

On his recent trip to the US, former president Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) disavowed the claim that his China policies were responsible for the Chinese Nationalist Party's (KMT) election losses in 2014 and last year, but, more importantly, Ma went out of his way to resurrect the alleged "bedrock importance" of Taiwan's "one China" relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC).

This is a conundrum that still needs to be deconstructed.

Central to this deconstruction effort is a willingness to grapple with and understand four key phrases that are part of its baggage, as well as realizing the three games required to work with that baggage.

The four phrases are: "one China," the "status quo," the "1992 consensus," and that dreaded "i" word: independence.

The three required games are "let us pretend," "make believe" and "that depends."

'One China'

Start with the phrase "one China," a phrase that the PRC insists that any nation trading with it must both accept and blindly repeat like a mantra.

At first glance, this seems innocent enough. There is one China, just like there is one France, one Brazil, one Thailand or one of any nation in the world.

However, as the saying goes, the devil is in the details. The problem is not that there is only one China, but in agreeing on what is included within that "oneness," and here the games begin.

When the PRC uses the phrase “one China,” it automatically presumes that everyone must accept its perspective that Taiwan is a part of that China.

Some nations, of course, fall for this presumption and bow to the usual past arguments, maps, twisted histories and more that are dragged out as part and parcel of its justification.

Ironically, many of those same arguments were also once used to support the claim that Mongolia and other lands the Manchus conquered are part of “one China,” but that is not so now.

Japan was the first nation to control the whole island of Taiwan. Some KMT members, for different reasons, still like to pretend that Mongolia is part of China. However, the real issue here is the PRC’s masked motivation to control the seas around Taiwan.

More astute game-playing nations understand this requirement of the conundrum and choose a more nebulous word — “acknowledge” — in regards to the PRC position on Taiwan instead of accepting it. Neophytes miss this distinction.

The US also constantly repeats the “one China” mantra, but its official position on Taiwan remains “undecided.”

The telephone call between President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) and then-US president-elect Donald Trump last year questioned the pretense.

Trump, who would later utter the “one China” mantra, tweeted: “Interesting how the U.S. sells Taiwan billions of dollars of military equipment but I should not accept a congratulatory call [from its president].”

Decoding Taiwan-China rhetoric

Written by Jerome Keating
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The game continues with other pretenses on why Taiwan is not quite a nation. Yet the US, like other nations, ironically trades with Taiwan, gives Taiwanese visa-free entry — which it does not give to Chinese — sells arms and has even created its special American Institute in Taiwan “embassy,” but it still maintains the pretense that it is undecided.

Has the US ever created such a large, separate institute for any other nation?

‘Status Quo’

This leads into the second phrase: “status quo.”

Almost everyone insists that the “status quo” must be maintained in Taiwan-China relations, but only Taiwan is expected to uphold its side of this alleged agreement.

Change is constant. One can pretend that it is not, but the only permanent reality in the “status quo” is that it is ever-changing.

The pretense on the pressured “status quo” is more that Taiwan should not “rock the boat.”

However, Taiwan has changed along with its relations with China.

The repressive Taiwan that existed in 1979 at the time of the Kaohsiung Incident is not the Taiwan of 1987 when martial law was lifted, nor is it the democracy that came to fruition in 1996 when the president was directly elected by Taiwanese.

Taiwan continues to be a democracy in progress that has been constantly changing and redefining itself.

Likewise, China has continued to change the “status quo.”

It has continued to increase the number of missiles and threats directed at Taiwan. It uses various trade sanctions as a carrot and stick. It made promises to Hong Kong in 1997 that it has not kept, and now it is ratcheting up its presence in the East China Sea and the South China Sea.

Somehow, through this, people are asked to make believe that the “status quo” is being maintained.

‘1992 Consensus’

This brings us to the third phrase: the “1992 consensus.”

Ma loves this phrase, despite former Mainland Affairs Council chairman Su Chi (蘇起) admitting that he invented it in 2000.

A simple KMT-to-Chinese Communist Party (CCP) agreement on exchanging mail and accepting each other’s university degrees happened in 1992. This was before Taiwan reached its full democracy. However, both the KMT and the CCP now insist on this “consensus” to preserve their sense of a make-believe “one China.”

The phrase “1992 consensus” has additional problems.

Most KMT members will say it means “one China” with different interpretations, though some are now saying it means “one China” with the same interpretation.

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The traditional KMT “one China” interpretation refers to the Republic of China which was kicked out of the UN in 1970, while China interprets it as “one China” under the PRC.

The KMT needs its version to legitimize itself and save the party from having to admit that it lost the Chinese Civil War and became a diaspora seeking a way back home.

Independence

Finally comes the dreaded “i” word.

Taiwan is independent, but the CCP and the KMT want to deny Taiwan this word since it disturbs each of their interpretations of “one China.”

Taiwan has of course been operating for some time as an independent nation, at least since 1996 — when Taiwanese directly elected the president — if not before.

In practice, most nations accept that if it walks like a duck and talks like a duck, it is a duck.

Such is the case with Taiwan. They deal with Taiwan independently through trade offices and embassies, but avoid challenging the “one China” issue.

However, the PRC will not accept the word independence, and threatens to attack if Taiwan formally declares its independence that already exists. Most nations feel that since Taiwan can act independently, there is no sense risking war just to expose China’s pretense.

‘It depends’

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Are all these games necessary? Should nations continue acting with what French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre called *mauvais foi* (“bad faith”), or is it a pragmatic way to avoid unnecessary conflict?

Nations recognize that Taiwan is independent, but just cannot bring themselves to say it aloud.

These four key phrases keep the Taiwan-China conundrum tied in a Gordian knot. If they must be used, they can at least be used with caution, a grain of salt and a bit of tongue-in-cheek game playing.

When asked to explain any one of them, the best response remains: “It depends.”

Depends on what? It depends on what and whose perspective you wish to take.

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