

Since taking office, the one thing President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) has been reluctant to do is break the decades-long ambiguity surrounding the “status quo,” the one term that manages to trump the so-called “1992 consensus” in terms of the variety of definitions given to them.

Fortunately, that is expected to change later this year. Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) Chairman Cho Jung-tai (卓榮泰) told the state-owned Central News Agency in an interview that the party plans to introduce a new resolution in September that could offer a clearer definition of the “status quo.”

The lack of consensus on what exactly the “status quo” is has bedeviled cross-strait ties, as it has allowed the leaders on both sides of the Taiwan Strait to accuse each other of “changing the ‘status quo’” without ever explaining what parts have actually been changed, causing tensions to escalate easily and quickly.

For the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the “status quo” was changed when Tsai refused to follow in the steps of her predecessor and publicly endorse a “1992 consensus” that locks Taiwan into Beijing’s “one China” framework. In its eyes, any words or actions that make Taiwan even so much as appear separate from China constitutes an attempt to alter the “status quo.”

However, the CCP does not consider its verbal threats, blocking Taiwan from participating in international organizations, or forcing foreign corporations to change how they refer to Taiwan as changes to the “status quo.” The DPP strongly disagrees, and regards actions designed to disrupt Taiwan’s democratic system as altering the “status quo.”

As for the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT), the main components of its definition of the “status quo” are cross-strait peace and prosperity, the “1992 consensus” and the existence of the Republic of China. The KMT sees any attempt to alter any of the three as altering the “status quo.”

It is risky to talk about maintaining the “status quo” without first having a clear, unanimous definition of what it is. Although the ambiguity around the term has given political leaders and

Time for a serious discussion

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government officials more leeway in handling cross-strait issues, it could result in misinterpretations of what the majority of Taiwanese really want, causing misjudgements and raising the risk of moves that could carry dire consequences.

While most opinion polls have shown that the majority of Taiwanese support maintaining the “status quo,” the truth is, as with the “1992 consensus,” few of them know what they are actually supporting and even fewer bother to find out.

Ask any political pundit and they would say that the “status quo” — whatever it is — cannot be maintained forever. Retaining “maintaining the ‘status quo’” as a possible option for cross-strait ties will only cause the public to remain in a state of denial and delay having the necessary serious discussions about an issue that cannot be indefinitely avoided: Do I want independence or unification?

Given the renewed support for the KMT, as evidenced by last year’s local elections, and the CCP’s ramped-up effort to push for unification under a “one country, two systems” formula, next year could prove to be a make-or-break year for Taiwan’s sovereignty.

Against this backdrop, Taiwanese society must begin a dialogue on the independence/unification issue before next year’s presidential election. The DPP’s planned resolution might determine the course of that conversation.

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