



A Conference with the Taiwan Affairs Office of the PRC State Council

**By Ambassador Stephen M. Young (Ret.)
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Introduction

The Forum on Asia-Pacific Security (FAPS) of the National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP) held its annual conference with the Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) of the PRC State Council on June 11-12, 2019 in New York. This conference brought together Chinese and American experts on relations across the Taiwan Strait and took place at a time of continued cross-Strait tensions as well as sharpened U.S.-China confrontation. Participants reviewed recent developments in cross-Strait relations and presented their perspectives on each side's policies. They also discussed the broader U.S.-China-relationship, especially as it relates to the Taiwan issue.

Overview of Current Cross-Strait Relations: Challenges and Opportunities

The American speaker noted that while the overall situation was tranquil, the Mainland's lack of understanding of Taiwan's democracy was an obstacle to improving relations between Taipei and Beijing. Efforts by Beijing to influence Taiwan's domestic politics were harmful to the overall health of cross-Strait relations. The curtailment of exchanges and attempts by Beijing to influence internal Taiwan electoral politics were not helpful. It was China, not Taiwan, who sought to inject conditions on cooperation. All of this has harmed Beijing's image in Taiwan. China's mishandling of Hong Kong, which Deng Xiaoping had included in his "one country, two systems" formula, was a further problem. After less than twenty-five years through the promised fifty-year autonomy under this concept, Xi Jinping's policies are alienating broad swaths of Hong Kong public opinion (this conference took place just as the massive protests of mid-June were erupting). So it was no wonder that people in Taiwan, who cherish their democratic system, view Beijing's actions with a great deal of concern.

The U.S. Congress was playing a more active role in support of Taiwan across party lines. This underscored the longstanding American commitment to support Taiwan's efforts to defend itself and possibly intervene militarily if China launched an attack against the island. It is also taking place at a time when U.S.-China relations are deteriorating as Beijing is seen as bullying American businesses through restrictive regulations and forced technology transfer. So, tension in cross-Strait relations and U.S.-China relations are both causes for concern.

The Chinese speaker began by expressing his own concerns over cross-Strait relations, arguing that the Trump administration was testing China's bottom line on Taiwan and thus hurting the feelings of the Chinese people. He worried that U.S. actions might make it difficult for the government in Beijing to persuade its own people of the need to stick to peaceful means of resolving cross-Strait tensions. He cautioned the participants not to mix democracy and independence, claiming China had no issue with the former. In the worst case, China might feel compelled to take action based on its 2005 anti-secession law. In the meantime, the participant urged Taiwan's current leadership to embrace the "92 Consensus" as a prerequisite for resumed dialogue, increased cross-Strait tourism and more people-to-people exchanges. But he worried that President Tsai was taking advantage of cross-Strait tensions to win reelection (the conference took place just before Tsai won the DPP presidential primary).

During the discussion, one observer suggested that China's bottom line remained ambiguous, making it difficult for Taipei to respond effectively. A Chinese participant sought to portray "one country, two systems" as an internal question, suggesting outsiders had no business trying to question it. This view was not widely accepted by the U.S. participants who reminded their Chinese colleagues that Deng had welcomed the world to observe the process when he unveiled it nearly forty years ago.

Overview of U.S.-China Relations

The U.S. presenter laid out a fairly pessimistic analysis, arguing that the basis for U.S.-China cooperation had eroded, with declining trust and growing suspicions of each other's strategic goals. President Xi Jinping's policies over the past seven years contributed to this deterioration, as did President Trump's election, though the trend preceded either man's coming to power. The hope for China's "peaceful rise" has faded. China's more aggressive approach to both the South China Sea and Taiwan has aggravated relations with the US, he said, citing IPR theft, human rights violations in Xinjiang and restrictions on foreign journalists in China. On the U.S. side a more skeptical attitude toward China had been evident in both major parties, and some US officials had spoken of a "clash of civilization" and an all-society struggle with China.

While still not considered a Cold War, bilateral relations have experienced a significant downturn from just a few years ago. The more frequent passage of U.S. warships through the Taiwan Strait was both a symptom and a cause of these new tensions. And things have been spiraling downward more rapidly since the detention by Canada of Ms. Meng Wanzhou, Huawei's Chief Financial Officer, and Beijing's harsh response. Economic cooperation is waning as tensions arise, with IPR theft by China as one aggravating factor. This speaker urged greater restraint by both sides, but was worried about the future.

The decline of mutual trust means the U.S. and China view each other with greater suspicion. A Chinese speaker argued that President Xi's overtures to Taiwan were not taken seriously by the American side. He attributed this to a lack of understanding of the Chinese leader's policies. Another Chinese participant argued that we could be heading toward a new Cold War and cited the run-up to World War I. An American participant suggested that many Americans were concerned that China is trying to export its ideology to its neighbors. The participant urged greater public discussion of controversial issues on both sides, and lamented the dearth of frank discussion and criticism of Chinese policies by Chinese colleagues. He also raised the issue of Chinese students in the U.S. reporting on one another back home if they step out of line.

An American observer wondered what happened to the times under Jiang Zemin, when he spoke openly about trying to promote change to improve the lives of Chinese citizens. Another American noted that China was trying to remake the UN to its preferred image, combining these efforts with those of other autocratic countries there. These concerns were shared by America's partners in Europe, Australia, Japan and elsewhere.

Chinese participants pushed back, asserting that China was playing a positive role in the UN, and claiming (on the eve of widespread demonstrations there) that Hong Kong was thriving under the Basic Law laid down by Beijing. American participants agreed there was fault on both sides, while regretting that the Chinese seem to be constrained from self-reflection. A Chinese participant stressed how far China had come from the dark days of the Cultural Revolution in the 1960's. He noted Beijing is effectively combating corruption, poverty and pollution. But China was still in the middle of this process, which would take time.

The View from Beijing and Washington

The Chinese speaker saw a worsening in Sino-U.S. relations over the last five years. According to this participant, there are three factors in this decline. First, the political foundation of cross-Strait relations had been "ruined." Second, there was the rise of pro-independence advocacy by the ruling DPP. Finally, he drew attention to the U.S.' role in this decline. Since these factors persisted, the situation remained bad. He lamented the emboldening actions of the DPP to challenge the Mainland on cross-Strait relations.

First, the DPP had sought confrontation with Beijing. Second, the DPP had sought to intimidate Taiwan citizens seeking to reside in the PRC. Finally, the Taiwan authorities had opposed normal exchanges with China. Mainlanders seeking to visit Taiwan ran into obstacles, or were forced to leave after arriving. Taiwan restricted travel to the PRC. The DPP also suppressed opposition parties in Taiwan, in part through the use of "so-called" transitional justice committees. The goal, he insisted, was destruction of the KMT Party. He claimed this represented an attempt to obtain one-party dominance and to squeeze other contenders out of the political process. He also complained that the DPP wanted to push sovereignty issues with the aim of eventually declaring independence.

According to the Chinese speaker, the United States was proactively taking unhelpful actions on these issues. He criticized the recent meeting by Taiwan's Secretary-General of the National Security Council David Lee with U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton in the NSC. This, he alleged, violated both the One China Principle and the Three Communiqués. The U.S. Congress was also busy passing legislation like the Taiwan Travel Act, the 2019 Taiwan Assurance Act and other measures inimical to PRC interests. The list of complaints also included celebration of the fortieth anniversary of the TRA, transit by U.S. warships through the Taiwan Strait, continued arms sales, and possible ship visits. The serious consequences of these actions should be clear to the U.S. side, the Chinese participant claimed. They impinged on core interests of the PRC and should not be pursued. Taipei was seeking to complicate Sino-U.S. relations.

Taiwan would continue to pursue its reckless activities through this election period, but the speaker made clear the Mainland's intention to push back. He invoked the January 2, 2019 speech by President Xi Jinping that described the "unshakeable goal" of realizing reunification. This was the aspiration of Chinese throughout the world. It afforded no room for Taiwan "secessionist" activity.

With the celebration of forty years of Sino-U.S. diplomatic relations, cooperation between the two sides was the only option. He hoped the U.S. would continue to adhere to the One China Principle and the Three Communiqués.

The Chinese speaker was also concerned about the outcome of the 2020 elections in Taiwan for its legislature and presidency and stressed the importance of honoring the '92 Consensus. Hopefully whoever wins the Taiwan elections would restore cross-Strait relations to a peaceful nature.

Responding to a previous speaker's concern over imprisoned activists in China, the Chinese participant underscored that those imprisoned had violated Chinese law, grounded in 5000 years of Chinese history. He ended by highlighting the importance of meetings such as this one to promote good will.

The U.S. speaker stated that USG policy was based on the TRA, the Three Communiqués, and the U.S. One China Policy. President Trump had reiterated these points during his November 2018 Beijing visit. These concepts allowed the United States to develop robust ties with Taiwan. He acknowledged the PRC view on Taiwan, including the Beijing statement that Taiwan is a part of China.

The key was that these issues must be resolved peacefully, without threats or use of force. The TRA had served the U.S. well for forty years, contributing to peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region. Under that framework, ties with Taipei and Washington represented a durable partnership grounded in mutual interest. Washington was also committed to providing Taiwan with arms of a defensive character. Any threat to peace and stability in the Western Pacific would be of grave concern to the USG.

With the aim of deterring any use of force or other means of pressure on the people of Taiwan, the U.S. continued to approve sales of defensive weaponry to Taipei, including three recent FMS packages approved by Congress. The opening of the new AIT Office Building in Neihu earlier this year was symbolic of the enduring ties between the U.S. and Taiwan. Washington would continue to support Taiwan's meaningful participation in international organizations that did not require statehood as a prerequisite for membership. This included advocating for Taiwan's status as an observer at WHO. Taiwan deserved praise for its efforts to participate in demining activities in Syria, cutting off illegal shipments to North Korea, and other similar activities.

The U.S. government was seriously concerned about the deterioration of cross-Strait ties over the past two years, which is driven by PRC activities. Recent Congressional activity, such as the passage of the Taiwan Assurance Act, reflected the reaction in Washington to increasing Chinese military pressure. DOD documents note Chinese preparation for potential conflict with Taiwan. Over the previous two years, the PLA has become more threatening in both air and sea, including flying planes across the mid-line of the Taiwan Strait, launching mock bombing attacks and implementing other pressure tactics.

Beijing sought to coerce international, including American, airlines to change their nomenclature toward Taiwan, which the U.S. opposed. Likewise, Chinese efforts to flip Taiwan's "diplomatic allies" were not conducive to cross-Strait stability. Beijing's blocking of Taiwan participation in WHO gatherings was hindering Taipei's contribution to global health activities. These steps increased tension in the Taiwan Strait and ran counter to Beijing's claim of wanting to work with Taiwan. They threatened a downward spiral in cross-Strait relations and were deeply troubling to the U.S. It was critical that China resume regular channels of communication to avoid misunderstandings and prevent accidents in the Taiwan Strait and surrounding waters.

President Xi's January 2nd speech could have reduced tensions. Instead, by not renouncing the use of force, it was a destabilizing factor. Taipei had reacted, as expected, with great disappointment. Taiwan rejects such efforts, stressing instead that all actions must be peaceful to the people on both sides of the Strait.

The abiding interest of the USG is to prevent policies that threaten cross-Strait peace. But the U.S. has seen little interest on Beijing's part for meaningful dialogue. Taiwan will hold legislative and presidential elections in early 2020, and the U.S. will work with whoever emerges from Taiwan's elections. Taiwan's transition to democracy is a great accomplishment, as Vice President Pence highlighted in remarks last year

The American speaker then listed some steps the PRC could take to reverse current adversarial trends. First, it should engage in dialogue with Taiwan. Second, it should stop squeezing Taiwan's diplomatic international space. Third, it should stop military provocations and suspend the anti-secession law. Fourth, it should cease attempts to undermine Taiwan's democratic elections.

In the ensuing summation of this session, a Chinese speaker said Beijing has opposed the TRA for forty years and would not relinquish the possibility of the use of force. He also reiterated the Mainland's commitment to the '92 Consensus as the starting point for negotiations. He saw acknowledgement of the One China Principle as opening the way to resolving other related issues. Finally, he rejected the U.S. speaker's claim that actions by the PRC in this regard were provocative.

The American speaker concluded that there had been clear attempts by China to coerce Taiwan. He called on China to cease such efforts.

U.S. and PRC Policies on Cross-Strait Relations

An American participant began by stressing Taiwan's shared value of democracy with the U.S. since the 1980's. Both Democratic and Republican leaders view Taiwan as a ward to be protected by the Congress. The anti-secession act calls for the use of force against Taiwan, which the U.S. opposes.

The American speaker indicated frustration over discussions in this forum over the past two years, opining that the long-term framework was becoming increasingly unstable. Eventually, people may look back at the Ma and Tsai eras as stable in comparison to what comes next. Both Tsai Ing-wen and Ma Ying-jeou served as head of the Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) prior to their presidential terms, so they brought significant experience to their presidencies.

There was growing pressure within the U.S. government to change the way it deals with Taiwan. The Defense Department wanted a more substantive role in arms sales. Public high-level visits, such as the one between David Lee and John Bolton, could become the new normal. The entire atmosphere in America was changing; negative feelings toward China were translating into greater support for Taiwan.

President Trump has actually been a restraining force on Taiwan, having stepped in a few times to rein in other members of his government who are inclined to go even further. President Trump is said not to have been impressed by the size of Taiwan's market, for example. But hard liners on both sides were reinforcing each other, which could lead to real trouble in U.S.-China relations going forward. Drifting into war, which is a real possibility, could "destroy the twenty-first century," this speaker concluded. Therefore, what is needed is greater realism in both sides' policy recommendations. The Mainland did not seem to fully appreciate President Tsai's restraint.

A Chinese speaker stressed the need for greater realism. He made four points: 1) the goal of peaceful resolution has not changed, but China is not prepared to abandon the possible use of force; and it is vital to 2) preserve the interests of the people living on both sides of the Taiwan Strait; 3) take into consideration the realities of Taiwan livelihood, which could be protected by one country, two systems; and 4) continue to treat the Taiwan issue as the core issue in U.S.-China relations. His conclusion was that the two sides must abide by the Three Communiqués.

Another Chinese participant reiterated the importance of President Xi's January 2, 2019 speech. He criticized the high threshold President Tsai had set for engaging with China, such as seeking Legislative Yuan approval. This has led to growing anti-China sentiment within Taiwan society. He was also concerned by the growing U.S. view of China as a threat.

How to Stabilize Cross-Strait Relations

An American participant expressed concern over the current situation, which he characterized as a "cold peace." He believed President Tsai had been quite cautious despite aggressive PRC actions, including attempts to destabilize Taiwan democratic processes. Despite China not having electoral campaigns itself, it has done a good job trying to destabilize those of democratic societies from Australia to Taiwan. So one must expect this to continue, particularly in favor of KMT candidates seen as favorable to Beijing's interests on the island. This speaker urged China not to continue provocative military flights around Taiwan.

If Tsai is reelected, this speaker urged China to go slow on political issues, and be cautious in invoking the '92 Consensus. This speaker also urged the Trump administration not to use Taiwan to provoke the PRC, for example by publicizing private meetings like that of David Lee's visit with John Bolton. Washington and Taipei should also avoid public appearances by Taiwan leaders transiting the U.S. It would be better to concentrate on things that really help Taiwan, like arms sales, rather than empty gestures.

A Chinese participant had some suggestions for stabilizing cross-Strait relations. He criticized President Tsai's cutting-off of student exchanges, which he claimed were helpful to cross-Strait relations. The result of the current policy was to make Taiwan's younger generation more pro-independence. This speaker also warned that provoking tensions or military action with China over Taiwan would endanger the lives of young Americans.

He criticized U.S. policy toward Taiwan, observing that it was now promoting democracy, even though the U.S. had a past history of supporting friendly dictatorships. This speaker even suggested it might be in Beijing's interest for the DPP to win upcoming elections, as this might hasten reunification. He urged Washington to focus less on human rights and more on national rights, which included: 1) realizing national reunification; and 2) advancing economic, political and legal development. He concluded that China wanted to advance friendship with the U.S., despite our different systems.

One participant questioned whether U.S. strategic ambiguity was really helpful, and also noted that "one country, two systems" might not be working for Hong Kong, and certainly seemed to attract little interest in Taiwan. Another speaker argued that, despite its flaws, strategic ambiguity had helped to maintain peace in a volatile region, while Chinese talk about reunification was not helpful, since this was not Taiwan's aspiration in the foreseeable future. Thus it could only occur through the use of force, although the broad consensus is that countries do not have the right to go to war to settle historical claims.

A Chinese speaker claimed that the territory's rights were being fully protected, and groused that some sought to "internationalize" the Hong Kong question. He claimed that the Hong Kong people were content with things. An American noted that considerable numbers of Hong Kong residents had either emigrated or taken out foreign passports to the U.S., Canada and other countries as a hedge against things deteriorating there.

A Chinese speaker stated that two million Taiwan citizens were working in the Mainland and were content there. An American participant countered that after only twenty-two of the fifty years of autonomy promised under "one country, two systems," China now seemed bent on narrowing the territory's freedoms. The reason so many young people were currently in the streets protesting was because 2047 is no abstraction to them, but represented their future. A Chinese scholar suggested it was permissible for China to influence Taiwan politics if the effect would be to advance reunification.

An American speaker claimed that there was credible evidence to prove Chinese actors—for example in Shanghai—were responsible for cyberattacks against Taiwan. Such interference was also evident in Australia, where Chinese money sought to influence elections there. None of this was seen as helpful.

How to Stabilize U.S.-China Relations

The first speaker in this session offered two recommendations aimed at improving the bilateral relationship. The first recommendation was to create a level playing field in order to resume trade talks. The second was that China should agree to resume talks with the goal of creating focus on areas where the two sides could cooperate, for example on North Korea and to interdict illegal drugs like fentanyl coming out of China. The speaker also offered two suggestions for improving the cross-Strait situation: first, neither party should seek to assist any candidate in Taiwan's presidential elections, and second, if the DPP retains power, China should find a more flexible position on the '92 Consensus. This might permit a reelected Tsai Ing-wen to find more common ground for moving forward on cross Strait relations.

A Chinese participant urged consideration of new ways to manage the global situation. He also thought Beijing had underestimated the populism and internal tension within U.S. politics. More needed to be done to address conflict between the world's two greatest powers. This led him to advance four policy recommendations:

- Both sides needed to stop challenging each other's core interests;
- The two countries should not link high-tech competition with espionage;
- Both sides' media should avoid overreaction to the other side's actions;
- When Presidents Xi and Trump meet at the G20, they should ensure that there is no deterioration of the bilateral relationship, particularly one caused by a third party.

A U.S. participant advanced five recommendations each for the United States and China.

For the United States:

- Object to the policy, but do not vilify the Chinese people or nation.
- Work toward solutions and avoid excessive demands.
- Push back against unfair behavior, strive to out-compete China, but do not block her.
- The U.S. should not be more like China, for example, by repudiating international rules and curtailing student exchanges.
- The U.S. should not use Taiwan as a weapon against China, but rather focus on its own priorities.

For China:

- Work harder to win back champions of U.S.-China cooperation, listening to U.S. concerns and taking action to address them.
- No problem is so bad that it cannot get worse, so look for ways to climb down from confrontation, for example, by reaching out to U.S. tech companies to seek mutual understanding and solutions.
- Two phrases should never be used by China; first claiming the need for special treatment because of China's "developing nation" status, and second using reference to "core interests" as if this was a magical formula, meaning no discussion or compromise is possible.
- Do not treat ethnic Chinese outside of China as if they are expected to be loyal subjects of the Emperor. Ethnicity is one thing; citizenship another.
- Focus more on patience and less on pressure; this applies particularly to the questions of Hong Kong, Xinjiang and Taiwan.

During discussion, one American speaker urged China to signal that it does not challenge U.S. aims in the region. Forcing U.S. companies to turn over IPR or coercing them to invest in China seem to be challenging the U.S. role in Asia. He raised American concerns about the treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang or the concept championed by President Xi Jinping of one-man rule over 1.4 billion Chinese.

In the ensuing discussion, a Chinese participant argued that both sides needed to be more scientific in their use of data, and take account of the other side's language. Sometimes the two sides use different meanings for the same words. He claimed that China was a "nation-state" but the United States was not. He cautioned that bullying and maximum pressure did not usually prove effective.

An American observer suggested China seeks a treatment it doesn't deserve when it claims it is a developing country. The participant urged both sides to deal with outstanding issues one by one and proportionally. This speaker thought both sides sought to weaponize globalization. As an example she raised the case of Huawei executive Ms. Meng detained by Canada on a U.S. warrant, which had led to trade sanctions and detentions of Canadian citizens by China. These steps were seen by many as disproportional.

A Chinese participant defended Chinese actions in Xinjiang as necessitated by its proximity to Afghanistan, which posed a security threat. There were also differences between the U.S. and China on the South China Sea. His point was to ask who deserves to make judgments on such issues. He urged listeners not to forget history. The participant also highlighted the central importance of Taiwan to Sino-U.S. relations. For almost seventy years, the two sides had avoided conflict over Taiwan. He was worried that this could change, if the two sides did not take care.

An American participant agreed with this observation concerning Taiwan. Recalling tension during the Chen Shui-bian presidency, this observer urged China to understand that Tsai Ying-wen was a very different person, and should not be dismissed as a possible partner. Most Americans saw her as cautious and prudent, supporting the status quo, not independence. She urged Chinese friends to objectively evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of Beijing's policies.

A Chinese participant sought to make three points. First, both sides needed to recognize the strategic interconnectivity between them. Second, it was important for the U.S. and China to reduce strategic suspicion. Finally, it was necessary to avoid strategic hostility.

An American participant offered several suggestions on the way forward. First, the two sides needed to have sustained dialogue channels, between the two presidents as well as at lower levels. Second, the two sides should establish a working group on Sino-American relations, perhaps also covering the Korean Peninsula and other issues, all reporting to their leaders. Third, adopt the principles of sincerity, respect and goodwill into bilateral relations. Fourth, America should make clear that its Indo-Pacific strategy is not directed at China. Fifth, seek to avoid having friction in one area spread to others. Sixth, work together to help China understand better the U.S. One China Policy. Seventh, ensure that the Taiwan question not become a trigger for U.S.-China conflict. And finally, have China make clear the meaning of its "one country, two systems" as it applies to Taiwan.

In conclusion, though the two sides are currently in a bad situation, it could still get worse. So both sides need to work together to avoid such an outcome through conferences such as this one and working-level dialogues.

**THE NATIONAL COMMITTEE ON AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY'S
FORUM ON ASIA-PACIFIC SECURITY (FAPS)
PRESENTS**

**A CONFERENCE WITH THE TAIWAN AFFAIRS OFFICE OF THE
PRC STATE COUNCIL**

JUNE 11 & 12, 2019

**PARTICIPANTS
(in alphabetical order)**

The Honorable Raymond F. BURGHARDT
President
Pacific Century Institute

Ms. CHEN Xiaolin
Deputy Division Chief
Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council

Ms. CHEN Xiaoyan
Staff
Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council

Mr. CHEN Yuanfeng
Vice Minister
Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council

Professor Thomas J. CHRISTENSEN
(Tuesday only)
*Professor of Public and International Affairs &
Director, China and the World Program*
Columbia University

Ms. Rorry DANIELS
*Deputy Project Director, Forum on Asia-Pacific
Security*
National Committee on American Foreign Policy

Mr. DUN Shixin
Director General
Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council

The Honorable Susan M. ELLIOTT
President & CEO
National Committee on American Foreign Policy

Ms. Bonnie GLASER
*Senior Advisor for Asia & Director of the China
Power Project*
Center for Strategic & International Studies
(CSIS)

Ms. Shenyi GLASS
Interpreter

Richard HOWE, Esq.
Executive Vice President; Treasurer
National Committee on American Foreign Policy

Professor JIA Qingguo
Dean, School of International Studies
Peking University

Ms. Helena KOLENDA
Program Director for Asia
Henry Luce Foundation

Ms. Juliet LEE
Project Manager, Forum on Asia-Pacific Security
National Committee on American Foreign Policy

Mr. LI Kai
Staff
Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC

Dr. Yuting LI
Program Associate for Asia
Henry Luce Foundation

Mr. LIU Zhenjiang
Staff
Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council

Ms. Tiffany MA
Senior Director
BowerGroupAsia

The Honorable James F. MORIARTY
Chairman of the Board
American Institute in Taiwan

Mr. Daniel R. RUSSEL (*Wednesday only*)
Vice President for International Security and Diplomacy
Asia Society Policy Institute

Dr. SHAO Yuqun
Director, Institute of Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau Studies
Shanghai Institute for International Studies (SIIS)

Mr. WANG Shushen
Associate Research Fellow, Institute of Taiwan Studies
Chinese Academy of Social Sciences

Mr. YANG Mingjie
President, Institute of Taiwan Studies
Chinese Academy of Social Sciences

Professor Donald S. ZAGORIA
Senior Vice President
National Committee on American Foreign Policy

Professor LI Peng
Director, Graduate Institute for Taiwan Studies
Xiamen University

Ms. LIU Yu
Counsellor
Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC

The Honorable Winston LORD (*Tuesday only*)
Chairman Emeritus
International Rescue Committee

Mr. MEI Jiangzhong
Interpreter

Dr. Douglas H. PAAL
Distinguished Fellow
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

The Honorable Jeffrey R. SHAFER
Chairman of the Board
National Committee on American Foreign Policy

Mr. WANG Qiang
Consul
Consulate General of the PRC in New York

Professor WANG Zhenmin
Professor of Law
Tsinghua University

The Honorable Stephen YOUNG
Former U.S. State Department Official
U.S. Department of State

Dr. ZHAO Yumin
Deputy Consul General
Consulate General of the PRC in New York

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