

On Thursday last week, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Susan Thornton gave a major policy speech on US-Taiwan relations at the Brookings Institution in Washington. She spoke highly of the relations between the two nations, saying that the administration of US President Barack Obama had worked to “reconceptualize and reinstitutionalize” the relations and built “a comprehensive, durable and mutually beneficial partnership.”

She also praised Taiwan as a “robust, prosperous, free and orderly society with strong institutions worthy of emulation and envy,” and went on to describe a long list of areas where Taiwan and the US had worked together to enhance Taiwan’s international presence.

She referred to Taiwan’s upcoming presidential and legislative elections in January, saying: “We look forward to another dazzling display of Taiwan’s robust democracy in action.”

Thornton also said that Washington does not take a position on the candidates.

As expected, cross-strait ties came up, and she said that the US has “an abiding interest in the preservation of cross-strait stability,” encouraging both Beijing and Taipei “to continue their constructive dialogue on the basis of dignity and respect.”

In further discussion during a question-and-answer session, the term “a firm basis” became a key phrase: Thornton described it as an essential element of cross-strait dialogue.

Subsequently, several reporters attempted to get her to say that the controversial, so-called “1992 consensus” pushed by President Ma Ying-jeou’s (馬英九) administration equaled this “firm basis.”

However, Thornton did not fall into the trap

Firm basis for cross-strait relations

Written by Gerrit Van Der Wees
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“How to characterize this firm basis we leave up to the parties involved,” she said.

“I do not think it is appropriate for the US to favor or not to favor any term,” she added.

OK, so far so good. However, what would be a firm basis?

This can be answered by examining what is not a firm basis: It is certainly not the “one China” principle that the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is trying to force down Taiwan’s throat. With this “principle,” Beijing is trying to tell the international community that in its long history Taiwan has always been part of China. This is simply not the case, as any objective historian can demonstrate.

Also not a firm basis is the “1992 consensus” touted by the Ma administration. How can a fictional construct with “different interpretations” be a firm basis? It might have brought some temporary peace and quiet across the Taiwan Strait, as Ma’s policies have given the PRC the impression that Taiwan was moving into its orbit.

However, it should be clear to any observer that a closer association of Taiwan with China would not only be detrimental to freedom and democracy in Taiwan (just look at Hong Kong), but also to peace and stability in the region. In particular, Japan would get very nervous. So the “1992 consensus” is not a firm basis for stable long-term relations across the Strait either.

So, what would constitute a firm basis? For one: acceptance by Beijing that Taiwan is a free and democratic nation and that in such a democracy changes of political power are a natural thing and nothing to get upset about.

A second element is that China’s threat of using military force must become a thing of the past. For this, it is essential that Beijing removes the 1600-plus missiles it has aimed at Taiwan and rescinds the “Anti-Secession Law” passed in 2005, which mandates the use of military force against Taiwan.

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A third element in a firm basis for long-term peace and stability across the Strait is actually the US itself: its continued forward presence in the region and its strong support for a free and democratic Taiwan, which Thornton herself described so eloquently as the “dazzling display of Taiwan’s robust democracy in action.”

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