

The change in cross-strait dialogue

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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Former president Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) was invited to speak at the World Chinese Economic Summit in Malaysia this month. Organizers not only gave him the honorific “His Excellency,” they also changed the title of his speech from Closer economic ties between Taiwan and ASEAN to The role of technology and culture for overseas Chinese in the world economy. Angered by what he saw as attempts to belittle him, Ma wrote his own name card — reading “former Taiwanese president Ma” — and complained about the pressure Beijing was exerting upon him, asking where China’s goodwill had gone.

Ma was the most pro-China president Taiwan has ever had. He was careful during his two terms in office not to say anything to provoke Beijing, made sure he mentioned the so-called “1992 consensus” and followed China’s lead with the “diplomatic truce” policy. Even after leaving office, he found it impossible to escape Beijing’s suppression.

In the past eight years, Beijing allowed economic, cultural and academic cross-strait exchanges, albeit under the auspices of the “one China” principle. When Ma met Chinese President Xi Jinping (習近平), the two men avoided using their official titles, took care to call each other “Mr,” and when Ma mentioned “one China, different interpretations” in a post-meeting news conference, Chinese officials did not object. He was indulged in being able to retain the “different interpretations” reference, but this indulgence seems to have been taken away now that Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) Chairwoman Hung Hsiu-chu (洪秀柱) is at the party’s helm: The new party platform mentions only the “1992 consensus.”

Ma has always emphasized “different interpretations,” although Beijing did not recognize it. Now Beijing is applying pressure on Ma, because Taiwan is reluctant to accept “one China.”

When President Tsai Ing-wen’s (蔡英文) administration refused to accept Beijing’s cross-strait policy, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) started applying pressure, and it is not just directed at Ma. China has sharply reduced the number of Chinese tourists to Taiwan, restricted trade and economic exchanges, and reduced the number of Chinese students allowed to study in Taiwan. The list keeps getting longer.

The CCP knows it does not control Taiwan, but hopes the two sides of the Taiwan Strait will come closer through economic, cultural and other types of exchanges in the long term, and eventually usher in unification.

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“Different interpretations” is an indulgence, not CCP policy, so it is allowed as a kind of strategic obfuscation. As far as the CCP is concerned, so long as Taiwan recognizes the “one China” principle, it is willing to look the other way. However, if Taiwan fails to recognize “one China,” then there is little hope of unification, and in that scenario Beijing is reluctant to accept the “one China, different interpretations” proposal.

It is probably unwise to read too much into Xi’s meeting with James Soong (蘇貞昌), Taiwan’s envoy to the APEC summit in Lima, Peru.

There is no obvious answer to the deadlock in cross-strait relations. The situation has to be scrutinized before a new, mutually acceptable narrative for cross-strait relations can be found.

Ma misinterpreted China’s attitude when he was in office, and his embarrassment at an international forum is of little consequence.

Tsai is president now and she has little room for error. She needs to listen to Taiwanese, watch everything Beijing says and does, and proceed with caution in her dealings with Beijing.

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