

Peace Across the Taiwan Straits Enhanced but Uncertainties Still Abound¹

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2005 can be described as the year of breakthrough in relations of China's mainland with Taiwan since the end of the Cold War. Many positive developments were recorded in 2005 that worked towards the relaxation of the tension across the straits, curbing the splitting activities by the "Taiwan Independence", and laying a good foundation for the further all-dimensional contacts between the two sides in a spirit of seeking stability and co-prosperity and eventual peaceful unification of the Chinese nation. The precious progress was achieved through the joint efforts by the compatriots from both sides. But it is also clear that the fact that the mainland readjusted its policy under the new leadership of Hu Jintao has played a particularly significant role in facilitating the change of the situation. The following are the most noticeable highlights of Beijing's efforts with regard to its new Taiwan policy last year:

First of all, while continuing to adhere to its consistent policy of seeking peaceful unification under the formula of 'one country two systems' and resolutely opposing Taiwan independence, Beijing evidently shifted its focus first and foremost on widening the contacts with the island in an attempt to win the soul and minds of the Taiwanese compatriots, and to create more favorable conditions for the eventual unification. On March 4, Hu set forth a four-point guideline on Cross-Straits relations, which reads:

1. Never sway in adhering to the one-China principle;
2. Never give up efforts to seek peaceful reunification;
3. Never change the principle of placing hope on the Taiwan people; and
4. Never compromise in opposing the "Taiwan independence" secessionist activities.²

Hu Jintao's above statement has actually set the basic tone for Beijing's new policy. One can easily find out that although Hu's four-point guideline repeated what had been stressed before, the way he expounded it clearly pointed to a more peace-orientated vision, characterized by greater creativeness, realism, patience, and magnanimity, compared to China's previous policy. No longer does one perceive the impetuous sentiments that Beijing used to show in its threat to use military force "if

¹ The author wishes to stress that the views expressed in the paper are entirely of his own, and do not necessarily represent those of any other individuals or any organizations.

² See "Hu Jintao Offers 4-point suggestions With Regard to the Improvement and Developing Relations Across the Straits", Xinhua News Agency, March 4, 2005, <http://www.china.com.cn/chinese/TCC/haixia/802236.htm>.

the Taiwan authorities refuse, sine die, the peaceful settlement of cross-Straits reunification through negotiations”, or its insistence on working out a unilateral timetable for the unification. Instead, what Beijing now seemed to emphasize was that as long as the Taiwan authorities were willing to maintain the status quo, the mainland would be glad to discuss any issue on an equal footing . These consultations and negotiations may be conducted in steps and phases and with flexible and varied modalities. It is also suggested that the two sides may consult and negotiate on officially ending the state of hostility, mapping out the development of cross-Straits relations, steps and arrangements for a peaceful reunification, the political status of the Taiwan authorities, the Taiwan region's room of international operation that is compatible with its status, and other matters concerning the achievement of peaceful reunification. All these suggestions have shown that China' new leadership headed by Hu has a better understanding of the security concerns of the people in Taiwan and a willingness to offer greater flexibility to meet these concerns during the reunification process.

Secondly, in light of Hu Jintao's policy guidelines, the National People's Congress (NPC) enacted the Anti-Secession Law on March 14, 2005. The law had, in essence, translated Hu Jintao's guidelines into legal language, thus constituting one more substantive step of the mainland to frustrate the designs of the independence secession force for creeping separation of Taiwan from the mainland and stabilize the situation across the Taiwan Straits in the future. Before the Anti-Secession Law, Beijing's policies with regard to Taiwan were all announced through statements of the top leaderships. From a legal point of view, these statements lack the legally binding power. Whenever there was change of China's leadership, questions would always arise if Beijing's policy may also see some changes. Against the backdrop, the law now provides for the legislative purpose and scope of application of the legislation all its consistent policy towards Taiwan. By articulating it in such a legal framework, the law will hopefully help reduce the capital of the secessionists to cheat, eliminate much of the misgivings that people may have, and give a sobering impact on the minds of the international community as the law now leaves behind no room for whatever doubt about Beijing's sincerity for the peaceful unification as well as the determination to employ “non-peaceful means” as a last resort if necessary. This policy will not change with change of Beijing's leadership as it already has become the law.

In addition, the law particularly stipulates that the State Council and the Central Military Commission shall decide on and execute the non-peaceful means and other necessary measures as provided for by the law and shall promptly report to the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress. This means that the Government and the PLA have actually been authorized by the Congress to take whatever measures as thought appropriate to deal with a dangerous situation in the future without having first to coming to the legislature for further deliberation. The authorization is extremely important as it will ensure an timely and effective

decision-making mechanism and implementation process in place when any action is needed taking. This should be one more indication that Beijing is truly serious about the use of non-peaceful means though as a last resort.

Thirdly, at the invitation of Hu Jintao on behalf of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC), Mr. Lien Chan, Chairman of China's Nationalist Party (KMT), Mr. James Soong, Chairman of the People's First Party (PFP), and Mr. Yok Mu-ming, Chairman of New Party all paid their visits to the mainland respectively in 2005. The visits by all the major opposition parties in Taiwan have evidently broken the long political stalemate in the relations across the straits. A number of agreements were reached between the guests and the host, with regard to the political conditions for any meaningful cooperative measures between the two sides of the straits. These political conditions include opposition to the independence, insistence on the 92 consensus (one China but two sides), and both the mainland and Taiwan belongs to the one and same China. The warm support to the visits by the masses of the people from both sides also demonstrated how deeply the mainland and the island have been tied to each other by over five thousand years' common tradition and culture, kindred-ship and practical common economic interests. The visits have also greatly increased the mainland society's understanding of the thoughts of its Taiwan compatriots and removed much misunderstanding among the Taiwan people about the mainland.

Fourthly, following the enactment of the Anti-Secession Law, and the agreements reached with the island's opposition parties, Beijing lost no time to implement serious, favorable steps and measures aimed at expanding the economic and trade, personnel and cultural contacts. Most noteworthy are measures to make traveling in and out of the mainland more convenient for Taiwan compatriots and allowing more varieties of Taiwanese fruit into the mainland market, of which 15 now enjoy duty-free treatment. They all won widespread support from Taiwan compatriots and acclaim from the international community.

Last but not the least, Beijing also strengthened its efforts to mobilize the international support to its revised policy towards Taiwan and achieved impressive progress. More and more countries and international organizations have now a better understanding of the delicacy of the Taiwan question, showed a more determined attitude of accepting that Taiwan is part of China and endorsed a peaceful unification on the basis of one country and two systems. But what is particularly noteworthy is that China seemed to secure a more explicit commitment from the US to oppose Taiwan's independence, thus noticeably reducing the frictions on the Taiwan question between the two countries. In fact, the US new diplomatic gesture is part and parcel of the overall trend of the stable development of the China-US relations in 2005. Senior-level exchange and communication between the two countries were frequent. President Hu Jintao and President George W. Bush met on several occasions and kept close contact through correspondence and the phone. During their meetings, both

sides agreed to enhance mutual understanding, expand consensus, strengthen mutual trust and boost the China-US constructive and cooperative relationship in the 21st century in an all-round way. This points out the direction for further development of the China-US relations. It is not to say that Washington has changed fundamentally its Taiwan policy, But clearly it seemed that putting the Taiwan question in the background is in the interests of both countries.

Against the backdrop, the security landscape across the Taiwan Straits has seen favorable changes to the peace and stability of the both sides. The tension in the Straits has greatly ameliorated; the pro-independence elements represented by the ruling party and Chen Shuibian in Taiwan has met serious setback while the influence of the opposition parties called the Pan-Blue camp is evidently on the rise; and the mainland seems now to have gained the initiative in the affairs across the straits and no longer let the pro-independence elements be led by the nose.

So, when we enter the year of 2006, the situation across the straits is quite encouraging. The mainland will no doubt make more efforts to build peaceful and stable relations across the Taiwan Straits. "We have repeatedly stated that we will seek peaceful reunification with our utmost sincerity and effort," Li Weiyi, spokesman for the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council, said at a press conference. "We will continue to unite the compatriots in Taiwan and overseas Chinese to further promote cross-Straits personnel and economic exchanges and cooperation, and promote the early realization of the 'three direct links' of the two sides," he said. "As long as the Taiwan authorities acknowledge the one-China principle and the 1992 Consensus, cross-Straits dialogue can be resumed and any topic can be discussed, we have full confidence in the good prospect of cross-Straits relations and peaceful reunification of the motherland," Li added.³

But on the other hand, one should not be too optimistic about the situation. „Taiwan Independence” forces have not ceased their splitting activities. As a result, the source of the tension across the straits remained; the situation for the opposing and curbing of the splittist forces and their activities is still serious and complex. Thus, it remains one of the most urgent tasks for the compatriots across the Taiwan Straits to unswervingly curb the splittist activities and safeguard peace and stability in the cross-Straits region. What deserves special attention is that although the DPP and Chen Shuibian are now in its worst shape and falling in utter isolation, they still have advantage of being in a ruling position. Further, they still enjoy the support from quite a large number of the fundamentalist pro-independence elements (called Deep-Green camp). Their capacity of making trouble should not be underestimated particularly if they were to be cornered and wanted to stake everything on a single throw. Already there are signs from Chen Shuibian’s new year address that he intended to pursue a more confrontational policy towards the mainland, and resist any moves to improve

³ „Curbing Splittists Urgent Task for Compatriots Across-Straits: Spokesman”, Xinhua News Agency, Beijing, January 9, 2006, <http://www.chinataiwan.org/web/webportal/W2037304/Uzhaobing/A171135.html>.

relations across the straits. He even brought up again the timetable of its "constitutional reform", shifted its promotion strategy for and puffed its "Taiwan Independence" – a very dangerous step that even startled Washington. In the circumstances, the future across the Taiwan Straits will still be full of uncertainties primarily because the obstinate resistance by the pro-independence ruling party.

The uncertainties will also come from the future development of the oppositions on the island. Despite the rise of the KMT – the largest opposition party in Taiwan, it seems still an open question if Mr. Ma Yingjiu, the new chairman of the KMT is able to unite all the party members around him and bring up substantive reform to the old party so as to remold the KMT into a truly dynamic political force that regain its appeal to the average Taiwanese, and to solve the problem of merging with the PFP so as to rally all the opposition forces into a more powerful Blue Camp in Taiwan to defeat the DPP in the next election in 2008.

Finally, the situation across the Straits will also hinge to a large extent on the US attitude towards the inevitable closer ties between the two sides. True, Washington does not hope to see the escalation of the increasing tension in the region to the point of growing into a military conflict, which may pose it a real dilemma whether it should involve or not. So, to restrain the independence elements and to mitigate the tension across the Straits is in the US interests. In the meantime, excessively warm relations between the two sides may also lead to the eventual unification, and jeopardize its security interests in its perspective. There are already voices of uneasiness from certain quarters of Washington with regard to the growing closeness across the Straits last year. Against the background, the critical question remains if Washington will continue to take a positive position of promoting the détente of the two sides and for the peaceful unification of China in the end. The answer to this question is far from being predictable and optimistic. In addition, the US arms dumping into the island will continue to be a serious issue between China and the US, which could easily become another bone of contention between the two countries.