



Asia Doesn't Need Another Crisis

Beijing Should Not Overplay Its Hand in Cross-Strait Relations

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Taiwan's 2016 general election was a watershed in Taiwan's domestic politics and a testament to the vibrancy of Taiwanese democracy. For the first time in Taiwan's modern history, a party other than the Kuomintang (KMT) won an absolute majority in the island's legislature.¹ That party, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), also captured the executive branch when its presidential candidate, Tsai Ing-wen, received a decisive 56 percent of the popular vote.² President Tsai's victory made her Taiwan's first female head of state and the first woman with no connection to a political dynasty to lead an East Asian government.³ Tsai's successful "Light Up Taiwan" campaign—and the campaign of the DPP more broadly—drew strength from an energized youth vote frustrated with economic stagnation and eager for progressive domestic reforms.⁴ This new generation of voters represents a powerful force in Taiwanese politics that will continue to shape electoral outcomes for years to come.

The 2016 election also presented an opportunity for Taiwanese and mainland Chinese authorities to show a good-faith commitment to maintaining stable and constructive cross-Strait relations during an orderly transfer of power in Taipei. President Tsai's predecessor, Ma Ying-jeou, presided over unprecedented growth in political, economic, and social connections between Taiwan and mainland China under his mantra of the three "no's"—"no unification, no independence, and no use of force."⁵ The electoral success of President Tsai and the DPP, while driven by many factors, reflected the majority of the Taiwanese people's desire for a reorientation in Taiwan's cross-Strait policy to better acknowledge and protect their interests.

Rather than accept this democratic outcome and make a good-faith effort to avoid escalation, however, Beijing has responded with an approach that validates Taiwanese voters' concerns. In contrast to President Tsai—who has responded to popular sentiment within an overall framework of preserving stability—Beijing has adopted measures designed to isolate Taiwan and weaken its economy. Such an approach carries a substantial risk of a further deterioration in cross-Strait ties at a time when peace and stability in East Asia are more fragile than at any point in the past two decades.

Background: Taiwan's changing demographics and the rise of the youth vote

Over the past 30 years, Taiwan has witnessed a profound political and cultural transformation. Starting in the late 1980s, KMT leadership voluntarily liberalized Taiwan's political system after decades of martial law, which led to the rapid emergence of competitive multiparty electoral politics on the island. Today, Taiwanese democracy may be the most vibrant in all of East Asia. Since 2000, there have been three peaceful transfers of power between KMT and DPP presidents resulting from fair and open elections in which a majority of Taiwan's citizens participated. Unlike in many East Asian democracies where politics often revolves around ethnic divisions or distributions of rents and resources, Taiwanese electoral campaigns have turned on substantive debates over economic performance, Taiwanese identity, and foreign policy. This democratic flourishing has been accompanied by a robust expansion in civil liberties and a deepening of the rule of law. This is perhaps best exemplified by the important role Taiwan's Supreme Court has played on key questions of social and political rights over the past two decades and, most recently, on the issue of same-sex marriage.⁶

Taiwan's democratic political system has nurtured an inclusive, pluralist society. Nowhere is this more evident than among Taiwan's youth, who came of age after democratization. Many of these young people feel no significant ties to mainland China, having never visited and preferring social media platforms that their Chinese counterparts cannot access through the Great Firewall—Beijing's extensive system of information control.⁷ Instead, the values of this new generation of Taiwanese—especially the activists focused on social justice and domestic political reform—dovetail more closely with those of young progressives elsewhere in the world. Concerns about low wage growth, generational injustice, and special interests animate this generation's understanding of current events and inform their desire for a new way forward that is people-centered and governed by progressive principles.⁸

The emergence of a new generation of politically engaged voters has had a major impact on Taiwan's politics. Voters under age 40 broke overwhelmingly for DPP candidates in both the 2014 local elections and the 2016 national elections, resulting in unprecedented gains for the party at all levels of government.⁹ The DPP achieved this outcome by focusing on domestic grievances and priorities such as stagnating wages, limited job opportunities, high rents, political and judicial reform, and gender equality.¹⁰

Yet the influence of Taiwan's youth vote goes beyond the DPP's resurgence. Deeply felt pessimism over the Taiwanese political system's ability to meet the needs of young voters has led to an upswell of grassroots activism aimed at upending the political status quo and bringing greater transparency and accountability to government activities. The most vivid manifestation of this activism was the Sunflower Student Movement of 2014, a protest movement of student groups and civil society organizations that arose

spontaneously in response to the KMT's attempt to hastily and secretly pass a trade agreement with Beijing.¹¹ The Sunflower Student Movement has since given rise to the New Power Party (NPP), a new Taiwanese political party founded by a heavy-metal rocker and prominent human rights activist, among others, in 2015.¹² The NPP claimed five seats in the Taiwanese legislature in 2016—more than any other party besides the KMT and DPP.¹³

Although the focus of youth activism has been on domestic issues thus far, the new generation of Taiwanese voters is by no means indifferent to cross-strait policy. Several high-profile incidents—including the KMT's handling of the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement and the 2015 face-to-face meeting in Singapore between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Taiwanese President Ma—led many youth voters to link progressive complaints that the KMT was governing in an authoritarian and opaque manner with the Ma administration's overtures to Beijing.¹⁴ These concerns among DPP and NPP supporters have only been aggravated by reports that Beijing has sought to wage disinformation campaigns and infiltrate grassroots political organizations in Taiwan in order to undermine perceived opponents of reunification.¹⁵ These factors have contributed to a growing desire on the part of Taiwanese progressives—and especially Taiwanese youth—to build distance into Taiwan's relationship with the mainland and, particularly, to pass legislation aimed at curbing foreign influence in Taiwan and promoting a more independent media.¹⁶

These trends in Taiwanese domestic politics provide a framework for understanding President Tsai's approach to cross-strait relations. Although many of her supporters are skeptical of Beijing, their support for President Tsai rests primarily on her domestic agenda rather than on an expectation of a proactive move vis-à-vis Beijing. This domestic focus has disposed Tsai and her advisers to seek continuity in relations with the mainland in order to focus on reform at home. At the same time, it is clear that Tsai would risk alienating her supporters were she to pursue cross-strait policies identical to former President Ma's, especially with respect to trade and investment. This has left Tsai in the unenviable position of needing to distinguish herself from her predecessor on cross-strait policy while avoiding tensions with Beijing that could distract from her reform program at home.

The Tsai administration's attempts to thread the needle

Since her election, President Tsai has sought to steer a middle path on relations with Beijing. In her inauguration speech, Tsai vowed that her government would “work to maintain peace and stability in cross-strait relations” and “establish mechanisms for intensive and routine communications ... to prevent misjudgment.”¹⁷ Crucially, Tsai referred to the talks leading to the so-called 1992 Consensus—an agreement between

KMT and mainland Chinese officials that there is “one China”—as a “historical fact.”¹⁸ She also acknowledged “over twenty years of interactions and negotiations” that both sides must “cherish” and stated that “such existing realities and political foundations” should be the basis for cross-Strait relations.¹⁹

The framework set out in President Tsai’s inauguration speech was in line with the views of the majority of her supporters and the 90 percent of Taiwanese voters who favor maintaining the status quo of peace and stability in cross-Strait relations.²⁰ In her explanation of the “existing political foundations” that will inform relations with the mainland, Tsai struck a careful balance between pressures from mainland Chinese authorities—who continue to demand that Tsai, like Ma, explicitly accept the “One China” principle of the 1992 Consensus—on the one hand and Tsai’s domestic political allies—who balk at dictates from Beijing on principle—on the other. Notwithstanding Beijing’s protests, Tsai’s reluctance to describe cross-Strait ties in exactly the same terms as her predecessor does not mean that she is seeking to chart a radical new course in relations with the mainland. To the contrary, at a practical level, Tsai’s primary objective appears to be finding a way to limit further integration with the mainland without creating additional cross-Strait turbulence.

President Tsai’s desire to preserve the status quo has led her to echo the rhetoric of her KMT predecessor in one important respect: Tsai has expressly promised “no provocation” and “no surprises” from Taipei’s foreign policy.²¹ Such an approach distinguishes Tsai from the previous DPP President, Chen Shui-bian, whose tenure was marked with repeated pro-independence gestures that caught Beijing, Tokyo, and Washington off guard. By contrast, President Tsai has so far avoided inflammatory statements and actions. To take one example, even before formally assuming office, Tsai effectively quashed a DPP initiative to remove portraits of Republic of China founder Sun Yat-sen from Taiwan’s public buildings last year—a symbolic gesture that would almost certainly have unnerved mainland Chinese authorities.²²

Beijing’s response

Mainland Chinese officials have made no secret of their preference for a KMT government in Taipei, which they view as more sympathetic to the ultimate goal of reunification and less committed to the idea of a separate Taiwanese identity.²³ During the eight years of the Ma administration, Beijing encouraged greater cross-Strait exchange in an effort to bind Taiwan closer to the mainland. This policy shift led to the full resumption of commercial flights between Taiwanese and mainland cities; an increased volume of mainland investment and tourism in Taiwan; and a substantial upgrade in informal communication between Taiwanese and mainland officials, including at the local government level and culminating in the 2015 Ma-Xi meeting in Singapore.²⁴

After President Tsai's election in January, mainland Chinese officials repeatedly demanded that she endorse the 1992 Consensus and affirm the "One China" principle.²⁵ Following Tsai's inauguration, mainland China's Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) called the new president's speech "an incomplete test answer" and announced a freeze on official contacts with Taipei.²⁶ Although informal conversation continues between Beijing and Taipei principally through think tanks and academic institutions, the most important institutional channels between Taiwanese and mainland authorities—above all, between the TAO and its Taiwanese equivalent, the Mainland Affairs Council—remain effectively closed.

This curtailing of cross-Strait exchange at the political level has been accompanied by a corresponding clampdown on business and reciprocity related to people-to-people links across the Taiwan Strait. Since Tsai's election, the number of mainland tourist groups visiting Taiwan has dropped sharply—by about 40 percent in the past 18 months. Although Beijing denies any interference in cross-Strait tourism, a wide range of media outlets have reported that mainland Chinese officials have leaned on tour operators to cut back on the number of mainland tourists since President Tsai's election.²⁷

In less ambiguous moves, Beijing cut the number of mainland students approved for study in Taiwan by more than half in 2017 and recently issued a warning aimed at Taiwanese investors with close connections to pro-independence groups in Taiwan.²⁸ Such tactics echo Beijing's response to other governments whose policies it disfavors—most notably that of South Korea, whose decision to install a U.S. missile defense system led to an analogous curtailment of Chinese visas and tour groups as well as a ban on some South Korean imports.²⁹

At the same time as Beijing has pulled back from cross-Strait ties, it has sought to further diminish Taiwan's already limited diplomatic relations with foreign governments and international organizations. In the 18 months since Tsai's election, Taiwan has been denied participation in several nonpolitical international bodies where it was previously a welcome guest—specifically the World Health Assembly, the International Civil Aviation Organization, and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations—allegedly in response to pressure from Beijing.³⁰ During that same span, the governments of Gambia, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Panama switched diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing, again reportedly as a result of pressure from mainland authorities, ending the so-called diplomatic truce that had prevailed during the Ma administration.³¹

Chinese premier Xi Jinping's work report³² speech at Beijing's 19th Party Congress suggests this approach to Taipei is unlikely to change in the near future. Using language similar to that of former president Hu Jintao's speech at the previous party congress,³³ Xi emphasized the policies of peaceful reunification, the "one country, two systems" principle, the "One China" principle, and the 1992 Consensus. Also, similar to his predecessors' work report speeches, Xi's echoed the language of the 2005 Anti-Secession Law by declaring that Beijing would not allow "Taiwan's independence splittist forces under

any name, in any form, to split Taiwan from China,”³⁴ which has contributed to concern that any democratic activity could be interpreted as seeking independence from China. However, Xi also called for engagement with Taiwanese leadership and used the phrase “historical fact” when speaking about the 1992 Consensus. Such language and the lack of a definite timeline for reunification suggests that Beijing does not intend to harden its current stance vis-à-vis Taipei; even so, an imminent thaw in cross-Strait ties is unlikely.

After Xi’s speech, President Tsai reiterated her administration’s respect for the “historical facts” of the cross-Strait relationship—including the talks in 1992—and appealed to both sides to “lay down the burden of history” and “conduct a positive dialogue to benefit people on both sides of the Strait.”³⁵ Saying that “now is a turning point,” Tsai appealed to “the traditional political wisdom of harmony and middle road” and urged both sides to “seek breakthroughs in the cross-Strait relationship.” In response, TAO spokesperson Ma Xiaoguang said that “only by returning to the political foundation of the 1992 Consensus could the development of cross-Strait relations ‘dispel the clouds and see the sun’ and open up new prospects.”³⁶ At the same time, Beijing has continued to run extensive Chinese influence operations on the ground in Taiwan, including spreading disinformation about Tsai’s policies in order to spark protests.³⁷

The risks of provocation

Beijing’s heavy-handed response to President Tsai’s efforts to steer a moderate course on cross-Strait relations is counterproductive and potentially destabilizing. Beyond the rhetorical question of the 1992 Consensus, the Tsai administration’s policies toward the mainland seek to avoid provocation and volatility in much the same way as those of her predecessor. That Beijing views such an approach as inadequate suggests a deliberate blindness to the reality of Taiwanese domestic politics and the will of the Taiwanese people. The message from mainland Chinese authorities appears to be aimed not just at the Tsai administration but also at the Taiwanese population more broadly, in effect punishing them for electing one of two mainstream political parties in Taiwan. Such a message will likely strengthen anti-mainland sentiment among groups already wary of Beijing’s intentions and embolden those in Tsai’s coalition who view her policies as too accommodating of the Xi administration. If Beijing’s aim is to continue down the path of closer cross-Strait relations, it will need to acknowledge and respect the democratic choices of the Taiwanese electorate.

Closing institutional communication channels and squeezing Taiwan on the international stage will only compound the destabilizing effects of Beijing’s clampdown on cross-Strait exchange. Regular and substantive contact between Beijing and Taipei—which President Tsai expressed a desire to continue in her inauguration speech—was an important mechanism for preventing escalation and instability during the Ma administration. Curtailing those ties while simultaneously seeking to isolate Taipei on the world stage

substantially elevates the risk of a cross-Strait incident. It is easy to forget, after nearly a decade of relative tranquility under President Ma, that the Taiwan Strait was once one of the most volatile geopolitical hot spots in East Asia.³⁸ President Tsai has so far sent a positive message that she is focused on her domestic reform agenda and has no interest in returning to the brinkmanship of earlier eras. Beijing would be wise to reciprocate with an equally positive message on the understanding that the DPP and the new generation of Taiwanese voters that swept it into power will remain a potent force in Taiwanese politics for years to come, even if they do not always have the reins of government.

The brakes are off: Washington's disappearing act

Since the United States established full diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China in 1979, successive American presidents and their administrations have carefully balanced their economic, security, and diplomatic resources to support peaceful and productive cross-Strait relations. Through careful and deliberate policymaking, the United States has for more than four decades played a vital role in defusing cross-Strait tensions and deterring provocative actions by both Taipei and Beijing.

Although U.S. President Donald Trump has largely avoided the subject of Taiwan since his inauguration, his repeated emphasis on deal-making and his transactional approach to diplomacy has left many in Taipei concerned that Washington will use Taiwan as a bargaining chip in pursuit of a grand bargain with Beijing. Likewise, President Trump's erratic statements on the "One China" policy—at first questioning, and later reaffirming,³⁹ the U.S. commitment to the long-standing diplomatic understanding—has injected uncertainty into an already unstable cross-Strait dynamic. These actions and the general erraticism of Trump's foreign policy positions have undermined confidence in the United States' ability and willingness to act as a moderating force in relations between Beijing and Taipei.

Beijing's recent provocations have resonated more loudly in Taipei in the absence of a firm and unambiguous U.S. commitment to ensuring peaceful resolution of cross-Strait disputes. Without the United States as a credible backstop to escalation, it is more important than ever that both mainland Chinese and Taiwanese authorities prioritize stability in their respective cross-Strait policies. Unfortunately, Beijing appears instead to have chosen to unnerve Taipei and risk a flare-up in cross-Strait ties, with no guarantee that Washington will intervene to protect the status quo.

Conclusion

For many years, Taipei was a wild card in cross-Strait relations that tested the restraint of both Beijing and Washington. It is a genuine accomplishment of former President Ma's tenure in office that both the KMT and the DPP now subscribe to his philosophy of no surprises in dealings with mainland China. Unfortunately, rather than accept this as a positive evolution in Taiwanese policy, one which President Tsai has largely maintained over the objections of her own political allies, Beijing has decided to play hardball and adopt provocative measures toward Taipei that threaten to reverse a decade of progress in alleviating tensions across the Taiwan Strait. At a time when the United States and many of the world's major powers are grappling with North Korea's nuclear weapons program, the possibility of a second crisis in East Asia is especially unwelcome. If Beijing is serious about acting as a responsible global stakeholder, it should avoid tactics that pose a real risk of further unsettling an already volatile regional geopolitical environment.

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