



WHOSE SIDE IS TIME ON? CHINA'S PERCEPTIONS/MISPERCEPTIONS OF CROSS-STRAIT RELATIONS

BY YUN SUN

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On Jan. 2, 2019, Chinese President Xi Jinping delivered a major policy speech to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the Message to Compatriots in Taiwan. The speech is widely interpreted as Xi's policy platform for cross-strait relations for years, or even decades, to come. While Beijing's statements on Taiwan policy have been relatively consistent, the speech and Chinese interpretations of it suggest key perceptions and misperceptions that will have major implications for cross-strait relations.

Use of force, or else?

First, despite speculation that Xi is more ready to use force for the purpose of unification, in fact, he is not. The speech did not change the mainland's line on "not abandoning the use of force." The language used is almost identical to former President Jiang Zemin's 1995 Eight-point Proposal for the Development of the Cross-Straits Relations and the Promotion of Peaceful Reunification. It is also consistent with former President Hu Jintao's call to "prepare to fight, seek to talk, don't be afraid to delay." Hu was more patient in his 2008 speech to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the Message to Compatriots in Taiwan, which did not mention "use of force." That patience is widely attributed to positive expectations on cross-strait relations following the inauguration of the Ma Ying-jeou government earlier that year, a luxury Xi does not enjoy today. Xi also sticks to the term "peaceful development," emphasizing "peaceful," suggesting continuation rather than a change of position.

However, there should be no mistake that Xi is keeping the threat on the table. His declaration that "the Chinese will not fight the Chinese" makes it clear that if Taiwan pursues independence and the Taiwanese are no longer Chinese, war will not be off limits. According to Xi, only Beijing has the authority to identify so-called "Taiwan independence separatists" and their separatist activities. Beijing wants to be both the referee and a player at the same time. That is self-serving and harmful for future solution of the issue.

Beijing navigating Taiwan politics

The most significant policy adjustment in Xi's speech lies in its call to look beyond the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) for discussion on the future of unification and cross-strait relations. Xi calls for "political parties and all sectors on both sides of the Strait [to] recommend representatives to conduct extensive and in-depth democratic consultation on cross-strait relations and the future of the nation and establish institutional arrangement for peaceful development of cross-strait relations." The mainland is apparently encouraged by the result of Taiwan local elections last November, which confirmed to Beijing that the DPP's popularity has waned. The mainland seeks out new political forces in Taiwan that do not necessarily share the DPP's agenda. Although the November election did not focus on cross-strait relations, those new political forces will become Beijing's engagement target. For example, the reelection of Taipei mayor Ko Wen-je, an independent, has raised great interest in the mainland about his political ambitions in the 2020 presidential election and the acceptability/compatibility of his cross-strait policy.

The problems with this formula are many. Apparently, the DPP is excluded from the so-called democratic consultation, yet it continues to represent a significant portion of the Taiwan population. By dropping the DPP from this discussion, Beijing is also excluding those Taiwanese that the DPP represents from participating in a decision on their future. No politician in Taiwan can embrace such a framework without being delegitimized.

According to Chinese government interlocutors, Beijing has given up hope on possible and meaningful engagement with the Tsai administration. It no longer believes it can convince President Tsai to embrace the 1992 Consensus and the One China principle. And any move to engage her government on an official level at this point will be perceived as a retreat by Beijing from the 1992 Consensus. Beijing will likely enhance efforts on both “peaceful development” to extend economic benefits to win over Taiwan’s public opinion as well as on military preparedness to prevent any risky moves by Tsai.

That Xi’s speech has boosted President Tsai’s popularity is dismissed by the mainland. This could be because officials and experts feel a need to defend Xi’s authority and deny any unexpected consequences from his speech. A more likely explanation is that Beijing is making the calculated risk to control damage and project a new strategic direction. It has insisted on concessions and reassurances from Taiwan, which is smaller and weaker than the mainland in every sense. The irony is that China also insists that the US should be the first to make concessions and reassurances to North Korea in denuclearization talks because “North Korea is much weaker and thus the US has material advantages, and hence the moral obligation to reassure Pyongyang.”

Xi’s speech messaged a demand for clarity on a broad range of issues. Some argue this is disruptive and destabilizing because ambivalence or ambiguity has sustained the status quo. However, from the mainland’s perspective, ambiguity only works for China when the Taiwan government is cooperative and willing to embrace the One China principle. In contrast, when the DPP government is seen as detrimental to the mainland’s agenda, ambiguity provides cover for “harmful maneuvers” by the Tsai administration and undermines Beijing’s interests. This perception prioritizes China’s need to push Taiwan but disregards the strain on cross-strait relations, and more importantly, on US policy, which emphasizes retention of the status quo. Beijing’s push to tilt the balance publicly and boldly does not promote stability.

Why the notorious one country, two systems?

There is a major disagreement between China and the rest of the world as to whether Xi equated the 1992 Consensus with the One Country, Two Systems (1C2S) formula. Taiwanese and foreign observers believe that he did. Mainland experts insist that Xi’s exact words—“peaceful unification and One Country Two Systems are the best approach to national unification”—do not exclude other arrangements. The dual message is that peaceful unification and IC2S are seen by the mainland as the best, but not the only, option, which leaves room for other non-peaceful means and other political arrangements.

Although the Chinese blame the “social stigma” associated with the 1C2S on Taiwanese politicians, they are deluding themselves if they believe this. Almost all Chinese interlocutors privately acknowledge the disastrous results of 1C2S in Hong Kong and Macao. However, Xi’s resort to 1C2S and the invocation of Deng Xiaoping’s authority to formulate his own Taiwan policy is politically safe. Given the domestic economic slowdown and the deterioration of China’s external relations, Xi cannot afford to make a new and untested proposal on Taiwan without full confidence in its result.

The Chinese often forget that when Deng first proposed 1C2S in the early 1980s, Taiwan was not a democracy and the vision was for the coexistence of two authoritarian systems based on a political deal. The attempt to place a democratic society under the governance of an authoritarian system has only led to the erosion of the former and forced a clash as has occurred in Hong Kong.

Mainland interlocutors sometimes express a willingness to explore arrangements other than 1C2S, or say that “everything can be discussed.” (In recent conversations, it was reiterated that the mainland will embrace “any negotiations in any format about any unification formula with Taiwan under the One China principle.”) That is just glaring hypocrisy. Beijing considers Hong Kong, Macao, and a reunified Taiwan as constitutionally subordinate entities. No one, Chinese or Taiwanese, expects the mainland to treat Taiwan as a true equal in such negotiations. If they did, 1C2S would not be unilaterally imposed by the

mainland. Chinese analysts have been vocal about the widening power gap between the mainland and Taiwan in the past decade, particularly since Xi assumed power. In the Chinese policy playbook, negotiations are decided by the power equilibrium between the mainland and Taiwan. Chinese conclude that Taiwan's best chance to negotiate a deal with the mainland only exists when it can leverage support from the US against the mainland.

Whose side is time on?

For the mainland, the solution to the Taiwan issue does not lie across the Taiwan Strait, but across the Pacific Ocean. Chinese insist Taiwan harbors three illusions about its future: that democracy can solve Taiwan's problems; that the mainland will collapse; and that the US will always come to Taiwan's defense. For the Chinese, the first two have been exposed as false and the last remains to be seen. **This is the single most important Chinese perception/misperception about the Taiwan issue: that it is not about Taiwan or its people.** The Chinese believe that as the balance of power shifts between China and the US, there will be a day when the US is exhausted by its commitment in a region far from its homeland and decides to withdraw after a grand bargain with China. That doesn't mean that China will immediately use force to take over Taiwan; but it does mean that the Chinese believe that the political will of Taiwan to negotiate with the mainland will not emerge unless the US leaves and Taiwan has no other option.

These perceptions lead China to reach the exact opposite conclusion on the essential question of whose side is time on? While the world sees Taiwan public opinion moving away from unification, the mainland has a paradoxical and confounding confidence that time is on its side. As they see it, the critical card is not in Taipei's hand, but in Washington's. While the US searches for a grand strategy in the region, it is essential to remember that China is waiting and Taiwan's fate is on the line.

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