



Whither Ambiguity? Next-Generation Perspectives on Cross-Taiwan Strait Relations

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Executive Summary

Amidst an absence of official dialogue and limited academic exchanges, the National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP) convened a second virtual working group of next-generation scholars and experts from the United States, Mainland China, and Taiwan to highlight new voices on the longstanding and sensitive issue of cross-Taiwan Strait relations. Participants from all sides shared their candid assessments of how to prevent conflict over Taiwan amid increasing global uncertainties, as well as growing concerns about misinterpretations and mismatch in expectations. They noted that each side's strategy seems to be heavily influenced by domestic developments, limiting the space for practical management and compromise as opposed to tit-for-tat escalation.

While all agreed on the importance of preserving peace and maintaining some form of the status quo, perspectives differed on the threats to peace and concepts of the status quo. Throughout these discussions, participants were heartened to find some overarching common analysis and principles, but there were stark differences on how to manage and prioritize goals.

Major takeaways and recommendations:

- Participants generally agreed that each side's priority is to maintain peace and stability, and to prevent the current situation in the Taiwan Strait from devolving into a catastrophic military event. To some extent, all three sides are focused on domestic issues, particularly their respective economies; none wants a military conflict. However, from an American perspective, there is the question of Beijing's hierarchy of priorities, as one participant viewed Beijing's current priority as preventing further perceived independence of Taiwan, and thus China's sovereignty seemed to be prioritized in the short term. A Chinese scholar countered that since it is Beijing's top priority to stabilize the economy, then any unexpected provocative actions that could potentially hurt China's ability to develop its economy will be seen as a threat. Participants acknowledged that priorities can change depending on the situation in the Taiwan Strait, and thus careful management is needed to ensure the priority of maintaining peace and stability does not change.
- Participants emphasized the importance of direct exchanges across the Taiwan Strait. There is a need for regular dialogue about signals, interpretations of actions, and desired

¹ This report reflects the notes and observations of the authors alone and is not a consensus document.

outcomes to avoid miscues and ensure that acceptable and unacceptable behaviors can be standardized, including through backchannels and trusted intermediaries. It is also necessary for Beijing and Taipei to normalize scholarly exchanges, as it has become ever more difficult for scholars from both sides of the Strait to engage directly with one another.

- Participants debated the definition of the status quo, and whose interests it best serves. From a Taiwan scholar's perspective, neither China nor Taiwan sticks strictly to their definition of the status quo. The definition may change as Taiwan experiences government turnover after its elections, or as China's economic and military powers grow. There is no consensus on what the status quo is, making it difficult for either side to accept it. As a result, participants also debated the utility of ambiguity in cross-Strait relations, with many arguing that each side needs to maintain their own ambiguity for now, noting that if they cannot hold onto that ambiguity, then the situation in the Taiwan Strait will continue to worsen.
- Domestic opinion towards the other side limits flexibility in policies and maneuvering room for diplomacy. Some participants advocated that the "Taiwan question" be managed responsibly by individuals who understand the costs and trade-offs of escalatory language, handled away from the front pages and domestic political agendas. Each side should be mindful of statements and sentiments coming from each side's domestic landscape and seek to put them in context and not overreact.
- Finally, there needs to be more confidence instilled in the future of cross-Strait relations. There is an urgent need to increase people-to-people ties, as familiarity with the other side can help bring to rebuild some trust across the Taiwan Strait.

The Status Quo and Ambiguity

Washington, Beijing, and Taipei have long sought to maintain peace and the status quo in the Taiwan Strait. However, all three sides have had their own ambiguous definitions of the status quo. When examining the worsening situation in the Taiwan Strait, participants from all three sides raised this dissonance and ambiguity as a challenge to preserving peace and stability. A U.S. participant noted that each side is pursuing their own version of peace, and that, while everyone tolerates the current status quo, not everyone is satisfied with it. While each side has been following their own version of the status quo and seeking to prevent coercion by the other side, the Taiwan Strait has become highly militarized, which increases the risk of an inadvertent crisis that would destabilize any management of the political situation.

Participants from all three sides debated the effects of a lack of consensus over the status quo. On one hand, a Taiwan participant contended that with each government pushing towards their own version of a peaceful and stable Taiwan Strait, there is space for each government to perceive the other's actions as clashing with their version of the status quo. They remarked that with the pan-securitization of different issues and a slew of unclear new seemingly threatening announcements, there is more space for people to interpret actions as they want. One participant thought that all sides should clarify laws and regulations regarding what constitutes espionage

and strive to reduce the excessive securitization of exchanges, which has become a major obstacle for cross-Strait communication.

Participants acknowledged the risks that come with laying out a clear and definite status quo. U.S. and mainland Chinese participants agreed that despite its imperfections, ambiguity has worked. From a mainland Chinese perspective, the concept of ambiguity is important; without it, the three parties risk perpetuating a cascade of detrimental events that the status quo aims to avoid. One of the strongest arguments in the Mainland against the use of force is that Taiwan is part of China. From this participant's perspective, if Taiwan is somehow considered separate from China, then this lowers the barrier to Mainland use of force. An American participant reinforced the usefulness of ambiguity, noting that red lines invite testing. In a cross-Strait scenario, more clarity may not necessarily be conducive to peace and stability.

The Role of the U.S.

Participants discussed the role of the U.S. in the Taiwan Strait and the likely future trajectory. A Mainland Chinese participant noted that the U.S. has the potential to play an active role in dissuading Taiwan independence. In Beijing, there are some who hope that the U.S. will continue to be an active manager of cross-Strait relations, specifically with regards to reigning in any ambition in Taiwan to move towards more independence. However, Beijing may be inflating the extent to which the U.S. can manage this in the absence of direct cross-Strait exchanges. From a U.S. perspective, besides coercion, Mainland China has few tools it can use to prevent Taiwan from moving toward independence and thus leans on the U.S. to prevent such moves.

Other participants also saw the role of the U.S. in the region as one of an influencer. The U.S. can be a positive force for peace, a Taiwan participant advanced, by maintaining a strong presence in the Taiwan Strait and by using all means to persuade Beijing that stability in this region—along with a strong and highly-developed Taiwan with a niche in high tech—is in the best interests of China and the U.S.

However, the U.S.' actions and presence in the region have not always been perceived as a positive force. Several participants thought U.S. rhetoric on the imminence of war in the Taiwan Strait was counterproductive and advocated the U.S. do more while saying less. Washington should avoid political stunts that are not conducive to increasing Taiwan's presence internationally. There was a general consensus that high profile political stunts could be seen as provocative and would thus be counterproductive.

Tensions in the Taiwan Strait are not solely affected or tempered by the presence of the U.S., and it is important for all actors to remain engaged to prevent further escalation of tensions. While many acknowledged the important role the U.S. plays in cross-Strait relations, a participant highlighted that Washington lacks appreciation of the daily level of engagement between Taiwan and China in terms of trade, business, flights, etc. There is a lot of practical work getting done in spite of the freeze in official communications. Participants expressed hope that by maintaining stable cross-Strait and U.S.-China economic relations, tensions could be further reduced. Within this context, the responsibility of ensuring a peaceful and stable Taiwan Strait does not rely on just one actor. One Taiwan participant expressed discomfort with the rhetoric that it is Taiwan who is responsible for the status of cross-Strait relations, when Beijing has cut off communication

with them. Another Taiwan participant argued that stability cannot be maintained through the efforts of one side, and must be the collective responsibility of both sides.

Restarting Exchanges

Participants from all sides, from emerging leaders to senior mentors, agreed that exchanges, especially directly across the Taiwan Strait, are extremely important. However, they also noted that while the three governments acknowledge the importance of exchanges, they make it difficult for these exchanges to resume.

The topic of excessive securitization of exchanges across the Taiwan Strait—as well as between the United States and China—was a common thread throughout the multiple discussions. Participants agreed that exchanges would help preserve peace and stability across the Strait and build trust. When planning the resumption of exchanges and dialogue, the focus should be on ensuring the safety of travelers, as confidence must be regained. There are fears in both Taiwan and Mainland concerning the movement of people, especially following Beijing’s announcement of the punishment of Taiwan independence “diehards,” which discourages travel to the Mainland. Participants pointed to numerous institutional restraints on exchanges due to the securitization of domestic politics and thought that meeting in third locations could provide a means to resuming exchanges in the short term. The value of these exchanges outweighs the risks; they should not be treated as a national security threat.

One participant emphasized that being exposed to this cross-Strait dialogue has given them hope for the future; despite differences, there is respectful exchange and broadening of perspectives. The three sides must provide more opportunities for such direct connections.

APPENDIX: LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

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