

Establishing a new ‘modus vivendi’

Written by Edward Chen 陳伯達

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On Jan. 4, the National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP) issued a summary report on its visits to high-level officials on both sides of the Taiwan Strait at the end of last year. In addition to recommending that the incoming US administration continue to support Taiwan’s democracy and expanded international participation, it recommends that the US support efforts to establish a “new modus vivendi” across the Taiwan Strait to maintain fundamental communication and exchanges.

This New York-based organization is a leading US think tank and every year it visits countries that play a part in US foreign policy. It also invites political and academic elite from around the world to exchange ideas, and provides reports and policy recommendations for the US and other governments’ reference.

The NCAFP sometimes acts as a mediator and even applies pressure. In the second half of 2011, the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) proposed a cross-strait peace agreement and then in the middle of October that year, the NCAFP paid a visit to high-level Taiwanese government officials. Soon after that, the administration of then-president Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) announced that it would not sign a peace agreement with China without public support, legislative consent and national need.

However, the US did not accept these three conditions. The Ma administration had no choice but to propose 10 conditions, but Washington was still not fully satisfied and Ma was forced to announce that unless it was decided in a referendum, Taiwan would not accept a peace agreement.

The NCAFP is clearly concerned about the future of relations between Taiwan, the US and China.

First, there is the uncertainty of the US’ China policy after US president-elect Donald Trump takes office on Friday. Even before taking office, Trump has touched on some issues that are very sensitive to China, such as his telephone conversation with President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文), statements regarding arms sales to Taiwan and challenging the US’ “one China” policy. It is impossible to predict whether he will display more restraint or take an even more aggressive approach after taking office.

Second, as for Chinese President Xi Jinping (習近平), the NCAFP believes that if issues such as the US-China economic and trade dispute, the South China Sea, the East China Sea and Taiwan can not be properly handled, relations between the two nations could deteriorate and that would pose a new challenge to cross-strait relations.

Third, the NCAFP is concerned about the deterioration of cross-strait relations. Not only do Taiwan and China insist on their own interpretations of the so-called “1992 consensus,” but cross-strait communication channels between high-level officials on each side have not yet been established.

In addition, calls for using military force have long drowned out calls for peaceful unification in China; and Chinese aircraft and vessels are seen circling Taiwan and holding military exercises in the waters surrounding Taiwan.

The NCAFP is also placing demands on Taiwan, the incoming US administration and China. It is calling on Trump not to use Taiwan as a bargaining chip or sacrifice the nation after he takes office, it strongly supports the Tsai administration’s democratic governance and the expansion of Taiwan’s international space, and it is calling on Trump to support the establishment of a new modus vivendi across the Taiwan Strait based on the current “status quo.”

In late November last year, Institute of Taiwan Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences director Zhou Zhihui (周志輝) issued a statement saying that, “the two sides of Taiwan Strait can search for a new consensus, as long as it is based on the central meaning of the ‘one China’ principle.”

Since then, academics in both Taiwan and China have been trying to find ways to resolve the issue. At the Shanghai conference on Dec. 23 last year, a Taiwanese academic suggested that the “1992 consensus” be replaced by a cross-strait “consensus of the Chinese people,” but Chinese politicians and academics disagreed.

In regard to these disputes, the NCAFP naturally feels a need to come forward and resolve the cross-strait deadlock. The proposal of a “new modus vivendi” is an attempt to help Tsai and Xi

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resolve the issue, so that after Trump takes office, cross-strait relations will not continue to deteriorate or even turn from the current cold relationship into hot confrontation.

Regardless of whether Tsai and Xi will accept the recommendations of the “new modus vivendi” or “medium-term consensus,” it is imperative to establish high-level communication channels that the top leaders of both sides can trust. If Taiwan and China are not even willing to establish high-level communication channels, they will fall short of people’s expectations.

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