



Two Perspectives on the Cross-Strait "White Paper"

This PacNet offers two perspectives written by James A. Kelly of the Pacific Forum and by Karen Sutter of the U.S.-China Business Council. Ms. Sutter's article is reprinted with permission from the March 2 issue of the Asian Wall Street Journal. Permission has not been granted to post Ms. Sutter's article on any web site and is intended for PacNet recipients only.

Waves in the Pacific: The White Paper After Three Weeks

by James A. Kelly

Sino-American relations are on a downslope again, after improving over the last six months. With a smooth Clinton-Jiang summit in Auckland, agreement at last on China's membership in the World Trade Organization, and a renewal of military contacts, there were hopes for a smooth year.

To be sure, the Taiwan presidential elections, to be held March 18, had brought a near-crisis in 1996, but there were hopes for less tension this time. Candidates in Taiwan are contending bitterly with each other, but all were bending over backward to avoid antagonizing Beijing.

In the U.S., China and other foreign policy issues were drawing little attention in the presidential primaries. Despite labor opposition, there was optimism about enactment of permanent normal trade relations (PNTR) for China, the key to WTO realization. And the Taiwan Security Enhancement Act, a red flag to Beijing, seemed to be drifting away in the Senate after its passage by the House of Representatives in January.

But a Chinese white paper, "The One-China Principle and the Taiwan Issue," sent ripples across the Pacific. This 11,000 word document, issued February 21 in Chinese, English, and other languages (and with a Latin phrase, "sine die" as a critical element) has seized attention. Reaction in the U.S. has been strong, with unspoken concern in Asian capitals. The white paper is providing a field day for analysts and advocates, with much parsing of "one-China" and arguing about what is old or new.

This perspective offers a short summary of effects thus far from the viewpoint of various players:

United States

– The addition of a new condition by which China might use force against Taiwan, its failure or indefinite delay to come to the negotiating table, compels reaction by the U.S. as a matter of basic politics. The threshold for resolving the cross-Straits issue by other than peaceful means has been lowered. At minimum this strains the three communiqués that, with the Taiwan Relations Act, are the basis for Sino-American relations.

– Whether or not the white paper ought to have any effect on the PNTR vote necessary for WTO participation, it makes the administration's task much harder and complicates the choice for members of Congress who believe an openly trading China is the best prospect for the future. President Clinton, with his Vice President's nomination assured, sent the PNTR legislation to the Congress this week.

– The white paper may or may not ensure passage in the U.S. Congress of the Taiwan Security Enhancement Act that it rails against, but its new reason for war guarantees that Taiwan will receive early U.S. approval of new purchases of defense equipment. This will bring predictable wails from Beijing.

– By issuing the white paper at the same time as the very senior Talbott delegation was returning to the United States, and after giving the delegation no clue of the impending announcement, Beijing further reduced the U.S. State department's already depleted credibility in East Asian policy. It takes pains to antagonize those presumed to be most committed to improving Sino-American relations. There is no sign of anyone more supportive in either the Bush or Gore campaigns.

Taiwan

– Although the timing of the white paper less than a month before the election has a purpose of intimidation, the accommodating stands the candidates had already taken diminished local impact. The three way presidential race is very tight, although there may be a boost for establishment candidate Lien Chan. The white paper does not itself raise the likelihood of near term cross-Strait military conflict.

– Future cross-Strait negotiations must await the Taiwan political process and Beijing's reactions. "Negotiate or else" does not improve the atmosphere for any talks, although the white paper emphasizes that it offers negotiations on the "basis of equality."

– A lower war threshold will intensify Taiwan's arms purchase requests so it can deter an attack. And such requests go only to the U.S.

China

– The white paper is a carefully prepared response by China's government, probably to last summer's "state to state" formulation by President Lee Teng-hui. The timing of its issue before the Taiwan election gives it extra meaning. The timing as PNTR and China/WTO go before the U.S. Congress conveys how Beijing wants all to understand how strongly it feels about Taiwan. It may also convey that some Chinese leaders put little value in opening trade or joining the WTO.

– As time goes on, we may have a better sense of the Chinese internal factors at work in the white paper. Are there

rightist elements or the PLA to be reassured? Must China's opening to the world be balanced for those who worry about the "spiritual pollution" that outside influences bring to rust the instruments of party control?

– The white paper pays lengthy attention to describing and criticizing American policy and history with respect to Taiwan. The U.S. is committed to a peaceful resolution, but the paper draws more attention to the U.S. role than is warranted. It misreads the cross-Strait problem, the solution for which can only unfold between the two sides without use of force.

Conclusion

Countries in East Asia want to stay out of China's "internal affair." But they fear as well that developing China might emerge as a power that is quick to use force.

On balance, the white paper is more about threats and lowering the threshold at which violence might occur than about motivating Taiwan. In the end, arrangements between China and Taiwan will require the acceptance of the people on Taiwan. Harsh pressure does nothing to bring that date sooner.

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Don't Miss Beijing's Real Message by Karen Sutter

U.S. government and media commentary on the People's Republic of China's white paper have missed the document's important message. If you only interpret one quarter or one-half of the document, then the white paper does present good reason for alarm. Beijing has introduced a new condition under which it might use force against Taiwan: the failure to return to the negotiating table to discuss reunification. But this is only part of Beijing's complex message. At the same time, the PRC has just issued its most flexible public statement on Taiwan since the mid-1990s, and, in so doing, has laid important groundwork for an opportunity to reopen the long-stalled cross-Strait dialogue once Taiwan selects its new president on March 18. This double-edged approach is not necessarily contradictory to the extent that it reflects a consensus-based policy that incorporates a diversity of senior Chinese leadership views and represents a complicated strategy that is designed ultimately with an eye to working out a peaceful solution with Taiwan.

While Beijing does not address all of Taipei's concerns, amid old language reemphasizing the importance of adhering to a one-China policy, Beijing specifically meets two of Taipei's outstanding conditions for reopening talks. One, Beijing reaffirms that any cross-Strait talks be conducted on the basis of equality. In case anyone might miss this point, the paper references the principle of equality no less than five times. Two, Beijing concedes that talks can resume with a focus on functional topics before proceeding to political matters. These are important concessions.

Both of these issues have been critical sticking points that have prevented Taipei from comfortably returning to the negotiations with Beijing since the mid-1990s. The first point on equality is fundamental to the resolution of talks. The PRC's increasingly rigid and political interpretation of "one China" has threatened to lock Taiwan into an unequal

negotiating position, creating an uncomfortable and politically unfeasible framework for the leadership in Taipei. While Beijing does not explicitly reject its political definition of "one China," neither does it reinforce it, leaving room for future flexibility. While the document rejects Lee Teng-hui's "state to state" formula, it neither rejects the possibility of future government-to-government talks nor does it require the future leader of Taiwan to renounce this formula.

Beijing's openness to the substance of talks is also promising and demonstrates a shift in thinking. Previously, the PRC had insisted that both sides must accelerate talks to address political relations. By pushing economic and trade issues back to the top of the agenda, Beijing has expressed a willingness to work on rebuilding trust before pressing on political reunification. Beijing's threat of using force is a desperate plea for resumption of talks that should not be ignored, primarily because it is backed by a willingness to put off discussions of reunification so long as Taipei just returns to the table.

Between the lines, Beijing has signaled Taipei that it is ready for constructive dialogue with a post-Lee Teng-hui leadership. It would be a shame to ignore this message and miss the important opportunity it presents. The real key to enhancing security in the Taiwan Strait is for the governments in Taipei and Beijing to resume their dialogue and find their own ways in which to reach an eventual solution to the status of their relationship that is acceptable to both sides. Beijing has demonstrated that it is ready and prepared to work toward middle ground so long as Taipei is willing to meet. An answer from Taipei in the heat of its presidential election campaign is difficult, but the swearing in of a new president in May offers new hope for a constructive response and the eventual resumption of talks.

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The entire text of the PRC white paper is available in English at www.chinadaily.com and www.nytimes.com.