The Whole Picture Can Be Made from the Pieces

Zhang Zuqian

Conventional wisdom suggests that there is practically no possibility of solving the Taiwan issue in the foreseeable future. It seems that the three major parties—namely, Beijing, Washington, and Taipei—are persisting in their positions, which conflict with one another. But if one put all the relevant pieces on the table, one might be surprised to find that one was not very far from having a whole picture—that is, the peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue.

1. There Is Large Overlap in Beijing’s and Washington’s Positions Toward the Taiwan Issue

Before the late 1970s, Beijing was determined to take over the renegade Taiwan province by any means. Everyone knew that the liberation of Taiwan could be achieved only by military means. With the adoption of economic reform and an open-door policy, however, Beijing made a significant adjustment in its policy toward Taiwan. The slogan of “Liberate Taiwan” was replaced with that of “Peaceful Reunification.”

In the 1980s, when he declared the policy of one country, two systems and peaceful reunification, Chinese supreme leader Deng Xiaoping said that this idea was first presented as a means of settling the Taiwan and Hong Kong questions. “Our sole purpose has been to find [a] mutually acceptable solution to disputes,” as Deng put it.¹

It should be pointed out that Deng’s broad vision informed his policy toward the Taiwan issue. When he talked with President U San Yu of Myanmar on October 31, 1984, Deng explained that the purpose of this policy was not only the realization of Chinese reunification but also peace and stability in the Pacific region and the rest of the world. Deng stressed that he earnestly took American interest into consideration as well. The following paragraph is an excerpt from his talk with President U San Yu.

The question of Taiwan is the main obstacle to better relations between China and the United States, and it might even develop into a crisis between the two nations. If the one–country, two–systems approach is adopted, not only would China be reunited, but the interest of the United States would remain unimpaired. There is a group of people in the United States today who, carrying on the “Dulles doctrine,” regard Taiwan as a U.S. aircraft carrier or a territory within the U.S. sphere of influence. Once the Taiwan question is solved through peaceful coexistence, the issue will be defused, and these people would shed their illusions accordingly. That would be a very good thing for the peace and stability of the Pacific region and of the rest of the world.²

During his interview with CBS correspondent Mike Wallace on September 2, 1986, Deng Xiaoping implicitly asked for help from Washington in solving the Taiwan issue peacefully:

I hope that during his term of office President Reagan will bring about further progress in relations between our two countries, including making some effort in respect of China’s reunifica-
tion. I believe that [the] United States, President Reagan in particular, can accomplish something in this connection.

As a student of European studies, I was deeply impressed by Mr. Deng’s vision, which seems to be similar to the policy pursued by the Federal Republic of Germany before its reunification in 1990. All German governments, from Chancellor Konrad Adenauer’s to Chancellor Helmut Kohl’s, insisted that the road to reunification would go through Europe. That meant that the reunification of Germany would not be achieved at the expense of peace and stability in Europe. Largely because of this correct policy and relevant efforts undertaken to achieve it, when Bonn seized the historic opportunity to launch the scheme of reunification, there was no serious opposition to it.

For a long time, it seems, few people in the mainland of China and in the United States paid sufficient notice to Deng’s strategic vision. Otherwise, there would not have been so many disputes between Beijing and Washington on the Taiwan issue. After all, many American officials and scholars (including Zbigniew Brzezinski) argue that Taiwan itself is not important to the United States. What is important is America’s position in the Asian Pacific region. If Washington tolerated Beijing’s takeover of Taiwan by military means, America’s credibility in the region would be severely undermined.

Fortunately, things began to change for the better in 2001, when the leaders in Beijing seemed to return to Deng’s vision. At the unofficial summit of the Asian Pacific Economic Conference (APEC), President Jiang Zemin made clear Beijing’s position toward the American presence in the Asian Pacific region by saying that China hopes to see America play a constructive role in this region. When he met with President Bush at his ranch in Crawford, Texas, in October 2002, President Jiang stressed that the separatist forces in Taiwan pose a threat to stability in the Strait and the development of China–U.S. relations. President Jiang expressed his hope that the United States would strictly observe the one-China policy and the three Sino–American joint communiqués. President Jiang also appealed to the United States to play a constructive role in China’s peaceful reunification.

When he met with Henry Hyde, chairman of the House International Relations Committee, in Beijing on December 10, 2002, President Jiang expressed the same idea. He said that the realization of peaceful reunification between the mainland and Taiwan as early as possible would be conducive to peace and stability in the Asian Pacific region as well as to the steady development of China–U.S. relations. Also, it would be in the interest of the United States. He again expressed the hope that the United States will deal with the Taiwan issue from a strategic perspective and will play a constructive role in the realization of the peaceful reunification of China.

With these positive developments, the overlap in Beijing’s and Washington’s positions has become more conspicuous than ever. The window of opportunity is beginning to open slowly.

2. Taiwan Could Enjoy a Respectful Status in the Framework of One China

After its establishment in 1949, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was a unitary state for a long time. Beijing regarded Taiwan as a renegade province that should be put under its direct rule. Even Deng Xiaoping once argued that the PRC alone must represent China internationally. All the leaders in Taipei (including Chiang Kai-shek and his son) refused to accept the definition of one China formulated by Beijing.

Some significant changes, however, happened in the formation of the state of the PRC and in Beijing’s officially declared definition of one China. Because of the handover of Hong Kong, the PRC is no longer the same unitary state. Under British rule, Hong Kong, as a crown colony,
enjoyed the status of a substate. For instance, Hong Kong, which was different from French overseas provinces and other territories, was entitled to participate in many international organizations. Since its handover, Hong Kong continues to enjoy the status of a substate under the policy of one country, two systems.

Both Deng Xiaoping and President Jiang Zemin promised that if Taiwan agreed to be reunited with the mainland, it would be allowed to enjoy more autonomy than Hong Kong. Beijing would not station anyone in the island. Neither troops nor administrative personnel would go there. The party, governmental, and military systems of Taiwan would be administered by the Taiwanese authorities. In a sense, based on the example of Hong Kong and the promises offered by Beijing, Taiwan would enjoy the actual status of a substate-plus after reunification. That means Taiwan would be entitled to many rights that embody state sovereignty only short of declaring its official independence.

In order to win favor with Taiwan, Beijing has made some important adjustments in its definition of one China. In the 1990s some high-ranking officials in Beijing suggested that one China did not necessarily mean the People’s Republic of China. In 2001 Vice Premier Qian Qichen issued the famous three-sentence statement in which he said that there is only one China in the world; both the mainland and Taiwan are part of one China; and the sovereignty of China should not be divided. By analyzing Qian’s statement, one can draw this conclusion: In Beijing’s new definition, one China is a sovereign framework above the PRC and the Republic of China (ROC), and these two entities jointly share the sovereignty of one China. It also means that under the framework of one China, the mainland and Taiwan are supposed to be the two legally equal parts of a sovereign country. According to this definition, Taiwan could enjoy a respectful position and much more international space than it has asked for.

In the political report delivered at the party’s 16th Congress, President Jiang Zemin made clear the concept of Taiwan’s international space if it accepts the one-China principle. He said that on the premise of the one-China principle, Taiwan would enjoy a certain kind of political status under which all issues could be discussed, including the international space in which Taiwan could conduct economic, cultural, and social activities compatible with its status.7

Needless to say, although Taiwan could enjoy a high degree of autonomy in the framework of one China, without a large population, extensive territory, legal nuclear power status, and permanent membership in the UN Security Council, Taiwan could hardly enjoy the international influence and prestige that the mainland enjoys now. But Taiwan, as a minor actor in comparison with the mainland, should be willing to tolerate the reality of life.

3. Political Will Is Needed to Solve the Taiwan Issue Peacefully

To make up the whole picture, an important missing piece needs to be added. That is strong political will in Beijing, Washington, and Taiwan. According to Deng Xiaoping’s strategic vision of the Taiwan issue, its peaceful resolution will not only realize the Chinese people’s long-cherished desire for national reunification, but it also will be in the interests of the United States, the Asian Pacific region, and the rest of the world. Today Deng’s vision is of more significance than ever.

September 11th and subsequent developments tell us that the international community is under a threat from terrorism and other unconventional threats. Both Northeast and Southeast Asia have severe security issues to deal with. For Northeast Asia, it is the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery, as well as the danger of large-scale armed conflict resulting from the unsteady regime of North Korea. For Southeast Asia, it is rampant...
terrorism and various kinds of organized crime. In order to concentrate more resources to deal with these threats, Beijing, Washington, and, to a lesser extent, Taipei should free themselves from the trap of their triangular disputes on the Taiwan issue.

There are other important reasons for the three parties to seek a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue. For Washington and Beijing, a peaceful resolution would eliminate a potential crisis that could involve the two countries and other countries in the Asia Pacific region in a war. By pursuing a peaceful course, the two countries—one, the only superpower in the world, and the other, a rising and most populous power—would lay a good foundation for a long-term cooperative partnership. History would judge it as one of humankind’s greatest accomplishments.

To this end, policymakers in these two capitals should have the political will to make a great deal. Washington should realize that its current policy of supporting Taiwan by committing itself to protect the island militarily is hardly sustainable. Such a policy would become increasingly more costly and risky because it would involve playing with fire at the gate of a rising power. The worst result for Washington would be to lose China and find an enemy rather than a cooperative partner in Beijing. Therefore, Washington should refrain from doing anything that would undermine the important interests of the PRC.

On the other hand, Beijing should realize that some important compromises will have to be made to solve the Taiwan issue peacefully, even though this issue is part of China’s internal affairs. For instance, Beijing could declare that such a resolution would not be at the expense of regional peace and stability as well as the interests of other countries. This promise could be embodied in international treaties signed by relevant parties. To make its promises convincing to the parties concerned, Beijing could be prepared to make more explicit commitments to regional security arrangements. History shows that a party rarely gets everything it wants from negotiations without making compromises. The successful German reunification is eloquent proof of that truism. Although it was rooted in the Atlantic alliance and European integration for nearly half a century, Bonn had to confirm its commitment to accept post–World War II European borders, especially the German–Polish border along the Oder and Neisse, on the eve of reunification. As long as compromises are conducive to China’s reunification and help Beijing to concentrate its resources on its modernization program, they will be worthwhile.

Meanwhile, efforts should be made by Beijing and Washington to enhance political and strategic exchanges in order to dispel suspicions about each other’s intentions. To this end, some arrangements should be established and institutionalized.

The fluidity of the situation on both sides of the Strait as well as in the Asian Pacific region as a whole will make it increasingly more urgent for the authorities in Taipei to seek a peaceful resolution of the issue. Simply because of the size of the mainland, Taiwan, without Beijing’s consent, could hardly win international recognition for its independence. In most cases, time is not on Taiwan’s side. The Strait is too narrow to protect Taiwan from the impact of development, whether positive or negative, on the mainland. With sustained economic growth and military modernization, Beijing likely will become more assertive toward Taiwan. If Beijing fails in its economic development and political reform and the situation on the mainland turns worse, the foundation for Taiwan’s existence, let alone independence, will be badly undermined. Therefore, there is no alternative for Taiwan other than to negotiate a deal with Beijing while it still has some cards to play. Peaceful reunification would surely help both sides of the Strait to reach a win-win result.

In conclusion, as long as policymakers in Beijing, Washington, and Taipei have the strategic vision, determined political will, and sufficient wisdom, the Taiwan issue will be solved peacefully. A peaceful resolution would be beneficial not only to the Chinese people but also to people
in the Asian Pacific region and in the rest of the world as well.

**About the Author**

Zhang Zuqian, a member of the NCAFP’s Roundtable on U.S.–China–Taiwan Relations, is the director of European Studies, Shanghai Institute for International Studies (SIIS). Since graduating from SIIS in 1985, he has worked at the institute. Between 1985 and 1992, he worked on European issues at the Department for European Studies. As the head of the Department for Comprehensive Studies between 1992 and 1996, he worked on China’s foreign policy and security issues in areas around China. In 1996, he was appointed director of the Department for European Studies and resumed his work on European issues. One of the major subjects he has been working on is the enlargement of NATO and the European Union. He also has worked on the Taiwan issue since the mid-1990s. Two of his papers on the Taiwan issue were published in the *Journal of Taiwan Studies* and the *Bimonthly of Strategy and Management*: “International Strategic Structure and Taiwan Question” (*Journal of Taiwan Studies*, no. 3 [Beijing, 1998]) and “Modernization of National Defense and Taiwan Question” (*Bimonthly of Strategy and Management*, no. 6 [Beijing, 1999]).

**Notes**

1. Excerpt from Deng’s talk with British Foreign Secretary Sir Geoffrey Howe on July 31, 1984; see *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping*, vol. III (Beijing, 1994), 76–77.
2. See *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping*, vol. III, 103.
7. See *Documents of the 16th National Congress of the Communist Party of China* (Beijing, 2000), 54.