



China-Taiwan Relations: Across the Strait, Across the Years

Gerrit W. Gong and Ralph A. Cossa

Fortunately, the final quarter of the year lacked the major shocks to the system that had featured so prominently in the Taiwan-China relationship in the previous quarter, which started with Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui's controversial "special state to state" comment. Nonetheless, cross-Strait relations continue to struggle and the turnover of Macao to China seems to have stoked the flames. Reports of a Chinese missile build-up across the Strait added to the tensions, as did the possibility of Taiwan developing a counter-missile capability. Beijing also continues to strongly protest any potential Taiwan participation in U.S. led theater missile defense (TMD). The PRC has thus far refrained from employing heavy-handed attempts, *a la* 1996, to influence the upcoming Taiwan Presidential election, but the Beijing leadership remains capable of overreacting to any new real or perceived Taiwan provocation as election day draws closer.

Across the Strait

Macao. The December 20 return of Macao to Chinese rule after 442 years of governance by Portugal lent the perfect occasion for Beijing to focus on the unresolved issue of Taiwan. At the ceremonies surrounding the turnover, President Jiang Zemin stated that Beijing is ready to "solve the Taiwan issue and achieve China's complete reunification," further noting that "we have both the determination and the ability to resolve the Taiwan question at an early date." With Hong Kong in the "one country, two systems" fold since 1997 and now Macao, it seems certain Taiwan will be the recipient of a greater portion of China's attention.

Making matters worse, press reporting indicates that Jiang, during former Admiral and now Ambassador Joseph Prueher's first courtesy call on him in Beijing in early December, stated in Chinese that China would "liberate" Taiwan, although the interpreter used the less-inflammatory "reunify." This was seen as another signal of Beijing's growing annoyance and impatience over Taipei's perceived "splittist" tendencies.

Of course, all this does not sit well in Taipei. Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) swiftly responded to Jiang's Macao speech, asserting that "the idea of imposing 'one country, two systems' on Taiwan is insulting and provocative," while pointing out the differences between it and the two former colonies. MAC Chairman Su Chi further noted that "the ROC government is not opposed to eventual reunification with the Mainland. However, that unification can only be realized under a free, democratic, and equitably prosperous China."

Military Concerns. Cross-Strait tensions also were increased following numerous press reports (mostly in the Western press) that China was increasing its offensive missile capability opposite Taiwan. This has been described as "saber rattling" by PRC critics, although Beijing has thus far refuted these missile claims, saying they are rumors being put forth by China's enemies to complicate cross-Strait and Sino-U.S. relations.

The reports have captured Taipei's attention nonetheless. In addition to increasing calls for Taiwan participation in TMD, concern over China's offensive missile threat prompted Vice President Lien Chan to say for the first time that Taiwan should consider developing intermediate range offensive ballistic missiles "to meet the challenge of the Mainland's missile threat." His comments were described as representing an "official viewpoint" but not "official policy."

Nonetheless, American Institute in Taiwan Chairman Richard Bush expressed U.S. concerns about this development during his mid-December visit to Taipei. Lien Chan assured Bush he was not advocating an arms race but noted that, in the past, "strategic thinking in Taiwan people perhaps placed too much emphasis on passive defense." Bush no doubt also indicated the Clinton administration's continued objection to the Taiwan Security Enhancement Act, which Washington believes will unnecessarily complicate Sino-U.S. and cross-Strait relations and be counterproductive to Taipei's long-term interests.

Concerns about possible cyber-warfare were also raised anew this quarter amid continuing reports of computer hackers invading one another's web sites. Meanwhile, a Taiwan defense ministry report warned that China's developing electronic warfare capability is expected to pose a direct threat to Taiwan within five years. Defense spokesmen vowed that Taiwan would develop its own cyber-warfare capabilities and electronic countermeasures.

Cross-Strait Dialogue. On the anniversary of his October 1998 visit to the mainland, Koo Chen-fu, head of Taiwan's Straits Exchange Foundation, again stressed that his mainland counterpart, Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait Chairman Wang Daohan, was still welcome to visit Taiwan. If not, Koo expressed his willingness to once again visit the Mainland.

For its part, Beijing continues to talk about the importance of dialogue but is in no apparent rush to resume discussions. One positive sign is that Taipei appears ready to meet one of Beijing's demands -- that President Lee meet with Wang in his capacity as Kuomintang (KMT) chairman rather than as a government official. However, Lee has steadfastly refused to meet Jiang's principal demand, that he retract his July statement that relations between the two sides should be on a "special state-to-state" basis. As a result, the prospects for a resumption of the Koo-Wng Talks in the near term, either in Taiwan or the PRC, appear slim. According to Beijing, "its not a matter of who should visit when; the real problem is Taiwan's 'two-states' pronouncement."

Vice President Lien also attempted to wave an olive branch in Beijing's direction, stating that he would be willing, if elected President on March 18, to undertake a "journey of peace" to the Mainland, either before or after his inauguration. The ruling party's candidate said he was "willing to meet with any Chinese Communist leader and discuss any topic with him in order to promote cross-Strait relations."

One of Lien's primary opponents, Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) candidate Chen Shui-bian waved an olive branch of his own, when he called for conditional direct links with China as part of his party's cross-Strait policy. Chen said the DPP would initiate a more open policy towards China by advocating conditional trade, mail, and transportation links. However, Chen also stated that he is favor of Taiwan joining the U.S.-proposed TMD program.

As the year ended, each side remained highly suspicious of the other's intent while Beijing (and Washington) worried if Taiwan had another new "shock" in store for the new year. (RC)

Across the Years

At the beginning of a new century where different mixtures of past and future may bump together across the Taiwan Strait, it is worth reviewing briefly three types of cross-Strait questions. From the more comprehensive to more specific, these three types of questions involve overarching historical perceptions and memories, developing frameworks and ambiguities, and the interplay of specific developments.

Overarching Historical Perceptions and Memories. These questions ask whether a new century can or should place Taiwan in a new perceptual or memory framework. One perspective is China's historical textbook wisdom that Taiwan is a nationalistic reminder of humiliation and weakness. Weakness evokes memories of China's defeat by Japan in the 1894-95 Sino-Japanese war where Taiwan was ceded to Japan as war spoils. It evokes memories of the inability of the PRC to completely defeat Chiang Kai-shek's nationalist forces during China's civil war, especially after the U.S. entered the June 1950 Korean War and subsequent decades of cold war. It evokes modern memories of U.S. involvement in the continuing separation of mainland China and Taiwan, including (Beijing asserts) through U.S. sales of advanced weapons to Taiwan.

That the historical memories of China's civil war and Japanese atrocities against China, particularly in the 1930s and 1940s, exist in the living memory for many Chinese is clear. Much remains to be done to ensure that the May 7, 1999 bombing of the PRC embassy in Belgrade does not become a modern example in China's historical litany of humiliations, lest the Kosovo war become a historical prism for viewing future Sino-U.S. relations, including Sino-U.S. military relations -- an extension of 19th century gunboat diplomacy using 20th century technological reach and precision.

Yet, that Chinese authorities can shift perception and memory among their own citizens is breathtakingly evident in the attitude on Chinese university campuses regarding the Tiananmen Square tragedy of June 4, 1989. In essence, memories of Tiananmen among many in China and many outside China have completely diverged; the Tiananmen crackdown has essentially ceased to exist for most contemporary students. Similarly, the willing belief by even elite Chinese students, for example, that "Taiwan is a small island with limited natural resources which could not survive without significant economic assistance from mainland China" suggests the historical relationship among China, Japan, and Taiwan is more flexible than if rigid assumptions about historical relations are maintained. Steadfast principles and fixed historical perceptions do exist.

But, as a new century begins, some modicum of historical flexibility remains essential if cross-Strait peace, prosperity, and stability are to continue.

Frameworks and Ambiguities. Are cross-Strait ambiguities inherently destabilizing? . . . should they be clarified? The Clinton administration has sought to preserve both strategic clarity and tactical ambiguity. Some assert unwavering U.S. commitment and the flexibility to implement according to circumstance. Others in the U.S. variously argue for removing any cross-Strait ambiguity. Some want to declare specific U.S. intent to defend Taiwan; others, to specify conditions (such as Taiwan's declaring independence) under which the U.S. would not. Similarly, some argue for removing any ambiguity regarding Taiwan's international status by "freeing Taiwan" completely; conversely, others state "one China" and its "three no" corollaries (no Taiwan independence; no one China, one Taiwan; no membership in international organizations requiring statehood) so unequivocally as to limit any separation of Taiwan from the Mainland.

Beijing has clearly sought to remove any ambiguity regarding its interest in establishing a closer rather than more distant deadline for an understanding on Taiwan unification. Yet no PRC leader, civilian or military, has declared an irrevocable deadline for Taiwan unification, or even for cross-Strait political talks, rightly recognizing that military conflict would arise from any such unilateral declaration.

For its part, Taipei has sought to retain some ambiguity regarding its real cross-Strait interests and objectives. This is partly to limit pressure or influence from Washington and Beijing. It is also to maintain a domestic political equilibrium. The old dictum that "those born outside Taiwan handle foreign policy" while "those born inside Taiwan handle domestic policy" no longer neatly applies. Even so, efforts at various times to have those with Mainlander background head the Mainland Affairs Council as a conciliatory sign to cross-Strait dialogue must still navigate concerns that native Taiwan interests not be "sold out" to the PRC.

It is, of course, the above context of cross-Strait tug-and-pull, including historical perceptions and memories, that prompted a U.S. discussion of frameworks to deal with (or not) cross-Strait frameworks and ambiguities, including the possible merits of variously proposed cross-Strait modus vivendi. Underlying these discussions is the core U.S. debate about whether the established "one China" framework promulgated in the Three Communiques and Taiwan Relations Act is sufficient to maintain cross-Strait peace, prosperity, and stability -- or whether past frameworks and ambiguities must be redefined in the face of present and future challenges.

All this has a timeframe: it is the period from March 18, 2000 when Taiwan elects a new president, to November 2000 when the United States elects its new president, to fall 2002 when China's 16th party congress may select new Chinese leaders. Whether new understandings, new arrangements, or new agreements during this period are feasible or desirable and what they would encompass are topics in the current debate.

Interplay. A third kind of question is how specific (and sometimes unpredictable) developments may affect cross-Strait dynamics. For example, efforts to bring together individuals from the U.S. and Taiwan presidential campaigns are intended to establish personal ties among possible administrations. Similar efforts, particularly between March 18 and May 20, could also lay important cross-Strait relations groundwork.

Before then, the intertwining of personality and circumstance in Beijing, Taipei, Washington, and elsewhere during the campaigns of spring 2000 remain dynamic and complex. For example, between March 7-14 California, New York, and 24 other states will hold primaries. This concentrated U.S. primary schedule beginning with the traditional March 7 Super Tuesday primaries essentially overlaps Taiwan's campaign period just prior to Taipei's March 18 presidential elections.

During this period, volatile issues such as offensive and defensive postures regarding deterrence and TMD, or differing Beijing and Taipei approaches to WTO accession or cross-Strait economic terms, could reverberate within, thereby complicating cross-Strait politics. Beijing's recent warning that it disapproves of President Lee Teng-hui traveling to Japan or elsewhere even following the inauguration of a new Taiwan president only underscores that expectations for a dramatic transformation of cross-Strait relations following Taiwan's spring elections are best kept to a minimum.

Should a new form of Taiwan nationalism develop beyond previous internal discussions of Taiwan culture and identity, Taipei's domestic political dynamic with respect to Washington and Beijing may also alter significantly. These concerns are affected by a strategic multiplier effect if any Washington tilt is perceived, however slight, toward Beijing or Taipei. This leaves Washington as a key battleground, despite the rhetoric (and the need) for direct cross-Strait dialogue.

Thus, overarching historical perceptions and memories may bring past and future into confrontation in the coming years. Frameworks and ways to deal with ambiguities need to be reaffirmed or reestablished between March 18, 2000 and the end of 2002. Interactions among Beijing, Taipei, and Washington domestic and international perceptions and realities will continue to defy prediction, especially during the spring 2000 political campaigns and in their aftermath. This underscores the need for work on multiple levels in multiple arenas to maintain a cross-Strait situation which otherwise promises to be more volatile and less amenable to management in the coming watershed years than it has been for half a century.

Chronology of China-Taiwan Relations

October - December 1999

Oct 9: Russian aerospace executive says China signed US\$2 billion contract to buy 30 advanced Russian Sukhoi-30 fighters.

Oct 12: Richard Bush, American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) Chairman opposes Taiwan Security Enhancement Act (TSEA) saying it would severely impact trilateral ties among Washington, Beijing, and Taipei.

Oct 14: Koo Chenfu, Taiwan's top envoy to China, offers to visit China a second time if it would help break a negotiating deadlock. Beijing rejects, saying the real problem is Taiwan's 'two-states' pronouncement.

Oct 18: President Jiang in an interview in *The Times* states: “By the middle of next century . . . we will resolve the question of Taiwan and accomplish the great cause of national reunification.”

Oct 26: U.S. House International Relations Committee votes 32-6 to approve TSEA.

Oct 31: Taiwan Defense Ministry warns China’s developing electronic warfare capability may pose direct threat to Taiwan in five years.

Nov 1: Vice-chairman of the MAC says President Lee is willing to meet Beijing’s chief envoy Wang Daohan in a capacity other than as head of state.

Nov 1: Taiwan Defense Minister Tang Fei announces that military expenditures would be raised by US\$1.26 billion for the next fiscal year to cope with a perceived growing threat from China.

Nov 2: U.S. House leaders decide to put off a floor vote on TSEA, after lawmakers raise concerns the move could interfere with sensitive negotiations to bring China into the WTO. Chinese embassy says China will stay on alert in opposing TSEA.

Nov 7: Reports surface China is acquiring an Israeli-made long-range radar system to strengthen its aerial power in the event of conflict with Taiwan.

Nov 12: Commander of U.S. Pacific Command, Adm. Dennis Blair, says U.S. should deploy regional missile defenses to protect U.S. troops and allies from threat of North Korean and Chinese missiles.

Nov 15: American and Chinese trade negotiators reach comprehensive agreement for Beijing’s entry into the WTO.

Nov 22: China successfully launches first spacecraft designed to carry humans into orbit.

Nov 23: U.S. State Department says it is watching buildup of Chinese missiles near Taiwan and is considering sales of missile defenses to counter it.

Nov 25: Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui says Taiwan would like to ease restrictions on trade with China under the WTO framework if Beijing shows sufficient goodwill.

Dec 3: Vice President Lien Chan indicates his willingness to undertake a “journey of peace” to the Mainland while urging China to respect the “special state-to-state relationship.”

Dec 8: *Washington Times* reports U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency discovered a second Chinese short-range missile base under construction near Taiwan. In Taiwan, Vice President Lien Chan says that Taiwan should develop ground-to-ground missiles.

Dec 10: Boris Yeltsin and Jiang Zemin pledge mutual support on Chechnya and Taiwan.

Dec 13: Results of an opinion poll show that 82 percent of Taiwan’s population support Lien’s suggestion that Taiwan develop intermediate-range missiles.

Dec 14: Chairman of the American Institute in Taiwan Richard Bush meets with Taiwan officials and expresses U.S. concerns about Lien's missile comments.

Dec 15: Independent presidential candidate James Soong explains why over NT\$100 million is in family accounts. Soong's support rate drops 8 percent.

Dec 20: Macao reverts to China under "one country, two systems" formula.