

Factors Affecting Cross-Strait Policy in 2015

Liu Shih-chung

Cross-strait relations require comprehensive strategic assessment and policy formulation to prevent misjudgments that could cause the situation to spin out of control, trigger tension and escalate into a crisis. Such assessment must take into account domestic political developments on both sides, changes on the foreign policy front, the respective leaders' perception of the situation and the consequences of policy implementation. The Sunflower student movement, which erupted in Taiwan in spring 2014, counterbalanced the overhasty promotion of cross-strait ties by the government of President Ma Ying-jeou. The ongoing Occupy Central protests in Hong Kong severely challenge Beijing's "one country, two systems" experiment. Chinese President Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign is presently approaching the critical point for success or failure. Mutual differences overshadow cooperation in China's bilateral relations with the United States and Japan. Then there is the alleged divulgence of state secrets by Chang Hsien-yao while he served as Mainland Affairs Council deputy minister. Moreover, the major opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) can expect to do extremely well in the Nov. 29 local elections, which will improve its chances of reclaiming the presidency in 2016. All these factors will affect cross-strait relations in 2015.

After urging Xi for months to hold a Ma-Xi meeting on the sidelines of the upcoming annual Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Beijing, Ma has seen his hopes for such a historic meeting go up into thin air. In his National Day address, he took a tougher stance, reiterating that Taiwan upholds

the 1992 Consensus of "one China, respective interpretations." He expressed his strong support for the Hong Kong people's struggle for universal suffrage of their chief executive and even appealed to Beijing "to let some people go democratic first." Beijing's Taiwan Affairs Office shot back saying, "the Taiwan authorities should not make irresponsible comments about Hong Kong." Since Ma's approval rate at home has been dismal for a long time, he urgently needs a Ma-Xi meeting to divert attention from his inaptness and clinch a place in the history of cross-strait relations. However, deeply disappointed about Ma's inability to push the Cross-strait Trade in Services Agreement through the Taiwanese legislature, Beijing no longer has the intention to deal with the lame Ma. Instead, Beijing prepares to join hands with the Kuomintang (KMT) leaders of the "post-Ma" era. At the same time, Beijing continues to use Washington to exert pressure on the DPP leadership, and to penetrate Taiwanese society at the grassroots level to win the hearts of the Taiwan people. Now that Ma is much less likely to seek a breakthrough in cross-strait relations also on the political front, why not consolidate achievements made so far and rebalance Taiwan's external relations? Why not devolving powers to ensure a peaceful, smooth transfer of government?

The recent cooking oil scandal involving the Ting Hsin Group has further undermined the KMT's election prospects. The company, which enjoys a cozy relationship with the governing party, has made a huge fortune in China under Ma's policy of encouraging cross-strait investment only to introduce adulterated

cooking oil back to Taiwan. For the DPP, the election situation looks very good so that party chairperson Tsai Ing-wen's chances to win the DPP nomination for next year's presidential election have markedly increased. However, even if the DPP wins big in the local elections, this does not necessarily mean it will return to power in 2016 since the pan-blue camp's sense of crisis over the possible loss of government power will increase as will its resulting sense of solidarity. Not to forget, this time Tsai's opponent will no longer be Ma. Tsai must not only lead the DPP to victory in the local elections. More importantly, she must address her party's relationship with the United States and China. In July, Tsai said "if we can win the nine-in-one elections, China will automatically adjust its course in a direction favorable to the DPP; moreover, as long as China adjusts its attitude toward the DPP, the United States will have nothing much to say." This statement triggered a rebuttal from Beijing and bewilderment in Washington. In September, Richard Bush, a former chairman of the American Institute in Taiwan, noted "Washington has not been quiet" when it comes to Taiwan's elections. He pointed to previous presidential races in Taiwan, when Washington conveyed its views through actions, public statements or through the media. "We feel there is a need for us to express our views on how our interests will be affected by Taiwan's elections. And to say nothing, as some in Taiwan might want us to do, is actually to make a statement as well," Bush told a conference on China-Taiwan relations in Washington.

Bush's statement does not represent the Obama administration and was not meant as a deliberate warning to Tsai but rather restated historic facts. However, in September 2011, when Tsai visited the United States in her capacity as the DPP presidential candidate, an

unnamed senior administration official told the *Financial Times* in an unsolicited phone call that the United States did not want to see Tsai elected because it could lead to tension with China. This incident strained relations between the DPP and Washington. Couldn't Washington regard Tsai's statement above as filled with the hope that the DPP looks to reclaim power and that Washington should therefore keep its mouth shut? It is time that Tsai and her foreign policy advisors rebuild mutual trust with the United States.

No doubt, the DPP can quote many reasons including civic movements in Taiwan and Hong Kong such as the Sunflower and Occupy Central protests as well as the imponderables of Beijing's domestic and foreign policy to convince the United States that more caution and a more moderate pace are called for in cross-strait relations. However, Tsai still needs to come up with a China policy that has more long-term strategic direction and is able to continue the current cross-strait relationship so that, at least, there will be no imminent crisis. She must win the support of Taiwanese voters and see to it that Washington does at least not take sides. Beijing will not go as far as breaking off cross-strait exchanges in a bid to exert pressure against the possible election of Tsai as Taiwan's next president. Therefore, it is high time that the DPP strengthened its policy discourse and strategic reassurances vis-à-vis the United States, identified and lobbied the possible next U.S. presidential candidates and their supporters and established substantial, trustworthy channels for dialogue with China to dispel Washington's and Beijing's misgivings about the unpredictability of the DPP leadership. **BT**

Liu Shih-chung is president of Taiwan Brain Trust