

The “1992 Consensus”—Adapting to the Future?

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In the January 16, 2016, Taiwan presidential and legislative elections, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) inflicted a devastating defeat on the incumbent Kuomintang (KMT or Nationalist Party). As a result, Taiwan politics will likely undergo massive changes in the years ahead. Realizing the economic and social changes President-elect Tsai Ing-wen has promised will also be extremely challenging. Overlaying and seriously affecting all of these efforts will be the dynamic of cross-Strait relations. This essay focuses on that last question.

Introduction

Despite the best efforts of the KMT to focus voters’ attention on what it saw as the inadequacies and risks of Tsai Ing-wen’s rather vague reassurances that she could maintain the cross-Strait status quo of peace and stability, Taiwan voters seem to have been convinced by her stance, and the issue did not play a very big role in the election. Now that the election is over, however, Taiwan—and Tsai—must face the reality that the course of ties to the Mainland will have an enormous impact on Taiwan’s future.

The focus of attention in Beijing has been on the central importance of adhering to the “1992 Consensus” and opposing “Taiwan independence.” The former means acceptance that Taiwan and the Mainland belong to one and the same China, while the latter means ceding any option for Taiwan’s people to choose their own future.

Given her own history and that of her party, there is no way Tsai will directly accede to either condition. But the Mainland has said that if she does not, then, in Xi Jinping’s words, “the earth will move and the mountains will shake” and all manner of existing relationships will be cut off. Further cross-Strait negotiations will come to a halt and implementation of existing ones could become questionable. Given Taiwan’s economic dependence on the Mainland market and on other relationships with the PRC, as well as Beijing’s influence over Taiwan’s economic partners, the costs could be quite serious.

The consequences would also likely involve curtailing much of Taiwan’s activity in international organization and poaching by Beijing on a number of Taiwan’s 22 remaining diplomatic partners.

While Beijing has been steadfast in its demands, Tsai has tried to find ways to convince both the voters and the leaders on the Mainland that she is not going to overturn either the bases or substance of the achievements over the eight years since the last DPP president, Chen Shui-bian, stepped down and the KMT’s Ma Ying-jeou assumed office. Among the most important steps was her Washington speech in June. But against a background of deep mistrust of Tsai for her role in both the Chen and the Lee Teng-hui administrations, each step, while ostensibly helpful, also fed doubts in Beijing about how she would

define the terms she was using. For example, when she spoke of observing the “existing ROC constitutional order,” did that mean acceptance of the constitutional provisions that incorporate both Taiwan and the Mainland into the Republic of China? That was unclear, and many on the Mainland were prepared to assume the worst.

Tsai also refrained from attacking the “1992 Consensus” and spoke in terms that seemed to point to an embrace of the achievements under the rubric of the Consensus. But she did not refer to the Consensus or indicate that she accepted its “core connotation,” as the PRC would define it: that Taiwan and the Mainland both belong to one and the same China.

Since the election, Tsai has voiced some views that have taken her further toward Beijing’s position than ever before, albeit still avoiding directly endorsing the Mainland’s mantra or abandoning the principles that she has previously espoused. The PRC has not clearly rejected her position, but—unsurprisingly—there are numerous indications that it is not satisfied with what some have called Tsai’s “micro-adjustments” and that it wants her to be more explicit.

We clearly have not heard the last word on the subject, and our purpose in this essay is to lay out in some detail the course of the “dialogue” over the past several months as background for understanding its evolution over the near to medium term, as Tsai moves toward her inauguration on May 20 and her presidency.

Adhering to the 1992 Consensus: Before the Election

Throughout the fall and up until the January 16, 2016 election, Beijing maintained a steady drumbeat about the central importance of adhering to the “1992 Consensus” (and its core assumption that Taiwan and the Mainland belong to one and the same China (大陆和台湾同属一个中国) and of opposing “Taiwan independence” if cross-Strait relations were to remain on an even keel. As in the past, sometimes this was expressed in “positive” ways (as long as we adhere to this path, we can create a wonderful future¹). Often, however, this happy vision was paired with a dire warning that failure to endorse the “one China” essence of the “1992 Consensus” would lead to the collapse of political trust and systematic negotiating mechanisms, and likely result in disaster.² Any responsible political party needed to take a clear stance, Beijing insisted.

Most readers will know that these were not new or unusual themes, but they were repeated essentially without let-up. Against this background, the KMT, whether President Ma, the original KMT presidential nominee Hung Hsiu-chu, or the eventual nominee Eric Chu Li-luan, pummeled Tsai Ing-wen, insisting that she explain how she could fulfill her promise to maintain the status quo of peace and stability without accepting the “1992 Consensus.” Tsai declined to go beyond her early June position that she would “push for the peaceful and stable development of cross-Strait relations in accordance with the will of the Taiwanese people and the existing ROC constitutional order” and that the “accumulated outcomes of more than twenty years of negotiations and exchanges... will serve as the firm basis of my efforts to further the peaceful and stable development of

cross-Strait relations,”³ and most public opinion polls revealed that respondents trusted in her ability to succeed.

In the course of adhering to this position, Tsai had to parry pressure from all sides. Among the more sensitive challenges was a statement by Tainan mayor William Lai Ching-te advocating Taiwan independence.⁴ Although not wanting to break with an important rising DPP leader, Tsai had to quell the media furor that this created. She sought to do so by saying that there was “no need to blow this issue out of proportion” (沒有必要去無限上綱). Rather, she reiterated her basic position as spelled out in the Washington speech, and “explained” that Lai’s basic meaning, like hers, was that the two sides could mutually understand one another and get along peacefully.⁵

From the other end of the spectrum, the KMT supported the “1992 Consensus” vigorously, warning that failure to adhere to it would overturn the achievements of peaceful development garnered over the years since Ma assumed office in 2008.

Having based his cross-Strait policy on it for over seven years, Ma Ying-jeou offered perhaps the most spirited defense of the “1992 Consensus” and its critical role in maintaining productive cross-Strait relations. Of five principles he identified in his 2015 National Day address as having helped maintain the cross-Strait status quo over his term of office,⁶ the most important, he said, was the “1992 Consensus.” “If we diverge from it, relations will deteriorate. And if we oppose it, there will be turmoil in the Taiwan Strait.” Clearly aiming his words at Tsai Ing-wen, who was sitting immediately behind him, Ma said: “Without the ‘1992 Consensus,’ ‘maintaining the status quo’ is just a slogan—empty words that can never become a tangible reality, or help promote peaceful development across the Taiwan Strait.”

Ma-Xi Meeting

When Ma met with PRC leader Xi Jinping in Singapore on November 7 in an event scrupulously choreographed to ensure that dignity and prerogatives were preserved on both sides,⁷ a clear goal of both leaders was to consolidate their common commitment to the “1992 Consensus” as the essential element that had made possible the wide range of positive results since 2008 and led eventually to their historic meeting. Although they did not seek a common definition of that Consensus—it was no more within reach that day than any other day—they shared the view that it was its “one China” essence that had been the critical element.⁸ Ma expressed this explicitly in his closed-door meeting with Xi.

The consensus reached between the two sides in November 1992 is that both sides of the Taiwan Strait insist on the “one China” principle, and each side can express its interpretation verbally; this is the 1992 Consensus of “one China, respective interpretations.” For our part, we stated that the interpretation does not involve “two Chinas,” “one China and one Taiwan,” or “Taiwan independence,” as the Republic of China Constitution does not allow it.⁹

When Ma was asked at the post-meeting press conference about the impact if the next president does not accept the 1992 Consensus, he responded indirectly.

The two sides today have a clear consensus that the 1992 Consensus is the primary foundation that has allowed cross-Strait relations to make tremendous advances over the past seven years, and created the most stable and peaceful cross-Strait relations we have seen in the past 66 years. Mr. Xi and I both hold this view... Without the 1992 Consensus, how would today be possible?¹⁰

As one would have anticipated, the DPP attacked the meeting both before it took place and afterward. Nonetheless, doubtless considering that she might want to participate in a Tsai-Xi meeting at some point, Tsai and her colleagues avoided criticizing cross-Strait leadership meetings in principle. Indeed, Tsai said she would not rule out such a meeting if “relevant conditions are met” regarding following “democratic procedure,” with open information, transparency, and monitoring by the legislature.¹¹ And DPP Secretary General Joseph Wu said there was no objection to normalizing such meetings, again, as long as the process was transparent.¹²

But Tsai slammed Ma for having planned everything in secret and informing the public “in such a hurried fashion.”¹³ This was “harmful to Taiwan’s democratic politics,” she insisted, accusing Ma, as she had done with regard to many of his cross-Strait dealings, of having conducted arrangements “in a black box.”¹⁴

On the eve of the meeting Tsai called on Ma to respect democracy, eschew political conditions and maintain equality and dignity. Without that, she said, it would only be a “news-making moment,” not an “historic moment.”¹⁵ Immediately after the meeting concluded she said none of these goals had been achieved, predicting that Ma would return home to even greater controversy about cross-Strait relations than before he went to Singapore.¹⁶ She launched a withering attack on Ma’s performance as “disappointing, even infuriating to a lot of people,” and charged that he had created more anxiety and division among the people by attempting to lock Taiwan’s future into a political framework out of consideration for his own political status.¹⁷

No doubt the attacks and expressions of skepticism had something to do with the decision to release the transcript of the closed-door Ma-Xi meeting, both to rebut the charges of secrecy and to demonstrate, even beyond what Ma had spelled out in his Singapore press conference, the ways he had, in fact, laid out for Xi his definition of the “1992 Consensus” as “one China, respective interpretations,” affirmed the “Republic of China,” pressed for more international space, and stressed the importance of according people in Taiwan dignity and respect.¹⁸

Some speculated that Ma had arranged the meeting as a way of promoting the KMT in the upcoming election or to consolidate his own legacy. The first seems unlikely at that stage, though there may well have been an element of the latter. But primarily, the

meeting was an effort to lock in, to the extent possible, the “1992 Consensus” as the mutually acknowledged basis for promoting stable and productive cross-Strait relations.

Xi Jinping, of course, shared this objective. Although Xi did not strike any notably new themes, he noted that the development of cross-Strait relations currently faced a choice regarding its direction and path.¹⁹ Hence, while he seized the occasion to press for faithfulness to the “one China” principle, he also raised, briefly but pointedly, the dangers of not doing so. Without that common foundation, he said, “the boat of peaceful development will encounter terrifying waves or even capsize.”

Zhang Zhijun Lays Out the Standard

Of some importance in assessing the significance of the nuanced adjustment in Tsai Ing-wen’s rhetoric after the election (to be discussed below), it is worth focusing for a moment on what Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) director Zhang Zhijun said in his Singapore press conference about Xi’s position regarding acknowledgement of the “1992 Consensus.” The language wasn’t particularly new, but it provides a standard against which to judge Tsai’s later position.

Xi Jinping emphasized that he hoped all Taiwan political parties and organizations could squarely face up to the “1992 Consensus,” that no matter which political party or organization, and no matter what its past advocacy had been, *as long as it recognized the historical fact of the 1992 Consensus and accepted its core connotation*, we are willing to interact with it.²⁰

PRC Perceptions of Tsai

Throughout this period, Tsai Ing-wen was still seen by Beijing as evasive regarding the “1992 Consensus.” Mainland observers noted that she had stopped denying its existence since spring, but focused on the fact that she nonetheless still declined to embrace it.

Asked in late November what the DPP would do if the Mainland insisted on adherence to the “one China” principle, the 1992 Consensus, and opposition to Taiwan independence, Tsai responded with a pitch for “candid talks.” Arguing that any pledges contrary to Taiwan public opinion could not long endure, she said “I believe that the Mainland authorities will respect Taiwan’s public opinions and take them into consideration when making decisions.”²¹

Responding to these comments, a TAO spokesman told a press conference that as long as parties agreed on the “core meaning” of the 1992 Consensus cross-Strait exchanges should continue. He said that the “core” of the Consensus is to oppose “state-to-state” relations across the Strait, which is another way of saying that Taiwan and the Mainland both belong to the same one China.²²

Tsai Argues For Balance, Dialogue and Respect

Tsai spent some effort arguing that while her policy toward the Mainland would be one of “no provocation and no surprises,” and that she would continue to safeguard cross-Strait stability on the basis of the ROC constitutional order, still, policy needed to be based on the people’s will and in conformity with the people’s interests “regardless of any political party stance.” “Beijing’s attitude is very important,” she said. But in a democratic society, where the people’s will is very important, “there is a need to balance” Beijing’s attitude with the popular will.²³

In the December 27 presidential debate, Tsai laid out her position on the “1992 Consensus” at some length.

I have said that both sides did have a meeting in Hong Kong in 1992, but everyone had different opinions at the meeting. However, they at least agreed on pushing cross-Strait relations forward based on mutual understanding and setting aside differences and seeking common ground. We do not deny the historical fact. We accept it. However, on how to interpret the historical fact and use what name to call it, everyone has different opinions. As a result, my position is simple. On this matter, we continue to set aside differences and seek common ground, and sit down to have a conversation. We can talk about anything. This is a very rational attitude. I also believe the Chinese mainland side will hold a rational attitude to interact with the DPP. After all, Taiwan is a democratic society. In a democracy, there must be party alternation and there must be parties with different positions in office. Accordingly, I believe both the Chinese leader and the policy-makers will realize that it is the reality of the democratic life in Taiwan and that they will show us some respect.²⁴

It was during that debate that Tsai said “the 1992 Consensus is an option, but not the only option” (九二共識是一個選項但不是唯一的選項),²⁵ a statement that caused some of the more independence-minded members of the DPP to fear she was cracking the door to possible acceptance of that concept. However, Tsai quickly “clarified” that what she meant was that both sides had sat down and talked about different interpretations and wordings in 1992, but while they disagreed, the “most important conclusions and achievements made at that time” were found in the spirit of the meeting to “reach mutual understanding, seek common ground and reserve differences.”²⁶

Beijing’s Reaction

Beijing’s reaction was not long in coming. The TAO spokesman said that in 1992, the two “white glove” organizations, Taiwan’s Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF) and the Mainland’s Association on Relations Across the Taiwan Strait (ARATS) had, “on authority” (受权), not only held talks, but had agreed that the two sides of the Strait belonged to the same one China and that cross-Strait relations were not state-to-state relations. This consensus, the spokesman maintained, “clearly defined” (明确界定了) the fundamental character of cross-Strait relations.²⁷ This was “crystal clear” (十分清楚).

Implying possible consequences if the consensus were no longer in effect, the spokesman said that the “1992 Consensus” was not only the common political foundation of consultations and negotiations, but also the common political foundation for the peaceful development of cross-Strait relations since 2008 and the reason that the Taiwan region had maintained peaceful stability and gained other benefits. The key to upholding the peaceful development of cross-Strait relations, he said, was “to recognize the historical fact of the ‘1992 Consensus’ and accept its core meaning” (承认“九二共识”的历史事实, 认同其核心意涵). It was the “anchor” (定海神针) of cross-Strait relations, and if it were destroyed, peaceful development of relations would be thoroughly overturned.

As the election approached, although she had denied that she as yet had a channel to Beijing,²⁸ Tsai opined that the key to dealing with Xi Jinping was to “communicate, communicate and communicate.”²⁹

Adhering to the 1992 Consensus: After the Election

On election night, Tsai reiterated her cross-Strait position much as she had articulated it in the campaign, albeit in somewhat abbreviated form.³⁰

In its immediate reaction to the elections, the TAO “noted” the results and reiterated the central role of the “political foundation” (政治基础) of adhering to the “1992 Consensus and opposing “Taiwan independence” in garnering all of the achievements of the past eight years. Expressing a willingness to enhance contacts and exchanges with all political parties and groups that recognize both sides belong to “one China” and so forth, the statement held to the Mainland’s consistent approach to the fundamentals.

Our major policies and principles toward Taiwan are consistent and clear and will not change because of the outcomes of the elections in Taiwan region. We will continue to adhere to the “1992 Consensus” and resolutely oppose any forms of “Taiwan independence” splittist activities. On the major principled issue of safeguarding national sovereignty and territorial integrity our will is as firm as a rock and our attitude has always been consistent.³¹

Both through what one assumes were authorized editorials as well as commentaries, the media immediately noted Tsai’s caution in her victory speech about pursuing a “consistent, predictable and sustainable” cross-Strait policy; her ceasing to deny the existence of the Consensus; and her stress on seeking common ground while reserving differences. Based on these factors, and on their view that dissatisfaction with the Ma administration and the KMT was the root cause of the election result, they maintained that the vote was neither a gauge³² nor a mandate³³ for independence. At the same time, some cautioned that the Mainland should be “more prudent” toward the power shift in Taiwan, not wavering in opposing any form of pro-independence movement but also adhering to a policy that maintains the importance of peaceful development of cross-Strait relations. Some noted that the rise of a multifaceted “Taiwan national identity” was perhaps the gravest challenge for the Mainland’s cross-Strait policy.

The dismissal of cross-Strait relations as a salient issue in the campaign or a defining issue in the election outcome was, in fact, strongly echoed by DPP Secretary General Joseph Wu Jaushieh in a speech in Washington in January.³⁴ Taking pains to say that the election outcome was not a “defeat” for “China,” instead, he said, what the DPP found people cared about were the general economic situation, food safety issues, long-term care, income distribution, housing cost, pension reform, and social housing. He also said the DPP victory was due not only to the party platform, but also to the enthusiastic support of voters below 40 years of age, public discontent with local KMT administrators, and the DPP’s determined assumption of balanced positions on potentially controversial foreign affairs issues. Assuming Wu is correct about the low relevance of cross-Strait issues despite the emphasis placed on them by the KMT and the PRC’s steady drumbeat on the theme, the most obvious explanation for this is that voters put faith in Tsai’s pledge to maintain the status quo of peace and stability and in her ability to follow through.

The Liberty Times Interview

Interestingly, Tsai’s response to Beijing’s initial commentary was to compliment the Mainland’s attitude before the election. “The best form of communication takes place when the other side understands your good will,” she said. “The other side of the Strait actually showed a high degree of restraint. This kind of understanding, appreciation and good will makes the best form of communication.”³⁵

This otherwise somewhat odd comment is perhaps explained by looking at Wu’s speech and the hint he gave about what was to come two days later: “I’m sure there will be more opportunities for us to send goodwill out to the Chinese side, and I also hope that the Chinese side can respond in a reciprocate [sic] manner so that the cross-Strait relations can move on and the confidence and the trust can be built step-by-step.”

What was to come two days later was an interview Tsai Ing-wen gave to *Liberty Times*, headlined “Tsai Ing-wen: 1992 is an historical fact, promoting cross-Strait relations.” Tsai began by noting that her position on “maintaining the status quo” represented mainstream public opinion, and that maintaining peace and stable development of cross-Strait relations was both the common expectation of both sides and their common responsibility.

She then went on to voice positions on the future conduct and basis of cross-Strait relations in carefully chosen language. Some of it was quite familiar, but there were important nuanced formulations.

During the press conference on election night I said the future foundation for cross-Strait relations will be based on the existing ROC constitutional order, the results of cross-Strait negotiations, interactions and exchanges, as well as democratic principles and the will of the Taiwan people. As president-elect, I reaffirm that after the new administration takes office on May 20, it will transcend partisan politics (秉持超越黨派的立場), respect the will and consensus of the Taiwan people, and be mindful of the public

interest (以人民利益為依歸) in maintaining cross-Strait peace and stability, based on the existing ROC constitutional order.

In 1992, SEF and ARATS engaged in discussions and negotiations based on the political mindset of mutual understanding as well as the need to set aside differences and seek common ground. They achieved several common understandings and acknowledgements (若干的共同認知與諒解). I understand and respect this historical fact (我理解和尊重這個歷史事實). I also believe that both sides of the strait should cherish and protect the accumulated status quo and outcomes (協商所累積形成的現狀及成果) that have been the result of more than 20 years of exchanges and negotiations between the two since 1992. On the basis of this fact and the existing political foundation (在這個基本事實與既有政治基礎上), we should continue to move forward on the peace, stability, and development of cross-Strait relations.³⁶

Tsai argued that the biggest difference between the incoming administration and the Ma administration on cross-Strait policy was her government's adherence to the people's will and democracy as two big pillars of managing that policy, as well its insistence on guaranteeing to the people of Taiwan the right to choose in the future. In this context, she laid out four "key elements" (關鍵元素) that comprised the "existing political foundation" she had referred to.

The first is the historical fact of SEF-ARATS discussions of 1992 and that both sides had a common understanding to set aside differences and seek common ground. The second is the Republic of China's current constitutional order. The third is the accumulated results of the more than 20 years of cross-Strait negotiations, exchanges and interactions. The fourth is Taiwan's democratic principles and the general will of the Taiwan people.³⁷

While these four elements did not meet the Mainland's definition, in the other two paragraphs she took a step forward, not to abandon her previous position but to bring it closer into line with Beijing's view in at least two respects. First, she had previously gone no further than to acknowledge the "historical fact" that the meetings had taken place in 1992 and that the two sides had agreed to set aside differences and seek common ground. Here, however, she said that they had "achieved several understandings and acknowledgements" and that she "understands and respects that historical fact."

This brought her much closer to the PRC insistence that what was achieved in 1992 was not simply a process but substantive agreements. She doesn't say that those "understandings and acknowledgements" were with regard to the existence of "one China," but it does not require too much of a leap to conclude that this is within the scope of what she was talking about—and that it was the "historical fact" regarding those aspects for which she was expressing "understanding and respect."

Second, although she has persistently declined to embrace Beijing's concept of a "common political foundation" (共同政治基础), here she adopted new language regarding an "existing political foundation." Again, it was not precisely the formulation that the Mainland was calling for (and certainly neither was the definition she then assigned to it), but it would seem clearly to have been designed to recognize that there is a "political foundation" and that she accepts that fact.

There are at least three other points worth noting in the interview. One is Tsai's assertion that her administration will "transcend partisan politics"—again, not new, but in this context a reminder that she will not be the agent of the DPP (which isn't even mentioned in the interview) but president of all the people. Another is her reference to the "accumulated status quo and outcomes," going beyond the previous formulation on the "accumulated outcomes." And the third is her statement that she not only will respect the people's will but also "be mindful of the public interest." This suggests that she is willing to take hard decisions on the basis of *realpolitik* where necessary in Taiwan's interest in maintaining cross-Strait peace and stability. There is no suggestion of a "sell-out" of democracy and public will here, though undoubtedly some people will worry about that. But it is a clear statement that she will not be bound by formulaic partisan ideological considerations when she can make progress by embracing pragmatism while not abandoning principle.

The Mainland's Response

The report of the TAO's response was also noteworthy.³⁸

First, the Xinhua report on the response managed to put in the mouth of the questioner the entire second paragraph cited in full above, ensuring that readers would know what Tsai said.

Second, although the spokesman referred to the essential role of adherence to and maintenance of the "common political foundation" for steady, long-term peaceful development of cross-Strait relations, in his lead substantive sentence, he referred to the "1992 Consensus" only as "the political foundation" of peaceful development of cross-Strait relations. He didn't fail to mention that the core connotation was that the two sides of the Strait belong to "one China." But by leaving out "common" in the first reference to the foundation, one might imagine he was echoing to some extent Tsai's language.

Finally, the response did not criticize Tsai nor, as the TAO has been known to do on other occasions, say that "this won't work" (行不通). This did not imply agreement with what Tsai said, or that her remarks measured up to Beijing's standards. But by not rejecting what she said, it left open the possibility that the Mainland views this as not only a step forward, but likely as much as they will get at least until the May 20 inaugural address and quite possibly beyond that. Moreover, Beijing might have made a judgment that this is sufficient to allow it to hold off from taking the kinds of punitive steps that have been much talked about in terms of suspending cross-Strait links, clamping down on Taiwan's international activities, and so forth.

Not all commentators in the PRC were as reticent to specify Tsai's shortcomings and accuse her of once again evading the core question about the "one China" essence of the "1992 Consensus." One example is Zhou Zhihui, director of the Taiwan Studies Institute under the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and a senior person in the circle of Taiwan experts on the Mainland.

Having published an op-ed article three days earlier insisting that Tsai had to choose between peace and confrontation,³⁹ after Tsai's interview *Liberty Times* appeared Zhou followed up with a Xinhua interview noting that Tsai had made "some micro-adjustments" (一些微调) and gone a step forward compared with her previous statements.⁴⁰ But, he said, she was still vague and ambiguous regarding the critical issue of "the nature of cross-strait relations" (何种性质的关系) and of "the two sides of the Strait belonging to one and the same China." "Seeking common ground while reserving differences," he chided, is the path to reaching the "1992 Consensus," not the Consensus itself. This issue brooks no evasion, Zhou said.⁴¹

Finally, it is worth noting that in his press briefing a week after Tsai's *Liberty Times* interview and the TAO's initial response, TAO spokesman Ma Xiaoguang held a regular, extended press briefing, where the question of future cross-strait relations featured prominently.⁴² Throughout the course of the briefing, and as he reviewed all of the cross-strait accomplishments during 2015, Ma referred numerous times to the fact that those accomplishments were due to adherence to the "1992 Consensus" and he referred to the perils of dismantling that foundation. Through the entire recitation, though he responded to numerous questions that mentioned Tsai by name, Ma himself did not do so.

Still the conditional nature of relations going forward was suggested in Ma's separate responses to questions about the future of the transit program,⁴³ the future flow of tourists, and the prospects for negotiating completion of a commodities trade agreement. In each case, while he mentioned something specific to the issue at hand that would govern progress, Ma also referred to "the situation in cross-strait relations" (两岸关系形势) or "the overall environment in the development in cross-strait relations" (两岸关系发展的大环境) as a determinant.

Similarly, in commenting on a proposal from a senior DPP legislator to reopen negotiations on the long-pending services trade agreement, Ma said the Mainland's first priority was maintaining the political foundation that allows SEF and ARATS to engage in consultations. And on the durability of the newly established hotline between the Mainland Affairs Office (MAC) and TAO, again he engaged in a recitation of the importance of maintaining the common political foundation as a stabilizing force in cross-strait relations, without which those relations would inevitably suffer.

A similar hint of tentativeness was evident in TAO head Zhang Zhijun's remark to MAC head Hsia Li-yan during their second-ever hotline conversation. Zhang drove home (once again) the point about how acceptance of the core implication of the "1992 Consensus" of "both sides belonging to one China" made possible the maintenance of the status quo. He added: "At present, cross-strait relations are very sensitive and complex, with increasing uncertainty about the future."⁴⁴

One should not expect PRC officials to express joy over Tsai's positions in her *Liberty Times* interview. She obviously did not repeat the mantra as Beijing would have liked, and however far forward she in fact did lean, the fact is that she remained somewhat vague about the exact wording. That said, one might hope that, as many have urged, Beijing will be creative and flexible, and will reciprocate what they must see as, if a small step for them, a significant step for her. But the continuing references to uncertainty and the doubt hanging over the future of the relationship merit close attention.

Authority

If anyone had any doubts about where the guidance on Taiwan policy is coming from, one only needs to turn to the recent remarks of fourth-ranked Politburo Standing Committee member Yu Zhengsheng.⁴⁵ Yu's points about the positive and negative possibilities were quite familiar. But what was striking was Yu's comment, "We will unswervingly uphold the principles and policies decided by the central leadership on Taiwan affairs." Such a reference is certainly not out of place given Xi Jinping's personal attention to the issue at various junctures throughout the past year or so. Nonetheless this is not a phrase one often sees in the Taiwan context and undoubtedly was not idly included in Yu's remarks.

Notes

¹ Li Hanfang, "General Secretary Xi Jinping meets representative personages of various circles in Taiwan" (习近平总书记会见台湾各界代表人士), Xinhuanet, September 1, 2015, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2015/0901/c1024-27538430.html>.

² Transcript of Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) press briefing, September 16, 2015, http://www.gwytb.gov.cn/xwfbh/201509/t20150916_10681724.htm.

³ Alan D. Romberg, "Squaring the Circle: Adhering to Principle, Embracing Ambiguity," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 47, July 14, 2015, <http://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/clm47ar.pdf>, pp. 2–3.

⁴ Tsai Wen-chu, "Lai Ching-te for the first time openly declares 'I advocate Taiwan independence!'" (賴清德首度公開宣示「我主張台灣獨立!」), *Liberty Times*, September 30, 2015, <http://news.ltn.com.tw/news/politics/breakingnews/1460674>.

⁵ Tsai's discussion of Lai's comment was thrown in ("On another topic" [此外]) at the end of a very long posting on the DPP website about totally unrelated issues: "Promoting Asian Silicon Valley, Tsai Ing-wen: Combining central and local governments' resource and energy to produce the greatest result" (推動亞洲矽谷產業 蔡英文: 結合中央和地方政府的資源與能量, 發揮最大效能), DPP, October 1, 2015, http://www.dpp.org.tw/m/index_content.php?sn=8233.

⁶ "President Ma Ying-jeou's National Day Address—Taiwan's Future: Sustaining Peace and Prosperity," Office of the President, Republic of China (Taiwan) (hereafter abbreviated OOP), October 10, 2015, <http://english.president.gov.tw/Default.aspx?tabid=491&itemid=35810&rmid=2355> (Chinese text at <http://www.president.gov.tw/Default.aspx?tabid=131&itemid=35809&rmid=514>):

- 1) Under the ROC Constitution, maintained the status quo defined by three principles: no unification, no independence, and no use of force.
- 2) Based on the 1992 Consensus of “one China, respective interpretations,” promoted peaceful cross-Strait development.
- 3) In interaction with the Mainland, put Taiwan first, for the benefit of the people.
- 4) In negotiations with the Mainland, address urgent matters before non-urgent ones, easy issues before difficult ones, and economic matters before political matters.
- 5) Interactions with Mainland based on equality, dignity, and reciprocity.

⁷ Examples of the exquisite protocol were that Ma and Xi attended as “leaders of the two sides,” addressed each other as “Mister,” and equally shared the cost of the meal they had together. (“Xi-Ma meeting breakthrough in cross-Strait ties,” Xinhua, November 11, 2015, http://www.china.org.cn/china/Off_the_Wire/2015-11/04/content_36980226.htm.)

⁸ In the public and private meetings and at dinner, Ma raised a number of issues with Xi ranging from military security—including reduction of hostility and peaceful handling of disputes—to expansion of cross-Strait exchanges; establishment of a cross-Strait hotline between the heads of the cabinet-level officials who manage cross-Strait policy (Mainland Affairs Council [MAC] in Taiwan, TAO in the Mainland); joint cooperation for cross-Strait prosperity; PRC missile deployments; Taiwan’s urgent need to participate in regional economic institutions; the need to build mutual trust on a foundation of dignity, respect, sincerity and good will; Taiwan’s quest for more international space (including for NGOs); trade in goods; reciprocal establishment of representative offices; transits in Taiwan for mainland Chinese travelers; and Mainland vocational students studying in Taiwan. The above draws on the following documents:

- “Opening remarks by President Ma Ying-jeou at his meeting with Mainland Chinese leader Xi Jinping in Singapore,” OOP, November 7, 2015, <http://english.president.gov.tw/Default.aspx?tabid=491&itemid=36083&rmid=2355&sd=2015/11/07&ed=2015/11/07> (Chinese-language text at <http://www.president.gov.tw/Default.aspx?tabid=131&itemid=36068&rmid=514>)
- “Full text of ROC President Ma Ying-jeou’s remarks in meeting with Mainland Chinese leader Xi Jinping, November 7, 2015,” MAC, November 9, 2015, <http://www.mac.gov.tw/ct.asp?xItem=113323&ctNode=6337&mp=3>, (Chinese-language text at <http://www.mac.gov.tw/ct.asp?xItem=113316&ctNode=5650&mp=1>).
- “Opening remarks by President Ma at an international press conference following meeting with Mainland Chinese leader Xi in Singapore,” (including transcript of questions and answers), OOP, November 7, 2015, <http://english.president.gov.tw/Default.aspx?tabid=491&itemid=36085&rmid=2355&sd=2015/11/07&ed=2015/11/07> (Chinese-language text at <http://www.president.gov.tw/Default.aspx?tabid=131&itemid=36074&rmid=514&sd=2015/11/07&ed=2015/11/07>).
- “President Ma, Mainland Chinese leader Xi meet in Singapore, agree to jointly consolidate cross-Strait peace and prosperity,” MAC, Press Release No. 62, November 7, 2015, <http://www.president.gov.tw/Default.aspx?tabid=131&itemid=>

36074&rmid=514&sd=2015/11/07&ed=2015/11/07 (Chinese-language text at <http://www.mac.gov.tw/ct.asp?xItem=113310&ctNode=5649&mp=1>).

⁹ “Full text of ROC President Ma Ying-jeou’s remarks” (see endnote 8).

¹⁰ “Opening remarks by President Ma at an international press conference” (see endnote 8).

¹¹ Lillian Wu, “DPP presidential candidate does not rule out meeting with Xi,” Central News Agency (hereafter abbreviated CNA), November 5, 2015, <http://focustaiwan.tw/news/aip/201511050028.aspx>.

¹² H.H. Lu and Lillian Lin, “DPP has no objection to normalization of cross-Strait meetings,” CNA, November 5, 2015, <http://focustaiwan.tw/news/aip/201511050017.aspx>.

¹³ As MAC head Hsia Li-yan revealed, although the notion of a Ma-Xi meeting had of course been on the cross-Strait agenda for some time, the inspiration for this meeting only emerged at the October 14 meeting in Guangzhou between Hsia and TAO head Zhang Zhijun. According to Hsia, Zhang broached the subject once more and Hsia suggested Singapore as the venue after Zhang turned down the idea of a meeting at the APEC leaders meeting in Manila. (Yuan-ming Chiao, “Details emerge on Ma-Xi meeting,” *China Post*, November 5, 2015, <http://www.chinapost.com.tw/taiwan/national/national-news/2015/11/05/450151/Details-emerge.htm>.)

¹⁴ Matthew Strong, “Tsai condemns Ma-Xi meeting,” *Taiwan News Online* (TN), November 4, 2015, http://www.taiwannews.com.tw/etn/news_content.php?id=2830754. The DPP spokesman issued a formal statement condemning the meeting, as well. (“DPP statement regarding the matter of the Ma-Xi meeting” [民主進步黨針對馬習會一事之聲明], November 4, 2015, http://www.dpp.org.tw/news_content.php?sn=8344.)

¹⁵ Sophia Yeh and Elizabeth Hsu, “DPP’s Tsai makes three recommendations for Ma-Xi meeting,” CNA, November 7, 2015, <http://focustaiwan.tw/news/aip/201511070009.aspx>.

¹⁶ “Dr. Tsai Ing-wen reacts to the Ma-Xi meeting,” DPP, November 7, 2015, <http://english.dpp.org.tw/responsemaxi/>. (The original Chinese text of Tsai’s statement was posted at the same URL.)

¹⁷ Sophia Yeh and Jay Chen, “Tsai continues criticism of Ma’s performance at Singapore,” CNA, November 8, 2015, <http://focustaiwan.tw/news/aip/201511080017.aspx>.

¹⁸ See “Full text of ROC President Ma Ying-jeou’s remarks,” endnote 8.

In an interesting commentary on the meeting, Renmin University Professor Huang Jiashu discussed the question of why the Mainland has never acknowledged Ma’s “different interpretations” formulation. He said it was out of concern that some people might try to put independence arguments into the basket of “different interpretations.” But when Ma told Xi that the “interpretations” do not include “two Chinas,” “one China, one Taiwan,” or “Taiwan independence” because those are not allowed under the ROC Constitution—a statement that Huang reports Ma read word-for-word from a prepared text—this was taken as a commitment. Although the formulation was still not identical to the words Xi used (the 1992 Consensus “makes it clear that the Mainland and Taiwan belong to the same one China and the relationship across the Strait is not a state-to-state one or between one China and one Taiwan”), these two statements obviously have the same meaning, Huang said. That is, both sides belong to one country. “The two sides

now do have a ‘consensus,’” he concluded, “and mutual commitment as to ‘what the 1992 Consensus does not mean.’” He judged this to be the “highlight” of the meeting. (Huang Jiashu, “A Cross-Straits meeting of the minds,” *China-US Focus*, November 16, 2015, <http://m.chinausfocus.com/article/4094.html>.)

¹⁹ 当前，两岸关系发展面临方向和道路的抉择 (Lin Yan, Yang Benyao, Xu Mengxi, “Full text of Xi Jinping’s speech: Collaboratively pursue the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” [习近平致辞全文：共谋中华民族伟大复兴], *China Review News* [hereafter abbreviated CRN], November 7, 2015, <http://bj.crntt.com/doc/1039/9/5/7/103995794.html?coluid=7&kindid=0&docid=103995794&mdate=1107193702>.)

²⁰ 习近平强调，希望台湾各党派各团体能正视“九二共识”，无论哪个党派和团体，不论其过去主张过什么，只要承认九二共识的历史事实，认同其核心意涵，我们都愿意同其交往。(Lin Yan, Yang Benyao, Xu Mengxi, “Full text of Zhang Zhijun’s press conference: History will remember this day” [张志军记者会全文：历史将会记住今天], CRN, November 7, 2015, <http://bj.crntt.com/doc/1039/9/6/0/103996053.html?coluid=1&kindid=0&docid=103996053&mdate=1107222913>. Emphasis added.)

²¹ “Tsai still evasive on 1992 Consensus in TV interview,” KMT News Network (from Taipei papers), November 23, 2015, <http://www1.kmt.org.tw/english/page.aspx?type=article&mnum=112&anum=17032>.

²² “Mainland official stresses 1992 Consensus on cross-Straits affairs,” *Xinhuanet*, November 25, 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-11/25/c_134854548.htm.

²³ Lu Hsin-hui and Lilian Wu, “DPP’s Tsai promises ‘no provocation, no surprise’ China policy,” *Taipei Times*, December 22, 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-11/25/c_134854548.htm.

²⁴ The Chinese text of her remarks is at “Full text of presidential candidate Tsai Ing-wen at the first televised debate, first phase, detailed statements” (總統候選人蔡英文首場電視辯論會 第一階段申論全文), *Light up Taiwan blog*, December 27, 2015, <http://iing.tw/posts/462>.)

²⁵ “Full text of presidential candidate Tsai Ing-wen at the first televised debate, third phase, interactive questions” (總統候選人蔡英文首場電視辯論會 第三階段交互詰問全文), *Light up Taiwan blog*, December 27, 2015, <http://iing.tw/posts/465>.

²⁶ “Tsai’s ‘1992 Consensus not the only option’ remark questioned within DPP,” *China Times* (as translated by KMT News Network), December 30, 2015, <http://www1.kmt.org.tw/english/page.aspx?type=article&mnum=112&anum=17180>.

²⁷ “Transcript of TAO press conference,” December 30, 2015, http://www.gwytb.gov.cn/xwfbh/201512/t20151230_11345139.htm.

²⁸ “Tsai still evasive on 1992 Consensus in TV interview,” KMT News Network (from Taipei papers), November 23, 2015, <http://www1.kmt.org.tw/english/page.aspx?type=article&mnum=112&anum=17032>.

²⁹ George Liao, “Communication is key to face China leader: Tsai,” *TN*, January 12, 2016, http://www.etaiwannews.com/etn/news_content.php?id=2867039&lang=eng_news&cate_rss=TAIWAN_eng.

³⁰ “During this election I had promised on many occasions that I will build a consistent predictable and sustainable cross-strait relationship. As the 14th president-elect of the Republic of China I reaffirm that after my new administration takes office on May 20 the Republic of China constitutional order the results of cross-strait negotiations interactions

and exchanges and democratic principles and the will of the Taiwanese people will become the foundation for future cross-strait relations. My position will move past partisan politics. Following the will and consensus of the Taiwanese people we will work to maintain the status quo for peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait in order to bring the greatest benefits and well-being to the Taiwanese people.

“I also want to emphasize that both sides of the strait have a responsibility to find mutually acceptable means of interaction that are based on dignity and reciprocity. We must ensure that no provocations or accidents take place. The results of today’s election showcase the will of the Taiwanese people. It is the shared resolve of Taiwan’s 23 million people that the Republic of China is a democratic country. Our democratic system national identity and international space must be respected. Any forms of suppression will harm the stability of cross-strait relations.” (This English translation and the original Chinese are both available on the DPP website at http://www.dpp.org.tw/news_content.php?sn=8770)

³¹ 们的对台大政方针是一贯的、明确的，不因台湾地区的选举结果而改变。我们将继续坚持“九二共识”，坚决反对任何形式的“台独”分裂活动。在维护国家主权和领土完整的重大原则问题上，我们的意志坚如磐石，态度始终如一。（“Responsible person of the CCP Central Committee Taiwan Affairs Office [and] State Council Taiwan Affairs Office makes a statement about the results of Taiwan region’s election” (中共中央台办、国务院台办负责人就台湾地区选举结果发表谈话), Xinhuanet, January 16, 2016, http://www.gwytb.gov.cn/wyly/201601/t20160116_11366668.htm. Translation provided by Open Source Enterprise, CHR2016011655375950, January 16, 2016.)

³² “Taiwanese choose Tsai, not independence,” *Global Times* (Editorial), January 17, 2016, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/963985.shtml>.

³³ Zhang Hua, “Tsai’s win not a mandate for independence,” *Global Times*, January 17, 2016, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/964084.shtml>.

³⁴ Tony Liao and Evelyn Kao, “Cross-Strait policy not salient issue in elections: DPP official,” CNA, January 20, 2016, <http://focustaiwan.tw/news/aipl/201601200017.aspx>. In the end, it would seem that Wu’s assessment is justified, which also underscores another point he made, that (at least in this election) viewing the election through a prism of independence versus unification might be outdated. The full transcript of Wu’s speech and Q&A is at http://www.brookings.edu/~media/events/2016/01/19-taiwan-elections/20160119_taiwan_elections_transcript.pdf.

³⁵ Jay Chen, “China shows ‘good will’ before Taiwan’s election: Tsai,” CNA, January 18, 2016, <http://focustaiwan.tw/news/acs/201601180004.aspx>.

³⁶ Tsou Ching-wen, “Tsai Ing-wen: 1992 is an historical fact, promoting cross-Strait relations” (蔡英文：九二歷史事實 推動兩岸關係), *Liberty Times*, January 21, 2016, <http://news.ltn.com.tw/news/focus/paper/951154>.

³⁷ 第一是，一九九二年兩岸兩會會談的歷史事實、以及雙方求同存異的共同認知。第二，是中華民國現行憲政體制；第三，是兩岸過去廿多年來協商和交流互動的成果；以及第四，是台灣的民主原則以及普遍民意。（*op. cit.*）

³⁸ Chen Jianxing, “TAO: Only by maintaining well the political foundation of the ‘1992 Consensus’ can cross-Strait relations stably move forward in the long run” (国台办：维护好“九二共识”政治基础 两岸关系才能行稳致远), Xinhua, January 21, 2016, http://www.gwytb.gov.cn/wyly/201601/t20160121_11371098.htm.

³⁹ “Zhou Zhihui: Peace or confrontation, which choice will Tsai Ing-wen make?”

(周志怀: 和平或对立, 蔡英文将作何选择), *Global Times*, January 18, 2016,

<http://opinion.huanqiu.com/1152/2016-01/8396717.html>.

⁴⁰ Cha Wenye, “Zhou Zhihui: Tsai Ing-wen still needs to face the core connotation of the ‘1992 Consensus’,” *Xinhua*, January 21, 2016, http://news.xinhuanet.com/tw/2016-01/21/c_1117854958.htm.

⁴¹ Although most of the published commentary more or less followed this same line, at least one did not. Arguing that the change of regime is an inevitable step in Taiwan’s political development and the restructuring of Taiwan society, Shanghai East Asia Institute director Zhang Nianchi said people should not view the election results as a failure of PRC policy or be pessimistic about the prospects for future reunification. On the other hand, he suggested that the Mainland’s model of “peaceful reunification, one country two systems” has no appeal in Taiwan and lacks inspirational force. Reunification is inevitable, he said, but we need a better narrative that puts us on the high ground. (Zhang Nianchi, “How to view another turn of the wheel in Taiwan” [怎麼看待台灣再度「變天」], *China Review News*, February 1, 2016, No. 218, pp. 4–6).

This approach was also consistent with a comment Zhang offered to the *Washington Post* in mid-January (before Tsai’s *Liberty Times* interview). What he said was: “Tsai’s [election night] speech showed that she has switched her role from being a party leader to a ruler. If she is on this track, we should accept and encourage her. We shouldn’t be unsatisfied with her not accepting the 1992 Consensus. Tsai was chosen by Taiwanese people, and that is a reality we have to face, too.” (Simon Denyer, “Opposition leader’s landslide win in Taiwan puts onus on China to respond,” *Washington Post*, January 17, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/opposition-leaders-landslide-win-in-taiwan-puts-onus-on-china-to-respond/2016/01/17/1f2fec52-b954-11e5-85cd-5ad59bc19432_story.html.)

⁴² “Transcript of TAO press briefing,” TAO, January 27, 2016,

http://www.gwytb.gov.cn/xwfbh/201601/t20160127_11376021.htm.

⁴³ Agreement for the first tranche of such transit visitors—Mainland passengers passing through Taiwan airports on their way to onward destinations—was announced in early January and the transits began in early February.

⁴⁴ “Cross-Strait chiefs speak via hotline,” *Xinhua*, February 5, 2016,

http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-02/05/c_135078098.htm.

⁴⁵ “Mainland committed to peace, stability across Taiwan Strait,” *Xinhua*, February 2, 2016, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-02/02/c_135068763.htm.