

Defining the 'status quo' is a new paradigm

Written by Gerrit Van Der Wees
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During the coming weeks and months, there will be heated debates in Taipei, Washington and Beijing about the structure of future relations between Taiwan and China. Terms like the "1992 consensus," the "one China" principle and the "status quo" will be bandied around with a religious fervor befitting the Middle Ages.

However, do they truly contribute to peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait, or is there a new paradigm that could lay the foundation for a more sustainable, long-term stability?

President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) government has been the most persistent adherent of the "1992 consensus," saying that it provides for different interpretations of what "one China" means. However, this interpretation is far removed from reality. In Ma's view, "one China" is the old "Republic of China" of Chiang Kai-shek's (蔣介石) Nationalists, and "the mainland" is part of their China.

However, the People's Republic of China's definition is very different: Beijing insists on the "one China" principle (negating any different interpretations) according to which Taiwan has always been an "inalienable" part of China throughout its history. A cursory examination of Taiwan's history of course shows this is equally at odds with reality.

In spite of these very different and contradicting interpretations, the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party have used this vague construct to push Taiwan onto a slippery slope toward unification. And it is very clear that Beijing's ultimate objective is unification. It would be naive for Western observers to think otherwise.

However, instead of religiously clinging to terms dating from the distant past, leaders in Taipei, Washington and Beijing should look toward the future and envision what a positive relationship could look like.

First, it is essential to understand that from Taiwan's perspective there is a new "status quo." Since Taiwan made its momentous transition to democracy in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it has further consolidated its democracy, and Taiwanese chafe against the fact that their nation remains dangling in political isolation. They believe that as a new democracy, they

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deserve to be accepted as an equal in the international community.

In particular for the young generation, the present restrictions and — often self-imposed — inhibitions are a thing of the past. They want to determine their own future, and see the formulations and structures imposed by the history of the Chinese Civil War as belonging to a previous age.

This new “status quo” is also characterized by a strong sense of participatory democracy. Transparency, democratic procedures and adequate checks-and-balances are key concepts. Input from citizens will be loud and clear, and it will not be possible anymore for a government to push key decisions through the legislature without ample debate.

So, what is the new paradigm? Mutual-acceptance-as-friendly-neighbors would be a main element in the equation. Yes, Taiwan and China do have a special historic relationship, but Taiwan has developed its own identity and character. Just like Americans have developed their own national character, and do not perceive themselves members of the British Empire anymore.

Such mutual acceptance should eventually lead to normalization of relations and sustainable, long-term peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. This new reality can only grow and prosper if Taiwan is given a chance to find its own role as a full and equal member of the international community, and as an equal partner in its relations with China.

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