

MORE STRAIT TALK: TEN YEARS AFTER THE TAIWAN MISSILE CRISIS

China Brief: Volume 5, Issue 22 (October 25, 2005)

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On July 21, 1995, in response to Taiwan's then-President Lee Teng-hui's controversial visit to his alma mater in the United States, China fired a volley of nuclear-capable missiles into the sea 90 miles north of Taipei. Those were followed by more missile firings that same year and in early 1996, and the United States moved aircraft carrier battle groups toward the Taiwan Strait. Cross-Strait relations turned taut as hostility intensified. Lee's visit, his defiant speech at Cornell University, and China's provocative response sparked a decade of mutual distrust across the Taiwan Strait that continues to this day.

Yet relations were not always so tense. In 1990, after five decades of hostility, both sides authorized track-two interaction to seal an effective deal on repatriation operations. Police agencies from both sides also worked together through international organizations such as INTERPOL on a collaborative monitoring system to suppress smuggling of illicit goods across the Taiwan Strait. By 1991, quasi-official organizations were established on both sides to facilitate such functional issues and institutionalize negotiation channels. The two sides demonstrated flexibility and pragmatism that not only preserved stability across the Strait, but also secured their mutual interests and indicated a cooperative future.

Unfortunately, this cooperation grinded to a halt after the events of 1995. Seminars held on cross-Strait crimes in Taipei in May 1998 and June 2001 reported that repatriation operations have been irregular while human trafficking and smuggling activities have increased at an alarming rate [1]. Moreover, the broader political-military environment has deteriorated to a troubling stalemate. The time seems ripe—indeed imperative—for the two sides to rekindle negotiations on basic functional issues that enabled them to work together constructively in the early 1990s. Such a move would be a small but important step to restoring mutual trust and strengthening stability in the Taiwan Strait.

Contrary to popular belief, the repatriation of Chinese mainlanders who illegally entered Taiwan—not trade or growing economic interest—spurred the first direct dialogue between Beijing and Taipei. The Red Cross Society on both sides broke new ground with the Kinmen Accord on September 12, 1990 to institutionalize repatriation operations. Under the agreement, Taiwan vowed to not mistreat the detained illegal immigrants or overcrowd the detention centers. Likewise, for the first time, the Chinese acknowledged their illegal migrants and worked to strengthen coastal patrols while agreeing to cooperate in the repatriation procedure. Taiwanese authorities transmitted a list of the names and records of detained mainlanders to

the relevant Chinese provincial governments for verification and identification purposes. The agreement further stipulated that once the list was confirmed, Taiwan's Red Cross vessels, accompanied by naval patrol boats, would take the deportees to Kinmen or Matsu, the transfer points where Chinese Red Cross vessels were at the dock to complete the repatriation. (Mainland Affairs Council, Republic of China)

Such a simple yet historically significant agreement opened up a new page in cross-Strait relations. Under this unprecedented framework, unofficial organizations, sanctioned by both governments, worked together for the first time to address a mutual concern such as repatriation. Moreover, it showed that Beijing was willing to cooperate in the repatriation of illegal immigrants, discrediting mounting suspicions in Taiwan that the Chinese government was encouraging its people to sneak onto the island. The repatriation operation continued smoothly, albeit with occasional hitches, and it soon became a routine procedure for both sides. The two Red Cross societies repatriated more than 3,000 illegal immigrants during the first year after the Kinmen Accord.

Following this initial success, Beijing and Taipei sought further cooperation on other fronts. With increasing commercial ties across the Taiwan Strait, smuggling also surged. Taiwan's Coast Guard reported that Taiwanese fishermen, operating on the high seas, traded electrical appliances such as television sets, radios, and refrigerators for cheap firearms, narcotics, and heroin, along with herbal medicines and endangered species from the mainland [2]. The amount of goods smuggled onto the island on a daily basis startled government authorities, and Taiwanese officials eventually found ways of communicating this concern with their Chinese counterparts through INTERPOL. In order to clamp down on smuggling operations, both sides benefited from relaying and sharing information on vessels carrying suspicious goods through the international agency's centralized database. According to seasoned experts on cross-Strait issues, the process was inefficient but creative, and established a cooperative monitoring system that allowed law enforcement agencies from both sides to work together.

In that era of pragmatism, Taiwan and China decided to expedite and institutionalize their cross-Strait negotiation process. Established in 1991, the Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF-Taiwan) and the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait (ARATS-China) were both quasi-official extensions of their respective governments. The historic summit between the chairs of SEF and ARATS took place in Singapore in April 1993 to review past successes on basic functional issues. They also agreed on formalizing communications channels to facilitate the negotiation process. This brought the constructive relationship to the next level so that functional issues such as the repatriation of illegal immigrants and criminals, crime control, judicial cooperation, and protection of Taiwanese businessmen were addressed with greater depth. Joint agreements were forwarded to their respective governments for implementation. Although seemingly minor issues were addressed, these low-profile communications signaled important political breakthroughs, and demonstrated the effectiveness of quasi-official dialogues and people-to-people diplomacy.

Following Lee's visit to the United States and China's missile tests, SEF and ARATS attempted unsuccessfully to dampen the rising hostility. Beijing and Taipei indefinitely suspended effective dialogue. The pathway to peace initiated in the early 1990s hit a dead end. The institutionalized negotiation channels, which took nearly four years to achieve, atrophied, and little political progress has ensued in the past

decade.

Since 1995, repatriation operations have stalled while human trafficking has increased. Taiwan has four detention centers that hold illegal Chinese immigrants. The space of accommodation is limited, and over the years, due to irregularities of repatriation, they have become overcrowded and under-staffed. Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) and SEF have tried unsuccessfully to contact their counterpart agencies in China to resume repatriation operations. MAC claims that the Chinese coast guard does not respond with urgency while Chinese officials reason that there are simply insufficient passenger boats to bring the illegal immigrants back to the mainland, hence delaying repatriation operations.

Furthermore, the emerging attitude of Taiwan's police force and coast guard is to turn a blind eye to the illegal Chinese immigrants so as to stem the overcrowding in the detention centers. As a result, Chinese women are increasingly lured with false promises of legitimate employment only to find out that they are trafficked for sexual exploitation in Taiwan. Health specialists are concerned by this trend, as it poses new threats in the form of HIV/AIDS and other sexually-transmitted diseases.

Although there is a "middle line" in the Taiwan Strait that marks the jurisdictional boundary, the lack of a systematic joint law enforcement mechanism has made cross-Strait movements and activities difficult to monitor and control. This has led inexorably to increased criminal activities across the Taiwan Strait. In recent years, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration has categorized Taiwan as a major transshipment point for drugs. Indeed, heroin and amphetamines are two of the most common drugs smuggled from southern China to Kaohsiung, Taiwan's southern city-port and one of the busiest ports in the world. Taiwan-based gangs have increasingly turned to the mainland for such supplies. Upon receiving the illicit goods, they repackage and sell them on black markets in Japan, Australia, and North America. Other than drugs, firearms have been smuggled in mass quantities across the Taiwan Strait. The Criminal Investigation Bureau, under Taiwan's National Police Administration, found that most of the contraband "Black Stars"—a 7.62-millimeter semi-automatic handgun—in the market can be traced back to Taiwan, the transshipment point, and ultimately China, where the weapons are produced in unregistered factories (Asia Times, June 2005).

Although leaders in Beijing and Taipei may be tempted to sacrifice long-term diplomatic objectives for short-term political gains, it is always important to remember that only 10 to 15 years ago, both sides demonstrated restraint, flexibility, and great political will to cast aside differences and focus on critical issues of mutual concern. Today, even more so than in the past, the questions of maritime safety and illegal activities in the Taiwan Strait call for closer cooperation between the two sides, which would also mark a reassuring step back on the path toward mutual trust.

Untying the knot of more than a half-century old conflict across the Taiwan Strait has never proven easy. Yet peace and stability can unfold in a pragmatic and step-by-step fashion. After a decade of "cold peace," it is in the best interest of both sides to engage in constructive dialogue on simple, functional, and non-contentious issues.

Notes

1. Chyungly Lee, "Maritime Confidence Building Measures Across the Taiwan Strait: Technical Collaboration for Human Security at Sea," <http://www.cmc.sandia.gov/links/cmc-papers/occasional-papers/chungly-final-op28.pdf>.
2. Ralph Clough, "Reaching Across the Taiwan Strait: People-to-People Diplomacy," *Across the Taiwan Strait: Mainland China, Taiwan, and the 1995--1996 Crisis*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1993.

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