

A different political era

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Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) Minister Katharine Chang (江志鈞) on Wednesday expressed her hopes of meeting with Liu Jieyi (劉捷義), who has been tapped to head China's Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO), and resuming a disconnected hotline with her Chinese counterparts.

The MAC, established in August 1988 as the Inter-Agency Mainland Affairs Committee under former Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) premier Hau Pei-tsun (侯派淳), facilitates relations with China in the absence of official ties between the two nations.

These relations are conducted on the basis of the “one China” principle and the so-called “1992 consensus.” Former MAC chairman Su Chi (蘇基) in 2006 said that he had made up the term “1992 consensus”—a tacit understanding between the KMT and Beijing that both sides of the Taiwan Strait acknowledge that there is “one China”—in 2000.

Unofficial exchanges between the MAC and the TAO therefore represent a sort of compromise. Such a compromise is acceptable to the KMT, which has always expressed its goal as working toward eventual unification with China, but for the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) administration, it is unworkable, as the DPP does not accept the “one China” principle or the “1992 consensus,” which China has made prerequisites for dialogue.

A lack of consensus on these issues means that the MAC, as well as the Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF) that it administers, are impotent.

Even Chang, an independent, acknowledged this when she responded to Chinese President Xi Jinping’s (習近平) reiteration of Beijing’s determination to quash any Taiwanese pro-independence forces. She said it would be difficult for Beijing’s unilaterally constructed “one China” principle to win public recognition in Taiwan.

Premier William Lai (賴清德) also reiterated the DPP’s position when he said at the Legislative Yuan on Sept. 26 that “Taiwan is a sovereign nation ... We need not subject ourselves to a framework imposed by a superpower and there is absolutely no reason to care about certain people’s remarks.” Lai at the time called himself “a politician who supports Taiwanese independence.”

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While the MAC facilitated China-Taiwan relations under the KMT, it hinders the DPP's aims of moving in the opposite direction — toward internationally recognized independence.

Its name suggests that China represents the “mainland” portion of the same nation as Taiwan. Its role of facilitating unofficial exchanges suggests that China and Taiwan are not actually two distinct nations.

Although the council could be renamed the “China Affairs Council,” Beijing would still insist on the “one China” policy and the “1992 consensus,” undermining a move toward independence.

China requires everyone, not just Taiwan, to accept the “one China” principle — this is a core tenet of its foreign relations policy. It is why the US had to drop Taiwan under former US president Jimmy Carter to establish ties with Beijing.

A healthy, sustainable relationship with China that recognizes two sovereign states would only be possible if Beijing abandoned its tough stance.

Whether this happens should not impede the democratic will of Taiwanese. The DPP should continue to make clear to Beijing that it is open to political, economic and cultural exchanges, but should insist on such exchanges recognizing Taiwan’s sovereignty and independence.

Naturally, Taiwan must first clearly establish this sovereignty and declare to the world that it has no intention of ever unifying with the People’s Republic of China. Once Taiwan has clearly and resolutely established its sovereign independence, relations with Beijing can be normalized with the installing of embassies in Taipei and Beijing.

In the interim, the MAC and the SEF have no purpose and merely serve to confuse the intentions of Taiwan.

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