

Analysis of China's 2015 Work Conference on Taiwan Affairs

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Since 1999 China has held an annual meeting of central and local officials in charge of Taiwan affairs, which sets up the direction and policy agenda for Beijing's work related to Taiwan in that year. Initially it was usually presided over by the director of the State Council's Taiwan Affairs Office, who also delivered a work report, and the vice premier made a major statement. The conference in May 2000 was an exception in that then Communist Party of China (CPC) General Secretary Jiang Zemin attended the meeting and delivered the keynote speech. Curiously, Hu Jintao never attended a Taiwan affairs work conference and Xi Jinping has not yet presided over a CPC Central Committee Work Conference on Taiwan Affairs. This indicates that Xi has not yet formulated a comprehensive Taiwan policy of his own.

This year, State Councilor Yang Jiechi presided over the Taiwan affairs work conference, whereas Zhang Zhijun, director of the State Council's Taiwan Affairs Office, delivered the work report. Politburo Standing Committee member Yu Zhengsheng, who is the deputy head of the CPC Central Leading Group for Taiwan Affairs, addressed the meeting. Yu stated that Xi attaches great importance to Taiwan affairs and has kept upfront with the latest developments in the Taiwan Strait. Due to his astute leadership and the conscientious efforts by various local departments concerned with Taiwan affairs across the country, cross-strait ties have progressed peacefully and new gains achieved, of which the Central Committee fully approves. This year Beijing will focus on seven areas in relation to Taiwan.

1. On the shared foundation of upholding the 1992 Consensus and opposing Taiwan independence, Beijing will continue to improve mutual confidence and to maintain positive interaction in order to consolidate the gains from the institutionalization of peaceful cross-strait development.
2. Beijing will actively push for institutionalized negotiations on follow-up issues to the Cross-strait Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) to reinforce the effects from its implementation and to expand its benefits to more people.
3. Beijing will promote cross-strait economic integration, foster overall planning for industrial cooperation, deepen financial cooperation, and make efforts to let Taiwanese small and medium enterprises as well as farmers and fishermen participate on a broader scale and reap greater benefits.
4. Beijing will support the further opening to Taiwanese enterprises of the Fujian Pilot Free Trade Zone, the Pingtan Comprehensive Experimental Zone as well as the Kunshan Experimental Zone for Strengthening Cross-strait Industrial Cooperation.
5. Beijing will lend practical help to Taiwanese companies in China to solve their actual difficulties.
6. Beijing will take active measures to promote the movement of people across the Taiwan Strait, expand cross-strait exchanges among youth and on the local level, and deepen cross-strait exchanges and cooperation across all fields.
7. Beijing will complement laws and regulations as well as work mechanisms relating to

Taiwan, strengthen cross-strait cooperation in law enforcement and judiciary, and protect the legal rights of Taiwanese compatriots in China.

Reading between the lines, Beijing has clearly retreated on the political front in comparison with the talking points presented in the 2012, 2013 and 2014 Taiwan conferences. No mention of “the two sides of the Taiwan Strait belong to one China” framework or “continuing to create the conditions for a breakthrough in cross-strait political cauldrons,” or “one country, two systems.” China seems to have decided to bypass the ruling Kuomintang (KMT) and ignore the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), instead seeking to directly work on Taiwanese society.

Faced with the changes Taiwan’s domestic political landscape saw in 2014, China’s counter strategy is to strengthen its initiative in Taiwan by intensifying its policy and propaganda toward Taiwan, to reach “into the island, into the households, and into the hearts (入島入戶入心)” Beijing continues to nurture and strengthen Taiwan’s pro-unification forces while deepening and fine-tuning its work targeting “the three middles and the youth” (Taiwan’s small and medium enterprises, the lower middle class, central and southern Taiwan as well as youth). Beijing keeps paying special attention to the attitudes, preferences and political leanings of young Taiwanese and exploring new media and other means to open up new avenues and approaches for cross-strait exchanges, with the ultimate goal of enticing the young Taiwanese to identify with China.

In December 2014, Chen Deming, the president of the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits (ARATS), came to Taiwan ostensibly for the 11th round of talks between

ARATS and its Taiwanese counterpart, the Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF). However, his true objective was to participate in the Cross-strait CEO Summit held in Taipei. Before Taiwan’s 29 Nov. 2014 local] elections, the SEF issued a statement saying that Chen Deming’s visit was to sign a tariff agreement and to launch the first working-level negotiations on Taiwan’s becoming a transit stop for Chinese tourists en route to other countries. As events turned out, Chen scrapped the ARATS-SEF talks and a possible consensus, instead signing 31 cooperation agreements or memorandums of understanding at the Cross-strait CEO Summit.

On Jan. 20, 2015, Zhang directly invited the executives of agricultural and fishing cooperatives from across Taiwan to a symposium in Pingtan on economic cooperation at the grassroots level. Not only the SEF but also Taiwan’s Mainland Affairs Council was unceremoniously relegated to the sidelines in these series of actions by China to appeal to Taiwan’s “three middles and the youth.”

China angles for direct control of Taiwan’s large corporations, conglomerates and the “three middles and the youth.” Its intention is clear – to use business to besiege politics. This strategy could potentially succeed in taking the KMT hostage and blocking out the DPP. Realizing that the probability of the DPP returning to power in 2016 has increased, China seems to be setting the stage for its proxies to contend with the DPP within Taiwan itself. **BT**

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