

TSR Interview with Andrew Nathan*

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True to its Marxist ideology, the Chinese Communist Party has put great faith in the power of material forces to steer Taiwan toward unification. In spite of the economic benefits Taiwan has gained in recent years from increasing ties with mainland China, most Taiwanese remain opposed to the idea of unification in large part due to antipathy for China's authoritarian system of government and its poor human rights record. *Taiwan Security Research's* Kristian McGuire** talks with Andrew Nathan, Class of 1919 Professor of Political Science at Columbia University, about human rights issues in cross-Strait relations, Professor Nathan and Andrew Scobell's book *China's Search for Security*, and more in this TSR exclusive interview.

Kristian McGuire: In a recent article in *Journal of Democracy* you argue that, although China's current foreign policy is "regime-type-neutral," Beijing often finds it easier to deal with authoritarian elites than to navigate complex democratic systems. How would you assess Beijing's navigation of Taiwan's democratic system over the past few years?

Andrew Nathan: I think they've found it very difficult. I think when Chiang Kai-shek and Chiang Ching-kuo were in charge, the Chinese government felt that they knew who was the boss in Taiwan and that they could negotiate with that person and see if they could find a deal with that person. But after the democratic transition took place, they've had to deal with a very complex, unpredictable, and changing situation. They don't know who is going to be in power—whether it's going to be the KMT or the DPP—and they also don't know whether the person who's in power has the capability to deliver what that person may want to deliver. So when Ma Ying-jeou came in, Beijing heaved a sigh of relief because they felt this was a guy who saw Taiwan's strategic interest in a way that was compatible with Beijing's purposes. I don't mean to say that Ma wanted to sell out Taiwan, but I think Beijing assessed that Ma was loyal to Taiwan but wanted to do a deal with Beijing that would serve the interests of Taiwan in a way that Beijing would like.

Now Beijing is looking at the possibility that the DPP will win the presidency in the next election, and so I think they find the democratic system in Taiwan unpredictable and difficult to deal with. It's hard to know who's in charge. And you have two different parties that alternate, so they don't necessarily maintain a consistent strategy across time. The public interferes, if you will, in the negotiations. And so the advantage of an authoritarian government is that there's one person or a small elite in charge and they're in charge for a long time, so you can negotiate with them and they have the power to implement what they agreed to. But the disadvantage of a democratic system as an entity with which to bargain, from Beijing's point of view, is that there isn't a consistent, or there may not be consistent, policy direction and the people who are supposed to be in power don't necessarily have the ability to deliver what they agreed to.

Kristian McGuire: What lessons do you think Beijing has or should have learned from last year's Sunflower Movement?

Andrew Nathan: I think that they had already learned that to settle what they call "the Taiwan problem" peacefully, which is their goal, they are going to have to win over public opinion in Taiwan—the people,

the voters. They knew that. But to me, the lesson of the Sunflower Movement is—but I don't know if Beijing understands the lesson the way I do—is that you can't win over public opinion strictly with economic benefits. I think Beijing's strategy had been that we will take care of the Taiwan economy by opening up our markets, by giving privileges to Taiwanese investors and others, and sending tourists, and so forth, and the Taiwan people will understand that their economic interest is in the same basket with us. It turns out that the Taiwan people are instead resentful of growing economic dependence on the mainland. They're not very trusting of how that economic influence will be used by Beijing. The Chinese leaders are still in some ways Marxist, they still believe in economic materialism, the idea that people will respond to economic incentives. They seem to have a hard time getting a grip on the idea of identity and self-dignity as an important factor that people sometimes fight for.

Kristian McGuire: Taiwan is a sensitive subject for the Chinese leadership and as such the CCP tries very hard to control media coverage of Taiwan politics, as we saw with last fall's local elections. Assuming that the CCP isn't looking to give up power anytime soon, what potential costs and benefits do you think Chinese leaders would obtain from unrestricted news coverage of Taiwan and free public discussion of cross-Strait issues?

Andrew Nathan: I think the first cost to opening up free discussion of *any* issue, and this is not special to the Taiwan issue, is it would send a signal to the population in mainland China, particularly the intellectuals, that you're now allowed to talk about anything and you're allowed to criticize the government—because if they open up the question of Taiwan policy some people will support it, of course, but some people will criticize it either from the left or the right—some saying that you should let Taiwan be independent, some saying that you should not have been so patient, we're a strong country let's just get this over with, why are the Americans allowed to meddle with us, and so on. So if you open up discussion of the Taiwan issue you're going to have a situation of lots of people bashing the government from one side or the other and being critical without any retribution. And once you let that happen, it's going to spread to every subject. It's just going to get out of control and the government is going to look weak. I think right now the government, to keep the lid on mainland China, they need to look strong and send the signal that you're not going to be able to criticize us. So I think that's really number one and it's not about Taiwan, it's about freedom of speech in general.

But as far as simply giving more news about Taiwan, I don't know that that would be such a scary thing for the mainland, because I don't think that if you read a lot of news about Taiwan, you get the picture that democracy is such a great thing. You get the picture that democracy is kind of messy. Some people would think it's great and we should have as much freedom of speech as the people in Taiwan do and as much political freedom as they do. But many other Chinese would draw the conclusion that if that's what democracy is, then we can't afford it here on the mainland.

Kristian McGuire: In *China's Search for Security*, you and your co-author Andrew Scobell explain how international scrutiny of China's human rights abuses has affected the country's soft power. To what extent do you think China's soft power vis-à-vis Taiwan is impacted by human rights concerns?

Andrew Nathan: I have the impression that it has a huge impact, human rights concerns in the broad sense—that would include suppression of dissidents, but also simply the fact that it's an authoritarian system and not a democracy, and it would also include things like consumer product safety scandals—all that kind of a thing. And I mentioned earlier that economic incentives alone are not winning the hearts

and minds of the Taiwan people, *but why is that?* And I think the reason is that Taiwan people look at the political system in the mainland, the repression, the concentration of power, the lack of political freedom, and freedom of speech, and academic freedom, and they say: a) we don't want that, and b) we don't trust the government that does those things. So I think that is really the primary obstacle to Beijing peacefully resolving the Taiwan issue – the fact that it's a human rights-abusing system. So when Lee Teng-hui way back in the day, I don't know if anyone remembers this, in the Lee Teng-hui presidency, he issued something called the 國統綱領, the National Unification Guidelines, and said that unification will have three stages, and in the second stage China will democratize, and then he said after that we can talk unification in the third stage. Well this was kind of a rhetorical ploy by Lee Teng-hui rather than a serious plan, but it put its finger on this problem.

Kristian McGuire: In *China's Search for Security* you contend that China's authoritarian system of government "remains permanently vulnerable to citizen rejection in a way that consolidated democratic regimes are not [...] because citizens are constantly aware that there is an alternative type of regime that is widely considered to be more legitimate." Has the example of Taiwan's functioning democratic system made it more difficult for Beijing to deny Hong Kong true democracy?

Andrew Nathan: I don't think so in any direct sense. As I said earlier, if people in Beijing knew more facts about Taiwan they wouldn't necessarily want democracy with all the infighting and messy politics that goes on. But at the same time, you don't hear people in Taiwan saying I wish we had martial law back, I wish we had KMT dictatorship back. People are quite dissatisfied with a lot of features of democracy in Taiwan (and the United States as well), but nobody is saying let's have a coup, let's have an emperor. But in China there is always somebody, despite the repression, who pops up and says we should have a democracy. And even the Chinese Communist Party says we need a democracy, and we are a democracy but we're not perfect, we're going to perfect our democracy. So there is this kind of uneven playing field between democracy and authoritarianism in terms of norms, global norms.

But when it comes to managing Hong Kong, I think that whether Taiwan was there or not, Beijing would have had the same problems with Hong Kong. I don't think that the existence of Taiwan made it any different than what it would have been. And those problems are that Beijing seemed to have promised democracy to Hong Kong—they promised universal suffrage, but this was widely interpreted as promising democracy—and the Hong Kong people, I think not every single one of them but a lot of them, really want more of the things we consider democracy: free political competition, more influence over their own politics, and so on. But Beijing is not prepared to undergo the risk that that entails, so I don't see the Taiwan factor as having complicated the situation. It was already complicated

Kristian McGuire: So, you also assert in your book that the West would no longer seek regime change in China if the country were to democratize. However, you argue that leaders of a democratic China would still want to assert authority over Taiwan because it, like Tibet and Xinjiang, is crucial to the defense of China's heartland. Does that mean that Taiwan would remain a potential flashpoint?

Andrew Nathan: Probably not. If Beijing became a democracy in some authentic sense, I believe that the problem of Taiwan's relationship to the PRC would then be much easier to resolve peacefully. And I guess I gave in my earlier remarks already the logic of why I think so. The Taiwan people do have an economic advantage in close relations with China, but they don't want to make that into a political relationship because they don't trust the authoritarian regime. But if China had a truly democratic

regime—I'm not saying a U.S.-type regime or any particular format, but something that was really democratic with political freedom and political security—then I think the Taiwan people would gradually grow to trust the government in Beijing and they would understand that this mainland China political entity has a security interest in an arrangement where both their own and Taiwan's security will be guaranteed, and we need to provide that to them, and it's not going to be a threat to us. That kind of a thought would grow in Taiwan.

And then I think on the Chinese side, they would also be willing to negotiate with the Taiwanese for their interests in more autonomy and they could—over the years, many different formulas have been vetted about confederation, and so on—they could probably solve the problem. So then I don't see it as a flashpoint. And U.S. policy has always been, and I think U.S. policy really is, that the U.S. would be okay with any *peaceful* resolution of the Taiwan issue. I don't see the U.S. preventing a solution between Beijing and Taipei if it's a negotiated solution. So I don't think it would be a flashpoint.

Kristian McGuire: Okay. Lastly, our readers would be interested in hearing about any projects you are working on related to Taiwan, China, or East Asian regional security.

Andrew Nathan: I'm a member of the Asian Barometer Survey, which is a thirteen-nation-survey research project run by Professor Chu Yun-han (朱雲漢) at National Taiwan University, with survey teams in thirteen countries: Taiwan, China, Japan, and other countries. We have huge amounts of data, and members of the project are engaged in writing articles and book chapters, and so on about it. The next major project I have on my desk is to edit one of the books coming out of the Asian Barometer Survey.

Kristian McGuire: Thank you very much for your time. We at TSR greatly appreciate it.

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Nathan is chair of the steering committee of the Center for the Study of Human Rights and chair of the Morningside Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Columbia. He served as chair of the Department of Political Science, 2003-2006, chair of the Executive Committee of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, 2002-2003, and director of the Weatherhead East Asian Institute, 1991-1995. Off campus, he is a member of the boards of Human Rights in China, Freedom House, and the National Endowment for Democracy, and a member of the Advisory Committee of Human Rights Watch, Asia, which he chaired, 1995-2000. He is the regular Asia and Pacific book reviewer for *Foreign Affairs* magazine and a member of the editorial boards of the *Journal of Contemporary China*, *China Information*, and others.

Nathan's books include *Peking Politics, 1918-1923*; *Chinese Democracy*; *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, co-edited with David Johnson and Evelyn S. Rawski; *Human Rights in Contemporary China*, with R. Randle Edwards and Louis Henkin; *China's Crisis*; *The Great Wall and the Empty Fortress: China's Search for Security*, with Robert S. Ross; *China's Transition*; *The Tiananmen Papers*, co-edited with Perry Link; *Negotiating Culture and Human Rights: Beyond Universalism and Relativism*, co-edited with Lynda S. Bell and Ilan Peleg; *China's New Rulers: The Secret Files*, co-authored with

Bruce Gilley; *Constructing Human Rights in the Age of Globalization*, co-edited with Mahmood Monshipouri, Neil Englehart, and Kavita Philip; *How East Asians View Democracy*, co-edited with Yunhan Chu, Larry Diamond, and Doh Chull Shin; and *China's Search for Security*, co-authored with Andrew Scobell.

Nathan's articles have appeared in *World Politics*, *Daedalus*, *The China Quarterly*, *Journal of Democracy*, *Asian Survey*, *The New Republic*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The London Review of Books*, *The Asian Wall Street Journal*, the *Boston Globe*, the *International Herald Tribune*, and elsewhere. His research has been supported by the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Henry Luce Foundation, the National Science Foundation, the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation, the Smith Richardson Foundation, and others. He has directed five National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminars.

Born on April 3, 1943, in New York City, Professor Nathan received his degrees from Harvard University: the B.A. in History, summa cum laude, in 1963; the M.A. in East Asian Regional Studies in 1965; and the Ph.D. in Political Science in 1971. He taught at the University of Michigan in 1970-71 and has been at Columbia University since 1971.

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