikely.

Staff writer Steven Mufson in Washington contributed to this report.

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