

The DPP's strategic ambiguity toward China by Emily S. Chen

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Any political party in Taiwan hoping to manage cross-strait relations must handle two relationships: one with Taiwan's public and the other with the Mainland Chinese leadership. While the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)'s cross-strait policy attends to the two, it is unevenly focused. Party leaders have given more clarity to DPP policies on domestic governance – such as promoting the passage of the cross-strait negotiations oversight law – but less to managing ties with China. The DPP's policy toward China remains ambiguous, and has good reason to keep it vague. The DPP's policy of “strategic ambiguity” allows party leaders to claim the DPP does not evade the China issue while allowing flexibility in interpreting its position to accommodate its pro-independence base. However, presidential favorite candidate Tsai Ing-wen may face public pressure to clarify the party's stance on cross-strait relations. This will be more urgent if Tsai wins by a small margin in the 2016 presidential election. According to a [poll](#) by Taiwan Indicators Survey Research (TISR) in July 2015, 59.5 percent of the Taiwanese public expects a new government after next year's elections to consult with China to replace the current “1992 consensus” and govern future cross-strait ties. The poll results show that Tsai needs to prepare for a policy leap and clarify the DPP's cross-strait policies before consulting with China to establish a new common ground to maintain cross-strait exchanges.

The DPP's current cross-strait policy

During the DPP's 28th anniversary reception on Sept. 28, 2014, Chairperson Tsai Ing-wen [described](#) the DPP's cross-strait policy as “consistent, responsible, and predictable,” promising that the DPP will seek to establish “constructive dialogue with China.” Since then, the DPP has attempted to flesh out its concept of cross-strait engagement, which puts Taiwan's domestic audience at the forefront.

Subsequently, Tsai [expounded](#) on the “three benefits and three commitments” policy to manage relations with China during the DPP's China Affairs Committee (CAC) meeting in January 2015. To benefit the “national development of freedom and democracy,” “regional peace and stability,” and establish a “mutually advantageous” cross-strait relationship, the DPP [has committed](#) to three policy approaches to manage cross-strait ties: 1) Taiwan's government's decision-making should be democratic and transparent; 2) cross-strait interactions should be “inclusive and open to a diverse range of participants;” and 3) the broader public should be able to

enjoy benefits of cross-strait exchanges. Tsai's “three commitments” policy reflects public dissatisfaction toward the Kuomintang's (KMT) China policy in the wake of the [Sunflower Student Movement](#) of March 2014, and aims to win public support. Tsai's efforts have started to bear fruit. In the public opinion poll mentioned earlier, 35.9 percent of respondents [reported](#) that they will vote for Tsai, leading her KMT competitor Hung Hsiu-chu and People First Party (PFP) competitor James Soong by 17 percentage points and 14.3 percentage points, respectively. But to secure public support, Tsai still needs to ensure people in Taiwan that the DPP can continue the peaceful development of cross-strait ties.

In addition to speeches assuring the public that the DPP will cautiously manage ties with China, Tsai has made attempts to explain the DPP's positions on cross-strait relations. To describe the DPP's policy, Tsai has used words such as “consistent,” “sustainable,” “predicable,” and “responsible” in speeches. But there has been little elaboration on the meaning.

Tsai has also advanced the concept of “maintaining the status quo” as the core of her cross-strait policy to assure the Mainland Chinese audience. In her speech at the second CAC meeting on April 9, 2015, Tsai [expressed](#) that maintaining the status quo enjoys broad support in Taiwan and is a basic principle of the DPP's management of cross-strait relations. Having been asked on several occasions to define the “status quo,” Tsai offered a three-pronged explanation. First, during a speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC, in June 2015, Tsai [noted](#) that China, the DPP, and the United States have different interpretations of the status quo. Without elaborating on their differing interpretations, she urged the three sides to prioritize the concept of “maintaining a peaceful and stable relationship across the Taiwan Strait.” Second, in a talk at a San Francisco press reception on June 8, 2015, Tsai [expressed](#) that the DPP's “status quo” has two bases and two meanings. Based on the “existing Republic of China (ROC) constitutional order” and the “accumulated outcomes” of past cross-strait negotiations and interactions, the “status quo” means: 1) sustaining the freedom and democracy enjoyed by the people of Taiwan; and 2) preserving the current status of regional peace and stability and the stable development of cross-strait relations. Third, aware of differences in political development, Tsai [has proposed](#) that if the CCP can “break out of the KMT-CCP framework” to find “the greatest common denominator” with the DPP, the DPP and the CCP can open up new possibilities for cross-strait relations.

Finding common ground with China

It is early to gauge Taiwan's desire for change after eight years of KMT rule. Avoiding wild steps that could constrain the DPP's policy flexibility if the party returns the government

is a major consideration for the DPP. Under the framework of “maintaining the status quo,” DPP’s explanations of the concept can go in different directions depending on whether the party wins the 2016 elections and by how much. If Tsai wins comfortably, the DPP can use public support as a bargaining chip with China, and show less willingness to compromise. In contrast, if Tsai wins a narrow victory, the DPP will need to leave more room for adjustments in its China policy to accommodate pressure from the Mainland and from pro-KMT constituencies in Taiwan.

Currently, Tsai seems to argue that the CCP and the DPP should prioritize benefits to the people on both sides, using the concept of “maintaining a peaceful and stable relationship across the Taiwan Strait” as common ground to continue facilitating cross-strait exchanges. But for China, “a peaceful and stable relationship across the Taiwan Strait” is only possible if there is an accord between the sides. To the KMT, the accord is the 1992 consensus, a verbal agreement between the KMT and the CCP to keep the concept of “one China” but accept strategic uncertainty surrounding its precise definition. While Tsai [has promised](#) to “treasure and secure” the accumulated outcomes of past negotiations and exchanges between Taipei and Beijing, she has refused to accept the 1992 consensus. She [has long emphasized](#) that accepting the 1992 consensus contradicts the concept of a cross-strait relationship “beyond KMT-CCP relations.”

However, Tsai needs to prepare for the worst-case scenario. When [asked](#) whether the DPP should conduct consultations with Beijing to solve political disputes between the two sides (issues including the cross-strait political relationship, military security, and Taiwan’s participation in international organizations) if the DPP returns to government, 67.7 percent of respondents answered positively. To make cross-strait consultation happen, the DPP’s challenge is finding a mutual understanding with China, on which cross-strait exchanges can be based. So what could be the DPP’s approach to seeking common ground with China?

At a San Francisco press reception in early June 2015, Tsai offered to look at the 1992 consensus from a different angle. Proposing to “put aside differences of diverging interpretations and phraseologies,” Tsai instead focused on the [spirit](#) of the 1992 consensus, which she said was a “mutual understanding to continue conducting exchanges.” Tsai’s view on upholding the spirit of mutual understanding and dropping the interpretation and wording offers a glimpse of hope. Indeed, the 1992 consensus has never been about terms, but stances. Beijing has urged the DPP to uphold the 1992 consensus as a “common political foundation” in cross-strait ties because of its fear that the DPP could initiate a Taiwan independence movement.

Will Beijing accept Tsai’s interpretation of the spirit of the 1992 consensus as a common ground on which to build future cross-strait exchanges? Or will Beijing regard Tsai’s argument as empty words? Any attempt by the DPP to re-interpret the 1992 consensus would likely put the party in a vulnerable position. Aggressive questions pushing for more details of the party’s stance on the concept will follow even a simple explanation. To gain better control over the public discussion, the DPP needs to set its own agenda. By enriching the DPP’s

proposal of “maintaining the status quo,” the party will stand a better chance at differentiating itself from the KMT’s cross-strait policy, soothing China’s nerves, and securing domestic support.

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