Opinion: California and Taiwan, renegade nation-states

By Joe Mathews

Is California becoming another Taiwan?

Taiwan is an independent nation—in its ambitions, its economy, its democracy. But many countries refuse to recognize it as a separate nation, deferring to mainland China, which claims Taiwan as a possession and responds with threats whenever Taiwan goes its own way.

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California shares some aspects of this conundrum. Our state has the ambitions, economy, and democracy of a leading nation. But it remains very much a part of the United States, which responds with threats whenever California goes its own way.

Yes, Californians fervently hope that our current conflict with the American government is temporary. But the hard truth is that California's differences with America predate President Trump, and so our status as a halfway country will likely outlast him.

I spent last week in Taiwan, and the major lesson I learned is how exhausting it is being a smaller country in the shadow of a larger power. The challenges there resemble those of

California, and of younger siblings everywhere. When you must constantly defend yourself against a bullying big brother, how do you develop into a success, much less a global model?

Of course, comparisons only go so far. While Californians suffer verbal and legal attacks from the federal government, the Chinese government threatens to attack Taiwan militarily, seizing the island nation by force if it becomes too independent.

Still, Taiwan and California have much in common. Both are overachievers. California has the world's sixth largest economy, though with just 40 million citizens, it ranks 35th by population. Taiwan has the world's 22nd largest economy, with just 23 million people, making it 55th most populous worldwide.

Even in an era of rising nationalism, both Taiwan and California remain stubbornly internationalist, committed to free trade and immigration. Despite struggling to forge diplomatic relations, Taiwan stays close to other China neighbors—especially Japan—for self-defense. California, in a similar spirit, works with other states in legal defense against the federal government, and makes alliances with other countries to address climate change.

Both Taiwan and California see themselves as defenders of democratic values that are at odds with the increasingly authoritarian governments of their national big brothers. Taiwan and California each have independence movements—two former Taiwan presidents are campaigning for an independence referendum, and multiple ballot initiatives seek California independence.

Both movements pose the same question: how much must we suffer from Beijing or Washington before enough is enough?

There are many Taiwanese answers. The mainstream response is, stay the course. "We don't want to be in conflict with China,"

Taiwanese premier Lai Ching-te says. “But we won’t bend to pressure either.”

But I also heard more robust answers.

First, be opportunistic in building solidarity. Whenever the Chinese issue threats, use them to develop a shared identity. Taiwan has been adept at this. A generation ago, most Taiwanese told pollsters they saw themselves as Chinese. Now, after decades of Chinese bullying, most Taiwanese see themselves as primarily Taiwanese.

Second, never miss an opportunity to expand your autonomy when the larger power leaves an opening. Consider President Trump’s recent threat to remove federal immigration enforcement from California. Our state’s political leaders mostly disregarded the comments as Trumpian nonsense. Perhaps, they should have taken his statements as an offer—and accepted it, declaring the state would happily take control of immigration enforcement.

Finally, success is the best revenge. Conflict is competition, so you must be friendlier, more democratic—and more attractive than the larger power menacing you. The most interesting conversations I heard were about whether Taiwan should respond to China’s militaristic behavior by declaring itself officially a neutral country, like Switzerland, unwilling to participate in wars outside its boundaries. Such a stance might make it harder for China to attack, and win Taiwan more international support. (Just imagine California, by ballot initiative, declaring that it would no longer support America’s endless wars.)

It’s possible to take the California-Taiwan comparison too far. “The mainland has missiles pointed at us,” one Taiwanese journalist reminded me. “Does American have missiles pointed at you in California?”

No. But I took heart that Taiwan and California are pursuing

strategies based on a similar faith: that a smaller country, through the power of its own example, can change a larger place.

California's history of defining the American future demonstrates the wisdom of this approach. Taiwan's economic revival—which inspired China to open itself to foreign investment—also proves the point.

In Taichung's Literature Museum, I encountered one of the most magnificent trees you'll see outside Sequoia National Park. It's a banyan that has grown so different roots and trunks, that it now appears to be many trees.

"In this way," said a guide, "a tree becomes a forest."

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