



## Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)

Forum for National Security Studies (FNSS)

# THE FUTURE OF CROSS-STRAIT RELATIONS

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The approach towards international affairs has shifted from closeted diplomacy to extensively covered State visits and bi-lateral meetings between the top leaders. Such shifts are highly visible in the relation building proceedings of the Chinese, Indians, and the Americans. The number of diplomatic visits have increased manifold, signaling to the significance of personal relations and confidence building.

The recent Chinese-Taiwan meeting, first in 65 years, presents the case for relation building. The leaders of both countries—President Xi Jinping (PRC)<sup>1</sup> and President Ma Ying-jeou (ROC) – met on November, 2015, at Shangri-la Hotel, Singapore. The leaders only used ‘Mister’ to refer to each other as neither party recognizes the statehood of the other.

The tricky timing of the meeting - just months before the presidential elections in Taiwan, and the estranged relations between the two countries, generated huge expectations from this meeting. Such meetings entail risks and would not be conducted without proper

objectives and a near guarantee for achieving them. For President Xi the objective to appeal to the public of Taiwan to vote the pro-China Kuomintang (KMT) once again to power, and for President Ma to seek permanency to the ‘now cordial relations’, even if KMT loses the coming presidential elections.

However, the meeting stood less productive than expected. Several issues were flagged, with the noncommittal *promises* to solve them but one cannot deny that this meeting broke the (long set) ice and could be used to establish a new precedence for future cross-strait meetings.

President Ma, known for his pro-China stand, worked his time in office towards normalizing the cross-strait relations.

At a post meeting press-conference President Ma briefly mentioned the issues brought up in the meeting. Firstly, he emphasized on the “One China, respective interpretations”, an alternative to the 1992 consensus, as the basis for relations, maintenance of the status quo of peace and

prosperity<sup>2</sup>. Secondly, the rising tension in the neighbouring waters is a worry for Taiwan, and hence a move towards “reduction of hostility and peaceful handling of disputes”<sup>3</sup> was urged. China has been actively involved in alienating Taiwan in the international arena. President Ma mentioned the frustration faced by the NGOs and interventions faced by the government when taking part in the regional economic integration and other international activities. Thirdly, a cross-strait hotline was proposed (also duly accepted) to help exchange views on matters of importance<sup>4</sup>. Several points on expansion of relations and joint cooperation were made. There was no signing of any agreement or memorandum as declared.

### **One-China, family matters**

President Xi urged the ethnic solidarity and national unity of the mainland and Taiwan. He appreciated the efforts made by the Ma administration which ‘furthered the bond between the two families’.<sup>5</sup> He also appealed to the masses for the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, its restoration to its ‘proper’ place in the world, it reflected in his statement that for him a country divided is weak and vulnerable. But Taiwan, which has moved from an authoritarian system to a democratic one, is less likely to agree to such notions before a political reform takes place in China.

The upcoming elections present a challenge for Beijing as it has become increasingly clear

(according to the opinion polls) that the opposition party’s (Democratic Progressive Party’s- DPP’s) candidate Tsai Ing-wen who is staunchly pro independence, is likely to win. Such a win will have negative consequences for Beijing both at home and internationally (a pro-independence Taiwan is likely to be pro external aide and political support). In the meeting a clear warning was sent out when President Xi identified two paths for Taiwan government, one–continue to follow the path of “peaceful development” and two–path of the renewed “confrontation”, “separation” and zero sum hostility<sup>6</sup>. He also mentioned that China’s policies towards Taiwan will depend on the adherence of 1992 consensus and opposition to “Taiwan Independence”. Xi warned without this “magic compass to calm the sea, the ship of peaceful development will meet with great waves and even suffer total loss”. He also expressed, "At present, the greatest real threat to the peaceful development of cross-Strait relations is the ‘Taiwan independence’ force [code for the DPP] and its splittist activities. The ‘Taiwan independence advocates’ instigate hostility and confrontation between the two sides of the Strait, harm the state sovereignty and territorial integrity, undermine peace and stability...which will only bring disastrous consequences to the compatriots on the two sides of the Strait.”<sup>7</sup>

The difference between the language and the attitude of both parties reveal the ‘power’ with which each approached the meeting. Xi

obviously holds more 'power' than Taiwan. But the issues of importance for Taiwan might not be achieved through compromise and accommodation of China. As President Xi gave no third option for the maintenance of peace and stability, it will be stressful for the new government to function with heavy pressure and harsher policies by China. Taiwan might choose to let the relations be as they are in order to remove any security dilemma perceived by Beijing. As China refused to commit to any propositions made by Taiwan, and with President Ma leaving office in two months, the results of the meeting have slim chances to survive the anger towards DPP.

If the Chinese goal was in fact to influence the voters in favor of KMT, China did more harm than good. There has been a consistent political struggle between China and Taiwan, but given DPP's stands for an independent Taiwan (status-quo until the political reforms in China) voters would be less likely to bring back a pro-China government. Also, President Ma has been unable to convey to the people the likely 'benefits' of moving closer to China which will supersede the need the value of sovereignty. In addition to the warning sent out by China, the dissatisfaction and fear among Taiwanese over the growing Chinese political influence on the island will be a deterrent factor for voters this time.

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])*

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> PRC-People's Republic of China; ROC-Republic of China; for further convenience China will be used to refer to PRC and Taiwan to ROC.

<sup>2</sup> Full Text of Ma's opening remarks at post-summit press conference, Focus Taiwan, 8 November 2015. <http://focustaiwan.tw/news/acs/201511080011.aspx> accessed on 9 November 2015

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*

<sup>5</sup> Richard C. Bush III, 'What a historic Ma-Xi meeting could mean for cross-Strait relations', Brookings, 9 November 2015, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/order-from-chaos/posts/2015/11/09-ma-xi-meeting-singapore-bush> accessed on 9 November 2015.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*