

Progress in the Cross-Strait Relations and its Ramifications for the Inter-Korean Relations

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On November 7, 2015, Singapore hosted the first official meeting between the leaders of Taiwan and mainland China. This is a historic summit (a.k.a. the Ma-Xi summit) between the President of the Republic of China (Taiwan) Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九), and the President of the People's Republic of China (PRC) Xi Jin-ping (習近平) —the first direct contact between the leaders of the two sides since the creation of PRC in 1949. Hence, the cross-strait relations are under the spotlight and have received attention from the international community.

In the past, contact between Taiwan and China has been carried out almost exclusively by two semi-official organizations: Taiwan's Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF) and PRC's Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits (ARATS). On October 6, 2013, Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) Minister Wang Yu-chi (王郁琦) met with PRC's Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) Minister Zhang Zhijun (張志軍) in Indonesia on the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting for the first time. They called each other the official titles, and initiated the new mechanism of the official contact between two sides of the strait. Present Ma considered it a specific practice on the "mutual non-denial of jurisdiction" between two sides of the strait, and a good start of normalizing the official interactions across the strait, which is the important milestone in the institutionalization of the cross-strait relations.

In February, 2014, Wang Yu-chi visited China for the first time with his official title and had an official meeting with Zhang Zhijun, which set the record on the meeting on the ministerial level for the first time across the strait. Both reached the consensus and agreed to create a formal dialogue mechanism between Taiwan's MAC and China's TAO. President Ma praised the "extraordinary significance" of the meeting, calling it an important marker in the peaceful development of cross-strait relations. In June, 2014, Zhang Zhijun was invited by Wang Yu-chi to visit Taiwan, which practically carried out the normalized contact and communication mechanism between MAC and TAO. In May and October, 2015, Zhang Zhijun and Hsia Li-yan (夏立言), the new minister of MAC, had Hsia-Zhang meetings in Kinmen, Taiwan and Guangzhou, China, respectively. Both stressed the establishment of the new era in the history of peaceful development across the strait, based on the concept of "one China, respective interpretations" (the 1992 Consensus).

On Nov 5, 2015, Minister Hsia Li-yan called a press conference and stated that the Ma-Xi summit was initiated and brought up by Zhang Zhijun during the Hsia-Zhang meeting in Guangzhou in October, 2015. Minister Hsia emphasized that 23 agreements have been signed by the SEF and ARATS, and 6 conferences have been held by heads of the MAC and TAO under President Ma's administration, which have improved cross-strait relations—or at least normalized in many respects—over the past seven years, and that the Ma-Xi summit was therefore the logical next step in the hope of institutionalizing the talks between the leaders of both sides. Following the Ma-Xi summit, the U.S. Department of State issued a written statement stating that “the United States welcomes the meeting between leaders on both sides of the Taiwan Strait and the historic improvement in cross-Strait relations in recent years. we encourage further progress by both sides toward building ties, reducing tensions, and promoting stability on the basis of dignity and respect”. According to the poll by the MAC, the result showed that more than 80 percent of Taiwanese supported the cross-strait summit as long as it was conducted with mutual respect and transparency.

In fact, since his second term, President Ma has actively sought to hold the Ma-Xi summit under unofficial Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit, especially in the 2014 APEC in Beijing. However, Beijing denied such request because the cross-strait affairs were not appropriate for discussion in the international events. Then, why Xi suddenly agreed the meeting with Ma in Singapore during the final half year of Ma's term? According to this question, one Chinese scholar responded in my interview that Beijing anticipated that Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) was expected to win the Taiwan's presidential election next year in January. Xi hoped to establish in advance the direct dialogue mechanism between two leaders of both sides to prevent both sides from making any misjudgment. Next, Xi hoped to give credit to Ma on Ma's contribution to the improved cross strait relations via this summit. For this, I think Xi's first purpose is to provide Tsai with the new “status quo”—the cross-strait summit under the 1992 Consensus, which is about the theory of “bridging”. If Tsai is not willing to aboard the bridge in the future, Xi can pass the buck to Tsai for the deteriorating cross-strait relations and thus can pressure Taiwan through US(經美制台). The second purpose is to encourage the political power in Taiwan that wishes to develop a friendly relationship with China to reserve the influence to balance Taiwan's independence. In a nutshell, the most important goal of the Ma-Xi Summit is to cement the peace between Taiwan and China and to keep the cross-strait status quo.

Of course, Xi has his concerns for the domestic politics and international strategies through the Ma-Xi summit. According to Chao Chun-shan (趙春山),

President of Foundation on the Asia-Pacific Peace Studies, since Xi stepped into the office, Xi has encountered many domestic and international issues, and does not wish to see any tension between the stabilizing cross-strait relations. Next, Douglas H. Paal, former Director of American Institute in Taiwan (AIT), stated that Tsai's winning the presidential election will make the cross-strait relation one of the important issues in the Chinese Communist Party's 19th Congress in 2017 and will become Xi's heavy burden. Furthermore, from the perspective of regional security in the Asia Pacific, Xi aims to weaken the influence of US's pivot to Asia or rebalancing strategy on China through the cross-strait leaders' summit with the same diplomatic purpose of the China-Japan-Korea Trilateral Summit and Xie's visit to Vietnam. However, Ma is no longer the chairman of the Kuomintang (KMT); thus, the Ma-Xi summit is not a party-to-party meeting, but can be regarded as "one country, two governments", or this summit can be interpreted as a tacit approval on the existence of the government of ROC, which can be Xi's risk to bear through this summit.

In contrast to Xi's active measures, what about South Korea's President Park Geun-hye's strategy toward North Korea? During the post-cold war, the inter-Korean relations that are similar to the cross-strait relations have been gradually approaching from the zero sum to the win-win situation. When former South Korean President Kim Dae-jung stepped into the office in 1998, he actively implemented the Sunshine Policy for more engagement with North Korea. President Kim of South Korea went to Pyongyang in June, 2000 for the ice-breaking trip to have the first inter-Korean summit in 2000 with Kim Jong-il, the former leader of North Korea, and co-announced that they would make joint efforts to reach their independent and peaceful unification. Kim Dae-jung won the Nobel Peace Prize. In 2002, President Roh Moo-hyun took over Kim Dae-jung's presidency and continued on this Sunshine Policy. In October, 2007, President Roh also visited Pyongyang, which was in his final four months of presidency under the circumstance of low public support of the presidential candidate from his own party. Thus, Roh's visit was questioned for the political manipulation for the election. Furthermore, the North Korean nuclear issue was not addressed in this summit, which shadowed this summit.

Due to the deadlock of the North Korea's nuclear issue and the Sunshine Policy being questioned over its effectiveness, President Lee Myung-bak took the hardline policy on North Korea, instead. During his 5-year term, the inter-Korean relations had seriously moved backwards. In February, 2013 when President Lee was about to leave the office before the new President Park Geun-hye took over the office, Kim Jong-un, who took over Kim Jong-il's leadership role in North Korea, carried out some provocative measures such as the third nuclear test, which strengthened South Korea's President Park Geun-hye's uncompromising attitudes. Although President Park

proposed the main axle of her policy toward North Korea based on the “Trust-Building Process on the Korean Peninsula”, and also expressed her willingness to meet with Kim Jong-un, President Park also stressed that the removal of the nuclear weapons in North Korea has been the main axle of building mutual trust on the Korean Peninsula. Hence, even though the Ma-Xi summit was just over, which may increase the pressure from within South Korea to improve its relations with North Korea on the Park’s administration, President Park responded to the foreign press by stressing again she will meet with Kim Jong-un if there is any significant progress in the removal of the nuclear weapons in North Korea. Hence, under this precondition, the possibility of the Korean Summit is very dim.

In fact, when President Ma met with Jeong Se-hyun, former Unification Minister of South Korea and expressed that his idea to push an improved cross-strait relation was from President Kim Dae-jung’s Sunshine Policy and the Ma-Xi summit has summarized Ma’s policy toward China. However, it is still inconclusive whether the new government next year will follow the “status quo” defined by President Ma’s China policy. Ironically, President Kim Dae-jung’s Sunshine Policy was put on hold by President Lee Myung-bak, and this policy was also being criticized by President Park Geun-hye who was not going to follow such policy because such peace is spurious. According to the poll by Seoul National University, more than half of the Korean people are willing to bear the cost incurred due to the Korean peninsula unification and more than 70 percent of the Korean people think that South Korea and North Korea should be united. Different from Korea, the majority of people in Taiwan presently do not wish to be united with China. According to the recent poll of the MAC, the support to main the status quo is up to 88.5%, while quick unification or quick independence falls short of support, which is about 1.5% and 4.6%, respectively.

According to Douglas H. Paal, former Director of AIT, the peaceful and mutually respected Ma-Xi summit has its historical meaning; especially the tension across the strait has been a while. International order in the post-cold war, which includes inter-Korean relations can use this as a paradigm for conflict management. However, whether the cross-strait relations in the post-Ma’s era can continue on their present course toward peaceful development is subject to Taiwanese identity on Taiwan independence. Similarly, the present biggest hurdle that undermines the inter-Korean relations results from threats of North Korea’s nuclear weapon development. Both issues are complex and hard to solve, which are testing the wisdom of decision makers across the straits and in the Korean Peninsula.

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