



# **Whither the Status Quo? A Cross-Taiwan Strait Trilateral Dialogue**

By Susan A. Thornton  
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## **Executive Summary**

Recent trilateral Track II discussions organized by the National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP) between Taiwan, Mainland China and U.S. scholars revealed that the cross-Strait status quo is perceived to be eroding at an increasing pace, and that signals sent by the three sides are being misinterpreted. It is urgent that officials in all three capitals clearly and consistently affirm declarative policies and cease being tentative on this score, especially as COVID-19 further limits chances for clear and frequent communication.

Participants unanimously expressed concerns about the increased militarization of the issue and about the intentions of the various players. Chinese scholars said Beijing is trying to reassure its domestic audience that it retains the upper hand and can afford to be patient while preparing for “any contingency,” an approach that is nevertheless seen in Taiwan as coercive intimidation and prompting the U.S. to beef up deterrence. Taiwan and U.S. participants maintained that their governments seek to preserve the status quo and that no policy changes have occurred. For its part, Beijing observes moves by the U.S. and Taiwan as creeping attempts to break out of previous commitments and mistrusts their adherence to the status quo. Chinese participants predicted that Beijing would continue to respond to such moves, deepening a cycle of misperception and mistrust.

## **Major Takeaways & Recommendations**

- There are no current prospects for a change to the status quo that can reasonably benefit any of the three parties, and yet all three parties are challenging the architecture that maintains the status quo.
- Since increased deterrence on one side of the Strait will be matched by increased deterrence on the other side, clear and continuous statements of reassurance related to maintenance of the status quo are required from all sides.

- Leaders in all three capitals are responsible for stating clearly the policies underpinning the longstanding and successful arrangements of the last 40 years, and for making clear in words and actions that these policies have not changed.
- These arrangements rely on ambiguity, which must and can be preserved through determined statesmanship.
- Military activities and shows of force in and around Taiwan by Mainland Chinese and U.S. and allied forces should be reduced in frequency. Authoritative and robust channels of private communication will be necessary to address the cycles of miscommunication that have led to more military signaling.
- Public messaging by leaders in all three capitals should focus on reassurance about the manageability of cross-Strait tensions.
- *Every effort should be made to find more venues for unofficial communication and people-to-people exchange between the two sides of the Strait, in the absence of official dialogue.*

## **Discussion**

In recent sessions of continuing discussions among Track II cross-Strait dialogue participants from Taiwan, the United States and the Chinese Mainland, it was apparent that statements and signals being sent are misinterpreted; that the three sides have varying views on whether, how and why the others are challenging the status quo; and that the situation in the Taiwan Strait is being militarized and is deteriorating with no prospect of improvement. American and Taiwan participants averred that the “cross-Strait status quo” remains extant albeit with challenges from the PRC, while the participants from Mainland China perceived that the status quo continues to be seriously undermined by the U.S. and Taiwan. Participants lamented that continued efforts to mitigate COVID-19 are contributing to communication breakdowns and further limiting already tenuous cross-Strait exchanges. Participants suggested that Track II exchanges be restarted, but with COVID-19 and in the absence of official communication links across the Strait, many thought this would be difficult in the near term.

Participants took up the question of how various sides see the status quo and whether it is imperiled. Taiwan scholars identified three areas in which Beijing is changing the status quo: increased military incursions (700 this year versus 380 last year) and signaling; various kinds of economic pressure such as, most recently, the ban on importation of certain kinds of Taiwan apples; and sanctions meted out to prominent Taiwan officials (and their financial backers) seen as supporting Taiwan independence. Chinese participants saw Tsai Ing-wen’s refusal in 2016 to continue to recognize the ’92 Consensus as the most significant blow to the status quo, but also noted as problematic a few recent statements by Taiwan officials supportive of independence,

Tsai's October speech seeming—in their view—to advance a “two state theory,” and efforts to appeal for international recognition.

Chinese scholars also outlined Washington's moves to alter the status quo, many of which begun under the Trump administration but are continuing under Biden, such as offensive weapons sales to Taiwan, more U.S. military maneuvers near Taiwan, and the elevated level of official contacts. In addition, they claimed there are new moves under Biden. They cited the recent questioning of UN resolution 2758 on Beijing's UN representation, revelations about U.S. troops training Taiwan soldiers on Taiwan, multiple pieces of pending U.S. legislation that call for changes to Taiwan policy, and the apparent dropping of reference by Biden officials to the three joint communiqués that form the basis of US-China diplomatic normalization. Biden officials habitually only mention the Taiwan Relations Act when referring to Taiwan policy, which does not include the U.S. one-China concept and is a unilateral domestic legislation, not an international agreement, Chinese participants said. There was also discussion of the use of military planes by U.S. congressional delegations visiting Taiwan maintaining that although previous congressional delegations may have flown to Taiwan in military aircraft, the practice was not emphasized in the press in the way it has been recently.

Chinese thinking with respect to the cross-Strait status quo should be put into the proper context, Chinese participants argued. Because of the unpredictability of Trump's policies (e.g. taking a phone call from President-elect Tsai Ing-wen in 2016), Beijing determined that it must prepare to respond to any eventuality, and should therefore envision the worst case. The current situation remains tense, and Beijing continues to prepare to defend against sudden moves.

An American participant noted that the core of the cross-Strait status quo—Beijing's adherence to peaceful reunification, Taiwan's commitment to no *de jure* declarations of independence, and the U.S. One-China policy—is holding. The question is whether current moves made to guard against changes to these policies will create a self-fulfilling dynamic by convincing one of the players that that such a change is imminent. In this suspicious environment, misinterpretation can lead to drastic policy miscalculation.

Participants attempted to clarify the intentions behind recent policy statements by leaders in the various capitals. American participants noted Xi Jinping's statement to President Biden that China “has patience,” but also that he warned Washington about “playing with fire.” Chinese participants attributed this warning to a growing sense on the Mainland that the U.S. views Taiwan as a strategic asset to be played in its competition with China. A Taiwan participant noted that there are some in Taiwan who are also raising such concerns.

In response to Chinese queries about statements on the part of President Biden, his administration, and members of Congress regarding a possible change to the policy of “strategic ambiguity,” American participants stated their understanding that there was no intention to make a change. Chinese participants also raised concerns about the number of pending bills in the U.S. Congress related to Taiwan. Furthermore, they intimated that President Tsai's October 10 speech had advanced a “two state” theory, in her reference to the PRC and the ROC not being subordinate in their relations. Taiwan participants explained that this was not new, as KMT presidential

candidate James Soong had used a similar formulation in 2000. Chinese participants rejected the precedent's relevance, however, claiming that Soong's reference was within the KMT's one-China understanding, embodied in the '92 Consensus.

With respect to public messages on the cross-Strait issue within China, a Chinese participant pointed to three significant public statements: Xi Jinping's speeches on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the CCP and the 110<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1911 revolution, and the history resolution from the recent 6<sup>th</sup> Plenum of the CCP Central Committee. All these statements, they asserted, convey three main themes: time and momentum are on China's side, the policy goal remains peaceful reunification, but China has to prepare for the worst in case of unexpected developments and foreign interference. While more and more people in China doubt the prospects for reunification without military action, the Chinese government will continue to stress peaceful reunification as a priority, they said. Chinese participants stated that Taiwan is seen by Beijing "as a political problem and not a military problem." They asserted that Tsai Ing-wen is sending the opposite message, however, by publicly announcing the training of Taiwan troops by U.S. forces on the island. This undercuts the credibility of Chinese government statements on peaceful reunification, they assessed, and absolves the Chinese government of any perceived commitment to stick to peaceful means, if the U.S. military is overtly training Taiwan forces.

Many participants raised their concerns about the sharp increase in militarization of the cross-Strait issue, and, in particular, the media narrative discussing prospects for imminent conflict over Taiwan. Taiwan participants raised the palpable feeling of intimidation on the part of people on Taiwan seeing fighter jets and bombers flying in close proximity. They complained about the toll this is taking on the Taiwan Air Force and pilots, and said the quantity cannot be justified by training or tracking foreign naval activity. They additionally cited the stationing of a Chinese naval vessel off the eastern coast of Taiwan to monitor activity.

Chinese respondents acknowledged more PLA military activity in and around Taiwan, but characterized it as "minimal compared to U.S. military activity and encroachments," citing more than 2,000 U.S. aircraft in the last 10 months conducting close-in surveillance flights along the mainland China coast, large-scale multi-country U.S. naval exercises off the coast of Taiwan and other maritime encroachments. A U.S. participant noted Chinese descriptions of some of its sorties as "combat training;" Chinese scholars said that this should be interpreted as the PLA "preparing for the worst." The U.S. has announced sales of offensive weapons to Taiwan which Chinese scholars maintained violates the status quo. "Beijing must change the status quo to meet the challenge of changes to the status quo from U.S. and Taiwan sides," a Chinese participant concluded.

While Track II dialogues were seen by participants as helpful and necessary mechanisms to clarify signals and intentions, participants from all sides urged that more authoritative channels of communication be established. Particularly in the absence of regular scholarly and other exchanges due to COVID-19 travel restrictions and fraught cross-Strait relations, reestablishing authoritative, if unofficial, channels of communication between Taipei and Beijing would reduce the probability of miscalculation.

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

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**A CROSS-STRAIT TRACK II VIRTUAL DIALOGUE**

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