

Malcolm Cook and Michael Fullilove
Taiwan's gambit could put West in dire straits
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'Spreading liberty' to Iraq has left the US with fewer options in China, write Malcolm Cook and **Michael Fullilove**.

The American foreign policy sage George Kennan famously wrote that democracies are like dinosaurs slow to anger but once awakened, prone to laying about themselves with such determination that they can wreck their native habitat. Insiders such as Kennan, a senior diplomat, have long been disturbed by the volatile role which public opinion can play in forming foreign policy particularly when political parties choose to rouse the dinosaur around election time.

A worrying example of the role of electioneering is the latest escalation in the long-running dispute in the Taiwan Straits. It has now moved beyond the foreign policy cloisters into the unruly world of domestic politics a shift which increases the risk of miscalculation. The danger is that short-term party political interests may override national interests and threaten regional and global stability.

There are three main players in this dangerous game Taiwan, China and the United States. In each country, the ruling party's interests hinder a pragmatic de-escalation of the issue.

In Taiwan, President Chen Shui-bian and the Democratic People's Party have decided to use Taiwanese self-determination as their key electoral strategy against a strengthened opposition, despite the attendant geo-strategic risks. Chen has promised to hold a referendum on March 20 next year the same day as the presidential election, on the military threat posed by China. Analysts see this as a proxy plebiscite on Taiwanese independence.

Chen's referendum gambit is playing well locally. It has boosted his flagging popularity and caused the opposition Kuomintang party to soften its traditional hostility to eventual independence. The Kuomintang standard-bearer, Lien Chan, recently referred to Taiwan as a separate country, the first time a Kuomintang leader has ever done so.

If re-elected, Chen has identified constitutional reform of Taiwan's sovereign status as the key issue for his second term, so the uncertainty is unlikely to dissipate after March.

In China, there is nothing as troublesome as free elections. Nevertheless, the dinosaur is beginning to stir. Beijing's implicit repudiation of communist principles since the late 1970s has left nationalism as the main legitimising device for continued one-party rule. This development solves one problem, but may have created another. There is anecdotal evidence that the Beijing leadership is finding it increasingly difficult to control the nationalist sentiment which it has stoked.

Several times in the past decade, Beijing has struggled to keep pace with popular opinion. In 1998, its muted response to reports of attacks on ethnic Chinese in Indonesia was stiffened after anti-Indonesian protests. The following year, Beijing fomented anti-US demonstrations after the US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, but authorities were taken aback when the protests turned violent. Chinese intransigence in the US spy plane dispute of 2001 reflected Beijing's desire not to be seen domestically as compromising China's territorial integrity. Of course, the territorial question that inflames Chinese nationalist passions the most is Taiwan.

Finally, in the US, the hard-wired pro-Taiwan, anti-Beijing stance of congressional Republicans may impair George Bush's ability to pressure Chen to step back from the brink, especially during the US campaign season. Much comment was caused by Bush's statement during the Chinese premier's red carpet state visit to Washington that the US would not support moves to alter the status quo in relation to Taiwan. The game is not yet over, however. Support for Taiwan and its democracy remains a cause celebre of the Republican right and one that is strongly supported by Taiwan's aggressive lobbying program on Capitol Hill. Democratic and Republican congressmen have criticised Bush's statement.

If Taiwan were to defy the US warning and proceed with the referendum, Bush's choice of policy options may be severely circumscribed, not least by the Administration's recent characterisation of the Iraq invasion as an effort to spread liberty in the Middle East rather than an exercise in hard-headed Realpolitik. Already, critics are calling attention to the stark contrast between the way Washington is talking democracy up in Iraq and talking it down in Taiwan.

Party politics in the Taiwanese elections have reignited cross-straits tensions while party politics in China and the US are constraining the world's ability to calm the dinosaur awoken by Chen and the Democratic People's Party. As Australia enters its election year, we can only hope that cool heads prevail; if any of the hundreds of Chinese missiles aimed at Taiwan were fired, the regional consequences would be grave.

Everyone's habitat is endangered when dinosaurs run amok.