

Triggering or Halting? Tasks and Challenges in Xi's China

Chih-Chieh Chou, Ph.D.

Professor in Department of Political Science & Institute of Political Economy

National Cheng Kung University

Executive Board Member & Chairman of Committee on Taiwan-China Dialogue

Chinese Association of Human Rights

1. External Dimension: Continued Need of External Stability with Slight Redirection

China realizes that the world is closely watching how Beijing protects its sovereignty and territory and how it implements its so-called “harmonious development,” “great power diplomacy” and “good neighbor diplomacy.” So, Beijing will tend to balance between the doctrine of “peace development” rather than “hegemonization” and the perception of “sovereignty without compromise.” China tends to facilitate the “Beijing consensus” and promote “democratization in international relations” in especially multilateral regimes and developing world.

Therefore, China will treat Sino-US relations as a core in external relations, while it realized the US marks the rising China as a potential challenger. Much more Chinese elite acknowledges that China deserves a reasonable international status and role, given that China is a radically rise power in diverse dimensions. China defined its “core interests” both in external and internal aspects. China couldn't stay outside the partnership with Washington, simply cause China is still not strong enough to play as the rival polar of the “G2” against the US. The US is betting that China will go the other way to become the “responsible stakeholder” because it is in China's interests, not just the US's, that it does so.

For U.S., Obama's rebalancing to Asia is really about shaping the environment in

which China will rise in ways that the US prefers. Washington thinks it still has a strong hand to play. Partners in the region are looking for Washington to demonstrate the sustainability of the “pivot” through not only words but actions, and not just in the military realm but across the breadth of US political, security, and economic interests in the region. In the security realm, Washington will continue to serve as a mediator of regional order and as an arbitrator of geopolitical “status quo.” it should continue to maintain a neutral gesture between China and Japan on the territorial dispute, and to press China and ASEAN to make progress toward a formal code of conduct for the South China Sea.

Obama’s strategy is to remind China that while it has lots of big trade partners, the US has lots of good friends as well as allies. It explains why the US has taken up the mantle of creating a proto Asia-Pacific free trade area through the Trans-Pacific Partnership. However, Washington cannot contain Beijing and isn’t trying to. It wants to continue to engage with China and worries it will need to hedge in case China’s rise turns malign. But most of all, the US wants to shape China’s rise, while China tend to rise in its own way, and most importantly, it respects the US-led but widely shared and co-defined “rules of the game.” For neighboring countries, such as Taiwan, Japan, Korea, Australia, ASEAN states, they have one thing in common that China is their leading economic partner, but their alliances with the US are the core of their national security.

2. Domestic Dimension: Dilemmas and Challenges in Xi Jinping’s Rule

The possible compatibility between “stability sustaining” and “rights defending” might appear, if the paradigm of “rule by law” (rule by the party) is gradually shifted to “rule of law.” Especially, Xi Jinping’s made a point in his first speech as head of the Communist Party to express concern for the lives and needs of regular Chinese

people. This is a sign that he wants the Party to pay more attention to a public unhappiness with the current state of governance where education, healthcare and the environment is concerned. And the social possible upheaval might resulted from the structural corruption of the party's "nomenclatura" (privileged bureaucratic class). Hence, reform of social governance and fairly implementation of existed law are key for Xi. The policy guidance embodied in the 18th Party Congress Work Report shows that the leadership appears to have reached consensus on the imperative to undertake structural reforms to sustain the nation's economic growth, and united in its support for a moderate reform program aimed at enhancing the responsiveness and efficiency of government service.

For example, to demonstrate the seriousness of the corruption problem, Xi appointed one of the Party's most capable officials, Wang Qishan, to lead the anti-corruption effort. Thus far Wang and his team have adopted a number of measures to great fanfare. They have issued regulations to limit official excess. Most recently announced that they will send teams of inspectors throughout the country to investigate local officials. All of these top-down measures have been tried in one form or another before, with disappointing results. Nevertheless, it is possible that this anti-corruption team will succeed where previous generations of Chinese leaders have failed. More likely, however, they will follow the same path: a number of high-profile arrests, no institutional change to ensure that the roots of corruption are addressed, and an endless cycle of anti-corruption campaigns. Recently, 七不講

2.1 Dealing with the Emerging Civil Society

Actually, civil society is growing increasingly important, with government withdrawing from large areas of activity, allowing groups to be active on the

environment, care of the elderly and the poor and educational provision. In the next five years, however, the Communist party and the government will come under increasing pressure to give civil society groups proper legal status, rather than continuing with the complex and ambiguous arrangements that exist at the moment. The sheer complexity of society as it develops towards middle income status by 2020 (this is the stated aim of the government) will mean that civil society groups will become more various, and their work will be far more needed. The current restrictions on their activities have already been challenged several times at the National People's Congress, China's parliament, and are likely to be revised so that they are more fit for purpose.

All of the above is predicated on a China able to deliver decent economic growth in the years ahead, and one which is able to enjoy a peaceful, stable international environment. In the case of a severe upset, such as unexpected international conflict, a pandemic that severely affects China, or an uprising amongst the more disaffected groups in society such as farmers or poor urban dwellers, the outcomes would be highly unpredictable. China continues to face enormous challenges to how it governs itself and develops as a society. It also has to deal with a rapidly aging population, an energy-hungry economy and an environment depleted by decades of rapid growth and industrialization. While on balance, China is likely to develop politically and socially in the decade ahead, recent history has proved that it is always wise to expect the unexpected, especially as China now enters a crucial phase of its transition, where GDP growth is no longer the sole priority, but far more complex outcomes have to be encountered.

2.2 Continued Struggle in Path of Political Reform

Xi and other political elite believe the country is not ready for adopting Western-style competitive elections, and proceeding political liberalization through so called ‘shock therapy’ will create an unacceptable risk of turmoil. They argue, sincerely in many cases, that China’s specific political history and culture require an alternative way that retains single party rule and gradually expands political participation to allow China to evolve in a unified and peaceful manner. But as it strives for this path, the Chinese leadership isn’t ready to put up with the distractions of a vocal opposition party—or see itself submitted to regular electoral scrutiny. With opponents liable to be jailed, and with even Internet dissent censored and blocked, the reform still appears ‘one step forward, two steps backward.’ Recently,

The Party has warned scholars and officials to combat Western values and other perceived ideological threats. The central document “Concerning the situation in the ideological sphere” highlights a warning against seven ideas” that are considered anathema, including universal value, media freedom, civil society, civil rights, the Party’s historical mistakes, privileged ‘nomenclatura’ and judicial independence. It seems that Xi is caught in a dilemma. This administration tries to satisfy widespread public expectations for cleaner, more accountable government and a fairer share of prosperity, it also defending centralized control, simply because the top priority is still to maintain the party’s rule. However, he also attempts to demonstrate that he will end this period of stagnation and draw a ‘China dream.’ Unfortunately, the two goals are conflictual with each other.

Furthermore, China’s economic slowdown is likely to negatively impact human rights. It does not domestically lies with the fact that demands for government accountability draw negative attention to governance issues that cannot be effectively

dealt with in the immediate term or difficult reforms that might not work out. In truth, it is not only the legitimacy of Xi's administration that will be called into question if such demands cannot be met, but the performance legitimacy of the Party to date. This is because, some of the greatest threats to the future of China's economic prosperity lies with the pathologies of China's investment-led growth model, one of which is of course endemic corruption. Understanding China's economic slowdown as merely an instance of inevitable middle-income trap that requires a rebalancing of the economy toward consumer driven growth is to miss the more disturbing structural problems that might cast a dark shadow over China's economic future as well as political stability.

2.3 Impact of Xi's Personality and Life Experience on His Leadership

In terms of Xi's political personality, he was shaped to a large extent by his father, Xi Zhongxun, a revolutionary hero purged and imprisoned by Chairman Mao, who furnished him with an inside view of party intrigue, a sense of mission and entitlement, and a network of contacts in the political elite, many of whom hold top civilian and military posts today. Xi spent seven of his most formative years after being sent into the countryside at the age of 15 along with millions of other students during Chairman Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution. However, it was his sudden transition from an urban life of relative luxury to one of rural hardship that left him with an acute self-awareness, an ability to relate to people from many walks of life, and a fierce ambition to reclaim his family's status. Hence, his political personality combine elite party pedigree, populist sensibility, and earthy pragmatism.

Moreover, Xi is part of a generation called "the generation of the Republic," raised and educated mostly under influence of both Cultural Revolution era and then

China's reform era, which has been a decisive influence in their lives. China opened itself to the world in 1978, when Xi and his contemporaries were young men eager to understand the world outside China. They are a generation inspired by Deng's realistic approach to shattering the walls that radical leftists had built around China, and one that believes that knowledge can change the destiny of the country and its people. When this generation assumes the mantle of leadership, its members will turn their passion and curiosity about knowledge and innovation into real work. They are surely willing to learn from the wider world as they seek to promote China's national interests abroad and encourage gradual change at home.

3. China's Confidence on Cross-Strait Interplays and Its Implication to Taiwan

For China's Taiwan policy, the 18th Party Congress Work Report suggests a continuation of policies to promote the mainland's gradual economic, cultural and political integration with Taiwan. So long as such trends can plausibly be interpreted by Beijing as progress toward laying the material foundations for eventual unification, the CCP leadership led by Xi may be satisfied with the "peaceful development" of cross-Strait ties. It seems that China attempts to institutionalize the existed diverse cross-Strait platforms in mutual dialogues and exchanges by focusing on promote four major forums: the Strait Forum (focus on social exchange: mainly inviting local NGO activists and local politicians), the KMT-CCP Forum (focusing on economic and cultural dimensions), the Entrepreneurs Summit (focusing on industrial cooperation), and the Peace Forum (focusing on political and military dialogues since 2013).

Considering the deepening and widening exchanges and ties across the Strait, and the geopolitical tendency faced by Taiwan, perhaps it is the time for Taiwan's to try to shift its strategic paradigm during the past 60 years (see Table 1). Cooperating with Beijing might be a rational option rather than an ideological thought. China

could not be the only potential enemy for Taiwan. Both sides can cooperation in non-traditional security and maritime security. Furthermore, Taiwan may consider its own interests from PRC-ROC common interests rather than from US-led geopolitical view.

Finally, Taiwan has the responsibility to push forward freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law as core values in the cross-strait relation. However, it is also true that the different paths towards modern societies between the two sides, which cannot be solved within a short period of time. Taiwan can be an appropriate lesson in terms of China's upcoming socio-political reform, as well as Cross-strait interplays in a spirit of mutual tolerance and mutual understanding.

Table 1: Relative Power Changes among USA, PRC, and ROC

Self- Identity	Position (capacity)			Identity (perception)
	political	military	economic	
USA	≡ ?	≡	≡ ?	A (friendly) Hegemon
PRC (China)	≡	≡	≡	A Regional Power A Hegemon Challenger? A Responsible Civilized Power?
ROC (Taiwan)	≡	≡	≡	An US "Buck-passing" Ally (or A Bandwagon)? A Member of Democratic Community? A Civilizational Leader in Chinese Societies?