

Prospects for Cross-Strait Relations Following the Legislative Elections

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Draft of talk at international conference

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“Taiwan-China Cross-Straits Relations - Outlook for Regional Security in East Asia”

In Madrid on 25 November 2004

Organized by the European Alliance for Asian Studies

There seems to be general consensus that cross-Strait relations will remain strained for years to come. (In Paris two days ago, the word “grim” was constantly used to describe cross-Strait relations.) Since Chen Shui-bian’s slim election victory last spring, it has been clear that Beijing is today as suspicious, if not even more suspicious of Chen Shui-bian and his intentions than during his first term. On the one hand, Beijing would prefer to simply ignore Chen and wait until 2008 with the hope that a more – in Beijing’s eyes - - constructive Taiwanese leader is elected president, one that would agree to talk about political integration in the long-term. On the other hand, from Beijing’s point of view, Chen cannot be ignored; he must be watched closely, his every move must be scrutinized

as Beijing fears that Chen will devise a scheme to further cement Taiwan's separate status by juridical means. If Chen does announce an initiative that Chinese leaders interpret as further complicating unification or making it impossible, Beijing will immediately turn to Washington and pressure the United States to rein Chen in.

The crucial question is not will there be tension, but rather how strained will cross-Strait relations be in the next few years. That is where there is no clear-cut answer; there is certainly room for discussion and speculation. Undoubtedly, the outcome of the Legislative elections in December in Taiwan will, to some extent, affect the degree of tensions to be expected in the near future.

One of the major issues affecting cross-Strait relations is Chen's desire to change the constitution. It is almost impossible for Chen to have an entirely new constitution approved by the Legislative Yuan because according to the constitution of the Republic of China (article 174), three-quarters of the members of parliament would have to vote in favor of the new constitution. At the moment, Chen's party, the Democratic Progressive Party, DPP, and its ally, the Taiwan Solidarity Union, TSU, do not even have a majority in parliament. It is entirely possible, however, that the DPP and TSU will together secure a majority in the Legislative Yuan in the December elections. But no one is predicting such a landslide victory for them that they would secure 75 percent of the seats. That is why Chen Shui-bian has changed his tune and now speaks of his constitutional engineering project, in other words, the present constitution will be modified, as it has already many times during the past few years.

Because of the impossibility of having an entirely new constitution approved by the legislature, Chen originally – about one year ago -- wanted to organize a referendum to approve drawing up a new constitution. But, as we know, Beijing's staunch opposition and the pressure put on Washington by Beijing to stop Chen resulted in Chen abandoning the plan. Could Chen go back to his original plan and try to push through a new constitution by referendum in the next 4 years? Of course anything is possible, but this is unlikely.

In stead of going in to scenarios that other specialists have already put forward, describing what might happen if Chen does decide to attempt to change Taiwan's status relating to issues dealing with the name of the island or sovereignty, which he has, after all, promised not to do, I will today discuss some of the prerequisites, as I see them, for political accommodation to take place between the two sides in the long-term. My intention is to see if any of these prerequisites will materialize in the near term.

I examined these prerequisites when working on an International Crisis Group report, Taiwan Strait no. IV that examines prerequisites for a political solution and also envisions what a political settlement might look like. My proposed model of a "Greater Chinese Union" was the subject of my talk two days ago in Paris, and for any one interested, I refer to the International Crisis Group website and the FIIA Report 8/2004 on the Taiwan Strait.¹

¹ *Taiwan Strait Report IV: How an Ultimate Political Settlement Might Look*, Brussels: International Crisis Group, Asia Report no. 75, 26.2.2004 (www.crisisweb.org), of which Linda Jakobson is the co-author. See

Now to the prerequisites for a political settlement:

One is a self-confident leadership, one with visionary skills, on both sides of the Strait.

I think we can agree that in the next few years it is highly improbable that either side will have a leadership with these characteristics.

Hu Jintao has not yet consolidated his position despite having taken over the last official position held by his predecessor Jiang Zemin, namely the Chairmanship of the Central Military Commission. Hu Jintao cannot be expected to be self-confident or visionary and therefore he will not be in a position to compromise. Willy Lam will surely speak more about this later on, so I will not elaborate further on Hu Jintao's position. Chen Shui-bian is certainly intent to – in some way – to make his mark in history during this, his last term as President. But Chen is simultaneously acutely aware that Taiwan is a politically polarized society, following the very tight presidential election and all the mud-slinging that took place during the campaign. He is also under pressure from Washington not to rock the boat, so to say. So though he is perhaps more self-confident than his counterpart, Hu Jintao, his actions are restricted by domestic constraints and pressure from Washington.

also Jakobson, "Taiwan's Challenge to China and the World – Part II: A 'Greater Chinese Union' offers best political solution", *YaleGlobal*, March 15, 2004, <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/display.article?id=3520> ; Jakobson's talk at seminar "The Volatile Taiwan Strait: Can Peace be Achieved?" at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs in Helsinki 12 May 2004, http://www.upi-fia.fi/english/navigation/events_frameset.htm ; Jakobson, *Taiwan's Unresolved Status. Visions for the Future and Their Implications for EU Foreign Policy*, FIIA Report 8/2004, Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs, November 2004, http://www.upi-fia.fi/julkaisut/upi_raportti/raportit/FIIA%20Report%208.pdf

Another prerequisite, in my view, for political accommodation is the implementation of genuine political reform on the mainland, in order for Taiwanese people to feel that the societies on either side of the Strait are more reminiscent of each other. This too is a tall order because due to Hu's insecurities there is little hope for meaningful political reform to take place in the next few years. On the contrary, with demonstrations, protests and riots on the rise on the mainland, it could well be that the measures taken by the Chinese authorities will harden against people demanding justice, and that in turn will have a negative effect on Taiwanese attitudes toward the mainland. I have written in the reports mentioned earlier that witnessing the process of democratization will most probably not endear the Taiwanese to a political accommodation because there are bound to be several ugly incidents on the way to the mainland becoming more accountable and politically open.

A third prerequisite is the continuation of economic integration, and on this front, positive progress will be undoubtedly made. One can expect economic integration to deepen, and that in turn will make the Taiwanese economy more dependent on the mainland, and likewise a larger part of Chinese economic growth dependent on investment from and trade with Taiwan.

A fourth prerequisite for political accommodation is what I have coined "the lure of belonging to a Greater China". If China continues to develop in the same way it has for the last 20 years, and if political reform is, bit by bit, implemented as successfully as economic reforms were during the past two decades, then, in my view, China could, over

time, become a partner that Taiwanese might increasingly want to be linked to. Mainland China would attract not only businessmen in Taiwan but also Taiwanese scientists, scholars in general, entertainment industry people, the arts world etc. In other words recognition in greater China would be more important than simply recognition in Taiwan. In the next few years China's importance can be expected to continuously grow, but in the near term this will not yet, due to lack of political reform in China, sway Taiwanese voters away from the idea of Taiwan as a very separate society from the mainland.

A fifth prerequisite is of course the active role of the United States, and to some extent other members of the international community, in encouraging political accommodation. With George W. Bush in the White House for the next 4 years one can expect Washington to continue its role as maintainer of the balance. The US will continue to oppose any unilateral move to change the *status quo*, as Bush said a year ago in December, when he gave in to Chinese demands and in the presence of Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao, rebuked Chen Shui-bian in public for Chen's referendum plans.

Does Washington want to see genuine political accommodation across the Strait? This is a subject of continuous debate. The US would most probably like to see the *status quo* continue, as long as the danger of a crisis escalating into an armed conflict recedes. A strong and amiably unified China is not necessary in Washington's interest though I do agree with officials of the Bush administration who say that the United States could do little to stop a political settlement taking place between the two sides, if the Taiwanese really wanted it.

So, one can safely predict that in the next few years the United States will encourage the two sides to talk, at least about establishing direct links. Business communities on both sides of the Strait desire direct links but in the current political environment this does not seem likely.

In some specialists' view, it was President Bush' s repudiation of the "strategic ambiguity" policy in 2001 that finally stabilized the escalation of tensions between Beijing and Taipei. Essentially, the president quite clearly stated that the United States would definitely help Taiwan militarily if the island is attacked by China and that Taiwan should not attempt to declare independence unilaterally to change the *status quo*. This "dual clarity" policy has, in some specialists' view, laid the foundation for a meaningful peace in the Taiwan Strait because it provides the most realistic deterrence to the extremists on both sides of the dispute. These analysts see Mr. Bush' s rælection as a strongly stabilizing factor in the Taiwan Strait.

On the other hand, there are specialists who predict that the influence of the United States over Taiwan is waning rapidly. If Chen Shui-bian secures a substantial victory in the legislative elections in December, it is possible that he might push ahead for a popular referendum to add the word "Taiwan", perhaps in parenthesis, to the name of the island, now officially ROC Republic of China, despite assurances he has made not to change the name of the island. Beijing has explicitly stated that it opposes any move that would alter or be seen as altering Taiwan's status or name.

Specialists who are predicting a marked escalation of tensions in the Taiwan Strait during the next few years point out – correctly in my view – that even the more radical elements within the Chinese leadership do not necessarily want to invade Taiwan, but advocate, if necessary by force, ending the impasse in the Strait by implementing strategic strikes against the island, especially the island’s telecommunications and shipping routes, to create havoc within Taiwanese society. That, according to this line of thinking, would break the will of the political establishment in Taiwan and, in turn, force the leaders of Taiwan to the negotiating table – which is exactly the goal of Chinese military threats. Not war, but to compel the Taiwanese political leadership to discuss eventual unification.

Thomas Christensen of Princeton University recently reminded us that since 1949 China’s leaders have often resorted to pre-emptive military strikes to halt trends not in the country’s favor. “The conflict isn’t about territorial acquisition, it’s about political identity,” Christensen stated. “That means China’s leaders might think they can achieve their goals through coercion instead of invasion.” As a result, the threshold for using force could, in Christensen’s view, be much lower.”² Specialists, who agree with Christensen’s line of thinking, point to the possibility of strikes by China’s submarines, for example.

For the United States, deterring China from an outright invasion of Taiwan is straightforward. But, would the United States become militarily involved in a conflict for the sake of one word, “Taiwan” in a parenthesis? Many doubt it. So do I. In addition,

² Trevor Corson, “Strait-jacket”, *Atlantic Monthly*, December 2004.

there are American military specialists who have put forth that the United States would have grave difficulties impeding a blockade of Taiwan.

In sum, I have discussed five crucial prerequisites for political accommodation:

1. visionary and self-confident leaders, 2. political reform on the mainland, 3. deepening of economic integration, 4. the lure of greater China, and 5. the active mediator role of the United States. Only on two fronts, in the realm of economic integration deepening and when assessing the role of the United States do we have positive to somewhat positive indicators. So in the near future regardless of the legislative elections in Taiwan this December, any form of political accommodation does not seem likely.

However, there are steps that are entirely practical and possible, IF and of course when discussing the Taiwan Strait many issues are BIG IF's – both sides would decide to improve the atmosphere.

First to measures that Beijing could adopt:

I have suggested that China allow Taiwan to host an Olympic event, for example the Olympic baseball event in Gaoxiong (a hotbed for the Taiwanese independence movement but also the cradle of Taiwanese baseball).

This would show the people of Taiwan that "One China" truly applies to people living on both sides of the Strait. This gesture would, in my view, evoke a substantial amount of good will in Taiwan. This is especially relevant at present since, according to media reports, Beijing is contemplating allowing Hong Kong to host the Olympic equestrian

event. The political leaders of the United States and the European Union should actively encourage Beijing to share an Olympic event with Taiwan.

I have also suggested that China should invite a Taiwanese along on one of its space missions – again, as a gesture of goodwill and to evoke positive feelings among ordinary Taiwanese. Yang Liwei’s visit to Hong Kong after becoming China’s first man in space was an immense pr-success for China. Ordinary Hongkongese, regardless of their opinion of the political leadership in Beijing, were very excited of Yang Liwei’s accomplishemtn and noticeably proud to be part of it.

Thirdly, I consider a goodwill visit by Premier Wen Jiabao to Taiwan, without preconditions, as a third important measure to evoke trust among Taiwanese toward the Beijing leadership’s intention.

As to measures that Taiwan could take, Taiwan should at least postpone contemplation of changing the name of the island or constitution, and see what initiatives Beijing proposes after Hu Jintao feels more confident in his position of power. This will take some years, which means that Chen Shui-bian has to abandon his aim to leave his own mark in history. This he has already done, as the first non-KMT president after 55 years of KMT rule.

Of course, sharing Olympic glory or a joint discovery of space is not going to bring about political reconciliation. But it would promote an atmosphere of trust and goodwill, which all outsiders should strive to encourage both Beijing and Taipei to promote. Without trust and goodwill there will be no compromises. Far-reaching compromises will be needed on both sides of the Strait if a lasting peace is to be achieved.

