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Confidence-Building Across the Taiwan Strait: Taiwan Strait as a Peace Zone Proposal

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Introduction

Chen Shui-bian's dramatic presidential election on March 18, 2000 signaled an historic shift in Taiwan's domestic politics.

It also offers his administration an opportunity to embark on a new era in cross-Strait relations. Only days after his election and his inaugural address, Chen took a number of conciliatory steps toward Beijing, reducing some of the tension and distrust that arose during the controversial presidential campaign.² President Chen now faces the difficult task of demonstrating to Beijing that Taiwan has the sincerity and goodwill necessary to initiate the comprehensive normalization of relations. This paper offers an innovative strategy to guide this new rapprochement and reap maximum political benefits as well as increased security for the region.

This paper proposes that President Chen advocate a Taiwan Strait Peace Zone (TSPZ). This process would be initiated by bold unilateral steps taken by Taiwan to induce a sense of mutual trust, followed up by distinctly new forms of confidence-building measures (CBMs) as well as arms control mechanisms that could guide future cross-Strait relations. Eventually, the two sides of the Taiwan Strait would sign a peace agreement formally ending hostility and create a zone of peace in the Taiwan Strait, so as to ensure cross-Straits prosperity and development, as well as the security of the region.

To provide some background, the paper begins with an historical overview of the recent tensions in the Taiwan Strait, followed by a detailed description of the Taiwan Strait Peace Zone proposal. This discussion of the framework, processes and prospects for the TSPZ

concept is followed by an evaluation of likely critiques. Finally, the study concludes by offering five concrete steps leaders on both sides will have to take to turn this vision into reality.

Security Dilemma Across the Taiwan Strait: An Historical Overview

In the early 1990s, Taiwan began a policy of greater openness toward the mainland. Its nominal policy of seeking to re-conquer the mainland was finally abolished in 1990. President Lee Teng-hui established in its stead the National Unification Council, which adopted the Guidelines for National Unification the following March. These stated that unification would be attained in three phases: a short-term phase during which the two sides would build understanding through non-official exchanges and contacts through quasi-official intermediary organizations; a medium-term phase of mutual trust and cooperation when official contacts and direct communications would be established; and a long-term phase of consultation and unification in the which the two sides would map out a constitutional system for a democratic, free, and equitably prosperous China.

The shift toward a more cooperative stance culminated in the establishment of two nominally unofficial organizations—Taiwan's Strait Exchange Foundation (SEF) and mainland China's Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait (ARATS)—in 1991. In the meantime, Taipei has concentrated on international political measures, hoping that latent security concerns across the Taiwan Strait will be ameliorated with growing international ties.

This trend toward reconciliation was interrupted after President Lee's visit to Cornell University in June 1995 and Beijing's subsequent display of military force in the Strait in July-August 1995 and March 1996. After a brief cooling off period, cross-Strait relations were once again disrupted as a result of President Lee Teng-hui's call for state-to-state relations with the mainland in June 1999. The election of opposition politician Chen Shui-bian in March 2000 ushers in a new, potentially more dynamic, but critical period for cross-Strait relations. However, by late 2000 both sides continue to eye one another warily, constrained by lack of trust and their respective domestic political climates.

The preceding summary illustrates a classic security dilemma for the Taiwan Strait. Taipei has insisted on pursuing international breathing space while Beijing refuses to give up the right to use force to halt Taiwan's independence. In the resulting cycle of stability-instability, neither side can easily take measures to strengthen its own security without making the other feel less secure, leading in turn to countermeasures that negate the original measures. This dynamic pressures both sides to continually pursue military buildups and destabilizing displays of determination.

Taiwan as a Peace Zone Proposal

The "one-China, two definitions formula," as agreed by both sides of the Taiwan Strait in November 1992, offers a foundation upon which substantial, far-reaching confidence building measures can be established and which can alleviate the security dilemma both sides confront. Under this formula to date, Beijing has supported ad hoc arrangements for Taipei's participation in a number of inter-governmental organizations. With Beijing's acquiescence, Taiwan has participated in the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) under the name of "Chinese Taipei". China also agrees that Taiwan may participate in the World Trade Organization (WTO) as a separate Taiwan-Penghu-Jinmen-Mazu tariff zone (or as Chinese Taipei) after China's entry into the WTO.

By the same token, Taiwan could adopt the Chinese Taipei formula and enter into multilateral arms control fora, international regimes, and treaty based inter-governmental organizations as a separate Taiwan-Penghu-Jinmen-Mazu peace zone.

The idea of declaring the Taiwan Strait as a Peace Zone has three essential pillars: autonomy, equity and reciprocity. Autonomy involves the development of procedures and institutions that will regulate cross-Strait security relations. Equity means achieving substantial consensus on the functional boundaries of the security arrangements and on the procedures for resolving disputes within those boundaries. Reciprocity requires the establishment of a mutually benign relationship, realized through joint pledges to not endanger each other's security and stability while in the midst of exchanges, and to not deny the other's existence as a political entity.

The Taiwan Strait Peace Zone would have three operational levels: unilateral, bilateral and multilateral. On the unilateral dimension, Taiwan should initially announce that it will not develop nuclear weapons for any political purpose in order to convey a positive signal to China. This unilateral approach understands that an offensive posture is as much the cause of strategic instability as defensive posture is the cause of strategic stability. Under the TSPZ formula, Taiwan will express explicitly that it will adhere to a non-nuclear posture. This unilateral step will be followed by written promises on both sides to not introduce nuclear weapons into the Taiwan Strait Peace Zone.

An ad hoc international arrangement of verification should then be established, preferably by the International Atomic Energy Agency, to guarantee compliance with the obligations deriving from these pledges.

On the bilateral level, Taiwan should forgo future options to participate in U.S.-led Theater Missile Defense (TMD) development in exchange for China removing all its short-range mobile missiles deployed within 600 kilometers of Taiwan. This approach addresses concerns in three separate areas. Militarily, Taiwan creates a stable security environment in the Strait, which in turn provides China with a favorable political environment. Politically, it eradicates certain political-military cooperation with the U.S. by Taiwan, which will invite positive political assurances from China. Strategically, Taiwan forgoes future limited military options aimed at reducing existing threats in exchange for gaining the strategic removal of China's ballistic missile threat and further deepening a new consensus across the Taiwan Strait.

On the multilateral dimension, China should support Taiwan joining multilateral arms control fora, international regimes and/or treaty-based IGOs as an observer under the name Chinese Taipei. Taiwan should pledge to fully observe the full-state membership requirements of these U.N. specialized agencies and subsidiary agencies. In return Taiwan should forge direct postal, transport and commercial links with China, followed by an exchange of visits by high-level officials. These concrete steps will create favorable conditions for future consultations and eventual resolution.

This proposal requires that the two sides adhere to several fundamental standards. First, each side should express explicitly that they adhere to a principle of peaceful resolution. Secondly, as a general rule China should recognize that Taiwan will require special ad hoc arrangements for its participation in international organizations before ultimate resolution. Third, China states explicitly in written form that it will refrain from using nuclear weapons against Taiwan and likewise, in a written form, Taiwan promises not to develop nuclear weapons for seeking Taiwan's independence. Overall, this proposal provides Taiwan with the greater "international space" it deserves, while laying the foundation for trust, reassurance, and a peaceful resolution of differences.

Caveats and Criticisms

Any effort to envision a future radically different from present reality is vulnerable to criticism for being impractical and possibly even dangerous. Likely criticisms of the TSPZ proposal arise in different categories of political science, those that emphasize domestic politics and realism. First, a typical realist critique would argue that no peaceful solution to the conflict over Taiwan is possible unless China is deterred from attempting to take Taiwan by force. The two critical elements for deterring China are the U.S. explicit commitment to defend Taiwan from aggression and Taiwan's own capacity to blunt the various military means—missile attack, submarine blockade, or outright invasion—that China might employ against Taiwan.

Second, domestic politics in both China and Taiwan also provide fodder for likely skeptics. In particular, Beijing's rigid insistence on the one-country, two-systems formula has been widely accepted by scholars as an indication of its unwillingness to show flexibility. Given a tense domestic situation and strong nationalism, China's leaders are under a great deal of pressure to show progress while avoiding compromise on Taiwan issues. Beijing therefore tends to view most cross-Strait issues in zero-sum terms. If this proposal is seen as favoring Taiwan, Chinese leaders will have a hard time accepting it. The inevitable trade-offs made through the negotiating process detailed above must therefore not be negotiated in secret between the U.S. and China, but instead openly negotiated between China and Taiwan or between China and the U.S. after extensive consultations with Taiwan.

Overcoming the obstacles posed by domestic politics in Taiwan is equally challenging. Many Taiwanese already believe that Taiwan's security is in jeopardy as a result of an aggressive Chinese military build-up. They argue that a rigorous arms build-up is therefore required to assure the credibility of Taiwan's deterrent. Under these conditions, it appears that a base of domestic political support for a CBM with China is unattainable.

However, there are at least three good reasons to question the underlying assumptions of these critiques. First, the cross-Strait relationship does not have to artificially constrain its scope to a near-exclusive military-driven mode of action and reaction. Second, this proposal demonstrates a potential tool which could integrate arms control approaches with political conflict resolution. By debunking Cold War orthodoxy about military solutions to the cross-Strait issue, this proposal shows how the TSPZ process can transcend the narrow goal of regulating the military balance and become a constructive tool for resolving this problem. Finally, the mere possibility of progress toward a peace zone should at least draw some attention from one or more of the Track II dialogues on cross-Strait relations.

Previously, aspects of the proposal, such as establishing the Taiwan Strait as a Zero Ballistic Missiles Zone and removing all existing Chinese ballistic missiles designed for a deep strike against Taiwan, seemed fanciful. However, dramatic shifts on the Korean Peninsula and the rising apprehension over an offense-defense race across the Taiwan Strait have made this proposal more plausible. With U.S. support, the TSPZ proposal could begin to address the Taiwan conundrum in a more far-sighted and productive manner.

Conclusion

Political relations between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait over the past few decades have been characterized by a traumatic cycle of fierce political tension, military standoffs and most of all, missed opportunities for a mutually acceptable compromise. Early expectations that economic interdependence across the Taiwan Strait would allow both sides to restructure the Cold War mode of relations evaporate quickly whenever Taiwan expresses its assertiveness. The degeneration of cross-Strait relations in 1995-1996 left both sides with few options for developing a closer relationship.

President Lee's more recent "state-to-state" formula may have poisoned the atmosphere in the cross-Strait relationship, but this may be alleviated by innovative new thinking by President Chen. Only if such novel thinking is not prematurely dismissed as an insignificant or transient departure from previous patterns of Cold War era conflicts could it produce distinctly new forms of dialogue and exchange that could guide future relations between Taipei and Beijing. A unilateral proposal of establishing the Taiwan Strait as a Peace Zone could produce distinctly new forms of CBMs as well as arms control mechanisms that could guide the future direction of cross-Strait relations.

However, such efforts must be reciprocated. Leaders on both sides of the Strait must have the courage and vision to recognize and integrate five key understandings into their policy deliberations. The first is trade-offs amongst the interrelated but often conflicting requirements of Taiwan's search for international space, the need to demilitarize the Strait, and Beijing's political demands. Taiwan's leaders will always need to choose a policy that will satisfy both domestic demands and a grand compromise with Beijing. There is no escape from this trade-off issue. The second involves Beijing's political and opportunity costs. Beijing's cross-Strait policies are imbedded in broader political and security contexts. Beijing has to come to grips with trading its military intimidation for Taiwan's embrace of a Taipei, China option. China's leadership is obliged to rethink how to preserve what is worth preserving and how revise outdated concepts in its Taiwan policy.

Third, policymakers on both sides must clearly judge the costs and the risks they are willing to accept in return for payoffs to which they attach a particular value. Fourth, both sides must decide whether to settle for a limited payoff in a particular situation or to strive for a substantially greater one. Fifth is a timing question: When is the best time for both sides to re-engage? It would be an act of strategic ignorance if both sides failed to take advantage of opportunities for an enduring peace. The Taiwan Strait as a Peace Zone proposal would help leverage that opportunity.

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