

# The U.S. factor in the Development of Cross-strait Political Relations: Positive Energy or Negative Energy?

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Prepared for the conference on “Cross-Strait Developments in 2013: New Trends and Prospects” by Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

October 3-4, 2013

## **Introduction**

The cross-strait relations have improved significantly over the last five years. Chinese mainland and Taiwan resumed semi-official negotiations between Association for Relations across the Taiwan Strait (ARATS) and Strait Exchange Foundation (SEF) on the basis of “1992 consensus” and signed 19 agreements, including the historical Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA). The economic and social relations become closer and closer and opened a new era for the peaceful development of cross-strait relations, and benefited most of the people on both sides across the Taiwan Strait. But compare to the improvement of economic relations, the political relations between the two sides remain in a stalemate. Some structural sensitive issues, such as Taiwan authorities’ political status, Taiwan’s participation in international community, confidence-building mechanism for military security, etc., are still far from getting the answer.

In the speech at the forum marking the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the issuance of the message to compatriots in Taiwan on December 31, 2008, former Chinese Mainland leader Hu Jintao appealed the two sides to take actions to “jointly end the history of cross-strait hostility” and “take pragmatic explorations in their political relations under the special circumstances where the country has not yet been reunified”, and “reach a peace agreement and build a framework for the peaceful development of

cross-strait relations”.<sup>1</sup> In the 18<sup>th</sup> CPC Congress report, Hu reiterate his appeal to “jointly explore cross-strait political relations and make reasonable arrangements for them under the condition that the country is yet to be reunified”. In 2013 national conference concerning Taiwan affairs, Yu Zhengsheng, a standing member of Politburo, emphasized to encourage the non-governmental informal political talks between the scholars and think tanks across the Taiwan Straits. On October 11, the first Cross-Strait Peace Forum will be held in Shanghai. Different from the former forums mainly focused on economic and social culture issue, the Peace forum will inspire talks on political and military issues. Mainland hopes this peace forum can help explore the political relations through non-governmental level, and create some kinds of conditions for the possible official level political negotiation.

Concerning the cross-strait political relations, both Mainland and Taiwan will inevitably take the US factor into consideration. Though the urgency of Taiwan issue declined in China-U.S. relations in the last few years, Taiwan remains the most sensitive and most dangerous issue in the future development of China-U.S. relations. China hopes the U.S. can turn Taiwan issue from “negative equity” to “positive assets” and help bring some “positive energy” into the cross strait relations. But the US positions on cross-strati political relations are ambiguity and full of cautiousness. Some experts both in Mainland and Taiwan believe that the main reason that Ma Ying-jeou’s reluctance to talk political issue with mainland was the U.S. discouragement. This paper will present how to understand Mainland’s motivations of initiating political talks? How the Mainland and Taiwan interpret the US attitude? What can the US do to bring “positive energy” into the development of Cross-strait political relations by avoiding send “negative energy”?

### **Chinese Mainland’s Motivations of Initiating Political talks**

When the Mainland and Taiwan resumed their consultations five years ago, they set the principle of taking of incremental steps to push forward the negotiations, that is, from easy issues to complicated issues, from economic issues to political

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<sup>1</sup> Hu Jintao, *Let us join hands to promote the peaceful development of cross-straits relations and Strive with a united resolve for the great Rejuvenation of Chinese nation*, People’s Daily, 1/1/2009.

issues, from urgent issues to regular issues. From the very beginning, Taiwan authorities were very cautious about the political talks, on July 14, 2009, former minister of Mainland Affairs Council Lai Shin-yuan mentioned in a speech, “No timetable for Cross-Strait political talks”, “Although studies on the issues of cross-strait military confidence building measures and cross-strait peace agreement are being conducted, the conditions are not yet ripe for addressing these highly political issues”.<sup>2</sup> But in November 2009, a conference titled “liang’an yi jia zi (两岸一甲子)” held in Taipei, some sensitive issues had been discussed on that occasion. Some scholars regard that conference as the first tentative step of cross-strait political talks. After that conference, many similar seminars held both in Mainland and Taiwan, more and more scholars devoted themselves into the research and discussion of sensitive political issues, some good thinking and advises proposed.

Mainland did not rule out the possibility of discussing political issues from the very beginning, and was very happy to see these issues to be discussed on the scholar-level. With the deepening of economic and social relations, Mainland more and more realized that political talks should not be ignored while achieving sustainable peaceful development of cross-strait relations. Basically speaking, Mainland at least has three motivations to take the initiatives of political talks, that is, to confirm and strengthen the political basis, to sustain the course of peaceful development, to resolve the practical problems concerning Taiwan people.

#### • Strengthen Common Political Basis

From mainland’s points of view, common political basis is crucial in the development of cross-strait relations. The main reason why the two sides can resume negotiations between ARATS and SEF in 2008 was, both the mainland and Taiwan authorities reiterated their stands of “sticking to 1992 consensus” and “opposing Taiwan independent”. Of course the two sides had different interpretations on “1992 consensus”. But just like the former Director of the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council Wang Yi said, the spirit of “1992 consensus” was seeking common points while reserving differences (求同存异, *Qiutongcunyi*). But *Qiutongcunyi* is not

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<sup>2</sup> Lai Shin-yuan, The Current Stage of Cross-Strait Relations and the ROC Government’s Mainland China Policy, via <http://www.mac.gov.tw/ct.asp?xItem=63748&ctNode=6256&mp=3>.

enough for the two sides to enhance their mutual trust to tackle the difficult problems. So the Mainland hopes the two sides can “develop a more explicit and definite common understanding and united position on safeguarding the one-China framework” and sees this as the “cornerstone to build political mutual trust”, also on that basis, anything could be open for discussion.

To some extent, Taiwan’s leader Ma Ying-jeou’s some remarks, such as the relations between mainland and Taiwan are not “state to state relationship”, “we can not regard Mainland China as another country”, “the two sides of the Taiwan Strait have been defined as ‘one Republic of China, two areas’”, “not pursuing Taiwan independence, two Chinas, and one China and one Taiwan”, did contributed to the establishment, strengthening and consolidation of the common political basis. We can also say that the two sides have already formed some kinds of definite common understanding over “one-China” Framework. But up to now, most of the common understanding and position was indirect, either stated unilaterally, or reached between the CPC and KMT. There’s no joint-statement or joint declaration between the two official authorities. Through political dialogues, the mainland and Taiwan not only can confirm their common basis directly, but also can help resolve some differences, such as the difference on the definition of “one China”, mainland believes that can only be resolved through political dialogues.

- **Sustain the peaceful development course**

Though the two sides across the Taiwan Strait achieved tremendous progress in the past five years, the relationship is still very fragile. After the easy part of the problems being settled, more attentions should be paid to the substantial difficult problems. From Mainland’s points of view, if there’s no follow-up power, not only it’s impossible to deepen the current relations, also the existing achievements will be lost. The two sides should not just sit and wait, they should do something to create a positive environment for the final resolution of the difficult problems, and create a framework for the sustainable development of cross-strait relations.

There is no doubt that the domestic political situation in Taiwan will affect the peaceful development of the cross-strait relations. Ma Ying-jeou’s low popularity

made him very cautious when making decisions. He himself once said Taiwan does not rule out the possibility of political talks and advocated the topic of Peace Agreement during his campaign. Because his low public support, it's not easy for him to turn these into moves in the near future. Also, Taiwan's opposition party DPP still held different opinion on these issues and showed unwilling to adjust its mainland policy fundamentally. If there's no such a framework to ensure the sustainable peaceful development of cross-strait relations, once DPP came to power again in the future, the cross-strait relations may be will suffer another round of tension, which we are not willing to see.

- **Solve practical political difficulties**

There are some practical functional political difficulties exist in current cross-strait relation that need to be resolved. In the past 30 years, one of Mainland's core policies over Taiwan was, placing hopes on the people in Taiwan, and gaining understanding and support from the people of Taiwan. In the past several years, Mainland emphasized the principle of "putting people first", and try to understand, trust and care for the people in Taiwan, to identify their wishes and appeals, address their concerns and serve their needs. Beijing really hope to resolve some difficulties Taiwan people cares a lot, especially over the issue like Taiwan people's participation of non-governmental organizations, Taiwan people's security concerns, Taiwan people felling over ROC, etc. By doing these, the Mainland hope Taiwan people's impression over Mainland can change a little bit.

Some scholars in Taiwan believe some political difficulties Taiwan encountered today was caused by Beijing's suppress and should be resolved by Beijing unilaterally. It seems Beijing understand the problem from a different angle, the political problems, such as Taiwan's international participation was historical issue, only could and should be resolved by bilateral negotiations. Without negotiation, how could Beijing know how to make concessions, where to make concessions and how many concessions it could make?

## **U.S. Attitude toward Cross-Strait Political Relations**

Over the past several decades, the U.S. has demonstrated its support for Taiwanese people and Cross-Strait peace in many ways. Just like Bonnie Glaser stated, the United States has a strong interest in seeing Taiwan's democracy continue to flourish, at the same time, the United States has an equally compelling interest in the preservation of cross-Strait stability.<sup>3</sup> In the last five years, the peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait realized, frankly speaking, the United States played some kinds of positive role during the development of cross-strait relations. The officials from the U.S. government expressed many times publically they support the improvement of cross-strait relations, just like the State Department Deputy Assistant Secretary David B. Shear's Remarks at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace event on July 7, 2010 stated, "Reduced cross-Strait tensions through dialogue and people-to-people interaction has been a goal of the United States for decades, and I believe we can take some of the credit for helping to lay the positive foundations that have made the recent dramatic breakthroughs in cross-Strait ties possible", "We welcome active efforts on both sides to engage in a dialogue that reduces tensions and increases contacts of all kinds across the Strait". As to the future dialogue and talks, Shear said, "the scope of future economic and political interaction will be determined by the people and leadership on both sides of the Strait, in accord with Taiwan's thriving democratic processes".<sup>4</sup>

Some U.S. scholars interpreted the U.S. attitude over cross-strait political interaction as "take no position". Bonnie Glaser stated in the paper prepared for the conference held by Shanghai Institute of East Asia Studies, "U.S. officials have never discouraged Taipei from raising specific issues with Beijing, and have not voiced concern about the opening of political dialogue between the two sides of the Strait."<sup>5</sup> Though U.S. did not publically show any unhappy or unwilling to see the two sides open their political talk, it's very obvious that Washington keep a close look on the possible moves taken by the Mainland to push forward the political dialogue and Ma Ying-jeou Authorities reactions. In the CRS report named "U.S.-Taiwan Relationship:

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<sup>3</sup> Bonnie Glaser, Taiwan's 2012 elections and cross-strait relations: implication for the United States, via [http://csis.org/files/publication/111114\\_Glaser\\_Taiwan2012\\_WEB.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/111114_Glaser_Taiwan2012_WEB.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> David B. Shear, Cross-Strait Relations in a New Era of Negotiation, via <http://www.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2010/07/144363.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> See speech and Q&A with Chairman of the American Institute in Taiwan Ray Burghardt, CSIS conference on China-U.S.-Taiwan Relations, April 23, 2013, <http://csis.org/event/china-taiwan-united-states-relations>.

Overview of Policy issues” for congress named, the authors believed that “Beijing could increase pressure on Taiwan, in preparing for if not pressing for political and military negotiations”, and “Beijing’s patience could be tested further by the sustained separate identity in Taiwan”.<sup>6</sup>

So from the open remarks and documents, the United States uphold an open attitude, it did not stated specifically it will support or oppose the cross-strait political talks, and it’s up to the two sides across the Taiwan Strait to decide the timing, the topic, and the procedure to handle the development of political relations. Some scholars analyst the possibility of political talks, Richard Bush, explained his reason why Beijing should not push for political talks, “one reason is that it is clear to me that the Taiwanese public is not ready for that turning point. Second, I think that there are still important conceptual gaps between the two sides”.<sup>7</sup> But due to the complicated triangle relations between the United States, Mainland China and Taiwan, and the lack of mutual trust between China and U.S., between Mainland and Taiwan, even between the U.S. and Taiwan, from the eyes of Mainland and Taiwan, the U.S. seemingly open attitude and the explanations conveyed some different messages.

### **Chinese Mainland and Taiwan’s Understandings of U.S. Attitude**

Chinese Mainland has always been very sensitive to the U.S. attitude toward Taiwan issue. Because of strategic distrust, some Chinese scholars and officials would rather read too much into the U.S. position. Some scholars believe that U.S. government had worked closely with Beijing to punish Chen Shuibian in order to avoid a conflict over Taiwan Strait during 2000-2008, now it is time for U.S. to work with Ma Yuingjeou to avoid Beijing’s integrating strategy over Taiwan, heading for early reunification. They concluded that the U.S. do not want to see the too rapidly improved relations across Taiwan strait, because they believe that will break the balance of power in east Asia and may lead to a final unification of China, which will lead to China’s challenge U.S. leadership in the world. So Chinese scholars interpreted the U.S. open attitude in a very different way.

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<sup>6</sup> U.S.-Taiwan Relationship: Overview of Policy issues, via [www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41952.pdf](http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41952.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Beijing should not “push political talks”, Taipei Times, via <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2013/04/10/2003559261>.

In an interview on Hongkong's Phoenix TV in November of 2009, a famous Taiwan research expert Xu Shiquan, deputy director of National Association for Taiwan Studies, showed his suspicious on Alan Romberg's points of "the U.S. government has no intention to involve into the cross-strait political talks, but U.S. will show its concerns over this issue". Xu said, the U.S. interfering into cross-strait affairs is an open secret, but no matter what kinds of role the U.S. wants to play, the negotiations should be the matters between the two sides across the Taiwan Strait.<sup>8</sup> In an comment published by Chinareview News Agency in November 2012 criticized that the reason why the cross-strait political talks encountered big obstacles was the U.S. two-faced strategy, and Ma Ying-jeou dare not breakthrough the red line setting by the U.S. side privately.<sup>9</sup> These kinds of conceptions are very popular among scholars, officials and ordinary people in Mainland China.

Taiwan authorities conducted the policy of maintaining the status quo of "no unification, no independence, and no use of force" across the Taiwan Strait in the last five years. Ma Ying-jeou asserted he would adhere to the established policy line, and continue to create positive conditions for peaceful and stable development on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. But he did not answer the questions how the peace and stability could be sustained without the improvement of political relations. Ma showed his reluctance to engage in political discussions with Beijing many times, in an interview with China Times in August 2013, he made it clear that "Time is not ripe for Taiwan to conduct political dialogues with the mainland," "Since there is no consensus on this point, then why rush?"<sup>10</sup> He didn't mention the U.S. factor and its possible influence on this issue, but some scholars still strongly believed that U.S. concern was one of the most important factors that influences Ma's decision.

In April of 2013, KMT vice-chairmen Chiang Xiao-yan visited the United States, he said the U.S. side deeply concerned the possibility of political talks between the

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<sup>8</sup> Whether the U.S. will interfere into the cross-strait political talks, via [http://phtv.ifeng.com/program/zhtfl/200911/1105\\_1687\\_1422415.shtml](http://phtv.ifeng.com/program/zhtfl/200911/1105_1687_1422415.shtml).

<sup>9</sup> Will the cross-strait political talks be determined by the U.S.?, via <http://www.zhghpl.com/crn-webapp/doc/docDetailCreate.jsp?coluid=7&docid=102307942>.

<sup>10</sup> Taiwan's Ma Ying-jeou says time not ripe for Beijing political talks, via <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1219952/taiwans-ma-ying-jeou-says-time-not-ripe-beijing-political-talks>.



Mainland and Taiwan. Some scholars interpreted these concerns as the U.S. did not trust Ma Ying-jeou on this issue. Some scholars explained that the U.S. always elaborated their policies very accurately, such as, “oppose the use of force”, not support Taiwan independence”, “encourage the dialogue”, etc. Comparing to these elaborations, “take no position” just means the U.S. haven’t decided whether to support the political talks or not. But because Ma Ying-jeou’s historical low popularity, he would rather take no risk and interpret it as the U.S. did not support the political talks.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Since 2012, the cross-strait relations entered a new era of peaceful development; both the Mainland and Taiwan want to see the United States continue to bring some “positive energy” into the future development of cross-strait relations. Recently “positive energy” becomes a very popular term in China, this term means “positive, healthy, hopeful, cheering, optimistic”. The United States has already showed its appreciation over the improvement of the cross-strait relations; it should and could do more to encourage the sustainable development of the relations. It’s understandable that the United States will, most certainly, continue its policy based on ‘one China’, three Sino-U.S. communiqués and Taiwan Relations Act, that means adopting a policy of opposing any unilateral move by either side to change the status quo, as this has been the policy of several U.S. Presidents. China has committed to build new model of major-country relationship with the United States, and wish to put Taiwan issue under a controllable situation. Reconsidering how to handle Taiwan issue not only benefit the U.S. national interests, but also benefits the people across the Taiwan Strait.

1) Chinese mainland should do something to eliminate the concerns and worries among Taiwanese people while pushing political talks and conducting political talks between non-official think tanks and scholars. The two sides should make it clear that the political negotiation was not reunification negotiation; some U.S. reasonable interest should be taken into consideration in cross-straits talks. The United States should consider how to send more positive signal on this issue.

2) Chinese mainland and the U.S. should seek consensus on some of the sensitive issues over Taiwan. Taiwan's bid to join international organizations not only need cross-straits talks, but also need Sino-U.S. coordination. For example, U.S. and China should reach a consensus on what kinds of international organization membership needs statehood status that Taiwan has no right to enter, and discuss the possibility of revise the charter or constitution of some organizations.

3) Both China and the U.S. should commit to reduce the sensitivity and importance of Taiwan issue in China-U.S. relations. Chinese government always emphasized that Taiwan issue was the most important and most sensitive issue in China-U.S. relations. The situation has changed since Ma's coming to power. China and the U.S. should pave the way to explore a solution for some difficult sensitive issues, such as U.S. arms sales to Taiwan.

4) In order to create positive conditions for cross-strait political talks and reduce resistance from the opposition party and their supporters, Chinese mainland should not only talk with KMT and their supporters, but also should open some new channel to talk with DPP members and their supporters. The United States should continue to send clear messages to DPP that they should not damage the peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait.