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Status Quo? What Status Quo?

Jessica Drun



The past year has seen renewed attention and emphasis on Taiwan and its place and role in the world—from the reelection of Pres. Tsai Ing-wen and her administration’s almost unparalleled success in handling the COVID-19 pandemic to an upsurge in not only contacts with Washington but also in Chinese coercive measures against the island. In the final months of the Trump administration alone, a stream of policy announcements regarding China and Taiwan sought to embed a more hardline

policy toward the former and a more robust and collaborative relationship with the latter. But even without this flurry of activity, broader geostrategic considerations—namely, China’s growing influence and the shift in the cross-Strait military balance—would have required debate on the long-term suitability of key elements of US policy toward Taiwan.

These discussions are important and necessary. Yet, they often suffer from the vagueness surrounding the keywords and phrases used in cross-Strait discourse. In some cases, such as that of the contentious “1992 Consensus” and in US strategic ambiguity on whether to come to Taiwan’s defense, imprecision is deliberate—to shelve contradictions and advance dialogue in the former and to preserve policy options in the latter. Arguably, however, the most inexact concept of cross-Strait relations is what constitutes the so-called “status quo.”

General alignment between Beijing, Taipei, and Washington on what the status quo encapsulated allowed for an era of cross-Strait calm from 2008 to 2016, spurred in part by Pres. Ma Ying-jeou’s policy of rapprochement toward the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the adoption of the “1992 Consensus” formulation that served as the baseline for official cross-Strait contacts. Since the inauguration of President Tsai in May 2016, however, this tacit, mutual understanding began

to unravel. It continues to disintegrate to this day—and Taiwan’s domestic politics offers no reason to believe that this trend will go into reverse. This has clear implications for trilateral relations among the PRC, Taiwan, and the United States.

Discussions on cross-Strait relations have centered on the idea of a status quo and the maintenance thereof. However, there has been insufficient attention to exactly what the status quo entails. Rarely do mentions of the status quo seek to explicitly define it, but instead, appear to defer to an obscure notion of a supposed ideal point in time or a universally tolerated state of relations—or as a “catchphrase to describe the stalemate in the Taiwan Strait” that was “convenient for all parties involved.”¹

It matters how the status quo is defined, however—not least of all because any movement away from this assumedly fixed moment draws consternation from the other vested players. Official statements out of Beijing and Taipei regularly condemn the other for actions that challenge the status quo and call for a return to sometimes unspecified, but often disputed, baselines. Washington has likewise stressed the need for balance and dialogue, and for both sides to adhere to the status quo, though Washington has often itself been accused by the PRC of being an instigator in ratcheting up cross-Strait tensions by disturbing a status quo,

especially during the four years of the Trump administration.

The issue stems, at least in part, from a genuine lack of agreement over what specific circumstance or set of circumstances make up the status quo. This is a fundamental disagreement over *denotation* and not just *connotation*. In practical terms, the concept of a status quo in cross-Strait relations is perhaps best understood as a point on a spectrum—a range that, at certain points in time, has helped to disguise disagreements among the three sides on shared goals and objectives. At one end of the spectrum lies “unification,” or the merger of the PRC and the Republic of China (ROC) into a single polity; at the other, “independence,” or formal moves to officially separate the two. The status quo is an imagined point between these two theoretical extremes—a way to describe and encapsulate “Taiwan’s ambiguous position as a de facto independent state that lacks de jure statehood.”²

The views of the major actors in cross-Strait relations—Beijing, Washington, and two major political parties in Taiwan, the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)—all exist at various points on this spectrum. The myth of a common status quo can be sustained whenever their respective views fall within proximity with one another. Politics, however, is never static, and, as the past four years have demonstrated, developments in

cross-Strait, US–China, and US–Taiwan relations have prompted shifts in each country’s perception of the status quo—leading to divergence along the spectrum and heightened tensions.

For example, for Beijing, the status quo is “One China”—accepted at this point under the “1992 Consensus” formulation. In China’s view, Tsai’s unwillingness to acknowledge the “1992 Consensus” constitutes a break from the status quo. This is despite of Tsai’s continued reassurance that she remains committed to the status quo—which, in her administration’s view, means building on the achievements of her predecessors. This was clear from Tsai’s first inaugural address, which included a nod to 1992:

Since 1992, over twenty years of interactions and negotiations across the Strait have enabled and accumulated outcomes which both sides must collectively cherish and sustain; and it is based on such existing realities and political foundations that the stable and peaceful development of the cross-Strait relationship must be continuously promoted.³

The Tsai administration’s approach to the status quo aligns with the broader, longstanding DPP position that Taiwan is already an independent country, as the ROC and thus does not need to formally declare itself as such, but which also makes any of Beijing’s One-China demands a nonstarter.⁴

This incongruence in views on the status quo has prompted policy responses that have further exacerbated existing differences—driving points on the

spectrum even further apart. The past five years are ripe with examples and include China cutting off official channels of communication with Taiwan, ramping up its campaign to poach diplomatic allies, restricting Taiwan representatives’ access to international forums, and increased military intimidation with the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) aircraft regularly entering Taiwan’s Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ). In response, Taiwan and the United States have both deepened and enhanced their already robust bilateral relationship, to include more high-level meetings, more regular arms sales, and inclusion of Taiwan in US-led regional frameworks, among other actions.

Further, one of the most critical elements in Taiwan debates is also one of the more underexplored—at least in English-language discourse. Much like the discussions on cross-Strait relations referenced above, assessments on Taiwan domestic politics also tend to fall back on black-and-white characterizations of key players, especially by categorizing the DPP as “pro-independence” and the KMT as “pro-unification.” This type of framing not only aligns with how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) labels Taiwan’s two main political parties but also plays into Chinese discourse control efforts—of shaping global narratives to better align with Beijing’s narratives and, in the process, help advance

its interests.⁵

The truth is far more complicated and may compel a further downward spiral in cross-Strait relations by bringing about a domestic convergence of views among Taiwanese actors while simultaneously driving collective Taiwanese interpretations of the status quo even further from that of the Chinese government. The KMT—China’s preferred interlocutor—has been reassessing party priorities and policies while in opposition—including the party’s approach to cross-Strait relations, which has long centered on the “1992 Consensus.” However, there are signs that the Chinese leadership may no longer accept the vague One-China agreement moving forward, and may instead demand explicit recognition that “China” refers to the PRC.⁶ At the same time, Beijing has seemingly tied the “1992 Consensus” with “One Country, Two Systems”—which is vastly unpopular in Taiwan and rejected by both major political parties.

Accordingly, the KMT is at a crossroads on whether it will continue pursuing the “1992 Consensus” in its current construct, in a moderated form, or to scrap it altogether—a debate that will play out in the elections for party chair later this year. Whatever

happens, however, both major parties in Taiwan will continue to place varying emphasis on the sovereignty of the ROC—a trend that will likely gain greater traction in the future, as identity politics in Taiwan are skewed heavily toward a uniquely Taiwanese identity, separate from China. It is hard to discern any signs of movement toward mainland China’s interpretation of the status quo.

In short, any future confluence of views on the status quo is becoming increasingly unlikely—and with it, any common baseline for cross-Strait discourse between the two sides. This is an overlooked, yet fundamentally important, aspect of cross-Strait relations. ■

Jessica Drun

Ms. Drun is a Non-Resident Fellow at the 2049 Project.

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Notes

¹ Chih-Chieh Chou, “Contending Notions of the Cross-Strait Status Quo in Taiwan and Across the

Strait: Impacts on U.S.-Taiwan Relations,” *China Review* 18, no. 3 (2018): 121–48, at 122.

² Lev Nachman and Brian Hioe, “No, Taiwan’s President Isn’t ‘Pro-Independence,’” *The Diplomat*, 23

April 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

³ “Inaugural address of ROC 14th-term President Tsai Ing-wen,” Office of the President of the Republic of China (Taiwan), last modified 20 May 2016, <https://english.president.gov.tw/>.

⁴ Nachman and Hioe, “No, Taiwan’s President Isn’t ‘Pro-Independence’.”

⁵ Elsa Kania, “The Right to Speak: Discourse and

Chinese Power,” Center for Advanced China Research, 28 November 2018, <https://www.ccp-watch.org/>.

⁶ Jessica Drun, “Taiwan’s Opposition Struggles to Shake Pro-China Image,” *Foreign Policy*, 11 March 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>.