



The People's Republic of China's Pro *Status Quo* Approach in Cross-Strait Relations

Elisa Gambino

Abstract: How the relationship between Taiwan and the People's Republic of China (PRC) will evolve in the future, or will eventually see a solution, is of great importance not only to East Asia, but also to the West because of the United States' (US) involvement with both sides. This essay deals with the Cross-Strait issue between the PRC and Taiwan and will present an overview of the relations between the two sides of the Strait, as well as assessing whether or not the PRC is interested in maintaining the current status quo. This essay will take the position that the People's Republic of China is pro status quo and examine the reasons behind its position.

Keywords: *People's Republic of China, Republic of China, Taiwan, International Relations, Cross-Strait, Security.*

Introduction

How the relationship between Taiwan and the People's Republic of China (PRC) will evolve in the future, or will eventually see a solution, is of great importance not only to East Asia, but also to the West because of the United States' (US) involvement with both sides. This essay deals with the Cross-Strait issue between the PRC and Taiwan and will present an overview of the relations between the two sides of the Strait, as well as assess whether or not the PRC is interested in maintaining the current status quo.

In the essay different names will be used in reference to the parties involved. The People's Republic of China will be referred to as Mainland China or the PRC, depending on the time period (before or after 1949) or to avoid repetitions. Formosa will also be used to refer to Taiwan, since it is the name given to the island by the Portuguese in the mid-sixteenth century.¹ The island will be also called the Republic of China (the ROC), depending on the historical period.

This essay will take the position that the People's Republic of China is pro status quo and examine the reasons behind its position. The loss of credibility that would affect the PRC government if Taiwan became *de jure* independent and the possible effect on its

¹ April C.J., Lin & Jerome F., Keating, *Island in the Stream: a quick case study of Taiwan's complex history* (Taipei: SMC publishing Inc, 2000).

Elisa Gambino is Master's Candidate in Chinese Studies at the University of Edinburgh, UK.

E-mail: s1127297@sms.ed.ac.uk

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economic growth are the reasons identified. Secondly, the economic ties that link the two sides of the Strait are of remarkable importance. Furthermore, it will deal with the island's geographical position that makes it a gate to the Pacific.² Lastly, if Taiwan became independent, the PRC's internal stability could be threatened since other areas, which seek to become independent, could follow Taiwan's example.³ The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) seems to think that the problem of Taiwan will solve itself with time, and for this reason the PRC proposed the "one country, two systems" policy, that it had already applied in Hong Kong and Macau.⁴

The first part of the essay will present a historical overview of the relations between Mainland China and Taiwan starting from 1991. It will also aim to provide a clearer understanding of the two sides' points of view over the years. The overview presented follows the PRC's timeline, as this is the government recognized by most countries and international organizations, such as the United Nations (UN).⁵ The second part analyzes the reasons behind the PRC's pro status quo position on Cross-Strait relations. The first sub-section will deal with how Taiwan's *de jure* independence could affect the PRC's image and threaten its soft power. The following sub-section will provide an analysis of how close economic relations are one of the reasons why people on both sides want to maintain the status quo. The following sub-section will analyze the importance of the island's position. The fourth sub-section will connect the Taiwanese possible independence with the PRC's internal stability. The final sub-section will present the "one country, two systems" ideal the PRC is pursuing.⁶ The last part of the essay will deal with the scenario of reunification and the implications for Japan and the international political scene. The conclusion will provide a brief summary and reflect on implications for the future.

Evolution of Approaches

In 1991, Taiwan formally ended the war with Mainland China. In doing so, Taipei renounced its goal of militarily taking back the "lost" territories on the other side of the Strait. Moreover, the end of the war also meant that, without changing its position on reunification, the Kuomintang⁷ (KMT) recognized that the PRC and its government existed and were in the same country.⁸ As a consequence, both sides agreed on the "one

2 Alan M. Wachman, *Why Taiwan?: geostrategic rationales for China's territorial integrity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007).

3 Namely the regions of Xinjiang, Tibet and Inner Mongolia, as suggested by Wachman, *Why Taiwan?*

4 Shaocheng Tang, "New trends in the Cross-Strait relations between China and Taiwan," *Asia Europe Journal* 4, no. 4 (2006): 555-562.

5 "United Nations Members States," last modified March 11, 2016, <http://www.un.org/en/members/>

6 Jing Huang & Xiaoting Li, *Inseparable separation: the making of China's Taiwan policy*. (Singapore: World Scientific, 2010).

7 The party which had lost the civil war on the mainland (Manthorpe, 2009).

8 C.C. Hsieh, "Pragmatic diplomacy: foreign policy and external relations" In: *Take-off for Taiwan?*

China” principle expressed in the “Beijing consensus” of 1992.⁹ This could be considered as the beginning of the status quo, which sees the factions on both sides of the Strait as one China with two different interpretations.

In 1993, the PRC released the paper “The Taiwan question and the reunification of China” (also called “the White Paper”). The authors of this document argued that the island of Formosa is part of China for geographic and historical reasons. Moreover, they claimed that “Taiwan was returned to China *de jure* and *de facto* at the end of the second world war.”¹⁰ There are two different interpretations of this matter, one legal and one that reflects the state of affairs. From the legal prospective, scholars argue that the rightful government in 1945 was the ROC and so the PRC should not control Taiwan. Therefore, when Japan lost the war in 1945, the island was given back to the ROC, and since the ROC still exists the PRC is not the rightful government of Taiwan. Legal matters aside, the PRC is the successor of the ROC since the CCP won the civil war, and is recognized as such by international organizations, including the UN.¹¹ Following this logic, the “White Paper” states that the PRC is the only recognized government of China and therefore Taiwan should not be involved in international matters, meaning that they should not be represented abroad or in international organizations’ meetings. The “White Paper” then explains how the reunification of China has and will always be central to the Chinese people.¹² It also clarifies the conditions under which Taiwan would be governed in case of reunification (“one country, two systems”). In addition, the authors stress the fact that, after reunification, Taiwan would be granted the status of an autonomous province.¹³

Jiang Zemin retained Deng Xiaoping’s position of pursuing the “one country, two systems” policy with regards to Taiwan. Not only did Deng initiate this policy to try to politically outmaneuver Taiwan’s independence claims, he also kept pushing for reunification and made efforts to secure the promise of non-interference from the US. Beijing made several offers to Taipei, stating that a “peaceful reunification” would allow Taiwan to retain its economic ties with the outside world.¹⁴ Under Jiang’s leadership, there was a threat of crisis in 1995-1996, during which the PRC tested missiles in the waters of the Strait. The crisis was caused by a visit of Taiwanese leaders to the US and elections on the island. The US reacted saying that both sides should not threaten to take military action against the other party.¹⁵ Under Jiang’s guidance, Beijing had to face the

Edited by P. Ferdinand (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1996).

9 Huang and Li, *Inseparable separation*.

10 John F., Copper, *Words across the Taiwan Strait: a critique of Beijing’s “White paper” on China’s reunification* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1995): 75.

11 Ibid.

12 John F., Copper, *Words across the Taiwan Strait: a critique of Beijing’s “White paper” on China’s reunification* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1995).

13 Taiwan would have to follow the same rules, and would have the same rights as the other autonomous regions, namely Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Guangxi, Ningxia and Tibet.

14 Huang and Li, *Inseparable separation*.

15 Ibid.

problem of Taiwanese nationalism.¹⁶ When Taiwan was discovered,¹⁷ it was inhabited by aborigines. The presence of the aborigines remained of great importance throughout the process of democratization. Taiwanese nationalism is a difficult concept to understand or define because of the issues between different ethnicities which coexist on the island, and also because of the loss of identity after centuries of being a colony.¹⁸ The ethnic groups are often defined as aborigines and mainlanders, according to whether they were born on the island or had moved from the Mainland.¹⁹ Moreover, Jiang Zemin had to face the refusal of the “one China” theory by President Lee Teng-hui and the consequent involvement of the US, which tried to steer the two factions towards peaceful dialogue. In this period the US also stood behind Clinton’s “Three No’s” statement of “no two Chinas”, no “one China, one Taiwan,” and “no to American support of Taiwan’s independence.”²⁰

In 2000, the CCP published a second “White Paper” to re-state Beijing’s position on the Cross-Strait issue. In this document the PRC put heavy emphasis on the “one country, two systems” policy and attacked Taiwanese President Lee because, according to the authors, he allegedly caused tensions in the Strait. The paper included a section about the possibility of a military intervention if Taiwan refused to talk about reunification with the PRC.²¹ This paper was published right before the presidential elections in Taiwan. Against all of the PRC’s predictions, Chen Shui-bian won the election. Chen had expressed his pro-independence position several times, which severely concerned Beijing. After the election, Chen’s idea on the subject changed drastically; Taiwanese independence would not be declared, unless a military attack from the PRC occurred.²² As a consequence, the status quo was clearly an equilibrium that neither of the two parties intended to break or

16 Manthorpe Jonathan, *Forbidden Nation: A History of Taiwan* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

17 During the 16th century the island was discovered by the Portuguese explorers.

18 Between the discovery of the island and the establishment of the PRC, Taiwan was subject to foreign presence. It was used by Japanese and Chinese pirates as a place to hide and carry out slave trade. In 1626 the Spanish set foot in Taiwan, but quickly fled after aborigine attacks. At the same time Holland developed an interest in this territory. During the same century Ming forces belonging to the Chinese Empire invaded Taiwan but were only able to control part of the island because of the aborigines. During the Qing era the approach towards Taiwan was essentially passive and other foreign powers such as the United Kingdom, France and the US became interested in the island and tried to get hold of it. In 1885, Mainland China officially recognized Taiwan with the status of province. Unfortunately for the Qing dynasty, Taiwan declared itself a republic in 1895. The Republic of Formosa lasted only three months because it was occupied by Japan and remained so after the Qing dynasty fell in 1911. It was only after the end of World War II that Taiwan was freed from Japanese control. See: Melissa J., Brown, *Is Taiwan Chinese?: the impact of culture, power and migration on changing identities* (Berkeley, Calif.; London: University of California Press, 2004).

19 Baik Ji-Woon, “East Asian perspective on Taiwanese identity: a critical reading of ‘Overcoming the Division System’ of Taiwan: A Radical Quarterly in Social Studies” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 11, no. 4 (2010): 591-604.

20 John F., Copper, *Taiwan: Nation-State or Province?* 4th ed. Boulder (Colo.: Westview Press, 2003).

21 Sheng Lijun, *China and Taiwan: Cross-Strait Relations Under Chen Shui-bian* (New York: Zed Books, 2002).

22 Manthorpe Jonathan, *Forbidden Nation: A History of Taiwan* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

modify. The status quo has not changed since the consensus of 1992, as both the PRC and the ROC agree on the “one China” concept but gave different interpretation to it.

In 2002, when Hu Jintao became the General Secretary of the CCP, the PRC altered its position on Cross-Strait relations. The PRC stopped pursuing the road of reunification and decided to try maintaining the status quo. In those years, the principle of “one China” was recognized by both the PRC and Taiwan, and therefore President Hu decided to base his politics on the concept of the “peaceful development” of Cross-Strait relations and of the PRC’s economy.²³ The PRC wanted to become an important actor on the international stage and thus it could not afford to project a bad image abroad. Hu Jintao was the first to firmly adopt the position of defending the status quo. When Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian reintroduced talks on separation, arguably to gather support for the upcoming election, the government of the PRC looked for help from the US.²⁴ The US responded by sending a representative to Taipei and stressing the importance of the shared concept of “one China.” In Hu Jintao’s eyes, the most important thing was to avoid Taiwanese independence. In order to accomplish this, the Anti-Secession Law was published in 2005.²⁵ The goal of this policy was not only to avoid secession, but also to create an environment in which the PRC could keep pursuing reunification.²⁶ A stable environment was important for both the PRC’s dream of reunification and its economic development. As long as leading powers did not see the PRC as a threat they would not try to stop its development. Therefore, the keywords often used to describe Hu Jintao’s line of action are “stability and development” as they reflect the President’s policies and general political approach to Taiwanese relations (“no independence, no use of force”).²⁷ While Hu Jintao was in power, Taiwan had another round of elections, with Ma Ying-jeou as the winner. Soon after his election, President Ma declared his policy of the so-called “Three-No’s”: no *de jure* independence, no dialogue about reunification, and no force involved. In conclusion, Hu’s period was characterized by his strive for stability.²⁸ The goal of stopping Taiwanese secession was strengthened with the promulgation of the Anti-Secessionist Law. Furthermore, President Hu tried to create the basis for a possible future reunification. His approach on the matter was pro-status quo from the beginning and reflected the general idea of “peaceful development” present in the majority of the policies he promoted.²⁹

The approach of the PRC’s current President Xi Jinping is not far from his predecessor’s.

23 Huang and Li, *Inseparable separation*.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Hu Lingwei, “The Basic Features and Challenges of Cross-Strait Relations in the New Era” *American Foreign Policy Interests* 32, no. 1 (2010): 5-12.

27 Tang, “New trends in the Cross-Strait relations between China and Taiwan.”

28 Huang and Li, *Inseparable separation*.

29 Ibid.

The general feeling, after the recent meeting³⁰ between Xi and Ma, is that the PRC's President is trying to narrow the gap in order to keep the relations between the two sides of the Strait prosperous. This demonstrates that a resolution remains distant.

The PRC'S Reasons to Retain the Status Quo

As the years pass, a solution to the Taiwanese issue seems further and further away. Charney and Prescott have proposed some solutions in their work "Resolving Cross-Strait relations between China and Taiwan."³¹ They present two possible extreme scenarios that are currently rejected by both sides: one, complete Taiwanese independence, or two, complete reunification with the Mainland. The use of force as a tool for solving the problem is unlikely because it could affect both sides negatively. In addition, the initiator of the war could be prosecuted through international law. If only peaceful solutions are taken into account, the issue might be solved through a "third party tribunal," even though both the PRC and the ROC are reluctant to have an external body deciding their future. The preferred strategy, at least for now, is to maintain the status quo, which Charney and Prescott define as "masterly inactivity."³² In the following sections, the consequences of Taiwanese independence and reunification with the PRC will be analyzed.

PRC's credibility could be affected by Taiwanese independence

In the twentieth century both the PRC and the ROC have tried to increase their soft power,³³ although their target countries were, and still are, different. The PRC has been trying to convey itself as a model for developing and authoritarian countries. In recent years, Mainland China has also started to become economically involved with some developing African countries, in order to expand its soft power. If Taiwan declared independence, the PRC's soft power would be highly affected, since the "China model" of development (characterised by a state-driven policy system) therefore would be seen as less effective. The PRC has also been trying to emerge as a power that gives a lot of importance to stability and peace, an example being the "Six Party Talks," and does not welcome any changes in the status quo that could damage its international image. The PRC is one of the world's leading powers, it is therefore of key importance that its rise is not perceived as a threat by any other prominent power. This is one of the main reasons behind the common use of the word *heping*³⁴ (peaceful) by Chinese leaders. On

30 November 7th, 2015 in Singapore.

31 Charney I. Jonathan and Prescott R. V. John, "Resolving Cross-Strait Relations Between China and Taiwan," *The American Journal of International Law* 94, no. 3 (2000): 453-477.

32 Ibid.

33 Soft power is defined by Nye (2011:20-21) as 'the ability to affect others through the co-optive means of framing the agenda, persuading, and eliciting positive attraction in order to obtain preferred outcomes'.

34 和平

the other hand, Taiwanese soft power has mainly been perceived as a reflection of the US' influence, it was needed to defend the island from the growing power of the PRC.³⁵ The soft power issue is complicated, but nevertheless the PRC cannot afford to lose its influence. One way to retain its soft power is not allowing Taiwan to be independent and stressing the importance of a “peaceful dialogue” across the Strait. Maintaining the status quo is central to the PRC's agenda connected to the expansion of its influence on the international stage.

Economic ties

When the PRC began to open up, the ROC's investments in Mainland China increased drastically. As a result, trade with the Mainland became more and more important for the Taiwanese economy, to the point where the island became more dependent on the PRC.³⁶ The PRC has always positively received Taiwanese investments. In fact, it has also promulgated a law “for the Protection of Investment Made by Taiwan Compatriots”³⁷ in the 1990s and, in 2000, the PRC decided to promulgate rules to clarify and make the trade process easier.³⁸ As the years passed, the Taiwanese economy became more dependent on trade with the Mainland. This is seen as a reason for Taiwan not to change the status quo, while also being a reason for the PRC to retain it. Taiwan has been a model of economic development during the 1980s and 1990s. If Taiwanese independence was accomplished, the PRC would “lose face.”³⁹ The Taiwanese “model” would win over the PRC's, and as a consequence the Mainland could also lose soft power in authoritarian countries, which look up to its development.⁴⁰ The PRC also sees the current status quo and the strong economic ties as assets that play an important role in retaining its influence over Taiwan.⁴¹

Geographical position of Formosa

In the “White Paper” published in 1993, the PRC stressed that Taiwan is geographically part of China and that its separation would create an empty space in Chinese “perfect” geography.⁴² As a matter of fact, the position of the island is important to the Mainland because it gives access to the Pacific. Some argue that this could be the real reason for the PRC to pursue reunification, since Taiwan could turn out to be an important asset for

35 Jacques deLisle, “Soft Power in a Hard Place: China, Taiwan, Cross-Strait Relations and U.S. Policy,” *Orbis* 54, no. 4 (2010): 493-524.

36 C.C. Hsieh, “Pragmatic diplomacy.”

37 Sheng Lijun, *China and Taiwan*, 75.

38 Ibid.

39 *Diu mianzi* 丢面子 or *Diu lian* 丢脸 means “to feel publicly humiliated because of an action displaying your incompetence or immorality to others” (Schoenhals, 1993).

40 deLisle, “Soft Power in a Hard Place.”

41 Fu Lin, “As Hazy as Ever, the Cross-Strait Status Quo” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 9, no. 2 (2008): 141-147.

42 John F. Copper, *Words across the Taiwan Strait: a critique of Beijing's “White paper” on China's reunification* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1995).

the control of the sea, since its location provides access to resources and possibility of military advantages.⁴³ At the same time, the current status quo is better than separation. Even if gaining control of the sea is relevant to Chinese strategy, the PRC still believes that a peaceful coexistence is an acceptable solution in the short term.

Possible endangerment of PRC's internal stability

The PRC has always faced many internal threats to its stability and legitimacy. It has to be noted that the PRC has established five autonomous regions,⁴⁴ many of which have raised issues concerning independence, namely the regions of Xinjiang, Tibet and Inner Mongolia.⁴⁵ If Taiwan succeeded in gaining independence, the above mentioned regions could also try to pursue independence of their own, which would undermine the PRC's stability. Therefore, the PRC is trying to retain the status quo to avoid internal problems and avoid facing such threats of independence.⁴⁶

Goal of "one country, two systems"

The policy of "one country, two systems" was initiated by Deng Xiaoping and is currently applied to Hong Kong and Macau. This policy reflects the idea of the recognition of the principle of "one China" and allows the PRC more direct control over these areas, while allowing a certain degree of autonomy. As stated in sub-section 3.3, the PRC views Taiwan as an important part of China. As a consequence, the application of the "one country, two systems" policy on the island of Formosa could guarantee the PRC more control over it. However, in 2000, Chen Shui-bian refused this policy, because it was created before the process of democratisation started in Taiwan and therefore would not be effective now.⁴⁷ As a consequence, the PRC publically values positively the possibility of retaining the status quo.

Non Status-quo: the Reunification Scenario

It is important not only to consider the change from the status quo to Taiwanese independence, but also the opposite scenario: reunification. The process of reunification could likely only happen under peaceful terms, considering that Taiwan is under the US-Japan defence umbrella and a war would not be ideal for the PRC.⁴⁸ In case of a non-peaceful attempt by the PRC to take over Taiwan, the consequences would be enormous,

43 Wachman, *Why Taiwan?*

44 Xinjiang, Guangxi, Ningxia, Tibet and Inner Mongolia.

45 Ibid.

46 Tang, "New trends in the Cross-Strait relations between China and Taiwan."

47 Copper, *Taiwan: Nation-State or Province?*; C.R. Huges, "Democratization and Beijing's Taiwan Policy" in: *Democratization in Taiwan: implications for China* edited by S. Tsang, and H. M. Tien (Basingstoke: Macmillan in association with St. Antony's College, Oxford, 1999): 130-147.

48 E.E. Dagdag, "China-Taiwan (Cross-Strait) Relations and the Philippines," in: *Ensuring Interests: Dynamics of China-Taiwan Relations and Southeast Asia* edited by K. Ho.

not only for the neighbouring countries, but also for other powers, such as the US. The reunification would also likely alarm Japan, which could perceive the PRC's action to be the first step towards further expansion.⁴⁹ Taiwanese return to the Mainland could be seen as a defeat for democracy by an authoritarian regime. This aspect would give birth to major concerns among world powers, since it would demonstrate an increased ability of the PRC to project its power in the region.

Conclusion

The aim of this essay is to analyze the reasons behind the PRC's interest in retaining the status quo regarding Taiwan independence. The first part of the essay provided historical background, which underlined the different approaches adopted by the PRC and the ROC over the years, in regards to the Cross-Strait issue. The relations between the two parties have undergone some crises, but have also improved, especially from an economic point of view. Since the two ruling parties agreed on the "one China" concept, the status quo has remained unaltered and relations had improved steadily until the threat of a possible declaration of independence of Taiwan. As a response to this, the PRC promulgated the "Anti-Secession Law" in 2005, putting stability before the goal of reunification.

As already stated, the current goal is stability and neither the PRC nor the ROC is interested in starting a Cross-Strait crisis that could affect their economy.⁵⁰ Currently, both Mainland China and Taiwan are focused on economic development and prosperity in a peaceful environment.⁵¹ The status quo would seem to allow continuity and certainty to this. Whether the PRC and the ROC will reach an agreement on reunification or independence in the future is currently not urgent for the PRC, because the status quo ensures both sides a certain degree of stability that no party has interest in losing.

In conclusion, the PRC is interested in maintaining the status quo in order to avoid damaging its image on the international stage and also to continue projecting its image of a "peacefully developing country." At the same time, the PRC is persistent in pursuing its goal of creating an effective "one country, two systems" scenario and not allowing Taiwanese independence. The status quo equilibrium is not as fragile as it might seem and is likely to be retained in the near future, as both sides of the Taiwanese Strait are unwilling to change it. **GPR**

49 Wachman, *Why Taiwan?*.

50 deLisle, "Soft Power in a Hard Place."

51 Huang and Li, *Inseparable separation*.

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