



Sigur Center for Asian Studies

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Building Cross-Strait Military CBMs - A Goal Between Far and Near

The issue of military confidence building measures, or CBMs, between China (P.R.C.) and Taiwan (R.O.C.) is one of continued importance to all parties interested in peaceful cross-Strait relations. CBMs are no less important at a time when cross-Strait relations seem to be relatively tranquil and heading in a promising direction, especially in light of increased economic integration. Various facets of the cross-Strait CBM issue were discussed at a Taiwan Roundtable entitled “[Building Cross-Strait Military CBMs - A Goal Between Far and Near](#)” held by the Sigur Center for Asian Studies on August 27, 2013. A full audio recording of the event can be found [here](#).

The Regional Overview: Cautious Optimism for CBMs

Alan Romberg, Director of the East Asia Program at the Stimson Center in Washington, DC gave a brief overview of the current political and security landscape of the Taiwan Strait. Reflecting a trend of pragmatism on the part of the P.R.C., Beijing has come to understand the limits to actual reunification, especially considering the political situation of Ma Ying-jeou. Ultimately, Beijing desires political dialogue. However, as much as tensions may have abated between the P.R.C. and the R.O.C., the potential for the use of force still remains. Beijing believes it is important to maintain a credible deterrent, including the possible use of force. While Mr. Romberg believes that the chance of any future R.O.C. administration moving toward de jure independence is close to zero, Beijing fears the consequence of saying that it would not use force under any circumstances. This is important considering that the use of force is one thing the U.S. has stated cannot occur as part of any eventual reunification. Yet from Beijing’s point of view, until reunification is actually achieved, the use of force must be an option. This position has major implications for Taiwan’s defense preparedness as well as U.S. force posture in the region, including

the continued sale of arms to Taiwan by the U.S.

Mr. Romberg went on to state that even if there is no chance of military confrontation occurring as a result of Taiwan declaring independence, there is still the danger that Beijing will lose patience at some point. However, Taiwan is far from the only regional security issue Beijing currently has to deal with. While Washington analysts are understandably focused on how Beijing's military modernization will affect Taiwan, these other security issues that Beijing has involved itself in during recent years (conflict over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, territorial disputes in the South China Sea) all vie for its attention and affect how it prioritizes Taiwan. Romberg stated that Beijing is not looking for a fight and would prefer to achieve its goals in a diplomatic manner.

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Regarding the U.S. role in cross-Strait security, Mr. Romberg claimed that Taiwan is not really a factor in the U.S. “rebalance” towards Asia and that the evolving military relationship between the U.S. and Beijing reflects the importance that leaders from both sides place on cooperation over potential instability wherever possible. In fact, since the end of the Chen Shui-bian era, the U.S. has gradually convinced Beijing that it does not favor Taiwanese independence. This pragmatic U.S. position has served to ease tensions in the region and has further enhanced Taiwan’s security. In sum, Mr. Romberg stressed that the trilateral relationship has evolved to a point where all three sides are striving to avoid any sort of crisis. On the contrary, they are seeking to consolidate a situation of peace and stability. Under this setting, certain types of CBMs could certainly be considered.

Taiwan’s Reluctance to Engage in CBMs

The next speaker was Da-Jung Li, Associate Professor at Tamkang University in Taiwan and a Fulbright Visiting Scholar at the Sigur Center for Asian Studies. He began by providing a brief overview of past efforts towards cross-Strait CBMs and the current situation. He underlined that CBMs are not a new idea as the Taiwan Unification Council had urged the R.O.C. government to engage in CBMs starting in the mid-1990s and that there have been official documents on the P.R.C. side proposing CBMs. However, the results have been disappointing for supporters of CBMs. Taiwan has largely reacted in a cold, conservative manner to the idea. Professor Li offered three explanations for Taiwan’s reluctance.

First, he highlighted Taiwan’s domestic politics as a barrier. In particular, there has been largely negative reaction to the invitation of retired R.O.C. generals to visit the mainland and engage in talks with their

PLA counterparts, even if it has been in an unofficial capacity. Since the long-time mission of the R.O.C. army has been to maintain constant preparedness for an attack from the mainland, images of retired R.O.C. generals playing golf with PLA officers has had a demoralizing effect on the military. Furthermore, there is no true consensus in Taiwan regarding CBMs. While the majority of Taiwanese citizens welcome improved cross-strait relations, mainstream public opinion is still strongly in favor of maintaining the status-quo. Second, there is a particular lack of urgency associated with the idea of CBMs on the Taiwanese side. The incentives for building CBMs are nowhere near as high as in 1996 when there was a genuine crisis occurring between the two sides, with Beijing firing missiles over Taiwan. In contrast, the cross-strait security environment today is relatively calm and auspicious.

Lastly, there is the U.S. factor. Taiwan does not want to produce any concern on the U.S. side that it is moving too far into Beijing's orbit, especially in light of the U.S. "rebalance" towards Asia. It is also important not to cause any unease in Washington for fear of jeopardizing continued arms sales. While Beijing is continually pressing for the termination of such sales and is trying to link CBMs to this issue, claiming that the improved cross-strait environment makes the sales unnecessary, Taiwan will not readily give up this aspect of its security relationship with the U.S.

Beijing's Approach and U.S. Policy toward CBMs

Following Professor Li's comments, Bonnie Glaser expanded on a few of his points as well as attempted to clarify U.S. policy regarding CBMs. Ms. Glaser is a Senior Advisor for the Freeman Chair in China Studies as well as Senior Associate with the CSIS Pacific Forum. She began her talk discussing specific types of CBMs. She stated, for example, that Taiwan needs "Conflict Avoidance Measures" as opposed to purely "Confidence Building Measures." She also pointed out that military CBMs are in fact already being implemented in the form of "Declaratory CBMs." Three examples include President Ma's "three no's," Taiwan's declaration that it will not develop nuclear weapons, and the practice of annually announcing its military exercises. In addition, she argued that any CBMs Taiwan agrees to should benefit Taiwan more than China, as it is Taiwan that is truly facing a threat.

Regarding Professor Li's comments that President Ma has subtly moved away from CBMs, Ms. Glaser stated that President Ma has in fact made it quite explicit that CBMs will not be high on the agenda for his second term. As for the point Professor Li made regarding President Ma being worried about causing anxiety in the U.S. government, Ms. Glaser claimed that what President Ma is really worried about is a reduction or termination in U.S. arms sales should the R.O.C. move forward with CBMs, something the president has stated more than once.

Turning to Beijing's approach to CBMs, Ms. Glaser characterized it as "top-down." In other words, Beijing works to establish a degree of political trust. Then, and only then can CBMs be put in place. Furthermore, one of the most important goals Beijing has regarding CBMs is to promote a "unified front" to win over the support of the Taiwanese people, hoping that this will eventually lead to support for unification. A good example

of this is Beijing promoting studies to support the mutual claims by the P.R.C. and the R.O.C. in the South China Sea and East China Sea.

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Lastly, Ms. Glaser emphasized that while the U.S. does look favorably on cross-Strait CBMs there is no policy of actively promoting them. The cross-Strait agenda is entirely up to the two sides to determine and the U.S. will not pressure Taiwan to pursue any dialogue that it doesn't feel is in its interests. Therefore, it is not accurate to say that the U.S. opposes CBMs or discourages Taiwan from pursuing them with the mainland. Rather, the U.S. supports CBMs if and when Taiwan is ready to discuss them. As Professor Li observed, Taiwan may not be ready to take this step just yet.

Clearly, it appears that CBMs are considered by many to be a good idea in theory. At the same time, the three panelists at this roundtable suggested that the issue of how and when to implement them can raise questions that have no easy answers.

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Sigur Center for Asian Studies

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