Observe Not Only at “Events” But Also “Trends” in Cross-Strait Relations

SU Chi
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Ever since Taiwan democratized, politicians and public opinions seem to be accustomed of being led away by the everyday news that are happening right under their noses. In the past 30 years, cross-strait crises are triggered by what Beijing calls “major events”, such as President Lee Teng-hui’s visit to the United States in 1995, the “Two-State Theory” in 1999, the “One Country on Each Side” proclamation, etc. Since there has not been any “major event” under President Tsai Ing-wen, many people believe that such peaceful days will last forever.

However, powerful countries care more so about the trends rather than singular events. Regarding Taiwan, mainland China not only looks at individual events but more so the trend of Taiwan’s potential separation from China. When reversing an unfavorable trend, the mainland often uses surprise attacks to achieve its strategic goals before its target is aware. This has been the case for the past three crises across the Taiwan Strait.

The first Taiwan Strait Crisis began with the bombardment of Kinmen in September 1945 and ended in early 1955 with the People’s Liberation Army seizing Yijiangshan and Dachen islands. Before the crisis broke out, the United States donated a large number of advanced fighter aircrafts to Taiwan and the two were concluding a defense cooperation treaty. At the same time, Taiwan was actively seeking membership to the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, whose goal was to contain Communist China. In fear that the separation of the two sides of the Strait would become immobilized, the mainland launched a surprise attack despite the risk of a nuclear retaliation from the United States.

Before the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1958, the United States and Taiwan were gradually increasing their military cooperation. The “Matador” missiles, capable of installing nuclear warheads, were deployed in Tainan, followed by joint military exercises. As the three-
year negotiation between the United States and mainland China in Geneva made no progress, China unilaterally announced the suspension. Immediately after, the mainland shelled the islands of Kinmen and three deputy commanders of the Kinmen Defense Command were “beheaded” by the first wave of attack.

The third Taiwan Strait Crisis happened between 1995 and 1996. Beijing decided to test its missiles because Taiwan President Lee’s visit to the United States was immediately followed by the announcement of Vice President Lien Chan’ visit to Europe. What concerned the Chinese mainland was not the single event of President Lee’s visit to the United States but more so the domino effect of Taiwan’s diplomatic breakthrough. This trend can be traced back to when Clinton administration greatly increased official exchanges between the United States and Taiwan.

The latest example is the protests in Hong Kong. As the Hong Kong government struggled to meet inner and outer expectations, Hong Kong national security law was formulated, which completely turned the tables on Hong Kong. The pro-democracy camp had no resistance at all and international solidarity was insignificant to change the situation. During the whole process Beijing may have seemed silent on the surface, but in reality, Beijing was secretly preparing for the one big shot that will set the future direction of Hong Kong.

Therefore, it is essential that Taiwan pays close attention to how Beijing perceives the current cross-strait relations’ trend. Unfortunately, the three minor trends (U.S.-Taiwan relations, Taiwan’s internal affairs, and cross-strait non-governmental exchanges) have all undergone tremendous changes under President Tsai.

At present, the biggest source of danger for both sides of the Strait is the fact that the Tsai administration is actively cooperating with the United States in playing the “Taiwan card”. Many new collaborations between the United States and Taiwan, including military cooperation, increasing offensive weapons, planning Indo-Pacific strategic layout, and many diplomatic actions, are all repeating the indications of the previous Taiwan Strait Crises in detail.

Perhaps the Tsai administration has become complacent and forgotten what has happened in the past. Even back when China was not as powerful as it is now, the mainland still took the
dangerous road three times. Now that Beijing believes that it is at the same level as the United States, what can hold it back from dealing with Taiwan?

The two minor trends of Taiwan’s internal affairs and non-governmental exchanges between Taiwan and mainland China have also deteriorated simultaneously. After five years of confrontation, Beijing has no more hope in the Tsai administration since President Tsai has brought down Taiwan’s “status quo” through the technique of “small steps and small cuts”. Tsai almost autocratically controls the five branches of the government, independent institutions and even the fourth estate—media. Recently, constitutional amendments have been launched in an attempt to lower the threshold for law amendments. In doing so, Tsai may hold hostage people’s opinion in the future in order to successfully claim Taiwan’s “de jure independence”. This will all increase the severity of the final crisis between Taiwan and the mainland.

Although China still occasionally sends out a warm call for people-to-people exchanges, the emphasis has been greatly reduced. The confrontation between the mainland and Taiwan's two nationalisms has so far shown no signs of reversal.

In order for the people of Taiwan to lead peaceful lives, President Tsai should first consider changing current cross-strait trends rather than being preoccupied with manipulating events small and large in order to consolidate within.

The author, chairman of the Taipei Forum, formerly served as secretary-general of the National Security Council, Republic of China (Taiwan), from 2008 to 2010.