



Cross-Straits Relations: Now What?

by Ralph A. Cossa

"What is Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui up to?" That remains the burning question, following Lee's reported abandonment of the long-standing "One China" policy that previously was the one important common denominator underwriting cross-straits relations and Sino-U.S. and Sino-Japanese relations vis-a-vis Taiwan. Lee has asserted that future cross-strait interaction should be based on the premise of "state-to-state" or at least "special state-to-state" relations, a pronouncement which drew a predictable, immediate, furious reaction from Beijing.

Frankly speaking, I'm not sure what motivated President Lee to take such a stand at this time. Lee's comments seemed more spontaneous than premeditated, but clearly reflect Taiwan's growing frustration with Beijing's attempts to force Taiwan to accept a politically inferior position going into cross-straits talks; something Lee sees as politically untenable and personally insulting. While Lee likely sees his current rhetorical shift as only a modest and logical extension of his previous positions, the initial reaction--both in the world press and in Beijing--has helped to create a crisis-like atmosphere.

One problem, of course, is that everything President Lee says draws an automatic negative reaction from Beijing, leading many to interpret China's most recent claim that this is "an extremely dangerous step" that puts relations "at the brink of the precipice" as more empty posturing. In my view, this would be a serious mistake. The Chinese, prior to this latest pronouncement, were already seriously paranoid about Lee's "splitist" intentions and are interpreting this new stand as a frontal attack on President Jiang Zemin's (to them) moderate Taiwan policy. The fact that it comes at a time when Sino-U.S. relations are at their worst state in years--and during the run-up to the People's Republic fiftieth anniversary on October 1-- increases China's paranoia.

What Beijing appears less capable of understanding is how its earlier actions--to include a steadfast refusal to give President Lee any international breathing space--continue to drive Lee into taking positions that keep both sides on a collision course. Should Beijing start believing its own propaganda--that Lee's comments do not reflect the views of the people of Taiwan and represent "attempts by foreign forces to interfere in China's reunification"--it will make it even more difficult for this tense situation to be defused.

It appears highly unlikely that Lee's comments were coordinated in advance with the "foreign force" that most readily comes to mind--the U.S. In fact, Lee's comments are likely to further strain already tense relations between Taipei and the

Clinton Administration which, like Beijing, will have a tendency to see this as an attempt by Lee to capitalize both on strained Sino-U.S. ties and on rising Congressional sympathies for Taiwan and its democratic and economic success. Were this to be Lee's intentions--and I'm highly doubtful that it is, because Taipei continues to claim that it sees improved Sino-U.S. relations as serving its long-term interests--this would also be a serious mistake.

Washington prefers to maintain a balanced, more neutral position between Beijing and Taipei. While I firmly believe that the Clinton Administration would have little option other than to come to Taipei's assistance in the event of an unprovoked assault on Taiwan by the mainland, Washington will react negatively to perceived attempts by Taiwan to force the U.S., needlessly, to take sides. Unfortunately, the lack of good, high-level communication channels between Washington and Taipei--largely at Beijing's insistence--makes it more rather than less likely that Taiwan will pursue policies perceived both in Beijing and Washington as undermining Sino-U.S. relations.

This latest crisis increases the importance of cross-straits dialogue, even as it makes such dialogue more problematic. China has already threatened to cancel the planned fall visit to Taiwan of its senior cross-straits interlocutor, Wang Daohan, stating that Lee's new formulation means there is now "no basis for contact, exchange, and communication" between Beijing's Association for Relations across the Taiwan Straits (ARATS) and Taipei's Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF), through which Wang has met with his SEF counterpart, Koo Chen-foo, as (non-governmental) equals.

Cross-strait dialogue currently holds risk as well as promise for Taipei as well, according to CSIS China specialist Gerrit Gong. Writing in "Comparative Connections," the new Pacific Forum quarterly electronic journal [<http://www.csis.org/pacfor/ccejournal.html>], Gong argues that Taipei must maintain a balance between what is politically popular in Taiwan and the more assertive cross-strait approach some in Taipei and Washington prefer. Taipei also wants to avoid giving the impression to the U.S. Congress and others that cross-straits dialogue could so successfully reduce misunderstanding as to render U.S. arms sales to Taiwan no longer necessary or helpful. Nonetheless, on balance, Taiwan has more to gain than to lose from such talks, and especially needs to avoid the perception that Taipei's actions are consciously undermining the process.

It is time for cooler heads to prevail. The U.S., wisely, has attempted to stay out of the middle of this dispute, merely restating that it remains committed to "our long-standing and certainly well-known one China' policy." Meanwhile, Beijing needs to avoid foreclosing the possibility of a Wang visit to Taipei in the fall. Unfortunately, what's needed most from Beijing--greater flexibility vis-a-vis Taiwan--has become less likely, at least until the current fervor dies down.

It would also appear that, at least as regards cross-straits talks, President Lee's comments may have painted Taiwan somewhat into a corner. The first and most obvious step is to let the paint dry, i.e., to avoid creating the impression that he is seeking to undermine cross-straits talks or Sino-U.S. relations. Nothing will cause Taiwan's hard-earned (and well-deserved) support among the American people and Congress to dissolve faster than to be seen as the instigator. Taiwan needs to assure all its friends and neighbors, as well as Beijing, that it remains committed to the long-term goal of reunification and that the basis under which it originally agreed to cross-straits talks has not, and will not, change.

The time-honored observation that "the British and Americans are two peoples divided by a common language" is even more accurate when applied to the Chinese residing on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. Neither seems capable of hearing the genuine, heart-felt concerns of the other. Taipei needs to understand and respect Beijing's serious sovereignty concerns--concerns that would grow, not diminish, were democracy to prevail on the mainland. Meanwhile, Beijing also needs to understand that the people on Taiwan have earned and demand more recognition for their accomplishments and that their aspirations (and pride) must also be taken into account.

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