

Defining the dynamic ‘status quo’

Written by Leung Man-to 梁文道
Thursday, 09 July 2015 08:05

At about the time Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) Chairperson Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) visited the US, tensions between the US and China had built up tremendously. Just before the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank's (AIIB) articles of association were signed, the two nations were having strategic and economic dialogues as an attempt to minimize differences and ease tension to pave the way for Chinese President Xi Jinping's (习近平) visit to the US in September.

Taiwan plays a vital role in the US' "first island chain," which serves to prevent Chinese expansion. The evolution of the relationship between Taiwan and China is of major concern to the US. In recent months, considerable pressure from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) has been placed on Tsai to acknowledge the so-called "1992 consensus." After she responded with "maintaining the status quo," she was pressed to explain what that meant. Apparently, during this war of words, all parties have different interpretations of what maintaining the "status quo" means.

China's Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) deems the "status quo" to be peaceful development in the Taiwan Strait realized on the basis of the "1992 consensus." Hence, as far as the CCP is concerned, by forcing Tsai to associate the "status quo" with the "1992 consensus" and then interpreting the "1992 consensus" with China's "one China" principle or the KMT's "both Taiwan and China belong to one China," the CCP can ensure that the DPP will not pursue Taiwanese independence if it comes to power.

Former DPP chairman Lin I-hsiung (林錫山) expressed his doubts over Tsai's lack of clarity and wondered why Tsai did not bring up the party's "resolution on Taiwan's future."

On the other hand, former president Lee Teng-hui (李登輝) said that the "status quo" cannot be any clearer in that Taiwan is Taiwan, China is China and that is the "status quo" to be maintained.

The opinions given by the two senior Taiwan-centric politicians originate from the idea that since the Republic of China (ROC) is already an independent country, there is no need to pursue independence. The biggest problem of the ROC's independence is the wishful thinking that Taiwan is already an internationally recognized sovereign country, governed by a legitimate administration fully mandated by its citizens. A mindset that regards Taiwan as a sovereign country can easily lead to complacency regarding the probability of Chinese

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annexation. However, Lee did shed light on parts of the truth: The “status quo” is dynamic. Yet does this not imply that the so-called “status quo” is being progressively reshaped by China and cannot be maintained?

The paradox is, when President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) asked Tsai: “Are you going to maintain the status quo as it was seven years ago, or the status quo as it is now?” his question highlighted that the “status quo” has been continuously changed by China with the assistance of the KMT.

Seven years ago, there was no Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA), nor were there 21 other agreements that China is now using to economically annex Taiwan. There were no negotiations held between the Mainland Affairs Council and the TAO, there was no massively expanded Chinese military, nor were there any considerably improved missiles aimed at Taiwan.

The DPP’s greatest miscalculation pertaining to China is its failure to notice Beijing’s ever-increasing military threats aimed at the changing “status quo.” Before the ECFA was signed, the US’ Military Power of the People’s Republic of China 2009 report pointed out that China’s armed forces were rapidly developing coercive capabilities for the purpose of deterring Taiwan’s pursuit of de jure independence. These same capabilities could be used to pressure Taiwan toward a settlement of the cross-strait dispute on Beijing’s terms, while simultaneously attempting to deter, delay, or deny any possible US support for the nation in case of conflict.

The 2011 report clearly stated that the balance of cross-strait military forces and capabilities were continuing to shift in China’s favor.

Last year the report said that China’s ability to enforce a full military blockade would improve significantly over the next five to 10 years.

This year it listed the six circumstances in which China would use force against Taiwan: Formal declaration of independence, undefined moves toward independence, internal unrest in Taiwan, Taiwan’s acquisition of nuclear weapons, indefinite delays in the resumption of cross-strait dialogue on unification and foreign forces stationed in Taiwan. China can use any of these conditions as an excuse to invade Taiwan.

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The US mistakenly took Beijing at its word that China was seeking a peaceful rise. In the wake of the South China Sea crisis and resignations of crucial pro-China staff at US President Barack Obama's White House, the US is actively implementing its shift of emphasis to Asia. If Tsai assumes power, she will have to revert Taiwan's inclination toward China and alienation from the US to protect Taiwan's interests amid the tug-of-war between China and the US.

On the one hand, she will need to review, or even put an end to, the ECFA framework, along with other economic agreements, thereby altering the "status quo." On the other hand, she will have to greatly ameliorate Taiwan's economic and trade relations with the US and Taiwan's national defense with the aid of the US, offsetting China's military blockade.

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Translated by Ethan Zhan

Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2015/07/09](#)