TAIWAN'S MILITARY UNDER SIEGE:
A Hazing Scandal Could Destabilize the Island's Relations with Beijing and Washington

August 12, 2013
Editorial by Rupert Hammond-Chambers

After several years of relative calm, Taiwan faces a new political crossroads. The tragic hazing death of army conscript Hung Chung-chiu has thrown the entire island into turmoil, and brought a coalition of civil society groups into collision with the Ministry of National Defense (MND). The way the ruling Kuomintang handles the scandal could destabilize relations with both the U.S. and China.

Corporal Hung, after receiving significant physical hazing, died in disciplinary confinement. His alleged transgression was the taking of a camera phone on to a military base, but many speculate that he was privy to corruption on the base. The video footage of his confinement was erased before it could be handed over to judicial authorities. Taiwan's citizens view this case through the prism of a MND that acts with impunity, and the possibility of corruption on the base has further aggravated events. Pro-China forces have jumped on the opportunity to further undermine the MND and claim that the military is unworthy of robust support.

Washington has reason to worry about that backlash because the MND is the most important pro-American institution within the government. Some in the KMT want to impose financial restrictions on the MND to “starve the beast” in the aftermath of the hazing scandal. This would further weaken the already underfunded MND at a time when the military requires resources and support to transform itself into a modern, well-equipped, and all-volunteer force. Mr. Ma committed to turning a conscript army into an all-volunteer force, but has so far failed to come up with the budget. That means the military is unable to execute a policy directive from its civilian leadership. The MND is frustrated over what it views as a policy that by design leaves it highly vulnerable to political attack. Recent events have also left a vacuum at the top, with two ministers resigning in rapid succession.

The scandal could also destabilize relations with mainland China. The “deep blue” - i.e. pro-China - members of Mr. Ma's Kuomintang party want him to open political and military talks with Beijing, which has been frustrated with the lack of movement in this area after it made economic overtures to the island. The deep blue camp wants to restrict funds to the MND, claiming that China's ongoing military build-up is nothing to worry about and that the money should be spent elsewhere. This is a dangerous road, as there is no consensus in Taiwan on moving forward with cross-Strait talks. More than 90% of Taiwan's citizens support the status quo of de facto independence, and forcing through such talks would further polarize Taiwan society. But without a credible defense, Taiwan could one day be forced to accept Beijing's terms on reunification.

Chinese leaders must be watching these developments with positive glee. Taipei is doing more damage to its own ability to deter mainland coercion and military attack than any weapon the People's Liberation Army could conceive. This damage represents a serious threat to Taiwan's national security, and by extension to the national security of the U.S. and Japan.

Given the political atmosphere, the KMT's prospects in next year's five municipal elections are tenuous at best. If the opposition DPP wins three or more municipalities, they will likely have the momentum to regain the presidency in 2016. And even if the KMT hold on to the presidency, the incoming president will have limited maneuvering room in relations with China. Either way, tensions are set to rise as China sees its present strategy of engagement founder on the realities of Taiwan's vibrant democracy.
The Obama administration's decision rhetorically and substantively to omit Taiwan from its pivot to Asia telegraphs to China that Taiwan is no longer central to U.S. policy. By doing so, the U.S. is inviting Chinese adventurism when the present trajectory of Taiwan-China relations changes in the spring of 2016, if not sooner. China is currently playing nice, because it believes that Taiwan is being drawn inexorably into the fold. That explains why cross-Strait relations have been calm since Mr. Ma's election in 2008. However, if Beijing starts to believe that time is no longer on its side, we can expect behavior more in line with China's aggressiveness toward its other neighbors.

If the U.S. wants to avoid repeating Dean Acheson's mistake of encouraging North Korea to invade the South in 1950, it needs to signal resolve to defend Taiwan. Taiwan's democratic growing pains should not open the door for further Chinese coercion. The U.S. can recalibrate its Taiwan policy by restarting the arms sales to Taiwan that have been stalled for two years. The first step should be new F-16 C/D fighters, followed by assistance with the procurement of submarines. In addition, as Mr. Obama has instructed his cabinet officers to make at least one visit to Asia each year, Taiwan should be a port-of-call for all the economic officers making that trip. More senior uniformed officers need to visit Taiwan, both to improve communication at the highest levels and offer U.S. support for the MND and its reform efforts.

The Obama administration has been happy with the U.S.-Taiwan relationship under President Ma, especially compared to the turbulence under his predecessor Chen Shui-bian. But this is because both sides have been content to allow the relationship to drift. Taiwan asks for little, which the U.S. provides. This complacency will come back to haunt both nations soon.

Rupert Hammond-Chambers is President of the US-Taiwan Business Council

---