



TAIWAN SHOULD RETURN TO THE 1992 CONSENSUS

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In 1992, representatives from the People's Republic of China (PRC or Chinese mainland) and the Republic of China (ROC or Taiwan) met in Hong Kong and devised an understanding whereby both governments could sidestep sensitive sovereignty questions related to "China" and move relations forward. In essence, the two sides of the Taiwan Strait agreed that there is only one China, but they also agreed to differ over the meaning of the term. The arrangement was described as "one China, respective interpretations" by Taiwan's Lee Teng-hui and Ma Ying-jeou administrations. In 2000, Su Chi, then a high-ranking Taiwan official, coined the catchy term "1992 Consensus" to describe the understanding. It was hoped that the phrase would appeal to those in the incoming administration of Chen Shui-bian, a member of the independence-leaning Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) as it did not include the words, "one China." And it was believed that it might appeal to Beijing, which was uncomfortable with the phrase, "respective interpretations." Now would be a good time to return to the use of this formulation.

Despite the fact that the "1992 Consensus" led to an unprecedented breakthrough in relations between Taipei and Beijing, it has not been without its detractors. Many criticisms are partisan. After all, the understanding was the brainchild of Taiwan's Kuomintang (KMT). But other criticisms reflect a

fundamental misunderstanding of the art of politics and diplomacy.

Some have argued that the "1992 Consensus" does not exist because the two sides do not agree on the meaning of "one China." In other words, there is no consensus because Beijing's interpretation of "one China" differs significantly from Taipei's understanding of the term. They appear to believe that the status of Taiwan must be settled before any genuine progress may be achieved in cross-strait relations.

More recently, a piece published in the *Diplomat* showed that many Taiwanese do not grasp the meaning of the "1992 Consensus." Taiwan's people "have no consensus on the definition of 1992 Consensus." The authors conclude that, as Taiwan is a democratic polity, this finding justified the decision by Taiwan's present leadership cohort to junk the policy in 2016 – a move that put the island squarely on a collision course with the Chinese mainland.

Neither criticism appears warranted. For starters, it is not unusual for two governments to cobble together a somewhat vague understanding to ease tensions and move relations forward. The 1979 US-PRC Normalization Communiqué provides one such example. In the English version of the document, the US side states that it *acknowledges (renshr dao)* Beijing's position that there is one China and that Taiwan is a part of China. The phrase indicates US cognizance of – not necessarily agreement with – the PRC position. In the Chinese version, however, Beijing declares that Washington *recognizes (cheng ren)* that there is one China and that Taiwan is a part of China. Despite these contradictions, the 1979 Normalization Communiqué paved the way for the establishment of diplomatic relations between the US and the PRC.

So, the disagreement between Beijing and Taipei over the meaning of "one China" may not be a major stumbling block after all. Each side may hold its own view. This "agree to disagree" approach facilitates dialogue and progress. But what about public opinion? Must Taiwan's people fully understand and comprehend the meaning of the "1992 consensus" before it can be adopted as policy?

With respect to the role that public opinion should play in policy-making, some studies have suggested that the public is "neither thinking nor doing" when it comes to diplomacy. Although the indictment seems unduly harsh (and controversial), there is evidence

pointing to its explanatory value. For example, in the 1990s, opinion polls revealed that most Taiwanese opposed President Bill Clinton's "three no's" policy toward Taiwan. But polls also showed that most Taiwanese could not identify the meaning of the "three no's."

But if one insists that policies must be supported by the public, there is strong evidence showing Taiwan's people do support the "1992 Consensus." The Taiwan National Security Survey (TNSS), which is conducted by the Election Study Center of Taiwan's National Chengchi University under the auspices of the Program in Asian Security Studies at Duke University, is a scientific poll. Since 2002, this survey has been conducted 11 times, most recently during November-December 2017. The results are illuminating.

Rather than confuse respondents by asking them to explain the nuances of the "1992 Consensus," the TNSS poll asks Taiwanese if they support the practice of pursuing cross-strait relations under the One China policy, but with their own interpretation of it. The results have consistently shown that a solid majority support this approach. Indeed, in 2017, 58.1 percent supported the proposition.

This discussion should put to rest any honest concerns about the "1992 Consensus." But there is more.

One need only compare the progress and stability that characterized the eight years (2008-2016) when Taipei adhered to the "1992 Consensus" to the past two years. President Tsai Ing-wen's decision to junk the "1992 Consensus" came with a high cost. Since her election, Taipei has lost five diplomatic allies. Taiwan has been locked out of the World Health Organization and all other important IGOs – doors that had been opened by the previous administration. The number of mainland tourists to Taiwan has been slashed. Cross-strait military tensions have soared and Taiwan's government is under increasing pressure by the US to stop behaving like a "freeloader" and spend more on its own defense.

On Nov. 24, Taiwan's voters handed the DPP a resounding defeat in the island's local elections. Analysts described the party's drubbing at the polls as a sharp rebuke to Tsai's policies, particularly her handling of the economy and approach to relations with Beijing. Arguably the biggest winner in the election was Han Kuo-yu, a charismatic 'dark horse' candidate who unabashedly called for a return to the "1992 Consensus" and managed to win the mayoral

race in Kaohsiung, a city that had been a DPP stronghold for two decades.

Responding to her party's defeat, Tsai observed that "democracy taught us a lesson." Hopefully, she has learned one important lesson – that Taipei needs to return to the "1992 Consensus." Criticisms of the approach to cross-strait relations do not hold up under scrutiny. And the present policy is flawed.

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