

# Cross-Strait Relations: Diplomatic Entanglement or Rapprochement?

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## **Preface**

SINCE MAYING-JEOU became the President of the Republic of China in 2008, Taiwan has taken a series of diplomatic initiatives in the hopes of expanding its role in international affairs. The Ma administration's foreign policy can be summarized as a "viable diplomacy"—another side of Taiwan's diplomatic truce based on the growing mutual trust between the Republic of China (Taiwan) and the People's Republic of China (Mainland China). "Viable diplomacy" allows all concerned sides in the region to breathe a sigh of relief. It allows Taiwan and Mainland China to interact peacefully and rationally and to create harmonious and nonconfrontational cross-strait relations. This essay examines (1) the evolution of cross-strait contacts and relations from 1949 to the present; (2) the effects of pragmatic cross-strait relations; (3) Taiwan's participation in international affairs; (4) impact of cross-strait relations on Washington-Taipei-Beijing relations and; (5) future prospects of cross-strait relations.

## **Evolution of Cross-Strait Contacts**

Cross-strait relations refers to the relations between Taiwan and Mainland China, which are separated by the Taiwan Strait in the west Pacific Ocean, and by political differences between their respective governments: the Republic of China (ROC) and the People's Republic of China (PRC). The 1949 Chinese Civil War turned decisively in favor of the Chinese Communists, who then proclaimed the PRC in Beijing; the ROC government led by the Kuomintang (KMT) retreated to Taiwan.

Military conflicts continued, and both governments diplomatically vied to be the “legitimate government of China,” each declaring the other as illegitimate. But during this period, until around 1971, most members of the United Nations recognized the ROC as the legitimate government that represented Taiwan and Mainland China. The PRC had legitimacy only for the members of the Soviet Bloc and the Non-Aligned Movement. In 1971, however, the PRC occupied the Chinese seat at the United Nations, replacing the ROC. Subsequently in 1979, the U.S. established formal diplomatic relations with the PRC. The international community thus generally acknowledged “One China, with the PRC as the representative government of China” (Lee 2001).

Beginning in the 1980s, the ROC underwent political and economic democratization. And since the lifting of martial law in 1987, Taipei has progressively adopted more open policies toward Beijing, spurring economic, cultural, and educational exchanges (Gluck 2007). In order to effect negotiations, Taiwan established the Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF) in November 1990, and Mainland China established the Association for Relations across the Taiwan Straits (ARATS) in December 1991. This mechanism allows the two governments to engage each other on a semiofficial basis without compromising their sovereignty. Since SEF and ARATS were established, the two organizations began a series of talks that culminated in the famous “1992 meetings,” which—together with subsequent correspondence—established the “1992 Consensus.” It is a tacit agreement, and the singular basis by which solid exchanges between Taiwan and Mainland China could be reached (Soong 2011). The 1992 Consensus, some observers describe, posits that, on the subject of the “One China principle,” both sides recognize only one China—that both Taiwan and Mainland China belong to the same China. However, the two sides agree to interpret its meaning according to their own definition (Su 2002).

However, in 2000, cross-strait relations completely changed because the Chen Shui-bian administration adopted a confrontational stance against Mainland China. Chen’s repudiation of the 1992 Consensus, along with

Mainland China's insistence that Taiwan agree to the "One China" principle for negotiations to occur, prevented further improvements on cross-strait relations. And after an eight-year rule and losses in the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) still struggles with and holds internal debates about cross-strait policy. Some scholars believe that if the DPP does not recognize the 1992 Consensus, cross-strait relations will deteriorate even if it wins the 2016 presidential election.

After decades of tension, relations between Taiwan and Mainland China have warmed since Ma Ying-jeou became the President of the ROC in 2008. The Ma administration has carried out initiatives to create conditions conducive for regional peace, stability, and prosperity on the basis of the 1992 Consensus. For better understanding between the two countries, President Ma reiterated the 1992 Consensus on 5 November 2014 (before APEC forum held in Beijing), saying that "both governments oppose Taiwanese independence and support a 'one China' policy with their own respective interpretations. It is therefore conducive to peace and helpful for future development"(United Daily News 2014) President Ma's basic cross-strait agenda is to maintain the status quo during his presidency under the framework of the ROC Constitution. This means no unification talks with Mainland China, no pursuit of Taiwan independence, and no use of force to settle sovereignty issues (Lam 2008).

Since the Ma-led KMT regained power in 2008, relations between Taipei and Beijing have continued to move forward. It is no exaggeration to suggest that cross-strait relations have been in its most stable phase in decades. Public opinion polls in 2014 showed that a vast majority of the population approves of the easing of tensions with Mainland China and believes that the rapprochement trend can boost Taiwan's economy. When Ma Ying-jeou was reelected by a larger-than-anticipated margin in January 2012, Beijing reaffirmed its conviction that President Ma's policy since 2008 had for the most part achieved its principal objectives of holding off opposition to Taiwan independence and fidelity to the 1992 Consensus (Ni 2012).

### **The Effect of Pragmatic Cross-Strait Relations**

Since President Ma assumed office in May 2008, the ROC and the PRC have undertaken a systematic effort to stabilize ties, reduce the level of mutual fear, and reverse previously negative relations. They have made significant progress on the economic front, removing obstacles and facilitating broader cooperation. The two have signed 23 agreements thus far—most notable of which is the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) signed on 29 June 2010. The ECFA serves as the foundation for a free-trade area between Taiwan and Mainland China. And since the start of Ma Ying-jeou's administration in 2008, China has become Taiwan's largest export market and its second largest source of imports. It accounts for the largest share of Taiwan's trade surplus, and the largest share of Taiwan's overseas investment (see Table 1). The signing of the ECFA is a major step forward in giving Taiwan the opportunity to participate more fully in the process of regional economic integration (Liu & Shih 2012, 16).

In 2008 and 2009, Taiwan and Mainland China signed the Cross-Strait Air Transportation Agreement and Cross-Strait Air Transportation Supplementary Agreement, respectively. Since then, direct flights between major cities in Taiwan and Mainland China have increased almost every week (see Table 2), with more than 850 weekly direct flights. As for cargo ships, there are at least 160 freighters which embark and disembark on 70 ports in both countries each month.

In 2008, Taiwan and Mainland China signed the Cross-Strait Agreement Concerning Mainland Tourists Travelling to Taiwan. Since then, the number of tourists from Mainland China visiting Taiwan has increased yearly (see Table 3). Currently, at least one million Taiwanese people work, study, travel, or migrate to Mainland China on a daily basis. On the other hand, 5,000 Chinese tourists are allowed to visit Taiwan everyday (see Table 4).

TABLE 1: Bilateral trade volume between Taiwan and Mainland China from 2005-2014

Year	Total Bilateral Trade Volume	Taiwan Export to Mainland China	Taiwan Import from Mainland China	Note
2014	103.2	82.1	48.0	
2013	124.3	81.7	42.6	
2012	121.6	80.7	40.9	Europe Debt Crisis
2011	127.5	83.9	43.5	
2010	112.8	76.9	35.9	In 2010, ECFA was signed and took effect.
2009	78.6	54.2	24.4	Global Financial Crisis in 2008-2009
2008	98.2	66.8	31.3	Start of Ma Ying-jeou's Administration
2007	90.4	62.4	28	
2006	76.5	51.8	24.7	
2005	63.7	43.6	20.1	Dr. Lien Chan's visit to Chinese Mainland to meet with President Hu Jintao

Data Source: Bureau of Foreign Trade of R.O.C.

\*Total bilateral trade volume is expressed in USD billion

TABLE 2: Weekly Direct Flights between Taiwan and Mainland China, 2008-2014

Year	Total Weekly Direct Flights
2014	850
2013	670
2012	558
2011	370
2010	270
2009	108
2008	36

Data Source: Department of Statistics, Ministry of Transportation and Communication of R.O.C.

TABLE 3: Chinese Mainland Visitor Arrivals to Taiwan from 2008-2014

Year	Total Visitor Volume	Growth Ratio
2014	3,987,152	38.93%
2013	2,870,000	10.96%
2012	2,586,428	44.90%
2011	1,784,185	9.41%
2010	1,630,735	67.75%
2009	972,123	195.30%
2008	329,204	—

Data Source: Tourism Bureau of R.O.C.

TABLE 4: 2014 Visitor Arrivals to Taiwan

	Origin	Total Number of Tourists	%
1	Mainland China	3,987,152	41.37%
2	Japan	1,634,790	16.96%
3	Southeast Asia	1,388,305	14.41%
4	Hong Kong and Macau	1,375,770	14.28%
5	United States of America	458,691	4.76%
6	Korea	527,684	5.48%
7	Europe	264,880	2.75%
Total		9,637,272	100%

Data Source: Tourism Bureau, Ministry of Transportation and Communications, R.O.C.

Taiwan and Mainland China signed the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA) under ECFA in 2013, which entails service market access and various reciprocal conditions. However, the DPP strongly opposed the CSSTA in the Legislative Yuan. And as a sign of protest, the youth, together with 54 civic organizations and NGOs, occupied Taiwan's Legislative Yuan from March to April 2014. Later coined as the "Sunflower Movement" (Cole 2014), the occupation was a response to the public's demand for supervision of cross-strait agreements, and an indication of national security concerns in the negotiation process. The government deemed it necessary to have a more open and transparent process to strengthen communication between the Legislative Yuan and the public. Given Taiwan's unique political ecology, it must be stressed that Ma Ying-jeou has never gained support from the opposition bloc for his cross-strait policy. They have repeatedly questioned his ability to handle the subtlety of Taiwan's relations with Mainland China, warning him to not overlook the extreme complexities of the matter.

### Taiwan's International Participation

Under the 1992 Consensus with Mainland China, Taiwan's policy of "diplomatic truce" has created a pragmatic and viable approach to expand its international space. Ma's administration compromised its participation in a certain range of international activities to some extent, but it called on Chinese leaders to stop isolating Taipei in the international community, and worked towards providing Taiwan an adequate 'international space' in global affairs. President Ma (2008) stated in his first inaugural address in 2008 that

"Only when Taiwan is no longer being isolated in the international arena, can cross-strait relations move forward with confidence."

Recognizing the need to seek Beijing's cooperation to expand Taiwan's international space, the Ma administration decided to commit to the 1992 Consensus and hold off pursuing Taiwan's *de jure* independence. As mentioned, the 1992 Consensus is a verbal agreement between Beijing and Taipei that allows them to support a One China policy, but have different interpretations thereof. Because this 'agree-to-disagree' formula aims to maintain the status quo, President Ma hopes that both governments could set aside their differences over sovereignty issues and advance relations—including Taipei's demand for international space—that will benefit both its people (Chu and Nathan 2007). President Ma's initiative is generally recognized as pragmatic and viable.

For its part, Beijing has become increasingly sophisticated and subtle in its cross-strait policies. Its leaders have repeatedly made calls for talks to end military confrontation, enhance economic cooperation, and negotiate arrangements for Taiwan's international participation (Xu and Vogel 2009, 114). And Beijing hopes that President Ma continue his conciliatory approach to cross-strait relations (Lam 2008) to meet Taipei's demand for more international space. For this purpose, priority was given to Taiwan's participation in the World Health Organization (Xinhua 2005). In addition to the Taiwan Minister of Health's participation in



seven consecutive World Health Assemblies (WHAs) since 2008, Taiwan was also invited to attend the triennial Assembly meeting of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) in September 2013. It is noteworthy that Taiwan's participation in international affairs enables it to contribute experience and knowledge that benefits the global community and justifies its status as a responsible stakeholder.

### **Impact on the Trilateral Washington-Taipei-Beijing Relations**

The improvement of cross-strait relations under Ma Ying-jeou has created a *modus vivendi* among Taipei, Beijing, and Washington despite their different, if not conflicting interests. This is evident in the matter of U.S. arms sales to Taiwan. Taipei has wanted closer ties with the United States and continued asking for more advanced weaponry system from the U.S. This has not been to the liking of Beijing, which wants the amount of arms sales significantly reduced, if not altogether suspended. For its part, Washington has exercised subtlety and restraint on these sensitive issues in order to not jeopardize the progress of cross-strait relations (Wang 2010).

It is interesting to note that in the midst of all the rows caused by the arms sales of the U.S. to Taiwan, overall cross-strait relations have not been adversely affected. Most likely, Taipei calculates that it can pursue the parallel course of benefiting from the improvement of cross-strait relations and purchasing arms from the US to strengthen its defense. Beijing, however, cannot afford to jeopardize the hard-earned achievements in cross-strait relations simply for the sake of opposing Taiwan's arms purchase from the U.S. Although Chinese officials kept arguing that such arms sales will send the wrong signal to the forces of Taiwan independence and seriously undermine the peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait, Beijing has not done anything to criticize Ma administration. Apparently, both Beijing and Washington are willing to show deference to President Ma as it is indeed in their common interest

to forge ahead with stable cross-strait relations. It can also be argued that with the significant improvements of cross-strait relations since May 2008, coupled with the Obama Administration's strong desire to maintain a stable U.S.-China relationship, the time might have arrived for all three sides to take a fresh and more creative look at the issue of the arms sale under the new dynamics in cross-strait relations and to find a way to manage, if not resolve, the problem.

### **Future Prospect of Cross-Strait Relations**

At any rate, it is fair to say that the dazzling and swift improvement on cross-strait relations since Ma Ying-jeou took office has significantly reduced the prospect of military conflict in the Taiwan Strait and has brought tangible and intangible "peace dividends" to people on both sides of the Strait and to the Asia-Pacific region as a whole. And after decades of twists and turns, Taipei and Beijing have toned down their assessments as to how far cross-strait relations can go under the current situation. Both should realize that difficult and sensitive issues remain and will need to be earnestly and jointly tackled in the future if the two sides can create and sustain a peaceful environment in the region.

One issue is the concern in some quarters that the rise of China poses a challenge, if not threat, to regional stability, including cross-strait relations. Whether that holds true or not, the maintenance of peace and stability with Taiwan and in the region would actually be more conducive to China's sustained development and national interests. Any hindrance or disruption of China's development efforts would pose harsh repercussions on its seething domestic issues such as income inequality, unemployment, and corruption.

Second, Ma's resounding defeat in the local elections on 29 November 2014—the litmus test for the coming 2016 presidential election—not only increased the stakes but also the unpredictability of future cross-strait relations because no one knows if President Ma's mainland China policy, especially the adherence to the 1992 Consensus,

would be maintained. Moreover, Taiwan's domestic situation and the "Blue-Green" entanglement have complicated Taiwan's handling of subtle domestic as well as cross-strait issues.

Third, while Beijing-Taipei rapprochement is still in its current stage of dealing with "easy and functional issues," Washington may still feel comfortable with the warming up of cross-strait relations. But when the relationship begins to touch on more sensitive political and security issues that have implications on U.S. interests and future U.S.-Taiwan-China relations, not only will Beijing and Taipei need to overcome more hurdles, but Washington may also find it more challenging to adjust to the changing new reality in cross-strait relations.

Fourth, even though there are demands to push for political consultation from Mainland China, it is important to know that if Beijing is perceived by the Taiwan public as pushing too hard, it could be counterproductive. All sides agree that the cross-strait relations have entered a period of "peaceful development," different from the period of "peaceful unification" and that the former could last for a long time. In this light, Mainland China should respect the achievements in cross-strait relations and avoid developing an eagerness for quick success and instant gratification. Beijing should not push to resolve difficult issues when the conditions for doing so are not there. It makes more sense to tackle political differences after the two sides have accumulated enough mutual trust. Indeed, Taiwan has adopted a "building blocks" approach in its pursuit of long-term peace across the Taiwan Strait.

Finally, a position on cross-strait relations under the R.O.C. Constitution framework is the best way of improving future negotiation process, both theoretically and practically. No matter who the ruling party is, only the R.O.C. Constitution ensures and steadily promotes institutionalized cross-strait negotiations on the basis of the 1992 Consensus of One China with respective interpretations. This was the ROC position in response to the 18th Congress of the Communist Party of China in November 2012; Taipei stated that it

would continue to adhere to the status quo of “no unification, no independence, and no use of force” as it promotes exchanges, dialogue, and negotiations under the premise of effective risk control and the framework of the R.O.C. Constitution. Taipei will continue to promote institutionalized negotiations in order to seek peaceful, stable, mutually beneficial, and win-win cross-strait relations (Mainland Affairs Council 2012).

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