



Cross-Strait Relations since 2008: Assessing Intra-position Politics

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Abstract

There has been a marked and significant upturn in relations between China and Taiwan since 2008. Indeed, one could describe the situation in the Taiwan Strait as an emerging rapprochement. The rapprochement has given rise to two suggestions: One, there has been a rare, tacit consensus among Taipei, Beijing and Washington on the priority of maintaining the cross-Strait status quo. And two, Taiwan has declined in importance as a security question. This article assesses these claims. Adopting a more nuanced, intra-position approach and relying on emerging new evidence and field data, the article will explore the politics of stances that have emerged in the cross-Strait theatre since 2008.

Keywords: *Taiwan, China, the United States, cross-Strait relations*

JEL classification: *F51, F59, H56, N45*

1. Introduction

Relations between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Taiwan have improved markedly in recent times. There has been a resumption of institutionalized dialogue between Beijing and Taipei (including annual CCP-KMT talks). Direct shipping, air transport and postal exchanges





across the Taiwan Strait have restarted. Nineteen cross-Strait agreements have been inked, including the momentous 2010 Economic Co-operation Framework Agreement (ECFA), boosting the growing cross-Strait bilateral trade even further. Politically sensitive negotiations on the creation of representative offices on both sides of the Taiwan Strait have also begun. Given the acrimonious history between the PRC and Taiwan, these developments, among others, are undoubtedly significant. They indicate that since 2008, a rapprochement between the PRC and Taiwan has effectively begun and emerged.

The China-Taiwan rapprochement has given rise to suggestions of (i) the decreasing salience of the Taiwan Strait as a security question; and of (ii) a tacit convergence among the key protagonists – China, Taiwan and the US – on the near-term priority of maintaining the cross-Strait status quo. In this article, I will assess these claims. Relying on emerging new data and field evidence, I will examine what I note as the “position” politics that is being played out in the cross-Strait theatre since 2008.

2. China: A Return to Jiang’s “Impatient” Approach?

For Beijing, for the past decade, it has mainly honed in on the more exigent task of checking Taiwan’s *de jure* independence. In this regard, the Chinese government shares a similar, near-term priority with the Ma government: that is, to maintain the cross-Strait political status quo.

Nevertheless, Beijing’s fundamental and overriding objective is clear: to ultimately reunite Taiwan with mainland China. The Chinese perceive reunification as a *daye* 大业 (great cause), one that will contribute to the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” and finally eradicate all traces of China’s “century of humiliation”. To be sure, the specific content of what exactly constitutes reunification is somewhat unclear and has never been explicitly delineated by China. And under former president Hu Jintao, China had given lesser attention to this objective, as opposed to the goal of preventing Taiwan’s independence. Yet, there can be no compromise on the reunification goal; a Chinese leader risks political oblivion and accusations of being a *hanjian* 汉奸



(traitor) if the leader is being seen as amenable to the idea of an independent Taiwan. In short, reunification is the justification for China's Taiwan policy, and the one consistent and immutable "core interest" of the PRC.¹

To this end, China has pursued a multi-pronged approach comprising of economic, political, military and cultural strategies. Economically, it aims to broaden and deepen cross-Strait economic integration. Politically, its solution is to offer the "soft" formula of the "one country, two systems". Militarily, it has maintained a hedging and coercive strategy of not discounting of the use of force to prevent Taiwan independence. Culturally, it seeks to build a bridge of cultural and identity linkages with Taiwan. In recent times, it is evident that the PRC has focused on the economic pillar of its Taiwan policy. The belief and hope is that growing cross-Strait economic integration will connect the two sides close enough to convince the Taiwanese to eventually consider some form of a political union. Some scholars have held up the case of the European Union, which evolved from a primarily economic entity to a partially political one, as corroboration for the plausibility of the economic integration formula.²

Recent evidence has suggested that the new Xi regime will pursue a more ambitious approach that, while continuing to underscore the economic aspects of its Taiwan policy, will express greater urgency on the reunification issue. Thus, even as China's policy position in the near-term will be to try to accelerate and maintain the momentum of "peaceful development" of cross-Strait relations, there appears to be an increasing *within-position* tilt towards addressing the political questions of China-Taiwan relations.

A number of signals lend to this assessment. Around 2010, some Chinese officials began to express their frustration with what they regard as Taiwan's continued refusal to consider (let alone engage in) political dialogue despite the evident progress in economic relations. Questions were raised if Taiwan was covertly pursuing a policy of "peaceful separation".³ At the 18th CCP party congress, Hu (just as the leadership transition was taking place) confirmed Beijing's increasing impatience with Taipei, publicly urging for "joint exploration" of political relations



between the two sides.⁴

Xi Jinping has continued where Hu has left off. In February 2013, Xi conveyed to a senior Taiwanese official that reunification was a sacrosanct “duty” for his government.⁵ At the APEC leaders’ retreat in October 2013, this message was more explicit. Xi told former Taiwan vice-president Vincent Siew that the Taiwan “problem” should not pass from “one generation to the next” and that eventually, the “longstanding cross-strait political differences” would have to “resolved gradually”.⁶ At this same APEC meeting, Zhang Zhijun, the head of China’s Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO), and Wang Yu-chi, the head of Taiwan’s Mainland Affairs Council (MAC), met each other in an unprecedented first for the ministers of both sides’ main government agencies in charge of cross-Strait relations. A few days later, Zhang told audiences at a Shanghai cross-Strait peace forum that “Taiwan and China cannot put off addressing their political differences for the long term” and that “sidestepping politics in favour of economic talks was unsustainable”. He also asserted that China’s “necessary” patience on reunification did not equate to “waiting passively without doing anything”.⁷

Why the Xi government would want to pay more attention on the political aspects of the cross-Strait relationship is an interesting question. One factor could be related to Beijing’s positive assessment of the cross-Strait strategic situation. It was noted that China-Taiwan relations had moved into a stage of “consolidation and deepening”, where China’s rising power gave it an increasing edge in dictating the terms of the cross-Strait equilibrium and to “cope with foreign interference”.⁸ Adding to this rising confidence was a growing realization among PRC officials and scholars that expanding cross-Strait economic linkages were not giving rise to concomitant political progress, that enough “economic fruits” had been plucked already and that it was time to aim for the higher but juicer “political fruits”.⁹ Another potential explanation could be related to leadership and political legitimacy factors in China. Based on early indications, Xi and Li appear keen to demonstrate that they are more prepared to make reformist or bold policy decisions as compared to the Hu-Wen duo. One criticism of the Hu regime had been that it was



too passive and unimaginative in terms of decision making, so the Xi regime could have felt the need to take a more inventive and bolder policy approach, which could have impacted policy thinking on Taiwan.¹⁰ Moreover, the Taiwan question is “an issue of legitimacy and regime survival” for any Chinese leadership, so there could be some degree of eagerness on the part of the Xi leadership to build on existing progress in cross-Strait relations to produce results.

Of course, much is still unclear about the direction of China’s Taiwan policy under Xi. Chien-Kai Chen has contrasted Jiang’s “impatient” approach as compared to Hu’s “patient” cross-Strait style.¹¹ Drawing on this dichotomy, the early indications have been that the Xi and his colleagues will be less “patient” than the Hu regime and may potentially move towards Jiang’s more exigent approach towards reunification.

3. Taiwan: Playing a Delicate Balancing Game

An important factor explaining the emergence of the rapprochement has been KMT’s restoration to power in Taiwan since 2008. The KMT’s position is that a pro-independence policy is reckless and jeopardizes the security and economic interests of Taiwan. There is thus broad convergence on the near-term priority of preserving the status quo between the KMT and the CCP.

On the Ma administration’s longer term cross-Strait vision, however, this has been left deliberately ambivalent, encompassing what some Taiwanese officials describe as a “shield” of strategic ambiguity.¹² Taipei has taken actions and expressed signals that appear just enough to satisfy the mainland, giving the latter enough hope of a long-term political solution. Ma has claimed that Taiwan “will never ask the Americans to fight for [it].”¹³ He has spoken about how China-Taiwan relations are not “state-to-state” relations.¹⁴ More recently, in a message to Xi, Ma stated that “both sides of the Taiwan strait reached a consensus in 1992 to express each other’s insistence on the ‘one-China’ principle.” The Taiwanese government’s usual rhetoric on the consensus was “one China with different interpretations (一中各表)”, as opposed to Bei-



jing's "respective expressions on the One China principle (各表一中)", so Ma's message raised eyebrows because it deviated from the norm and excluded the "different interpretations" parlance.¹⁵ Then, at the double ten 2013 national day address, building on his earlier "not state-to-state" rhetoric, Ma asserted that cross-Strait relations are not "international relations".¹⁶

Such statements should be music to Beijing's ears, and in some respects, are a reflection of the extant state of progressing relations between China and Taiwan. Nevertheless, the Ma government has tried to balance these apparently pro-China signals with caveats and clarifications. Ma has stated that reunification is unlikely to happen in his lifetime.¹⁷ He has pushed back Chinese pressure on a cross-Strait peace accord, and suggested that this issue should be put to a national referendum first, claiming that the Taiwanese people feared that peace accord talks would end up being a pseudo-discussion on reunification.¹⁸ Indeed, the Ma government see little need for a formal peace pact, arguing that all 19 cross-Strait agreements signed already represent "some form of a peace agreement" between the two sides.¹⁹ This line of argument is also used to refute accusations from the mainland that Taipei is deliberately stalling political discussions, with the Ma government stressing that several of the 19 cross-Strait agreements entail political implications. Similarly, Taipei has been cool on Beijing's suggestions of mutual military confidence-building measures.²⁰ Lastly, while Ma has stated that the state-to-state framework cannot apply to cross-Strait ties, he has also qualified that this relationship cannot be considered as "entirely domestic either."²¹

Taiwan's "strategic ambiguity" approach also encompasses a strong American dimension. The Ma government has been keen to sustain and enhance Taipei's relationship with Washington. Noting that Taiwan-US relations had been "damaged" during the previous Chen regime, the Ma government has sought to reassure Washington with its stated policy of "no surprises" and "low-profile" pragmatism.²² It has continued to purchase or request advanced weaponry from the US, which in the past 5 years has totalled a value of some US\$18.3 billion, the highest in twenty years.²³ Economic relations between Taipei and Washington have also



strengthened and there is now talk of Taiwan's potential inclusion in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement. Most significantly, the Ma government has expressed support for the US rebalance to Asia. Ma noted that Taiwan plays a "very important role" in this rebalance while Taiwan foreign minister David Lin has suggested that Taiwan "welcomes" the US rebalance to Asia.²⁴

One could analogize Taiwan's cross-Strait approach to that of "cooking a curry that appeals to both eastern and western tastes", i.e., it seeks a pragmatic approach of "currying favour" with both US and China. Taiwan's representative to the US and important aide to Ma, Jin Pucong, explains this approach clearly: "We need strong support from the US, but we also have to deal cautiously with mainland China because they are now the number one partner of Taiwan."²⁵

4. The United States: Affirming the Salience of Taiwan

The basis for the US official position on Taiwan is essentially the three US-PRC Joint Communiqués of 1972, 1979 and 1982, the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), and the so-called "Six Assurances" of 1982. A number of key ideas define and delimit this position. For a start, America "acknowledges" the idea of "one China." Hence, Taiwan is not regarded as a sovereign country and its status is deemed as "unsettled" by the US. Second, the resolution of Taiwan's status is a question that is best left to peoples of both sides of the Taiwan Strait to decide, without an expressed determining role for Washington. Accordingly, and thirdly, any cross-Strait resolution should be mutually agreed and peaceful. No side should unilaterally impose its own solution while Washington will regard any use of force in the Taiwan Strait as a "grave concern" and a "threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific." This obliges the US to maintain the capacity to "resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion" that threatens or imperils the security of Taiwan. Thus, even as the US acknowledges the idea of one China, it retains the right to sell arms to Taiwan – i.e. "to provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive character".²⁶



The aforementioned principles sound straightforward but in reality obfuscate the fact that American position on Taiwan encompasses a number of ambiguous elements. For instance, while it is reasonably clear that Washington opposes any unilateral steps to amend the cross-Strait political status quo, it has not explicitly endorsed the idea of unification between Taiwan and China. Here, US policy statements reveal a preference for the terms “settlement” or “resolution” instead of the more politically loaded nomenclature of “unification” or “reunification”.²⁷ Meanwhile, the usage of a particular important phrasing – that the US “acknowledges” (instead of “recognizes”) the idea of “one China” – suggests only awareness, but not necessarily agreement, with the Chinese position.²⁸

The American position is also ambivalent on the questions of whether the US will actually intervene in the event of a military conflict between Taiwan and China, the specific conditions for this intervention, and the extent of an assumed intervention. A commitment by the United States to maintain the capacity to resist aggression or coercion in the Taiwan Strait is not the same as a commitment that it *will* resist aggression or coercion. In 2001, George Bush did say that the US will do “whatever it [takes] to help Taiwan defend herself.” But in that same statement, Bush also clarified (which drew less attention) that “a declaration of independence is not the one China policy, and we will work with Taiwan to make sure that that does not happen.” By 2005, Bush would simply state that the US will respond according to the “spirit of the Taiwan Relations Act”, giving little away in addressing the question of America’s role in a cross-Strait conflict.²⁹

It would certainly be in Washington’s interests to have a less than straight forward cross-Strait policy. For one, positional ambiguity means that the US need not be committed to, and restrained by, stances that may well lead to politically and materially costly policy responses. Given that the US has to balance its relations with both China and Taiwan, positional ambivalence (in some ways similar to Taipei) lends Washington a certain amount of manoeuvring space and leverage in navigating the politics of the Taiwan Strait. This ambivalence also serves Washington well in making it appear neutral in cross-Strait affairs; after



all, the American position neither explicitly supports independence nor reunification. Of course, there are those who see US cross-Strait policy as less a product of clever, strategic thinking and more a consequence of political contestation and compromise in Washington. Nevertheless, one broad observation seems evident: the American position is less fixated on “specific outcomes” as opposed to “the *process* of the resolution of the Taiwan question”.³⁰

By the time of the second half of the Bush administration tenure, it was suggested that Taiwanese president Chen Shui-bian had been regarded as a “persona non grata” in Washington. This is probably an overstatement but what is true though is that Washington “had been concerned, and exasperated, by the efforts of the former DPP [Democratic Progressive Party] regime to steer Taiwan towards de jure independence.” It is evident that the perceived unilateral antics of the then DPP government had risked alienating Washington. Not surprisingly thus, when Ma won the Taiwanese presidential elections in 2008 and a cross-Strait rapprochement subsequently developed, these developments were viewed positively in Washington.³¹ It welcomed the change in government in Taiwan as a “fresh opportunity for both sides to reach out and engage one another in peacefully resolving their differences”, praised the re-establishment of the “three links” between the PRC and Taiwan, and hailed cross-Strait relations as developing “in the right direction”.³²

By the first term of the Obama administration, the China-Taiwan rapprochement was progressing rapidly as talk of a formal cross-Strait peace agreement emanated from both sides of the Strait. It would seem that Taiwan had become less critical as an issue of security concern for the United States and as an instability factor in the Asia-Pacific. This assessment would appear corroborated by evidence from a Congressional Research Service (CRS) study on the evolution of major statements (from Washington, Beijing and Taipei) on the “one China” policy. The CRS report detailed four key US statements on the “one China” framework during the Obama administration, as opposed to seventeen statements during the Bush administration and fifteen statements during the Clinton administration.³³

Alongside this supposed growing desecuritization of the Taiwan issue was an emerging view that the Obama government, not unlike other administrations, was not averse to ignoring Taiwan's interests in its pursuit of better relations with Beijing. Indeed, there were some signals alluding to Washington's apparent willingness, in one analyst's words, to "downgrade" relations with Taiwan. For example, the Obama administration had offered to host cross-Strait military talks, a move which according to some, goes against the spirit of the 1982 "Six Assurances" that specifies, among others, that the US "will not exert pressure on Taiwan to negotiate with the PRC."³⁴ There was also the 2009 US-China Joint Statement, which pronounced that both China and the United States "agreed to respect each other's core interests"; it was suggested that this implied US acknowledgement and acquiescence to the non-negotiable nature of China's interest on Taiwan.³⁵ In 2010, Defence Secretary Robert Gates noted that the United States was only obliged to supply "minimal levels of defensive capability" to Taipei. He also reiterated Washington's fundamental "opposition" to Taiwan's independence, a noteworthy comment in part because the term "opposition" deviated from the traditionally milder parlance that the US "does not support" Taiwanese independence.³⁶

These official statements coincided with a rising advocacy among some American commentators and former policy makers that, in the wake of the rapprochement, it was perhaps time for Washington to re-think its policy towards Taiwan (including the issue of arms sales) so that a more stable and cooperative relationship with China could be forged. Zbigniew Brzezinski, the former US national security adviser, argued that "it is doubtful that Taiwan can indefinitely avoid a more formal connection with China", and that "any long-term US-Chinese accommodation will have to address the fact that a separate Taiwan, protected indefinitely by US arms sales, will provoke intensifying Chinese hostility."³⁷ Another proponent was Rear Admiral Bill Owen, a former vice-chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff under the Obama government. Suggesting in the *Financial Times* that arms sales to Taiwan were no longer in America's "best interest", Owen argued that the "outdated" TRA was in need of a "thoughtful review". Owen was of the

opinion that Beijing would see such a move “as a genuine attempt to set a new course for [the US-China] relationship...”³⁸

Unsurprisingly, such calls were critically received by those in the US who thought that their adherents were “guilty of seeking to abandon Taiwan.”³⁹ Critics argue that cross-Strait policy shifts tilted towards China would not be in American interests as, fundamentally, a reunification scenario would be (i) politically unpalatable domestically, as it means backing “the idea of a democratic Taiwan in an undemocratic China”; (ii) would mean the loss of operational and intelligence linkages with Taiwan; (iii) would mean the loss of Taiwan as a strategic buffer to the American West coast as well as a strategic “leverage” to the US-China bargaining table; and (iv) would imply the gratuitous and unwise appeasement of a growing peer power.⁴⁰

By the time of the second half of the Obama administration, earlier assessments about a more pro-China US cross-Strait policy would appear misguided. Inevitably, the US strategic “pivot” to Asia raised questions on how Taiwan’s role squares with America’s overall strategy vis-à-vis China. This issue was unequivocally addressed by Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell in a significant 2011 testimony to the House Foreign Affairs Committee. Underlining that “Taiwan matters”, Campbell stated that “a critical part of [the US rebalance] is [about] building a comprehensive, durable, and unofficial relationship between the United States and Taiwan” and that “the bedrock of that relationship is the [US-Taiwan] security relationship”. Some have noted that Secretary of State Hilary Clinton’s 2011 *Foreign Policy* article on “America’s Pacific Century”, which many considered the first public affirmation and outline of the US pivot, did not address the issue of Taiwan. But in a key speech on the same topic the following month in Honolulu, Clinton conspicuously mentioned Taiwan and stressed that it was an “important security and economic partner” of the US.⁴¹

Washington followed up its rhetoric with discernable actions to improve its relationship with Taiwan, or at least not let this relationship regress. In 2012, the American move to grant Taiwanese nationals visa-free entry to the United States (for ninety days) became effective. The following year, US legislation was passed to support Taiwan’s



involvement in the International Civil Aviation Organisation (although some would point out that Beijing did not particularly oppose this participation as well). Meanwhile, talk of Taiwan's potential inclusion in the TPP framework also emerged, and the US representative in Taiwan Ray Burghardt has suggested that Washington "would oppose any efforts to exclude Taiwan from [the] TPP."⁴² In the 2013 Obama-Xi Summit, president Obama did not shy away from reiterating American commitments towards Taiwan even as he discussed a "new model of cooperation" between the US and China with his Chinese counterpart. More importantly, Obama affirmed the US commitment to continue to sell arms to Taipei.⁴³ Taken together, these signals suggest that the US pivot to Asia has squared with an apparent re-evaluation of the significance of Taiwan to US strategic interests and an enhancement of US-Taiwan relations.⁴⁴

5. Concluding Remarks

It appears that the current trend of warming cross-Strait relations will continue and that this relationship will remain relatively stable for the foreseeable future. Indeed, all three actors (China, Taiwan and the United States) concur on the near-term position of maintaining the cross-Strait status quo, i.e. no Taiwan independence. However, this broad consensus should not be seen as static and monolithic. Within this broad consensus, as this paper has shown, there have been intra-position shifts and developments that merit further attention. Based on recent evidence, Beijing may well start to pursue an increasingly "impatient" cross-Strait approach that will shift the focus from checking Taiwan independence to one which is more reunification-centric. Nevertheless, the mainland will be mindful of appearing to exert too much pressure on the Ma regime, which could backfire. The Chinese leadership is not unaware of domestic political constraints in Taiwan and will be careful not to destabilize the current equilibrium.

Taiwan will continue to pursue its bi-directional policy of enhancing relations with both China and the US, as this approach clearly allows the maximization of Taiwanese interests. But this approach will contain



necessarily ambiguous elements because Taipei does not want to be perceived as drifting too close to either side. In that sense, Taipei's position is not just about preserving the status quo; it is also about *perpetuating* the status quo. The question of course is how long will Beijing be able to accept this situation.

Finally, the US will look to shore up its “unofficial” relationship with Taiwan. On the one hand, the US encourages Taiwan to have cordial relations with China, but on the other hand, it does not want this embrace to “go too far”.⁴⁵ While the US will be less able to leverage the Taiwan card on China after the cross-Strait rapprochement, Taiwan is a nontrivial component in the US rebalance strategy to Asia, so Washington will be keen to take US-Taiwan ties to a higher level.

Notes

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