

A Long Road: Enduring Goodwill with Patience Cross-Strait Relations in 2012 and Beyond

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Summary

The relations across the Taiwan Strait enters a new phase in 2012, a phase of uncertainty and cautiousness. Political leaders on both sides are challenged with more than handful domestic issues from economy to political transition, and are not expected to raise major initiatives to each other in the next 18 months.

Even with 16 agreements signed and significant reduction of probability of armed conflict, basic posture in the Taiwan Strait has not changed in the past four years – China continues its military deployment targeting at Taiwan; and surveys in Taiwan showed no increase of support of unification with China.

Taiwan's mainland policy in the next four years will focus on two areas: expanding economic benefits through the post-ECFA negotiations, and guarding against pressures on political dialogues and negotiations from Beijing.

It will be a long road for both sides of the Taiwan Strait in political engagement.

A. The Essence of Cross-Strait Development since 2008

At the invitation of Mr. Alan Romberg, I gave a talk on the “future of cross-strait relations” at the Stimson Center in January 2009, a month after the beginning of regular and direct flights across the strait and full implementation of Three Links. There were five development trends I identified – envisioned the growing challenges lied ahead in the cross-strait negotiation:

- From relatively easy issues to complicated processes
- From functional issues to highly sensitive, political issues
- From simple expression of goodwill to a reality check of substantial gains
- From purely bilateral issues to processes may involve third parties
- From well-prepared issues to subjects had not been thoroughly discussed

The five trends are still valid in cross-strait relations today.

In President Ma Ying-jeou's first term, there have been 16 agreements reached across the Taiwan Strait, including the flagship Economic and Cooperation

Framework Agreement (ECFA). In addition, China employed charm offensives by sending quite a few large delegations, led by provincial governors and party chiefs, to Taiwan and committed significant procurement of Taiwan goods and agricultural products, showing good will and trying to win over the hearts and minds of Taiwanese people.

In the next four years, however, even in the areas of economic and trade, both sides have recognized that cross-strait negotiations are moving toward the so-called “deep water zone” – increasing difficulties to reach consensus.

B. President MYJ’s Evolving National Security Strategy

Rebalancing Taiwan’s relationship with two nuclear powers – Mainland China and the United States has been the center of gravity in President Ma’s national security strategy.

■ Managing cross-strait relations as priority over foreign and defense policy

When Ma took office, U.S.-Taiwan relationship was in flux after his predecessor President Chen Shui-bian’s insistence in pushing for a national referendum on “participation in the U.N.” However, relations across the Taiwan Strait was much worse as dialogues between Taipei and Beijing was cut off for 10 years since 1998. Efforts to resume dialogues and reinstate regular meetings between Strait Exchange Foundation (SEF) and Association for the Relations across the Taiwan Strait (ARATS) were naturally a top priority.

In almost every occasion, in talks with business communities, foreign visitors, and military officer corps, Ma had always addressed the importance of rapprochement with Chinese Mainland to Taiwan’s national security – believing that Taiwan future development requires a peaceful environment and manageable cross-strait relations.

■ Reconnecting missing links with both Beijing and Washington

From the beginning of his presidency, Ma has also made efforts to rebuild trust between Taipei and Washington – emphasizing Taiwan will no longer a “trouble maker” but a “peace maker,” and a stable and peaceful Taiwan Strait is in the interests of the United States, friends and allies, and neighboring countries in the Asia-Pacific region.

As cross-strait relations improved and institutionalized SEF-ARATS dialogues resumed, Taiwan has moved to a relative balanced but began to walk a more delicate tightrope in dealing with the two giants at the same time to protect national security interests.

■ Iron-triangle: Moving from “defensive” to “normal” strategy

In his video conference with the Center for Strategic & International Studies on May 12, 2011, President Ma for the first time clearly defined his national security strategy as “three lines of defense” – “institutionalizing the Cross-Strait rapprochement, enhancing Taiwan’s contributions to international development and aligning defense with diplomacy.” While agreeing with the Ma’s national security strategic thinking, when I first heard the term of “line of defense,” I was rather disappointed at the staffers who might have advised the president. To me, the concept of “line of defense” is passive, defensive and lack of momentum.

I was relieved to learn that, a year later, in his second inaugural speech on May 20, 2012, Ma redefined his national security strategy much clearly with “*tie san jiao*” or “iron triangle,” and – “*The first is the use of cross-strait rapprochement to realize peace in the Taiwan Strait. The second is the use of viable diplomacy to establish more breathing space for ourselves in the international community. And the third is the use of military strength to deter external threats.*” Most importantly, Ma said: “*We must regard each as equally important and develop them in a balanced manner.*” With this clear and balanced deliberation, Ma’s national security strategy emerges normality and maturity.

C. Challenges in Cross-Strait Relations

The current state of cross-strait relations may be challenged by various and complicated factors. Determinants of future dynamics include mainly the followings:

- Global financial crises and domestic economic conditions

Like other countries, cautiously monitoring global financial dynamics and maintaining economic stability and growth will be the top priority for both Taipei and Beijing in the foreseeable future. International financial conditions and relative economic performance may influence the trade and investment relationship, and positions on negotiations across the Taiwan Strait.

- U.S.-China “game of throne” in the region

Power balance and associate policy measures between Mainland China and the U.S. will be one of the dominating factors influencing the future strategic map in the Asia-Pacific region. What will be the impact of “Pivot to Asia” under austerity and defense budget cuts? How strong and how far can the Chinese exercise its anti-access and area denial military capability? Taiwan and other regional countries all are not immune from this power competition.

- Beijing’s pressure on political dialogues

Surveys in Taiwan in the past four years showed no increase of support of political integration with Mainland China even with strong efforts and economic

incentives by Beijing. Mainland China's official statements maintained the policy of "economic first" and that Beijing does not expect any hasty move to political negotiation with Taiwan, but calls from netizens and People's Liberation Army for political and military dialogues have never grown weaker. Whether Beijing will increase its pressure on Taiwan on political dialogue and by what patterns and degrees are remain to be seen.

- Political transitions and leadership solidarity in China

The lack of institutionalized leadership transition in Mainland China is one of the troublesome factors in assessing political stability. Patterns of political successions from the first generation of Mao Zedong all the way to the fifth generation of Xi Jinping, there have been no repetitive reference yet.

The scandal and downfall of Bo Xilai gave observers of Chinese politics a certain level of doubts that how the selection/competition of next generation leaders in the coming 18th national congress of the Chinese Communist Party will play out, and how the next leadership-collect would collaborate in the future.

- The strength of "abandonment of Taiwan" voices in the U.S.

Many American friends had repeatedly advised Taipei that the arguments of abandoning Taiwan are minority views and will not influence U.S. policy. The continuing supports of U.S. government to Taiwan, including arms sales have proved that there will not be a Taiwan policy change any time soon. However, from the stand point of Taiwan, views expressed in major foreign policy journals or by important opinion leaders did carry some weights and might bring incremental or accumulative impacts on U.S. policy.

- Quality of leadership and capability of governance

The most important factor that may have fundamental influence the balance of cross-strait relationship will be the vision and wisdom of political leaders on both sides. How capable the leaderships in Taipei and in Beijing in terms of understanding international power relations and maintaining domestic harmony and stability will definitely determine policy approaches toward the other side of the strait.

D. Interpreting MYJ's 2nd-term Mainland Policy

President Ma's policy toward the Mainland can be best conceptualized in his inaugural speech on May 20th this year in which he lays out two main themes in managing cross-strait relations in the next four years.

- Continuity with pragmatism on economic and cultural exchanges

In his second inaugural speech, President Ma has reemphasized that he has *“promoted cross-strait ties in accordance with the principles of putting ‘pressing matters before less pressing ones, easily resolved issues before difficult ones, and economic matters before political ones.’ This approach has yielded unprecedented successes in the areas of economic and trade ties, transportation, public health, culture, education, judicial assistance, and financial services.”* Given the mounting challenges in economic, financial and domestic social arenas in the years ahead, President Ma is expected to continue such pragmatic approach, and focusing on economic and culture exchanges in cross-strait relations.

■ One step back to guard against pressure from Beijing for political dialogues

My reading of President Ma’s second inaugural address is that he has laid out there fire walls – guarding against or defusing Beijing’s possible pressure on political negotiation in the next four years.

1. Political relationship rests on Constitutional sovereignty

President Ma reaffirmed the “1992 consensus” as the base for cross-strait relations, and further clarified recent confusion regarding the expression of “one China, two areas.” Ma made it clear that it means “one ROC, two areas,” and *“the Constitution of the Republic of China is the supreme guiding principle for how the government deals with cross-strait relations.”* Some might argue there is nothing new from Taiwan’s previous position on sovereignty, but by reiterating Taiwan’s constitutional definition of one China, Ma directly addressed against the basic logic and legal rationale of China’s Anti-Secession Law of 2005. Setting line of legal contest in cross-strait relation on the basis of constitution will give Taiwan a stronghold position facing future possible pressure on political dialogue.

2. Political mutual-trust must be built on human and civil rights

In order to consolidate peace and deepen mutual trust, President Ma expressed his hope that *“civic groups on both sides of the Taiwan Strait will have more opportunities for exchanges and dialogue focusing on such areas as democracy, human rights, rule of law and civil society, to create an environment more conducive to peaceful cross-strait development.”* His remarks could be interpreted as a direct reaction to the recent case of blind lawyer Chen Guangcheng seeking justice and civil rights; or it could be a clear message to China that without human and civil rights, political trust could hardly built across the strait.

3. Political reform toward democracy is encouraged – Western democracy is not alien to Chinese soil

“Taiwan’s experience in establishing democracy proves that it is not

impossible for democratic institutions from abroad to take root in an ethnically Chinese society.” President Ma’s remarks can be seen as echoing Premier Wen Jiabao’s numerous calls for political institutional reform, but more boldly reminds the Beijing leaders that Western democracy can be universal and has worked in Taiwan.

With such strong positions, one can conclude that President Ma is taking a long-term vision and will not seek breakthrough in political relations or enter into political and military dialogues with Beijing.

E. Final Notes

- The eventual political relationship between Taiwan and the Mainland has never been an easy one. Formulas and approaches have been suggested by intellectuals and politicians on both sides but none of them has shown practicality in the past 30 some years. There will be a long road ahead.
- Taiwan is not alone. Regional allies and countries in Asia will continue to gauge their relationships with Mainland China and the U.S. as the two nuclear giants tango their relations.

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