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The U.S. Factor in Cross-Taiwan Straits Relations

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THE U.S. FACTOR IN CROSS-STRAIT RELATIONS

Conference Report

The relationship between Taiwan and the People's Republic of China is as complex as it is important. Disputes are plentiful and often provoke sensitive reactions on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. Recent events have provided a host of new contentious issues and heightened the need for increased discussion. To this end, The Association of Chinese Political Studies and the George Washington University's Sigur Center for Asian Studies co-sponsored a closed-door conference entitled, "The U.S. Factor in Cross-Taiwan Straits Relations." Approximately twenty-five scholars from Taiwan, the PRC, and the United States participated in the one-day round table discussion. Assured of their privacy, the participants spoke freely, covered a wide-range of issues, and exhibited a diversity of viewpoints. This is a brief report of the discussion's broad topics and themes.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF CROSS-STRAIT CONTACTS?

Throughout the day, scholars expressed a variety of opinions on the success, nature, and trends of cross-strait contacts. There were debates over numerous issues including formal dialogue between government officials as well as non-governmental contacts such as business, cultural, and other personnel exchanges. Most scholars seemed to feel that exchanges to this point have failed to produce significant reductions in tension or to build trust between the PRC and Taiwan, but they had different views as to the reasons for this perceived failure.

Scholars on both sides expressed the view that official dialogue has failed to produce the desired tangible results. Divergent expectations, intentions, and goals have plagued political interactions, which unfortunately continues to be viewed by both governments as a zero-sum game. Those from Taiwan tended to recommend the dialogue begin with apolitical small issues and leave the larger political issues to the future. PRC scholars expressed the belief that political negotiations are necessary to resolve disputes between the two sides. For them, past experiences demonstrated negotiations over other types of issues tended to end up with political disputes between the two sides. However, neither side expressed much confidence for the prospect of improved dialogue in the immediate future, particularly given the added tension following Lee Teng-hui's "special state-to-state" declaration. At most, scholars were cautiously optimistic.

Questions about the benefit of informal contacts, particularly business and economic ties, were also prevalent. Several scholars, mostly from Taiwan, expressed reservations about the conventional wisdom that increased economic ties inevitably lead to better political relations. Some scholars from Taiwan favored increased economic contact, but at a prudent pace. They contend that if Taiwan is cautious about its investment on the mainland, it is only because the PRC has failed to demonstrate political stability or to provide assurance that Taiwanese investments are legally protected. For the sake of national economic security, high tech and long-term investment should be

restricted, even though this goes against the self-interests of Taiwan's businessmen. Others advocated holding off whole scale economic exchange until political and military relations were more stable. PRC scholars, as well as a few from Taiwan, believed that the mainland is becoming a more promising market to Taiwanese and all exchanges are beneficial in building political trust. Preaching patience, the PRC scholars noted that the benefits of exchange were gradual and incremental, but nonetheless real. Some accused Taiwan's government of failing to respond to the PRC's appeal for the three direct links (mail, trade, and transportation). Taipei's policy of limiting the scale of direct foreign investment on the mainland was an additional complaint. In their view, cross-strait economic exchanges are helpful to both Taiwan's domestic economy and the improvement of cross-strait relations. But regardless of their opinion about future economic ties, few scholars from either side expressed the belief or provided concrete examples that political ties were significantly stronger as the result of the economic exchanges to date.

TOLERANCE, FLEXIBILITY, AND RESPONSIBILITY

Regardless of the specific issue, scholars from both sides of the Strait tended to see their government as tolerant and flexible, while blame for mistrust and tense relations usually lay with the other government. Both sides felt that improving relations requires the other side acknowledge its obduracy and soften its stance. The ball, it seems, is always in the other court.

The Taiwanese tended to see their government as reacting to Beijing's intractability. They viewed Beijing as engaged in an all out attempt to diminish the Taiwanese "living space."

Beijing's diplomatic war necessitates that Taiwan take steps to maintain visibility through numerous channels such as seeking membership in international organizations and aiding Third World countries in adopting the Taiwanese model of economic development. Additionally, Beijing's complete unwillingness to institute domestic political reform, and its staunch adherence to its unrealistic panacea of "one country, two systems," negates Taiwanese flexibility in reunification matters. Taiwan sought Beijing's help following the September earthquake, but many claimed that Beijing's insistence on using the incident for diplomatic advantage soured relations and provoked mistrust. The list of issues goes on, but in each case, Taiwanese tend to see their side as flexible and merely reacting to Beijing's unbending attitude.

On the other side, Mainland scholars tended to see their government as exceedingly open to compromise. In their eyes, Beijing has greatly softened its stance on reunification. Admittedly, it has not renounced the use of force, but in contrast to the 1950s and 1960s when reunification was to come through the "liberation" of Taiwan, Beijing now states that it wants reunification by peaceful means. China believes it is also very lenient with its "one country, two systems" policy, which is only a broad framework rather than a strict formula. One example of this lenience is the fact that while Jiang Zemin insists that China's territory is indivisible, he does not state outright that the PRC is the only legitimate government representing all of China. PRC scholars also claimed that Taiwan's accusations of PRC intransigence towards domestic political reform are equally misguided. In fact, the Mainland has taken significant steps towards democratization such as its implementation of local elections and the creation of a more

rational and collective policy making process. On the issue of survival space, PRC scholars suggested such an issue could only be resolved through negotiation and asked just how much survival space does Taiwan need? Rather than seeking living room, they see Taiwan as cornering the PRC with its movements towards independence. From their perspective, it is Lee Teng-hui's persistent steps toward Taiwanese independence that are forcing China's hand. They argued that if only Lee would stop seeking independence, then the PRC and Taiwan could begin to build trust and enter into a more fruitful relationship. Without mutual trust, an equivalent relationship between Beijing and Taipei cannot be established.

In sum, the issues were the same, but the perspectives were sharply different. Some scholars recognized these differences, and cautioned against unnecessary finger pointing, but the divide in outlooks remained distinct. While mutually beneficial solution may be possible eventually, it is too early to predict what may be the final result.

INTELLECT AND EMOTION

Throughout the discussion there was a mix of intellect and emotion. Carefully crafted logic and elegant use of political theory were demonstrated in the initial presentations as well as in the responses and general discussion. A grasp of history and detailed knowledge of the various aspects of Cross-strait relations was apparent. But at the same time, sentiment was never far from the surface. Several participants supported their arguments, particularly when discussing the intransigence of the other side, with anecdotal evidence. These anecdotes were often quite personal and appealed to the listener's sense of dignity as much to his or her sense of logic. Even when it was not personal, the debate often became impassioned.

For example, the issue of the handling of the earthquake produced inflamed responses from both sides. PRC scholars argued Beijing's proposals to send rescue personnel to the island and to request UN assistance on behalf of Taiwan demonstrated its sincerity in helping Taiwanese. Unfortunately, these proposals were simply rejected by Taipei. Scholars from Taiwan, on the other hand, contended Beijing's offer of financial assistance to Taiwan was insufficient, and was dwarfed by the huge amount of money spent on the PRC's 50th anniversary celebrations. Further, because of Beijing's objections, Taiwan cannot join the World Health Organization and thus was not able to acquire international health assistance in the wake of the September earthquake. Debates on Lee Teng-hui also fired tempers. A reference to Lee as a "troublemaker" produced an emotional response that Lee was a "father figure" for many Taiwanese. It was further asserted that insulting Lee, who enjoys wide popular support among Taiwanese, is equivalent to slandering the Taiwanese people. In sum, both the intricacy and the sensitivity of Cross-strait relations were on display throughout the day's discussion.

Discussion of the potentiality of Beijing's military action against Taiwan was also a mix of intellect and emotion. While it is doubtful whether Beijing has the military capability to take over Taiwan, PRC scholars as well as a few from Taiwan believe that if Taiwan moves toward de jure independence, Beijing may have no choice but to resort to military means. From the perspective of domestic politics, nationalism and neo-conservatism are developing within the PRC as a result of gradual economic reform, growth of national strength, and the return of Hong Kong and Macao to Chinese sovereignty. Chinese society may be more pluralistic than before,

but Taiwan's independence may still not be acceptable to them because national sovereignty is regarded as a sacred duty endowed by the constitution. As one military expert from Beijing put it, declaring Taiwan's independence means declaring war across the Taiwan Strait. The Chinese army has both the intention and the capability to defend China's territory and sovereignty. Beijing's staunch attitude against Taiwanese independence may have contributed to Taipei's ambiguous strategy in pursuing its independent sovereignty: Lee Teng-hui's special state-to-state relations announcement was ironically followed by his clarification that Taipei was not pursuing independence for Taiwan.

In a similar vein, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) shifted its strategy from an active promoter of Taiwan independence to a passive defender of the status quo. Both the KMT and DPP argue Taiwan has been an independent country since 1945 and therefore it is not necessary to make a formal declaration of independence, which would provoke Beijing. Such a strategy of "creeping independence" has forced Beijing to define Taiwan's independence from a legal perspective, that is, whether or not Taipei changes its constitution to accommodate the new special state-to-state policy announcement. In view of Beijing's bottom line, scholars from Taiwan believed that both the KMT and DPP would not promote the revision of the constitution in this regard, at least in the near term.

THE UNITED STATES AS A QUESTION MARK

Despite the title of the conference, the role of the United States in Cross-strait relations rarely took center stage in the course of discussion. But neither was it ignored. Rather,

the United States was a component in the debate over most issues. There was a general acceptance that the United States had an important role to play, but how that role is defined and how the US will elect to play it was the source of much dissent.

Many scholars from both sides viewed the United States as trying to promote a peaceful settlement of cross-strait issues and desirous of encouraging dialogue. But there were numerous viewpoints as to the effectiveness with which the United States is accomplishing its goals. Some predicted the U.S. may ultimately serve as a final guarantor of peace to ensure US interests in its tacit framework of "no unification, no independence, and no war" in the Taiwan Strait. Others pointed to the danger of an American-generated "moral hazard." By assuming a role as a third party guarantor of peace, the United States is encouraging risky behavior and miscalculation. For instance, if Taiwan is confident that the U.S. will defend it from an assault from the mainland, regardless of whether Taiwan's actions provoked the attack, it may be more willing to act provocatively. Similarly, if the PRC is confident the U.S. would not come to Taiwan's defense, it may take more intimidating actions against Taiwan. In both situations, the belief that such actions do not carry risks may encourage risky behavior. The US has been carefully trying to articulate both its level of commitment and the limits on that commitment, but the message is not always conveyed clearly.

PRC scholars were unhappy with US strategic ambiguity. For them, there are no disagreements between Beijing and Washington in terms of the one-China principle, the desirability of peace in the Taiwan Strait, the importance of cross-strait dialog, and the need to protect Taiwan's economic prosperity and political democratization. The disputes between the U.S. and China focus on U.S.

arms sales to Taiwan and plans for a proposed theater missile defense system in Asia. Because Taiwan may be drifting away from the one-China framework, Beijing cannot renounce the use of military force as a final resort. U.S. actions in Asia have often made the PRC feel contained and isolated, hindering cooperation in cross-strait issues. Another viewpoint saw the U.S. role in Asia best served by remaining involved but as aloof as possible and encouraging the PRC and Taiwan to solve the problems on their own. In short, most thought the U.S. had a role to play, but few agreed on how it should play it.

The U.S. response in the case of a military conflict was also a recurring point of concern. Some PRC scholars expressed the belief that the U.S. learned its lesson in the Korean Conflict and would be loathe to intervene. American scholars urged them to pay careful attention to the context of domestic politics in the U.S.: several Republican presidential candidates have advocated a more explicit pledge of American defense of Taiwan, and a group of very prominent former U.S. government officials recently issued a letter calling for a similar pledge. However, several Taiwanese expressed doubts about the U.S. resolve as well, noting that many in Taiwan are much less optimistic about the security of U.S. protection than they were in the past. Others questioned the extent to which the United States has strategic interests in Asia and so questioned the willingness of the United States to intervene militarily. Again, the U.S. position seemed difficult to define.

A final area in which the role of the United States was questioned involved American domestic politics. Some American scholars asserted that both Taiwan and the PRC over-analyze American foreign policy statements

and fail to take into account the role of domestic politics in American foreign policy. Slight changes in wording in public statements are not always indicators of a change in policy, even though both Beijing and Taipei tend to view them that way. One suggested it might be wise to look at U.S. policy toward the PRC and Taiwan more as a reaction to the current tide of domestic politics and less as a grand strategy. It was further noted that there exists a potential conflict between the interests of the American politicians advocate America's duty to defend Taiwan and the actual security interests of Taiwan itself. The staunchest defenders of Taiwan in Congress are usually in the right wing of the Republican party who are as interested in punishing China and embarrassing the White House as they are in protecting Taiwan. Meanwhile, the American population is largely cautious about defending Taiwan against the mainland. Recent public opinion polls show that although most Americans are very suspicious of China and see it as more hostile than friendly toward the U.S., there is surprisingly weak public support for actively defending Taiwan, or even increased arms sales, if doing so would damage US-China relations. How these contradictory positions will affect future American policy and future Cross-strait relations is crucial, but remains unknown.

SUMMARY

In the end, more questions were raised than issues were solved. Even after four sessions of intense debate on sensitive issues, at the end of the day the energy level was high and the atmosphere remained cordial. Perhaps few minds were changed, but each side learned a little about how the other's perspective. In that sense, the conference ended on the perfect note, with an agreement to disagree.

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