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Chinese Leadership Transition and Cross-Strait Relations: Continuity Amid Uncertainty

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DALEI JIE, MAY 11 2012

The People's Republic of China's (PRC) upcoming once-in-a-decade leadership transition from the Hu Jintao-era to the Xi Jinping-era has sparked speculations about the future trajectory of this rapidly changing country. The Chinese leadership transition also inevitably injects a degree of uncertainty into its relations vis-à-vis Taiwan.

History

If history is any guide, however, the PRC's leadership transition will not produce a drastic change in its Taiwan policy. Some argue that the most significant transformation of the PRC's Taiwan policy—from its militant one of “liberating Taiwan” to one of peaceful unification under “one country, two systems”—was indeed prompted by the end of the Maoist era and the rise of the Deng Xiaoping-led leadership in China.

But the transformation was not so much a result of leadership transition as it was driven by momentous changes in the Beijing-Washington-Taipei triangular relationship. This included the normalization of Sino-American relations, the de-recognition of the Republic of China (ROC), and Beijing's belief (and to a lesser extent also Washington's) that the Kuomintang (KMT) regime on Taiwan could not hold out any longer with drastically dwindling international status.

Furthermore, another significant change in the PRC's Taiwan policy was precipitated by external developments, such as ROC President Lee Teng-hui's historic visit to the United States in 1995 and similar, though less dramatic moves to consolidate Taiwan's sovereignty. From the mid-1990s onwards, the key features of Beijing's Taiwan policy become the People Liberation Army's scenario-focused military modernization and China's intensified diplomatic strangulation.[1]

The current strategy of “Peaceful Development” was formally proposed and systematically elucidated by PRC President Hu Jintao in commemoration of the 30th anniversary of the “Message to Compatriots in Taiwan” on December 31, 2008.[2] However, elements of this strategy, such as prioritizing preventing Taiwan's *de jure* independence over achieving unification, strengthening economic ties and extending concrete benefits of closer cross-Strait relations to average Taiwanese people, were developed and practiced earlier in the decade.

In practice, the “Peaceful Development” strategy included pushing for greater economic and human exchanges, accepting more international space for a diplomatic truce with Taiwan, agreeing to delay political talks, and sustaining military pressure to hedge against the possible revival of Taiwanese pro-independence forces. Interestingly, the adoption of this strategy was not prompted by leadership transition in the PRC, but by the change of government in Taiwan in May 2008.

The current strategy works

Beijing's current Taiwan strategy and policy will likely endure after the leadership transition simply because it has been working. In a recent editorial published in the Chinese Communist Party's mouthpiece magazine, Wang Yi, director of Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council, summarized the Peaceful Development strategy's

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achievements as follows: laying the political foundation (opposing Taiwan independence, adhering to the 1992 Consensus) for the development of cross-strait relations; institutionalization of cross-strait exchange and cooperation and the signing of sixteen agreements, including the landmark Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA); realization of direct and two-way postal, air and sea, and trade links; significant expansion of all-level cross-strait human exchanges; and the containment of Taiwan independence separatist activities.[3]

ROC President Ma Ying-jeou's reelection in January 2012 for a second term through 2016 further suggests that the new PRC leadership is not likely to change course, at least in the near term. Ma's electoral victory not only makes Taiwan's future mainland policies more predictable, but is in itself seen as a vindication of the wisdom of Beijing's current policies.[4] After the election, Wang Yi commented with apparent relief that cross-strait relations had gone through a "major test", and that "Taiwan compatriots in the end chose peace, rejecting instability; cooperation, rejecting confrontation; and to move forward, rejecting falling back".[5] Had Tsai Ing-wen, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)'s presidential candidate, won the election, it is quite likely that Beijing's current policies towards Taiwan would have been reassessed, if not readjusted.

Meanwhile, the DPP's possible adjustment of its policy vis-à-vis mainland China also adds to Beijing's confidence that the "Peaceful Development" strategy is working. The DPP suffered another setback in the recent presidential elections, even though it lost by a much smaller margin compared with four years ago. The DPP's post-election review unemphatically pointed out that the party should seek more exchanges with mainland China in order to escape the "false impression" that it is "anti-China and locking Taiwan".[6]

Some prominent members of the DPP explicitly identified its China policy as the major cause of its electoral defeat, and even called for accepting the "1992 consensus" or working out some other formula that would enable it to open dialogue with Beijing.[7] How the DPP will specifically address these issues and the extent and pace of its policy adjustment remain to be seen, given that the intra-party debate is still ongoing and it is in the process of selecting the next chairperson. But it is reasonable to expect that the direction of the DPP's future China policy is to embrace more exchanges, dialogue and understanding with Beijing. For Beijing, this is good news.

Institutional constraints and Xi's Taiwan connections

All of the above developments seem to portend that time is on Beijing's side. There is also strong strategic rationale in retaining the current policy for the Xi Jinping-era Chinese leadership. Moreover, as Jacques deLisle pointed out, there are also institutional barriers to an abrupt rupture with the Hu Jintao-era approach to Taiwan. These institutional traits include the gradual process of leadership transition, as it takes several years for a new leader to consolidate power and bring forward new major policies. The PRC's consensus-based collective leadership makes important policy changes increasingly hard to achieve.[8] Paradoxically, the recent, dramatic fall of Bo Xilai simultaneously reveals the divisions among Chinese top leadership, as well as the paramount importance they attach to maintaining a façade of unity.

Even if Xi Jinping aspires to have his own legacy on the Taiwan issue he will ten years to build it. Moreover, the accomplishments that have defined previous PRC leaders' most important legacies are almost always at the domestic level—economic, social and political developments—not its foreign relations. In addition, Xi's long-term political career in Xiamen City and Fujian Province (1985-2002), both of which are geographically and culturally close with Taiwan and benefit enormously from cross-strait economic ties, has led some people to predict that Xi might adopt a more accommodating Taiwan policy. Tsai Der-sheng, Taiwan's Director-General of the National Security Bureau, opined that Xi understands Taiwan more than his predecessors, but also cautioned that no Chinese leaders would dare compromise too much on issues related to sovereignty and territorial integrity.[9]

Possible areas for change?

It will be interested to observe whether there will be some changes within the broad contours of the "Peaceful Development" strategy. There are two policy areas to watch. The first is whether Beijing will be more eager to push for political talks under Xi. There are already some PRC analysts that have expressed frustration over what they say

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is Ma's overcautious approach towards cross-Strait political issues.[10] But we should remember the unexpected tempest Ma cause during the election by mentioning that a seemingly innocuous peace accord with Beijing could be considered in the next ten years. Both the Taiwanese government and populace are not ready to step into the deep water of cross-Strait dialogue, politically, and psychologically.

More recently, the Taiwanese government denied that an economic experimental zone located on an island off the coast of Fujian is a jointly-sponsored pilot project testing the "one country, two systems" concept as Beijing appeared to portray it as. Taipei warned Beijing to refrain from leveraging economic affairs for political purposes, therefore indicating the sensitivity of even non-political matters with potential political implications.[11] Under these circumstances, a hasty push for political talks by the PRC will likely be met with a backlash from Taiwan.

The second area to consider is the military dimension of the PRC's Taiwan policy. Despite the unprecedented cross-Strait rapprochement, there has been no clear sign yet that the PRC intends to ease its military pressure against Taiwan. But if a new chapter is to be written in cross-Strait relations, the military dimension cannot remain the exception to the overall rule forever. As a first step, Beijing could consider partial redeployment or withdrawal of the 1,000+ short-range ballistic and cruise missiles targeting Taiwan, which have for many years have been the symbol of the military threat and hostile intentions of the mainland. A partial redeployment or withdrawal will not significantly impede Beijing's deterrent capability, but could sway the island's public opinion enormously.[12]

Xi Jinping is believed to have greater stature in the Chinese military than previous leaders. Time will tell whether he is willing and able to take on hardliners and the political risks that are required to make bold moves. If so, he may have his own name written into the history book of cross-Strait relations.

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[1] On the Taiwan scenario-focused military modernization after the mid-1990s, see David Shambaugh, *Modernizing China's Military: Progress, Problems, and Prospects*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002, p. 4; on Beijing's intensified diplomatic strangulation, see Jason C. Hu, "The Current State of ROC Diplomacy: An Abridgement of the Report by Foreign Minister Jason C. Hu to the Foreign and Overseas Chinese Affairs Committee, Legislative Yuan," September 21, 1998.

[2] Hu Jintao, "“Let Us Join Hands to Promote the Peaceful Development of Cross-Straits Relations and Strive with a United Resolve for the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation,” Speech at the Forum Marking the 30th Anniversary of the Issuance of the “Message to Compatriots in Taiwan”, December 31, 2008, http://www.gwytb.gov.cn/en/Special/Hu/201103/t20110322_1794707.htm

[3] Wang Yi, "Deepening Cross-Strait Relations, Creating A New Situation of Peaceful Development," April 17, 2012, <http://www.chinareviewnews.com/crn-webapp/doc/docDetailCNML.jsp?coluid=7&kindid=0&docid=102077388>.

[4] Taiwan Affairs Office, "Communist Party Central Committee Taiwan Affairs Office, State Council Taiwan Affairs Office Spokesman Comments on the Results of the Taiwan Region's Dual Elections," January 14, 2012, http://www.gwytb.gov.cn/wyly/201201/t20120115_2248402.htm.

[5] Wang Yi, "New Year's Message on Cross-Strait Relations: Carrying Forward and Write A New Chapter," January 30, 2012, http://www.chinataiwan.org/xwzx/la/201201/t20120130_2260513.htm.

[6] The Democratic Progressive Party, February 22, 2012, http://www.dpp.org.tw/news_content.php?sn=6043

[7] Chris Wang, "DPP Soul-Searching on Taiwan, '1992 Consensus'," *The Taipei Times*, January 30, 2012,

Chinese Leadership Transition and Cross-Strait Relations: Continuity Amid Uncertainty

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<http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2012/01/30/2003524216>; “Tung Li-wen: Evading the 1992 Consensus, the Key to Election Loss,” March 24, 2012, <http://www.chinareviewnews.com/doc/1020/5/1/0/102051054.html?coluid=5&kindid=23&docid=102051054&mdate=0324104519>; “Hsu Hsin-liang: Denying the 1992 Consensus, A Serious Strategic Mistake,” *The China Times*, February 14, 2012, <http://news.chinatimes.com/focus/501010543/112012021400522.html>.

[8] Jacques deLisle, “Strait Ahead? China’s Fifth Generation Leaders and Beijing’s Taiwan Policy,” Foreign Policy Research Institute E-Notes, July 2011, <http://www.fpri.org/enotes/2011/201107.delisle.chinatransition.pdf>

[9] “Xi Has Best Understanding of Taiwan: NSB Chief,” *The China Post*, March 11, 2012, <http://www.chinapost.com.tw/taiwan/china-taiwan-relations/2012/03/11/334227/Xi-has.htm>.

[10] Alan D. Romberg, “After the Taiwan Election: Planning for the Future,” *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 37, April 30, 2012, pp. 11-12.

[11] Shih Hsiu-chuan, “China’s Pingtan Zone too Political: MAC,” *The Liberty Times*, March 16, 2012, <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2012/03/16/2003527892>.

[12] In this regard, the U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, especially the possible sale of 66 requested F-16 C/D fighter jets, will render such a move much harder by justifying the PRC hardliners’ position that it still makes sense to keep as much military pressure as possible upon Taiwan. In history Beijing has indicated its flexibility in the missile deployments once. In October 2002, former PRC President Jiang Zemin reportedly proposed to President Bush that China could reduce the missiles opposite Taiwan, but on the condition that the U.S. reduces its arms sales to Taiwan. David G. Brown, “China-Taiwan Relations: Is China’s Flexibility Tactical or Significant?” *Comparative Connections* Vol. 4, No. 4, January 2003. On the other hand, the Obama Administration recently did seem to be more forthcoming in considering selling F-16 C/Ds to Taiwan. Paul Mozur, “U.S. Says It Is ‘Seriously Considering’ Selling More F-16 Fighters to Taiwan,” *The Wall Street Journal*, April 28, 2012.