



Another step toward better cross-Strait ties
by Brad Glosserman and Bonnie Glaser

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Chinese and Taiwanese are holding their breaths this week as Chen Yulin makes a five-day visit to Taipei. As head of the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits (ARATS, the semi-official body in Beijing that manages relations with Taipei; its Taiwanese counterpart is the Straits Exchange Foundation, or SEF), Chen is the highest-ranking Chinese official to visit Taiwan since 1949.

His trip is a significant step forward for the tempestuous cross-Strait relationship. Since Ma Ying-jeou took office as president of Taiwan earlier this year, Taipei and Beijing have tried – with some success – to rebuild relations. Ma has made that a priority, not only for its own sake, but for the paramount task of strengthening Taiwan's economy, an objective that has become even more pressing – and more difficult – as the world experiences an economic downturn.

Yet the very idea of building a more stable cross-Strait relationship is questioned by many in Taiwan and on the mainland. Taiwan remains deeply divided about its appropriate relationship with Beijing, and Ma has been challenged since his inauguration about his ultimate intentions and the wisdom of his attempt to strengthen cross-Strait ties. As estimated, half a million protesters turned up at a rally last week organized by the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) opposing Chen Yunlin's visit. On the mainland, there are doubts about how far to go in pursuit of an improved cross-Strait relationship. Some believe that greater insecurity in Taiwan is in mainland China's interest as it will push the island to compromise in its dealings with Beijing. Others fear that concessions to Ma will be exploited by pro-independence advocates in a subsequent government. China is also worried that Ma is too weak politically and will not have sufficient backing to negotiate a peace accord, which both sides have set out as a common objective.

So far, wisdom has prevailed and the leadership in both capitals has seized the opportunity to build a more stable and mutually beneficial relationship. Since Ma took office, there has been an unprecedented level of discussion between the two governments or their appointed representatives. Those talks have been matched by gestures that reflect and consolidate the gains from the changed atmosphere. Regular weekend cross-Strait charter flights have been launched and are likely to

become more extensive (serving more cities), geographically more direct (rather than via Hong Kong air space), and operated daily. Agreements will reportedly be signed on direct sea cargo routes, air charter flights, direct postal links and food safety concerns when Chen meets his Taiwan counterpart, Chiang Pin-kung of the SEF this week.

We assessed and supported these incremental improvements in a recent study of the role of confidence building measures (CBMs) in cross-Strait relations. Confidence building measures are formal and informal measures that address, prevent, or resolve uncertainties among parties and thus reduce the possibility of incidental or accidental conflict and increase mutual understanding and trust. Simply put, they help decrease tensions and provide a foundation for a more stable, enduring, and peaceful relationship. Few places would seem more needing of, or provide a richer environment for, CBMs than cross-Strait relations.

In our analysis, we identified a menu of possible CBMs, ranging from the establishment of reliable communications channels – a seeming necessity as the volume of cross-Strait traffic increases – to the publication of military exercises or the pursuit of cooperation in areas such as environmental protection and public health. We are especially gratified to note that one of our suggestions, joint emergency response exercises, has already begun: last month, teams from both sides of the Strait conducted a search and rescue exercise in the waters between Xiamen and Jinmen where boats ferry passengers hourly as part of the "three mini-links." About 300 people joined, using more than 40 transport vessels.

While progress has been made, future gains are not guaranteed; for that matter, recent accomplishments can be reversed. The key to future success is ensuring "win-win" outcomes for both Taiwan and mainland China. Both leaderships and the public – especially in Taiwan – have to believe that a better relationship is good for them. That is not easy when the two sides have different long-term goals. An overwhelming majority of Chinese seeks reunification (and that is the official goal of government policy); Taiwan is deeply divided about relations with the mainland. (A majority prefers the status quo, preferring to wait and see how the mainland develops politically and economically in the future.)

In this environment, small incremental steps that build confidence and have benefits for both sides are critical. Our study concludes that top leaders play a critical role in this process, particularly on the mainland. They must make the decision to accommodate the needs of the other side and promote improved cross-Strait relations. Without this direction, lower-level officials will not take politically risky initiatives to advance the relationship.

One element of this approach is a separation of political and economic discussions. The former should be shelved for now; measures that return economic benefits will pave the way for future talks about touchy political issues. The Chen visit has adopted that mindset. In comments to the press before his departure, he explained that his talks will focus on economic cooperation: “No political issues pertaining to cross-Straits relations will be involved, nor will Taiwan's internal political affairs.”

Yet even that divide will be tested if he meets as scheduled with Ma. The president wants to meet him in his official capacity and be called “Mr. President”: that could be difficult since Beijing does not recognize leadership titles that imply sovereignty. Its political significance means that encounter could provide benefits of its own. For his part, Ma has said the ground rules for the talks include “facing up to reality, no denial of each other's existence, creating benefits for the public, and peace for the two sides of the strait.”

In many respects, progress to date reflects “low hanging fruit.” More substantial gains require more significant gestures on both sides. For its part, mainland China should continue to abide the tacit “diplomatic truce” proposed by Ma and resist the temptation to further reduce the number of Taiwan’s diplomatic allies (which now stands at 23). In addition, Beijing can and should address the demands of the Taiwanese people for greater participation in the international community, beginning with the World Health Organization. China could also make a near-term political gesture by reducing some of the missiles currently aimed at Taiwan and in the longer term take meaningful steps to reverse its military buildup opposite the island. Through bilateral negotiations aimed at a peace accord, Beijing could declare its intention not to use force against Taiwan as long as Taiwan refrains from declaring independence.

Taiwan should persist in expanding its engagement and contacts with the mainland, be flexible in its approach to seeking participation in international organizations, maintain robust defense capabilities, and consult with the U.S on managing the evolving cross-Strait relationship. It is especially important that all of Taiwan’s political parties learn the meaning of constructive opposition and act responsibly. The extreme partisanship that dominates politics on the island – and manifestations such as the assault last month on Zhang Mingqing, Chen’s deputy, by protestors when he visited Taiwan – only undermine Taiwan’s image in the world. Both Taiwan and the mainland should avoid setting preconditions for engaging in dialogue on any specific issues.

There is a third party to this process: the United States. While the future of cross-Strait relations depends on decisions made in and actions taken by Taipei and Beijing, the U.S., by virtue of the Taiwan Relations Act and its moral commitments to Taiwan and its desire to build a constructive and cooperation relationship with China, is also involved. The U.S. administration should make clear that it supports improvements in cross-Strait relations reached through the free choices of the people in Taiwan and China and offer to assist them, when requested by both sides, in overcoming obstacles to implementing any future agreements they reach.

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