

Change: Mainland's Taiwan Policy

Chu Shulong & Guo Yuli

The Hu Jintao Era

Under Hu Jintao, new leaders with new thinking and new policies have emerged, sometimes imperceptibly, and often in bold relief. Hu has successively put forward thoughts, policies and guidelines on a number of major domestic governance and diplomacy areas including a scientific view of development, a harmonious society, a harmonious world and peaceful development. His policy innovations have thus far exceeded the total inaugurated during the entirety of Jiang Zemin's thirteen-year reign. Among other shifts between these administrations, perhaps the most dramatic shift has been the Mainland's policy towards Taiwan.

Taiwan forms the primary "strategic focus" for the Communist Party of China and its general-secretary, Hu Jintao, who have undertaken major developments

Chu Shulong is a professor at the School of Public Policy and Management, Tsinghua University. Guo Yuli is on the research staff of the Institute of International Strategy and Development, Tsinghua University.

China Security, Vol. 4 No. 1 Winter 2008, pp. 127-133
2008 World Security Institute

in the past five years. The most notable highlights include the “Four Absolute No’s” (“Hu Jintao’s Four-Point Formula”) in early 2005; the enactment and adoption of the *Anti-Succession Law* in the same year; the call to reach a peace agreement across the Taiwan Strait put forward at the 17th Party Congress; opposition to a referendum on Taiwan’s U.N. membership; the promotion of chartered flights, agricultural product trade and tourism across the Taiwan Strait; sending two pandas to Taiwan; as well as stepping up “preparations for military struggle concerning Taiwan.” The message in all of this has been clear: peace, but not independence.

In 1979, Ye Jianying, chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress, sent a message to the compatriots of Taiwan urging “peaceful reunification,” thus inaugurating a strategic guideline that would last into the early 21st Century.¹ That strategy was to advance reunification by any means possible. In 1999, the *White Paper on Cross-Strait Relations* raised the temperature by stressing that cross-Strait reunification “cannot be dragged on indefinitely,” making any attempt by the Taiwan authorities to stall reunification a basis for the use of force.² Such rhetoric implied a timetable for resolving the Taiwan question.

However, the failings of this strategy have been evident. Not only has the possibility of reunification become ever more remote, but the “Taiwan independence” movement has gained ground. Since Lee Teng-hui came to power on the island, cross-Strait relations have changed considerably. Taiwan increasingly employs a proactive stance while the Mainland has largely been passive or reactive. To a significant degree, the Mainland has had no choice but to adapt to the dramatic transformations in Taiwan. Since the year 2000, however, when the Democratic Peoples Party (DPP) gained power in Taiwan, “reunification” as the focal point of the Mainland’s strategy toward Taiwan became unrealistic and untenable. The decision to adjust the Mainland’s strategy to one of “opposing independence” was driven by circumstances of the situation: the political realities and a change in social attitudes in Taiwan.

This shift in strategy has occurred entirely under Hu Jintao since he took China’s top leadership position. While Jiang Zemin’s “Eight-Point Formula,”

(which among other things, pushed for progress on reunification) was not reversed, the shift in emphasis and focus has nevertheless been clear.³ Since the 16th Party Congress in 2002, Hu Jintao, Wen Jiabao, Zeng Qinghong, Jia Qinglin and other central leaders have stressed “maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Straits,” “opposing and containing Taiwan Independence,” and “promoting peaceful development.” They no longer warn of unacceptable “dragging on” of the Taiwan question. While “peaceful reunification” and “one country and two systems” will continue as long-term goals, the shift in strategy is palpable and will continue for a long time in the future.

Decision-Making

China’s Taiwan policy under Hu Jintao emphasizes pragmatism over idealism. It is based on the reality of cross-Straits relations that neither side has the ability to “change the status quo” at present, nor for a period of time into the future. It is not realistic for the Mainland to pursue an ideal of unification at present or in the immediate future because the majority of people and political forces inside Taiwan have not formed a majority to support unification. Similarly, neither is it realistic for Taiwan separatist forces to achieve “Taiwan independence” because independence has not become the consensus view of the majority of the people and political parties in Taiwan (nor will the Mainland accept a state of Taiwan independence).

The change in Hu’s strategy toward Taiwan is the logical and necessary conclusion of many years of internal debate and discussion in China. This debate began with Lee Teng-hui’s visit to the United States in 1995 and ended with the June 17, 2004 statement by the Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) “On Current cross-Straits Relations,” also known as the “5-17 declaration.”⁴

The above outcome of this debate was effectively a critique - even a negation - of “reunification” as the core of the Mainland’s Taiwan policy since 1979. Looking back, under this strategy the Mainland had yielded to and compromised with Taiwan in numerous ways. It had encouraged trade and investment (resulting in a significant surplus in Taiwan’s favor), not imposed limitations on personal

exchanges, and even allowed Taiwan to participate in many international and regional organizations.

And to what end? It resulted in Lee Teng-hui's visit to the United States, the announcement of his "two-state theory", and the 2000 election of Chen Shui-bian, head of the "pro-Taiwan independence" DPP. Taiwan is obviously not growing closer to the Mainland, rather it is moving further away. The Taiwan independence movement was on the offensive, becoming increasingly outrageous and daring in challenging the "red line." At the same time, the Mainland merely "turned the other cheek," acting completely helpless. It was realized that the strategy of "reunification" was ineffectual and errant. It was a failed policy and needed to be abandoned, changed or at least adjusted and augmented. Even the Mainland public criticized the government for being too "soft" on the advancement of Taiwan independence.⁵

These trends culminated with Chen Shui-bian's "one country on each side of the Taiwan Strait" (*Yibian yiguo*) statement in 2002 and the proposal for a referendum in 2003 during the election campaign, which forced the Hu Jintao government to shift strategies toward Taiwan through the "5-17 declaration." This document set out the following unambiguous positions: Taiwan independence is unacceptable; nothing is more important or sacred to the Mainland than safeguarding national sovereignty and territorial integrity and it will use all means necessary and spare no cost to oppose and stop Taiwan independence.

Thus the "5-17 declaration" laid the groundwork for the change in Hu Jintao's strategy and policies toward Taiwan, ending a passive stance and beginning a new era for cross-Strait relations.

Primary Tools: Law and the Military

Eventual reunification of the country is the "ultimate guiding principle" for the Mainland's strategy towards Taiwan, and preventing independence is the "bottom line" of that strategy. Reunification can be postponed far into the future, but separation will never be acceptable. This position has remained unchanged in recent years despite a significant transformation in the Mainland's overall ap-

proach towards Taiwan. This strategic cornerstone has been further entrenched in the five years since Hu Jintao came to power.

The mainland has begun to use legal means to strengthen its anti-independence stance. As an extension of the spirit of the “5-17 declaration”, the 2005 *Anti-Secession Law* (ASL) stipulates that Taiwan independence is not permitted. If Taiwan were to declare independence, the law requires and authorizes the government to “adopt all necessary means” to stop it.⁶ The ASL largely removes the decision of acting against Taiwan independence from the position or policy of any particular leader, government or party. All will be forced to act based on national law. This approach is an important improvement in the Mainland’s method of dealing with the Taiwan issue. On the one hand, it shows China’s internal and external policies are not capricious but work through law. On the other hand, it is meant to show in unambiguous terms what China’s intentions are, thereby reducing the potential for strategic misunderstandings in Taiwan and the international community. In this way, the ASL acts as a deterrent but also strives to better “manage” cross-Strait relations.

Chinese leaders and the government have decisively reprioritized national defense development following the 16th Party Congress in 2002. In the first 20 years of Deng Xiaoping’s initiation of reform and opening up in 1978, economic development was prioritized over national defense. After the 16th Party Congress, under the direction of Hu Jintao, the economy and national defense were developed in a “coordinated fashion,” meaning that the latter is no longer subordinate to the former, raising the status of defense modernization in China’s national strategy.⁷ This change is entirely a result of the forward movement of Taiwan independence, forcing the Mainland to treat the situation gravely by developing the military means to prevent independence by force if necessary.

Guided by this strategic policy, the government made preparation for conflict over Taiwan the fundamental task for military development in the early twenty-first century.⁸ To this end, the government has increased national defense spending for now over five years. Notable progress has been made in China’s preparations for a military struggle with Taiwan and in its national defense mod-

ernization including the areas of missile development, submarine and surface naval vessels fighter planes and electronic warfare capabilities.

Flexibility

Despite the necessity of military preparation to ensure the bottom line, the core of Hu Jintao's strategy is to stabilize cross-Strait relations through a peace agreement and mutual development in economic, social and cultural terms. The Mainland is earnest in its intention to fulfill this goal as long as the basic "one China" principle can be maintained.⁹

The most difficult problem with cross-Strait negotiations is of course what form the relationship will take, what name each side will use and how all of this will be mutually acceptable to the other – all the while upholding the integrity of the "one China" principle. Yet this problem can be resolved with imagination and common understanding.

The issue of international space is also of deep concern for Taiwan. Again, there is no reason these goals cannot be satisfied if the two sides can come to an understanding on the "one China" principle. The Mainland and Taiwan have worked together for Taiwan's participation in international organizations (including the Olympics, the World Trade Organization and the Asian Economic Cooperation Agreement), which are models that can be expanded. The Mainland understands the desire and interests of Taiwan in this regard and, with Taiwanese interests in mind, will seek a solution acceptable to both.

The fierce exchange witnessed over the past 20 years strongly suggests that neither "reunification" nor "independence" is realistic or achievable for the foreseeable future. This is the case regardless of the "justice" perceived by each side. Therefore, Hu Jintao has made significant shifts to realism in his policy toward Taiwan. It is now Taiwan's turn to change its policies. The Legislative Yuan results in Taiwan on Jan. 12 are good news for Beijing, but they are still insufficient to hold out real possibility for change. But there is hope. Regardless of who is elected, the next leader of Taiwan will likely have little choice but to pursue constructive change. The past 20 years of efforts for Taiwanese independence

have resulted in a dead end. If the next government continues to pursue independence, its economy will suffer decline, Taiwan-U.S. relations will cool further and cross-Strait dynamics will continue to worsen. In sum, the road of Taiwan independence will be bad for China but an utter dead end for Taiwan. Conversely, the stabilization of relations across the Strait will improve the internal situation of each side, further economic and social development and fulfill the interests and desires of the people on each side, realize peace and stability, and improve Taiwan's relations with the international community. ☉

Notes

¹ "A message to the Compatriots in Taiwan," National People's Congress, *People's Daily*, Jan. 1, 1979, p 1.

² "The One-China Principle and the Taiwan Question," Taiwan Affairs Office and Information Office of the State Council, *People's Daily*, Feb. 22, 2000, p 2.

³ Jiang Zemin, "Strive to Promote the Great Cause of the Reunification of the Motherland," *People's Daily*, Jan. 31, 1995, p 1.

⁴ The Office for Taiwan Affairs under the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CCCPC) and the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council, "Taiwan Affairs Office of CPC Central Committee, Taiwan Affairs Office of State Council are authorized to issue statement on current cross-Straits relations," May 17, 2004.

See: http://www.gwytb.gov.cn:8088/detail.asp?table=headlines&title=Headlines&offset=625&m_id=154

⁵ Tong Zhenyuan, "Analysis of CCP'S Policy towards Taiwan after 16th Party Congress," *Mainland China Studies*, Volume 46, Issue 2.

⁶ "The Anti-Secession Law," *People's Daily*, Mar. 15, 2005.

⁷ Hu Jintao, "Hold High The Great Banner Of Socialism With Chinese Characteristics And Strive For New Victories In Building A Moderately Prosperous Society In All Respects – Report to the Seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China," *People's Daily*, Oct. 25, 2007, p. 4.

⁸ Hu Jintao, "Promote preparation for military conflict," *Xinhua News*, March 11, 2006; "PLA's preparation for military conflict," *World Security*, Issue 6, 2004.

See: <http://mil.news.sina.com.cn/2004-06-27/1204206854.html>

⁹ Hu Jintao, "Hold High The Great Banner Of Socialism With Chinese Characteristics And Strive For New Victories In Building A Moderately Prosperous Society In All Respects – Report to the Seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China," *People's Daily*, Oct. 25, 2007, p. 4.