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Alan M. Wachman, Why Taiwan? Geostrategic Rationales for China's Territorial Integrity

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- 1 Sixty years after the retreat to Taiwan of the Nationalist army, the question of Taiwan still remains important and has even, on various occasions, been defined as the only problem that could lead to direct confrontation between the great powers in the post-Cold War period. As Alan Wachman sees it, the heart of the question of Taiwan centres on what he calls the Shi Lang paradigm (p. 112), which has prevailed since the end of the seventeenth century. From this perspective, control over Taiwan seems to be necessary for mainly defensive reasons: whether as a source of rebellion, a port — and later what General Mac Arthur called “an unsinkable aircraft carrier” — in the hands of a rival power, or simply left to its own devices, the island is a constant threat to the south-eastern provinces of mainland China. To Alan Wachman, this singularity in the position of Taiwan explains the extreme rigidity of China's position. He emphasises the unconvincing nature of the arguments linking the latter to the exacerbation of nationalist feeling on the mainland or Beijing's attachment to territorial integrity. Quite clearly, while the categorical imperatives (p. 38) of sovereignty and national unity should have forbidden any “losing” negotiation in the range of territorial disputes involving Beijing, “China has settled fourteen of its frontier disputes peacefully, largely through offering substantial compromises to its neighbours.”¹
- 2 Alan Wachman's argument is based on detailed analysis of the position occupied by Taiwan in the mental map of China (p. 47). Thus he emphasises the appearance of Taiwan on this map after the submission of the heirs of Zheng Chenggong, thanks to Shi Lang's intervention with Kangxi, who had originally shown little interest in the island (p. 55). Wachman points out that this “integration” of Taiwan into China was carried out then for reasons connected with the security of the mainland's coastal provinces, and even this unification appeared to be only partial, with a line from north

to south dividing an area of the island under real control from a zone under nominal control. Soejima used the lack of clarity surrounding Beijing's real sovereignty over the island and the lack of control over the aboriginal population as a pretext to justify Japanese intervention. Taiwan then became more clearly at stake in the rivalry between two great powers, one on the decline, the other rising fast.

- 3 Alan Wachman underlines the fact that a consequence of the break caused by the Treaty of Shimonoseki was a fading of Taiwan from this “mental map” of China. Sun Yat-sen, and initially Chiang Kai-shek as well as Mao Zedong, expressed little interest in Taiwan, not to mention in any later annexation. Wachman emphasises that the re-emergence of a claim over Taiwan, almost half a century after the island was ceded to Japan, was closely linked to anxiety over the security of the mainland. Beginning in 1941-42, both the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) saw Taiwan as a buffer zone that offered essential guarantees for the security of the future Chinese state.
- 4 Chapter 6 sails into more familiar waters, recalling the geostrategic bases of the question of Taiwan at the beginning of the Cold War. President Truman's decision to neutralise the Taiwan Strait by sending in the Seventh Fleet, for fear that any hostilities would mark the beginning of a vast Communist offensive, established the rules of the game for decades to come. Wachman emphasises that the CCP, recently victorious on the mainland, perceived this move not only as the touchstone of counter-revolutionary containment, but also as a substantial threat to the coast of the People's Republic. The confirmation of a strong link between Taiwan and Washington after the Korean War increased Beijing's fears as well as giving lasting definition to the basic structure of the question of Taiwan. Despite important changes in the regional and global environment, Taiwan has remained a central stake in the rivalry between the United States and China, with the importance of the island to the latter still linked to the “Shi Lang paradigm.”
- 5 Taiwan's place in the “imagined geography” of the People's Republic in the contemporary period remains, to the author, deeply influenced by anxiety over Chinese vulnerability. On top of this “defensive” dimension, however, comes a more “offensive” interest. Taiwan appears as a point of entry to the Pacific, the only access point in the first chain of islands that does not impinge on the claims of any other state. From this point of view, Taiwan's importance seems crucial as the key to accessing naval power and thus great power status. Alan Wachman highlights in particular constant reference to the pioneering work of Alfred Mahan in the arguments put forward by the majority of Chinese military analysts. More than ever, perhaps, Taiwan appears as the cornerstone in the construction of a China restored to power and status. Based on a strategic continuity, Alan Wachman's book presents itself as a powerful antidote to belief in an exclusive “identity” basis to the question of Taiwan. However, resorting to the notion of “imagined geography” remains less convincing to the extent that the relationship between geography and the balance of power rests on relatively tangible bases — such as the deployment of two naval air force groups close to Taiwan by the Clinton Administration in the spring of 1996. Wachman's line of reasoning on Chinese naval power also remains problematic to the extent that control of Taiwan is of marginal importance to the security of Chinese maritime communication links, and that the modernisation of the structure of Chinese naval forces shows specificities — in

particular a trend towards denial of access — that remain difficult to relate to the explanations provided by Wachman's book.

6 Translated by Michael Black

NOTES

1. Robert J. Art, "The United States and the Rise of China," in Robert S. Ross and Zhu Feng, *China's Ascent: Power Security and the Future of International Politics*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2008, p. 279.

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