



“The Balancing Act Across the Strait” by Richard Bush

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So far, events have proven the optimists to be correct. The dialogue between Taiwan's Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF) and the PRC's Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait (ARATS) has resumed. As the basis, the Taiwan side only pledged adherence to the "1992 consensus," and Beijing did not object to President Ma Ying-jeou's formulation of this phrase, even though the resulting association with "one China" is vague. SEF Chairman Chiang Pin-kung held meetings in Beijing on June 12 and 13 with his counterpart Chen Yunlin, chairman of ARATS. The two signed agreements concerning weekend charter flights and Mainland tourists. True, the DPP government did most of the work on both agreements, but it was not until the political climate had changed with Ma's victory that drafts could be turned into signed texts.

The two sides are off to a good start, but it is only a start. At this early stage, the two sides should be pleased with their initial achievements, but they should remember that they have embarked on a long and complicated process of re-engagement. Expectations are high and pitfalls exist. The recent experience of South Korean President Lee Myung-bak demonstrates what happens when a leader ignores pitfalls and cannot meet expectations.

By its nature, this re-engagement process must be gradual and interactive. Over the last fifteen years, mutual trust and shared understanding between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait have declined seriously. There was a downward spiral of mutual insecurity as each side believed increasingly that the other threatened its fundamental interests. Each adopted policies based on those fears. China built up its military to deter what it believed were Taiwan's separatist schemes. Taiwan leaders intensified claims of sovereignty as a defense against, as they saw it, looming domination by Beijing. Each side's moves intensified the other's defense mechanisms.

Now that President Ma has taken the stage and dialogue has resumed with good initial results, the atmosphere is certainly better. But it does not mean that the mistrust of the last fifteen years has disappeared with the Chiang-Chen meeting, and the Hsiao Wan-chang-Hu Jintao and Hu Jintao-Wu Po-hsiung meetings before it. PLA Lieutenant General Ma Xiaotian recently warned that "secessionist forces for 'Taiwan Independence' will continue with separation movements" and asserted that "the mission of opposing and curbing secessionist activities remains strenuous." Taiwan lives under the cloud of

China's growing military capabilities, particularly ballistic missiles. If the two sides are to reduce mistrust and increase mutual understanding, it will occur not through some "grand bargain" but as a result of a gradual, step-by-step process where each side's initiatives do not entail substantial risk and the other's positive response encourages momentum.

The current interactive process will also succeed if Beijing and Taipei agree, at least informally, on what its goal is. Having an objective gives the two sides focus and a sense of purpose. On democratic Taiwan, the existence of a goal gives the public a benchmark with which to evaluate the performance of the Ma administration. Every time the two sides successfully take a step toward that objective, they gain more confidence that more can be achieved.

Clearly, the goal is not unification: President Ma has made clear that is not on the agenda during the period of his administration. And that makes substantive and political sense. The obstacles to resolving the fundamental cross-Strait dispute are too profound to address any time soon. Moreover, the Taiwan public is not ready to forge consensus on them.

But it appears the two sides have identified another goal worth striving for. My own term for this goal is "stabilization," that is, creation of an environment for cross-Strait relations that allows the two sides to coexist without mutual fear. Stabilization begins with each side's declaratory reassurance that it does not intend to challenge the fundamental interests of the other. Stabilization requires reliable channels of communication and dialogue, such as the SEF-ARATS channel that has resumed (and it is proper that SEF-ARATS be the primary channel). Stabilization takes substantive form through broadening and deepening of cooperation in a variety of fields. This will occur most obviously and quickly in the economic field, but it must also expand into the arenas of international space and security if it is to be convincing and enduring. If fully realized through an incremental process, stabilization will make cross-Strait relations more predictable and will significantly reduce mutual fear. Leaders will be far less likely to suspect that the other side is preparing to change the status quo. They would therefore see less need to pursue the hedging and deterrence policies which so far have fed the insecurity spiral.

Obviously, bringing about stabilization is an extremely challenging task, particularly at the beginning. The balance of rewards must be equitable. Even as each side tries to reassure, the other still has doubts (which is why building trust must be incremental). Each side has interests that it must protect. Taiwan will seek to preserve the claim that the ROC is a sovereign state, even as it refrains from doing so in a provocative way. Indeed, the sovereignty issue will become a practical obstacle to broadening and deepening cooperation if the two sides do not find ways to keep it from becoming so.

How to translate the decline in mutual fear into less threatening military arsenals is a complex question, particularly for Beijing. Leaders on each side will have to ensure that key political constituencies tolerate their respective policy courses. President Ma must maintain the support of independents and cannot totally alienate pan-green voters. President Hu will have to keep military leaders on board.

Balancing all these factors will not be an easy task for either leader. This is a new challenge for each. Beijing may not yet realize how much Ma Ying-jeou is depending on its positive moves to help him ensure sustained political support within Taiwan for his policy agenda. Yet the two sides have learned something from the experience of the last fifteen years. They have stared into the abyss of mutual fear. They appear to understand what can be gained from seizing today's strategic opportunity. For all the difficulties that lie ahead, they are off to a good start.