

Cross-strait relations enter new era

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) on Thursday said in his Double Ten National Day speech that the cross-strait ties are not international relations. The latest definition of the relationship indicates that his administration is moving closer to political dialogue with China.

Last year, Ma defined the situation with China as “non-state-to-state relations” in the wake of a meeting between his envoy, former Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) chairman Wu Poh-hsiung (吳伯雄) and Chinese President Xi Jinping (習近平) at the annual KMT-Chinese Communist Party (CCP) forum in China, during which Wu made similar remarks.

Taiwan and China share a special relationship because the two sides do not recognize each other’s sovereignty, but would not deny each other’s existence, Ma said last year.

The Ma administration tried to play down the political significance of Ma’s latest definition by arguing that it is essentially the same as earlier ones.

However, Ma’s latest attempt to get a handle on cross-strait relations during Thursday’s festivities sent a clear message that he is removing the barriers to political negotiations.

When Ma sent Mainland Affairs Council Minister Wang Yu-chi (王郁琦) to meet with Taiwan Affairs Office Director Zhang Zhijun (張志軍) at the APEC forum last week, during which the two referred to each other by their official titles, cross-strait relations entered a new era.

The two sides of the Taiwan Strait have handled affairs through semi-government agencies or through party-to-party communications since Ma took office in 2008. With the Wang-Zhang meeting, the two nations took a big step forwards in mutual recognition of each government’s authority. The “special relationship” is no more.

By showing goodwill to the Ma administration, Beijing hopes to speed up the pace of negotiations and resolve political differences.

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In his meeting with former vice president Vincent Siew (宋楚瑜) at the APEC meeting, Xi stressed Beijing's "one China" framework and the urgency of resolving political division so it would not be "passed on from generation to generation."

Xi's remarks underlined a lack of patience by Beijing over the so-called "1992 consensus," which it sees as an insufficient foundation for political talks.

Ma chose to unveil his new cross-strait rhetoric on National Day because of pressure from China. The phrase "cross-strait ties are not international relations" abandoned vague wording and the "three noes" policy — no unification, no independence and no use of force.

Despite his basement-level approval ratings, the president seems no longer conservative and reserved about cross-strait relations. His definition of the situation indicates a strategic transformation of his policies. This transformation will shape Taiwan's future.

Ma should fully explain his new definition to the public and seek public consensus on this critical issue. Whatever definition the nation decides on, it should be the result of public discussion and a democratic decision-making process. The future of Taiwan and China's relationship cannot be the will of one president or one party.

The public has lost trust in Ma and the KMT during the so-called "September political strife" over improper lobbying allegations and allegedly illegal wiretapping. As serious as these are, they are mere shadows compared to the threat of a redefined cross-strait relationship. Ma must respect Taiwanese, who have developed a strong sense of identity, and refrain from making wayward moves against their clearly expressed will.

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