

## **“Trends” Matter More Than “Events” in Cross-Strait Relations**

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Perhaps because politicians and public opinion seem to be led by the news that pop up under their noses every day. Perhaps because during the past 30 years, cross-strait crises had been triggered by what Beijing calls “major events,” such as President Lee Teng-hui’s visit to the United States in 1995, his “Special State-to-State Relationship” statement of 1999, President Chen Shui-bian’s “One Country on Each Side” proclamation of 2002, etc. And since no “major event” has occurred on President Tsai Ing-wen’s watch thus far, many people in Taiwan believe peace will last forever in the Taiwan Strait.

However, great powers care more about the “trends” rather than any particular “events.” The bitterly partisan Republican and Democratic Parties could unite on shifting the U.S. China policy from one of “engagement” to “competition,” is not due to any specific Chinese policy or behavior. Rather, it is the fear of losing its predominant role in world affairs that propelled the change. Likewise, regarding Taiwan, Mainland China focuses not so much on individual events than the trend of Taiwan's separation from China. But the U.S. and China have traditionally adopted completely different methodologies in dealing with their perceived adverse trends. The U.S., being a democracy with separation of powers and check and balance built into its political system, has to be open and transparent on its major foreign policy departures. On the other hand, the authoritarian China oftentimes sought to rely on “surprise attacks” to achieve its strategic ends. The attacked were often caught completely unawares by the PRC strikes. This has been true for each of the last three Taiwan Strait crises.

The first Taiwan Strait Crisis began with the bombardment of Kinmen in September 1954 and ended in early 1955 with the People’s Liberation Army seizing Yijiangshan and Dachen islands. Before the crisis broke out, the United States delivered a large number of jet fighters to Taiwan and the two were talking about signing a mutual defense treaty. At the

same time, Taiwan was actively seeking membership to the newly formed Southeast Asia Treaty Organization with the aim of containing Communist China. Vietnam was formally divided into North and South Vietnam and Beijing was worried that separation of the two sides of the Taiwan Strait would be similarly made permanent. At the risk of nuclear retaliation by the U.S. China launched a surprise attack against those offshore islands.

Before the second Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1958, the United States and Taiwan were gradually upgrading their military cooperation. The “Matador” missiles, capable of carrying nuclear warheads, were deployed in Tainan, followed by joint military exercises. China unilaterally suspended the Geneva talks between the U.S. and China that had lasted three years without progress. When the Mainland shelled the islands of Kinmen in August, its first wave “decapitated” three deputy commanders of the Kinmen Defense Command.

Third Taiwan Strait Crisis happened between 1995 and 1996. Most observers attributed Beijing’s missile firing to President Lee’s visit to the U.S in July 1995. In fact, the announcement of Lee’s visit did not stop the high-level visit by the Deputy Director of Association for Relations across the Taiwan Strait, Tang Shubei, to Taiwan in late June. China’s surprise missile firing took place after Tang completed his visit and immediately following Taipei’s announcement of Vice President Lien Chan’s prospective visit to Europe. In other words, the tipping point was not so much Lee’s visit to the U.S as the domino effect of Taiwan’s diplomatic breakthrough. For China, this trend actually began with Clinton administration’s “Taiwan policy review” in 1994 which led at one point to the visit of Secretary of Transportation to Taiwan, including meeting Lee in his Presidential Office.

The latest example is the 2019 protests in Hong Kong. As the HK government struggled to meet inner and outer expectations, and pro-democracy activists won 86 % seats in the yearend District Council election, many in HK and Taiwan were elated that Beijing was finally dealt a severe blow. But as soon as the HK national security law was passed late June, 2020, the table was turned instantly and completely. The pro-democracy camp could hardly muster any resistance and international reaction turned out to be too insignificant to make a difference. Looking back, Beijing’s previous calm and silence actually disguised a process of thorough preparation for the one big shot that would set the future course of Hong Kong.

Therefore, it is essential for Taiwan to pay close attention to how Beijing perceives the trend in current cross-strait relations. Unfortunately, the three sub-trends (i.e., U.S.-Taiwan relations, Taiwan's internal affairs, and cross-strait people-to-people exchanges) have all undergone tremendous changes under President Tsai.

At present, the biggest source of danger is that the Tsai administration is actively cooperating with the United States in playing the "Taiwan card". The enhanced military cooperation, offensive weapons, Indo-Pacific strategic layout, and U.S.-Taiwan diplomatic activities, are all inklings of past behavior leading to the previous Taiwan Strait Crises.

Perhaps it behooves the Tsai administration to remember that China took huge risks to strike Taiwan three times, not a single time, when it was clearly an underdog vis-à-vis the U.S. Now that Beijing believes it is on a par with the U.S. in terms of power and status, would it be more timid on Taiwan than before?

The two other sub-trends, Taiwan's internal affairs and people-to-people exchanges, have also deteriorated simultaneously. After five years of interaction with each other, Beijing seems to have no hope in Tsai changing her heart politically. While avowing "maintaining status quo" in her inauguration speech, she had actually upended the "status quo" over the past five years through skillful salami tactics. She now controls all five branches of the government, all independent institutions and even the media. Furthermore, she recently embarked on a new round of constitutional revision which might lower the threshold for follow-up constitutional amendments. In due time this may lead Taiwan to "de jure independence." All of these development are paving the path to eventual showdown between Taiwan and the Mainland.

Although China still sends out warm greetings to Taiwan people occasionally, the emphasis has definitely been greatly reduced. There is no sign whatsoever that the trend of Chinese and Taiwanese nationalisms clashing with each other will be reversed.

In order for the people of Taiwan to truly enjoy peace, President Tsai should deliberate on the ways to change current cross-strait trends, not to remain preoccupied with manipulating events, large and small, to consolidate her domestic support.

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