

Stabilizing the Cross-Strait Relationship: A Strategy for Taiwan's Dignity and Security

Remarks by Larry Diamond
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Good Evening, and thank you for the opportunity to speak with you this evening. It is always a pleasure for me to be with people from Taiwan and friends of Taiwan. I spent a year living in Taiwan, in 1997-98, based at the Academia Sinica, and studying democracy in Taiwan. It was one of the most fascinating and enjoyable years of my life. Even though I came to study Taiwan somewhat late in my career, do not speak Chinese and thus cannot grasp vital elements of the culture and politics of this extraordinary society, I have a special place in my heart for Taiwan.

In the past three decades, Taiwan has achieved three extraordinary miracles. When scholars speak of “the Taiwan miracle” they usually refer to its phenomenal transformation from an extremely poor, agricultural economy to a sophisticated industrial and now even post-industrial trading powerhouse within two short generations. But it is also a miracle that Taiwan has survived at all as a free state despite half a century of efforts by the Communist behemoth just across the Strait to isolate it, humiliate it, intimidate it, subdue it, and compel it to unify with the PRC. Given the disparities in power, it is a miracle that Taiwan was not forced to become a province of the PRC.

The third miracle has been Taiwan's transformation from an authoritarian political system into a democracy—indeed one of the most democratic political systems in Asia, and one of the most liberal of any of the former so-called “developing countries.” As an amazingly open,

competitive, free, and liberal democracy, Taiwan stands as an example and inspiration to mainland China and to people's all over the world. This is a model of democratic progress that, for all its troubles and difficulties, deserves to be better known around the world. With its economic resources, technical expertise, and political experience, Taiwan is now in an excellent position to become the first non-European "third wave" democracy to establish its own international foundation to assist and promote democratic development around the world. I am delighted that President Chen Shui-bian has recently announced just such an initiative, and I look forward to the positive impact this will have on the global struggle for democracy and on Taiwan's international standing and reputation.

Not only as a friend of Taiwan, its people and its government, but as comparative scholar of democracy, I believe that the survival of democracy in Taiwan is vitally important to the future of democracy in Asia and the world. Taiwan's democracy faces many internal challenges. But there is one huge external challenge that dwarfs all others: mainland China and cross-strait relations.

I am going to say some things tonight with which some of you are bound to disagree. So let me underscore at the outset my personal feeling that Taiwan has earned, through decades of economic and political development and struggle, the moral right to be a free and independent country. In pure and abstract moral terms, if the people of Taiwan want to permanently separate from the Mainland, they should be allowed to do so. But we do not live in a world of pure and abstract morality. We live in a world in which conceptions of rights conflict. Peoples must find ways to accommodate if violent conflict is to be avoided. I do not suggest that avoidance of

violent conflict is always the highest value. This nation, the United States of America, was born out of violent conflict. And most of the world would be enslaved today by one form of dictatorship or another if it were not for the willingness of the United States to use violence to defend our principles and interests.

However, war is always tragic, and if a country contemplates going to war, it needs to be confident of its ultimate ability to prevail and it needs to conclude that there really is no other viable course.

My fear is that Taiwan is headed toward war with mainland China over its political status, and that the people of Taiwan, along with many of its political leaders, have not adequately considered the rising likelihood of war, or the probable devastating costs to Taiwan. If Taiwan is going to survive as a democracy and as a de facto independent political and social system, I believe it must develop a different strategy for dealing with mainland China.

For some time now, cross-strait relations have been deadlocked in a state of friction, tension, and mistrust. Certainly, there is much blame to be laid at the feet of mainland China for this regrettable state of affairs. But I believe President Lee Teng-hui knew precisely what he was doing when he declared in July 1999 the existence of a “special state-to-state relationship” between the PRC and Taiwan. This radical redefinition of the political status quo was seen in Beijing as halfway toward a declaration of independence, and part of a very deliberate strategy of “creeping independence.” It came very near to bringing military retaliation by Beijing, and it destroyed what seemed to be a likely prospect of resumption of the “Koo-Wang” talks between

Taiwan and the PRC. Over the years, the PRC has been belligerent, intimidating, and offensive in its conduct toward Taiwan. But Taiwan has also been embarked on a very clear strategy of promoting Taiwan identity, degrading its historical, cultural, and symbolic connections to the Chinese mainland, and trying to secure permanent separation from mainland China without formally declaring independence.

The view in Taiwan, both of President Lee Teng-hui and of a great many people in President Chen's Administration—if not the President himself—has been that Taiwan should be permanently separate and independent. However, it cannot formally declare independence without risking war. So, the theory goes, if it just very gradually, very incrementally, expands the symbolic and institutional trappings of an independent Taiwan, it can entrench permanent Taiwan independence in everything but name. Consequently, Taiwan has backed away from and now refuses to embrace any longer the principle or language—however vaguely—of “one China.” It changes the name of its representative offices and institutions, again gradually. It assumes that if everything is gradual, and if many things are done quietly and without fanfare, Beijing will not notice, or that each step will be too small to justify a violent reaction.

I fear this logic is deeply, and will someday prove fatally, flawed. Beijing is noticing, and is alarmed. The Chinese leadership believes that Taiwan is in fact embarked on permanent separation, and that this process cannot be tolerated indefinitely. Part of the reason for their muted reaction at this point stems from their preoccupation with their own internal woes. Part of it stems from their hope that Chen Shui-bian will be defeated in 2004 and then they will have a more pliable leader in Taiwan to deal with. Part of it involves a strategic calculation that they are

not militarily strong enough yet to achieve victory in a military confrontation with Taiwan that could bring in the U.S., so that unless Taiwan actually declares independence, they are better off waiting to act until they are much stronger militarily. Part of it involves the cleavages between hard-liners, especially in the military, and soft-liners, especially in political, diplomatic, and economic circles that want good relations with the United States.

The danger is that as Taiwan pushes out the boundaries of its Taiwan identity and encounters no military resistance or consequences, pro-separation political leaders conclude that they can just keep safely pushing, as long as they don't declare independence. This is the flawed logic, in my view. At some point, an invisible threshold may be crossed, patience may be exhausted, or a political and economic crisis could erupt in the mainland that provokes the Chinese political leadership to play the military card, in a context where they believe there is no prospect of any political, diplomatic progress.

I am well aware, and so are Beijing's leaders, of the efforts of President Chen Shui-bian to exercise restraint and extend a hand of friendship toward Beijing. They scrutinize meticulously his every word and gesture. They took note of the conciliatory language in his inaugural address, even though they did not respond as many in Taiwan hoped and expected. They appreciated President Chen's vow not to write the "special state-to-state relationship" into the Constitution, not to alter the name of the country, and so on. But they watch his gestures and actions as well as his words, and their assessment is one of pessimism about Chen, the DPP, and Taiwan. It is important to keep in mind that everything said and not said is filtered through a historical view of the DPP as a pro-independence party, which still has a quasi-pro-independence

plank in its charter.

Hence, relations between Mainland China and Taiwan are on a confrontational path. This path is likely to lead inexorably to a military conflict at some point in the next decade if something is not done to put the cross-strait relationship on a more stable and accommodating footing.

If the only alternative to war were for Taiwan to throw in the towel and surrender its democratic sovereignty, then perhaps war, however cataclysmic, would be worth preparing for. But that is not the case. I do not think—and I know of no major scholar of China who thinks—that the PRC needs or will demand an agreement by Taiwan on “one country two systems” any time soon. The political leaders in Beijing do not need—for their own political survival and national and strategic peace of mind—a final resolution of the Taiwan question in their favor. What they need is to halt what they perceive to be the slippage toward a final resolution of the Taiwan question in the direction of Taiwan independence. For Beijing, the status quo is not acceptable not because it is a stalemate but because it is a moving target, moving toward permanent separation.

I believe that one sentence uttered by President Chen Shui-bian could alter this dynamic and restore a much more viable and sustainable status quo. That sentence would be something like, “We recognize the principle of ‘one China,’ but we have a different interpretation than the PRC of what ‘one China’ means.” In other words, return to the “1992 consensus” or if you will

the 1992 understanding that enabled the Koo-Wang talks to begin in the first place. Under the vague umbrella of “one China”—the two sides can agree to disagree and get on to practical matters. It is both the getting on to practical matters and the fig leaf of a shared symbolic commitment to one China that would stabilize the relationship and persuade the Beijing leadership that there is time, that Taiwan is not driving toward permanent separation and therefore military action is unnecessary. With that restoration of that earlier, more stable status quo (in which each side officially acknowledged “one China”), the relationship could proceed for an indefinite period to focus on more immediate and practical issues, leaving the political relationship between the two sides to be negotiated at some point probably far in the future.

It is very dangerous to assume that China will not use force because the costs would be too great. It cannot be assumed that Beijing will weigh the risks of military confrontation by what we would assume is a rational calculus. For the Chinese people on the Mainland, the Taiwan issue is a deeply emotional and symbolic one. For most of them, including those who oppose the Government, Taiwan represents the last vestige of China’s colonial humiliation over the past century and a half, and Taiwan’s permanent separation from China is therefore unacceptable.

The crucial near-term imperative for peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait is the resumption of political talks based on the “1992 consensus.” Each side would acknowledge the principle of “one China” but agree to differ on its meaning. In some respects, Taiwan and

mainland China have been inching toward a restoration of this previous status quo. The remaining difference must somehow be bridged. How can that be done?

Getting to Political Talks

Under Jiang Zemin, Beijing has offered some promising hints of flexibility in its conditions for resuming the political talks. Senior Vice-Premier Qian Qichen has stated that “one China” does not have to mean the PRC; that both Mainland China and Taiwan are parts of one China; that when the two sides meet to talk, they could meet as political equals; and even that confederation could be discussed. These statements have not been broadcast internally within China, and they are contradicted by other PRC declarations. But if they were embraced more coherently and authoritatively, they could serve as the basis for a breakthrough to resume the dialogue. PRC officials regard these statements as very significant political concessions, departing from the earlier insistence that negotiations with Taiwan would be between a central and a local government. Qian’s statements are a deliberate effort to improve the climate for negotiations. The new message is that anything (including the political meaning of “one China”) can be discussed under the general, mutually accepted rubric of the “one China” principle. But that principle is not negotiable. In order for talks to resume, the Government in Taiwan must explicitly acknowledge the principle of “one China.”

Qian Qichen’s statements suggest that Beijing now accepts (or would be willing to formally accept) that the two sides can have different interpretations of “one China,” and that a

return by Taipei to its previous interpretation of the “1992 consensus” would be sufficient to renew the dialogue. The Koo-Wang talks (perhaps under different negotiators) could resume on the basis of the 1992 understanding of “one China, different interpretations.” However, the second half of this principle could only be acceptable to Beijing if the first half were explicitly acknowledged. Nothing less than an explicit public acknowledgement of the “one China” principle by President Chen can rekindle the semi-official dialogue. A passive, implicit “one China” policy will not suffice.

A breakthrough deal is possible to restart semi-official talks. Taiwan would explicitly acknowledge the principle of “one China” but with its own interpretation. To give Chen Shui-bian the political cover to make that statement, China would repeat in a more authoritative way the assurances that Vice-Premier Qian Qichen has already made, and then broadcast them to their own people and enshrine them unambiguously as official policy.

The precise wording and timing of what each side would say (and *not* say) would have to be negotiated in advance in careful detail. Every statement and its timing would have to be agreed upon in advance. Each side would then be able to take the risk of its rhetorical gesture because it would know precisely what the response would be. An important part of this understanding would be an assurance from the PRC to Taiwan that there would be no further political demands once talks resumed—that a return to the 1992 understanding on “one China” would restore a status quo that could persist for an indefinite period of time. This would address one of the deepest sources of understandable anxiety within the DPP, that acknowledging “one

China” would initiate a rapid slide toward “one country, two systems.”

Once the semi-official dialogue resumed, Taiwan and China could pursue a number of practical steps to improve the relationship:

- The “three direct links” could finally be negotiated, inaugurating direct shipping and air traffic across the Taiwan Strait. This would give a needed boost to Taiwan’s economy, attracting new investment and invigorating Taiwan’s shipping and transportation companies and facilities expanded.
- The PRC and the ROC could officially agree to end hostilities. The ROC has already declared an end to the hostilities. An official declaration of the end of hostilities by the PRC would formalize the existing situation but also pave the way for further local arms-reduction and/or demilitarization measures.
- An early agreement could be reached essentially exchanging “no force for no independence.” The PRC would commit not to use force against Taiwan, now that Taiwan had returned to the “one China” principle. The PRC could restate that “Chinese will not fight other Chinese.” President Chen might seek to have the DPP repeal from its party constitution and platform the provisions that call for independence.

- China and Taiwan could negotiate a standstill agreement on diplomatic relations, freezing in place the current distribution of official diplomatic ties with various countries around the world. This would remove a major source of friction, greatly improving the political climate and mutual confidence of the relationship. Within a few years, Taiwan representative offices in countries that had diplomatic relations with the PRC might be regularized in some way. (The same might be done for PRC representative offices in countries with diplomatic relations with ROC.) Eventually, some broader form of cooperation and sharing might be discussed.
- An early symbolic manifestation of progress and good will in the relationship could well be a summit meeting between the Chinese President and Chen Shui-bian.
- After a cease-fire in the diplomatic wars, it might be possible to grant some international space for Taiwan to have observer status at the UN, the IMF, the World Bank, and other international organizations. Beijing might welcome Taiwan's participation in APEC.
- A set of military confidence-building measures and restraints or de-escalations could be negotiated. An early goal could be a moratorium on missile deployment and a withdrawal of short-range missiles from Fujian Province in exchange for demilitarization of Taiwan's offshore islands.

- Smaller, more practical issues could simultaneously be pursued, such as establishment of boundaries in the Taiwan Strait designating fishing rights for each side. The two sides could work out agreements to handle such matters as extradition of criminal suspects and the smuggling of weapons and illegal labor.

Without pressing for any change in the political status of Taiwan, the resumption of the semi-official talks could thus yield diffuse improvements in the cross-strait relationship. Each side could build upon successfully negotiated agreements on a step-by-step basis over some considerable period of time. Economic integration and cultural contact could proceed within a stable political climate, while buying considerable time for continued economic growth and political evolution within Mainland China that would eventually enable a more durable, peaceful, democratic political solution. Most important of all, the current drift toward military hostilities would be reversed.

The Difficulties for Each Side

Any kind of progress in a political stalemate requires some painful, soul-searching steps. For China, any deal with Chen Shui-bian would be difficult, particularly one before the 2004 presidential election that would virtually guarantee his reelection. But there is also a reason why the PRC should want to reach an agreement with Chen Shui-bian, rather than some future leader.

No Taiwan president in the near future is likely to be able to generate such a broad consensus behind such an opening with the PRC. The PRC might be ready to resume talks with Taiwan, even if it expected such a breakthrough deal to lift Chen Shui-bian's and the DPP's political fortunes at the polls. The PRC wants progress on the cross-strait issue, and it is willing to deal with any Taiwan leader and party that will acknowledge the "one-China" principle.

For the DPP, and for many Taiwanese who wish fervently for Taiwan independence and dread the thought of any step toward unification with the mainland, the modest and largely symbolic concession I have advocated here may seem too hard and bitter a pill to swallow. But it is time for these Taiwanese political leaders and ordinary citizens to shed their illusions of security and face up to the gathering prospect of a military confrontation. Please allow me to say to you now, as a friend, in a heart-felt and sympathetic way: I hope and believe that if Taiwan were attacked by China without the gross provocation of a declaration of independence by Taiwan, the United States would come to Taiwan's defense. In essence, it would go to war against China. We would win that war, decisively. But at what cost? After a barrage of missiles, destruction of Taiwan's ports and airports and other economic infrastructure, what would be left of Taiwan in the "victory." Taiwan's economic vitality would be shattered for decades to come. Many investors would never return. And that would not be the last war that the United States would fight with China. No one would gain from this conflagration. It would be ugly and devastating.

I know what many of you in this room hope and dream. I know that you believe there is a

moral issue at stake here—Taiwan’s moral right to be independent. But I would urge you to consider here the words of a great Latin American political leader and thinker, Julio Maria Sanguinetti, who was the first elected president of Uruguay after the return to democracy from military rule in 1985, and who struggled with the issue of whether to punish the military torturers and risk another military coup. Let me close with his more general reflections on the dilemma of conflicting moral imperatives.

Max Weber said that ‘in all societies which desire to be guided by an ethical principle, there are always two ethics in conflict: the ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility.’ The ethics of conviction tells the religious man to ‘act according to what you believe is right and leave the consequences to God,’ while the ethics of responsibility says ‘always try to do good, but never forget the logical and foreseeable consequences of your actions.’ Political leaders must be especially attentive to consequences, for we have no right to wash our hands of them.

This is for me the great theme, the very crux of the ethics of transitions: always strive to ensure that your actions do not produce consequences which contradict your good intentions. Otherwise, democratic idealism may degenerate into a dream and then give rise to a nightmare.”

Thank you.