

THE CHINA-TAIWAN RELATIONSHIP: CURRENT STATUS AND POTENTIAL DIRECTIONS

Introduction

Taiwan is a primary flashpoint in East Asia. Its explosiveness results from China's ongoing insistence – and Taiwan's refusal – that Taipei fall under Beijing's auspices. It's a periodic dispute which has lasted for over 60 years. China has not openly attempted to force Taiwan to reunify, yet there have been several times when it has initiated borderline provocations. Both sides are starting to reconcile their differences albeit slowly and with little progress. The key to resolving the dispute will probably occur within one-to-two generations, plus via a currently unthoughtof solution.

The article is divided into several sections. First, it will briefly analyze the issue; Second, the piece will examine the current state of affairs between Taiwan and China. And finally, the article will explore the difficulties of finding an answer to the reunification controversy.

Analysis

The Taiwan-China Relationship is one of the most paradoxical affiliations in Pacific Rim affairs. Both countries have strong economic, yet strained political ties as a result of the reunification issue. The controversy could disappear overnight, if Beijing recognized Taipei's status as an independent country; acknowledging Taiwan's stature would require China to abandon a primary foreign policy objective. Chinese policymakers and independent analysts have suggested a solution is for Taiwan to adopt Hong Kong and/or Macao type model. The proposition's difficulty is both entities and Taiwan share dissimilar backgrounds. Taipei would lose its de facto political and economic independence, if it agreed to similar conditions. The other solution is for China to force Taiwan to accept Beijing's jurisdiction. The scenario will probably not occur considering the United States is obligated by American to law to militarily intervene if China attacks Taiwan (an issue for another article). Resolving the contro- ▶

versy probably won't occur within the current generation's timeframe, since leaders on both sides of the Taiwan Strait are from or are distantly linked from the era when the dispute started. The most likely scenario is the reunification issue will remain unresolved for years to come – and that a discounted and/or unconsidered solution will present itself when a new generation of leaders occupies Beijing and Taiwan's political reins.

Background:

Historical roots, China's Perspective, and Taiwan's Viewpoint

The Taiwan conflicts' origins are historical and political in nature. Its roots are traceable to the 1940s, while the current difficulties are linked to differences between how Beijing and Taipei interpret a settlement of the reunification problem.

The dispute started in 1949. Throughout the 1930s forces loyal to the Chinese Communist Par-

ty and General Chaing Kai-Shek clashed in a civil war. Both sides set aside their differences and coordinated their efforts between 1937 and 1945 against the Japanese when Tokyo invaded and occupied a significant part of the country. Their dispute reemerged after Japan's defeat. The civil war lasted for another four years until 1949 when Chaing Kai-Shek fled to Taiwan after his forces were defeated by the CCP. A key objective of the Chinese authorities has been the reunification of Taiwan under Beijing's auspices since.

China's policy towards Taiwan is defined in the Chinese Constitution's Preamble and the 2005 Anti-Secessionist Law. The Constitution's Preamble states,

"Taiwan is part of the sacred territory of the People's Republic of China. It is the inviolable duty of all Chinese people, including our compatriots in Taiwan, to accomplish the great task of reunifying the motherland."¹

Beijing's 2005 Anti-Secessionist Law further explains China's policies towards Taiwan. Article 2 notes that there is only "One China" and Taiwan is a part of it. Article 5 contends Beijing will seek reunification with Taipei under peaceful means. Article 6 details issues China will collaborate with Taiwan over to encourage peace and stability in the Taiwan Straits. These subjects range from economic activities, such as trade, to combating crime and encouraging cultural exchanges between both entities. Article 7 examines the steps Chinese authorities are willing to initiate with Taiwan on the reunification matter. These include ending hostilities, establishing procedures for the development of cross strait relations plus a peaceful reunification, ascertaining the political status of Taiwan's authorities within the Chinese government hierarchy, determining Taipei's international status within Beijing's strategic apparatus, and related issues relevant to Taiwan's status within China. And finally Article 8 endows Chinese authorities with the latitude of utilizing military force against



Ma Ying-jeou

Taiwan, if Taipei's officially declares independence from Beijing.²

Taiwan's policy towards China was spelled out in a June 2008 interview President Ma Ying-jeou furnished to the New York Times. Ma called for an enhancement of economic ties between the PRC and Taiwan to include a broader access to China's markets for Taiwan's businessmen, plus direct air flights between Taiwan and China among many proposals. He said Taiwan is willing to negotiate its political status with China but only when Beijing removed its short-and-medium range missiles targeting Taipei.³ He officially opposes reunification⁴, yet the Taiwan leader is willing to consider indirect discussions on the matter. Ma noted during the 2009 Presidential Campaign that he accepts the non-documented 1992 understanding between Beijing and Taipei leaders of the "One China" concept. What neither side resolved is what officially does the "One-China" idea mean? Neither side has revisited the issue since the 1992 meeting.⁵

The Reunification Issue:

Complexities, the Hong Kong-Macao Solution, and Realities

The Chinese-Taiwan relationship is divided into economic and reunification related affairs. The direction Beijing and Taipei have made on the issues is paradoxical in nature. Both sides have made notable progress in the financial realm; the political issue remains deadlocked, especially regarding the reunification subject.

Beijing-Taipei relations were almost non-existent from 1949 to the early 21st century. A thaw in the rapport started in 2004, when Taiwan elected a president, Chen Shui-bian, who was receptive to closer relations, unlike his predecessors. The changed attitude led to a meeting between China's President Hu Jin Tao and the chairman of Taiwan's leading political party in April 2005. Both sides increased their interactions, consequently, and signed several economic agreements shortly thereafter. Their efforts were complimented by additional accords signed

since 2008. The agreements allowed for direct flights, maritime and mail links, and an augmentation of trade and investment opportunities between China and Taiwan.⁶ Both countries signed a significant accord called the Economic Co-operation Framework Agreement (ECFA) in June 2010. It seeks to reduce tariff barriers and obstacles to commercial interactions. The ECFA additionally provides favorable tariffs for over 500 types of Taiwanese exports to China, while Chinese companies will receive preferential tax breaks on approximately 260 products.⁷

The relationship's most difficult issue relates to reunification. Various solutions have been pro-

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posed to address the matter. One suggested idea is to place Taiwan under a similar administrative arrangement as Hong Kong and Macao. It's an issue many Taipei policymakers oppose, since they contend it may cause Taiwan to lose its independence.⁸ The situation requires exploring several questions: under what type of jurisdiction is Hong Kong under? Is it similar to Macao? And could Taiwan accept an administrative arrangement akin to Hong Kong and Macao's status?

One approach to understanding the commonalities/disparities between Beijing's governorship over Hong Kong and Macao is an examination of the agreements China signed with the United Kingdom and Portugal over both areas. The prime documents between Beijing and London/ ▶

Lisbon are called “The Joint Declaration of the Government of the 1) the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of the People's Republic of China on the Question of Hong Kong; and 2) People's Republic of China and The Government of the Republic of Portugal on the question of Macao.”

Hong Kong and Macao share similar administrative arrangements. Both areas are described as a “Special Administrative Region.....in accordance with the provisions of Article 31 of the Constitution of the PRC”⁹ A second commonality is Hong Kong and Macao are managed by the PRC's Central People's Government (CPG). The “Special Administrative Region” designation allows Hong Kong and Macao's Executive, Legislative, and Judicial authorities to create and implement their own laws and regulations; the designation prohibits both entities from formulating their own defense and foreign policies – a responsibility given to the CPG.¹⁰ Another similarity relates to the appointment of governing officials. Both Declarations give the authority for assigning Hong Kong and Macao's chief executive to the CPG, which will make its determination based on each entity's local electoral results. Both entities' principle officials will be nominated by the executive officer for appointment by the CPG.¹¹ Hong Kong and Macao are allowed to establish economic relations with their original London and Lisbon overseers, plus any other nations of interest.¹² The last major issue relates to the right of Hong Kong/Macao's citizens. Individuals from both areas will retain their original political, economic, and

commercial privileges under the Joint Declarations; both documents mandate Hong Kong and Macao authorities with guaranteeing these rights.¹³

Utilizing Hong Kong and Macao's administrative arrangements with Beijing as a model for Chinese-Taiwan reunification is unrealistic. There are similarities between Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Taipei; the differences outweigh the commonalities. Hong Kong and Macao were originally established as Colonies by the British and Portuguese, whereas Taiwan's polity was formed by the late General Chang Kai-Shek and the KMT party. Taiwan occupies a larger geographical area, and consists of different jurisdictional areas. The island's government is divided into various “county's”, which are similar to Japan's Prefectures or the American States with their own local and municipal governments, unlike Hong Kong and Macao. Taiwan has a viable military, including an army, navy, air force, and Marine Corps. It also belongs to several international organizations including the World Trade Organization. The one commonality Taiwan shares with Hong Kong and Macao is a well-developed and modern economy.¹⁴ Taiwan is a country in all but diplomatic circles, unlike the former British and Portuguese colonies.

How Beijing and Taipei might resolve the reunification issue is unknown. There are several possibilities for addressing the matter. The author failed to discover reportage of the first two scenarios in media and/or academic circles; while the

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final model was suggested by Dr. Cal Clark from Auburn University.

- First, China's acceptance of Taiwan's status under the condition that Taipei officially designates itself as "The Republic of Taiwan", not the "Republic of China".
- Second, Beijing's unofficial acknowledgement of Taipei's independence with the agreement that Taiwan does not report China's policy reversal in media circles.
- A final possibility is for reunification to occur via an EU type model as suggested by Dr. Cal Clark.¹⁵

The last option is the most unlikely. It would entail Beijing allowing Taipei to possess an equal vote in all political, economic, military, and foreign affairs decisions. It's probably the least viable scenario considering the CCP might argue Taiwan only represents of a fraction of China's citizenry (even those living outside the Mainland would not equal the PRC's population numbers). Nothing can be discounted, especially an idea as implausible as the above.

Any resolution of the dispute must entail a settlement whereby both sides maintain a perceptual credibility in the constituents' view – any agreement jeopardizing this tenet could have political consequences for the party seen making concessions. This component of any accord may be the hardest to achieve since both sides' positions are clear and seemingly inflexible.


Resolving the matter will probably occur via a currently unthoughtof solution plus a new generation. Beijing and Taiwan's present leadership are directly or indirectly tied to policies neither are apparently unwilling to deviate from. The other aspect is probably a historical linkage to the leaders and events resulting from the Chinese Civil War. There is a strong possibility the leaders on both sides of the Taiwan Strait have family members who were involved in

the conflict – fathers, uncles, cousins, or related kin. The connection may be creating a situation where pragmatism is non-existent. The reunification issue may be settled once a new generation takes the reins in Beijing and Taipei; a generation several decades removed from the events of 1949 plus who are willing to consider a new approach and/or visit old, previously discounted solutions.

Conclusion

The Taiwan controversy is one of the simplest, yet most complex issues to resolve. Its simplicity is that the problem could be resolved within a short-period, yet there might be strategic ramifications for the party seen as making concessions (under the current political climate at least). Taiwan is an

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independent country for all intents and purposes. It has a well-defined political system, a modern economy, and military. What Taipei lacks is a diplomatic acknowledgement necessary for Taiwan to function as a standard international player; it's a problem Beijing is stymieing because of the "One China" issue. Any agreement between Beijing and Taipei over the reunification issue will probably not occur in the foreseeable future. This will only change if Chinese or Taiwanese policy-makers develop a political determination that may adversely impact their professional livelihood. The question is how high priority is the issue among Beijing/Taipei's leadership? And is it a significant enough concern to make the potential sacrifices necessary to resolve the decades-old issue? The existing evidence is that the subject is a secondary matter, plus neither side is willing to make the concessions needed to end the dispute. The stalemate over the reunification issue will most likely remain for the foreseeable future consequently. 

Notes:

* **Matthew Kennedy** is a guest editorialist at Vail Daily.

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