The Political Controversy over Cross-strait Relations

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Abstract

The development of cross-strait relations has made significant breakthrough since the past two years. On February 11, 2014, the then chairman of Taiwan’s Mainland Affairs Committee embarked on an official visit to mainland China. This marked the first high-level government-to-government contact between the two sides since 1949. Against this backdrop, this paper analyzes the current political development and controversies across the Taiwan Strait. In 2014, China proposes the “one China framework” to promote cross-strait political negotiations. This plan, however, was disrupted by Taiwan's sunflower student movement. This paper argues that if China (the People's Republic of China) does not recognize Taiwan’s national title, namely the Republic of China, as well as the legitimate jurisdiction of the Republic of China, there is little room for the Taiwanese government to start any dialogue on political issues with China.

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1. Introduction: Recent Development in Cross-strait Relations

The development of cross-strait exchanges has made significant breakthrough since the past two years. In October 2013, at the CEO summit of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) held in Indonesia, the then chairman of the Mainland Affairs Committee (MAC) of the Republic of China (ROC), Yu-chi Wang, met Zhijun Zhang, the director of the Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) of the People's Republic of China (PRC). It was the first time that each addressed the other by his official title. Before this meeting, the two sides maintained their semi-government contact through the Straits Exchange Foundation (the ROC side) and the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait (the PRC side). On February 11, 2014, Wang embarked on an official visit to mainland China and met Zhang again in Nanjing. This marked the first high-level government-to-government contact between the two sides since 1949. When Zhang granted Wang, following the practice of the previous meeting at APEC, he addressed Wang as “Minister Wang” and Wang addressed Zhang as “Director Zhang”. On June 25 of the same year, Zhang led a delegation to visit Taiwan. Against this backdrop, this paper analyzes the current political development and controversies across the Taiwan Strait.

2. Cross-strait Political Relations: The PRC's Viewpoint

This section examines the PRC's viewpoint about cross-strait political relations. The PRC holds the “one China principle,” which states that there is one, undivided sovereignty of China, and the PRC is the sole legitimate representative of that sovereignty. In this sense, the PRC regards Taiwan as a renegade province of China, and proposes “one country, two systems” as a unification method. Taiwan will become a “Special Administration Region” after unification. For the PRC, neither “one country on each side” nor “one China, one Taiwan” is acceptable. At the same time, the PRC does not rule out the possibility of military option, under certain occasions. The red line is when Taiwan declares independence, holds referendum on independence, changes the national title, or writes a new constitution.

In the past two decades, the PRC has gradually downplayed the use of military force. The current principle is peaceful reunification. Now the PRC seeks further increases in economic and human exchanges. It is a long-term strategy of making Taiwan depend on the mainland and of building political ties through economic ties. While the substance of this principle has been kept since the current leader Xi Jinping came to office as the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in late 2012, Xi seems to put more emphasis on political relations with Taiwan. On February 2014, when meeting with Lien Chan, the then Honorary Chairman of ROC's ruling party Kuomintang (KMT), Xi Jinping made a number of critical statements about cross-strait political relations.

In the article titled “Realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese dream together” published by the Xinhua News Agency, Xi puts forward four principles of handling cross-strait relations: (1) People on both sides of the Taiwan Strait are one family, and kinship cannot be severed; (2) Family affection will help heal past wounds and sincerity will help resolve existing problems; (3) The peaceful development of the cross-strait relations is to the advantage of compatriots on both sides; (4) Realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation—the prosperity of the country, the rejuvenation of the nation as well as the happiness of the people—is the long-cherished wish of the two sides. A closer look at these four principles tells us that for Xi, nationalist link based on kinship ties is the foundation of cross-strait relations. This echoes Xi Jinping's remarks in October 2013 at the APEC summit when granting Taiwan's former vice president Vincent Siew that cross-strait political differences could not be handed down from generation to generation.
To solve the political problem, Xi proposes the “one China framework.” This formulation moves one step forward from the “1992 consensus.” The latter is officially accepted by the CCP\(^2\) and the KMT, but with regard to Xi’s “one China framework,” the aforementioned four principles do not provide concrete pictures. From my point of view, the only one that is directly related to the framework is the second principle which states that the mainland “respects Taiwan's choice of social system and way of life.” This message implies that mainland China does not have any intention in interfering in Taiwan's internal affairs. However, this argument has not yet recognized Taiwan's legitimate jurisdiction over its own territory. While Wang Yu-chi and Zhang Zhijun each addressed the other by his official title when they met in Nanjing in 2014, Chinese media did not mention Wang's official title when broadcasting the meeting. For example, the China Central Television and the Xinhua News Agency called Wang the responsible person of Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council. The spokeswoman of PRC's Taiwan Affairs Office, Fan Liqing, avoided the word “Executive Yuan” when referring to Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council. From these facts we see that the PRC has not prepared to recognize the ROC government in Taiwan. Moreover, the Taiwan studies institutions in China have not developed any mainstream discourse to face the ROC's nationhood. Taiwan is still a renegade province of China.

While not recognizing the jurisdiction of the ROC government, the PRC still hopes for political dialogue with Taiwan. During the Wang-Zhang meeting in Nanjing, in addition to improving cross-strait economic, cultural and educational exchanges based on the “1992 consensus,” the MAC and the TAO agreed to establish mechanisms to normalize the communication links. Accordingly, Zhou Zhihuai, the director of the Taiwan studies institute at China Academy of Social Sciences, wrote in the Global Times that this mechanism would be an important platform for soft landing cross-strait political disputes. In fact, in PRC’s original schedule, the focus of the year 2014 was to promote cross-strait political negotiations. The bilateral relation between the two sides should be improved from one based on economic cooperation to one incorporating political dialogues. The political issue was to be on the agenda. This plan, however, was disrupted by Taiwan's March 18th student protest, namely the sunflower movement.

3. Cross-strait Political Relations: The ROC's Viewpoint

The ROC puts a different interpretation on the content of “one China.” To the KMT, one China refers to the ROC, founded in 1911 and with de jure sovereignty over all of China. The ROC, however, currently has jurisdiction only over Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen, and Matsu. Taiwan is part of China, and the Chinese mainland is part of China as well. Accordingly, we see that the current ruling party from both sides of the Taiwan Strait, namely the KMT in Taiwan and the CCP in China, agree that there is only one China, while the two sides have different opinions as to the meaning of “one China.” However, Taiwan's opposition party, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), does not see both sides reaching any consensus.\(^3\)

For the majority of Taiwanese people, the “status quo” is preferred. The status quo refers to a situation of neither unification nor independence. Most Taiwanese people do not want to stir PRC hostility, but at the same time are hesitant about unification. The following data show the trend of political attitudes among Taiwanese.

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\(^2\) The 1992 consensus was written in Hu Jintao's report of the 18th CCP congress in November 2012.

\(^3\) Please see Appendix 1 for the distribution of political party preferences in Taiwan.
From my point of view, the major explanation of Taiwanese people's unwillingness to accept unification resides in the PRC's hesitation about recognizing the ROC's jurisdiction. In Lien's meeting with Xi in 2014, Lien urged the Mainland to adopt a pragmatic attitude and to face the reality of the existence of the ROC. “Recognizing the ROC is to facilitate the cross-strait exchanges. It is not a liability.” However, Xi did not give any formal responses, and there was even no mention of this statement across the Chinese media.

On the other hand, the ROC has made significant progress in recognizing the PRC. Although before the 1980s, the ROC adopted the three noes policy (namely, no contact, no compromise and no negotiation with the Chinese Communists), the abolition of the “Temporary Provisions Effective During the Period of Communist Rebellion” in 1991 signaled the recognition of the PRC’s effective rule in mainland China. In addition, according to the ROC Constitution, the Additional Articles (Amendments) use the term “Free Area of the Republic of China” to refer to all areas under ROC's current jurisdiction. These Additional Articles also state that the Amendments are to meet the requisites of the nation prior to unification and will automatically be voided when reunification. The current ROC president Ma Ying-jeou publicly mentioned on several occasions that the ROC's principle to deal with cross-strait relations is “mutual non-recognition of sovereignty and mutual non-denial of

Source: The Election Study Center, National Chengchi University (NCCU), Important political attitude trend distribution.

jurisdiction.” This principle is based on the interpretation of the Additional Articles of the Constitution.

4. Conclusion: Prospects in Cross-strait Political Relations

While president Ma's two mutual noes principle has not yet been fully accepted by the Taiwanese society, the people of Taiwan have gradually reached a consensus about the status of ROC and most of them believe that they are citizens of ROC. For many years, some observers of cross strait relations argue that identity crisis is prevalent among Taiwanese people and this is the source of instability of the status quo. In addition, the PRC government has long been skeptical about the DPP's willingness to keep the status quo. When the DPP took the office in 2000, the PRC was afraid that Taiwan would be moving toward independence and announced the Anti-secession Law in 2005 to deter independentist. However, from my point of view, when president Chen from the DPP swore into office in 2000 under the national flag of ROC, there was no doubt that the DPP had accepted the legitimacy of the ROC and the nation's title was “Republic of China” (and not “Republic of Taiwan” or something else.) In the Taiwanese society, according to Figure 1, more than fifty percent of Taiwanese people support the status quo. In another report, sixty percent of the population identify themselves as Taiwanese, and more than thirty percent consider themselves both Taiwanese and Chinese (see Figure 2 below). Combining Figure 1 and Figure 2, we find that for the sixty percent who identify themselves as Taiwanese only, they do not necessarily support independence. In fact, many of them equate being Taiwanese as being a citizen of the ROC, and hence want to maintain the status quo and do not ask for any changes of the nation's title. Figure 1 and Figure 2 also tells us that a consensus has gradually developed in the Taiwanese society.
Scholars may have interpretation about this consensus but the legitimacy of the national name “Republic of China” is widely accepted. While few polls in Taiwan have asked the question of whether you identify yourself as ROC citizens, judging from Figure 1 and Figure 2, the supportive rate should be more than fifty percent or higher. Accordingly, if the PRC ignores this opinion and does not face the legitimacy of the ROC, there is little, if any, room for the Taiwanese government to move toward more engagement with the PRC. Moreover, it will be very difficult to start substantial political dialogues with the PRC. Therefore, there is a need for the PRC to find out a way to recognize the ROC’s jurisdiction and to think about how to recognize the legitimacy of the ROC. While the current cross-strait relation does not deviate from the path of peaceful development, in order to deal with more deep-seated controversies including political relations and identity issues, the key factor remains at the PRC’s side, that is, how the People's Republic of China views the legitimacy of the Republic of China.

Source: The Election Study Center, National Chengchi University (NCCU), Important political attitude trend distribution.\(^5\)

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Appendix 1: Party Preferences Trend Distribution in Taiwan (1992/06~2015/06)

Source: The Election Study Center, National Chengchi University (NCCU), Important political attitude trend distribution.⁶