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The Geopolitical Dynamics of Cross-Strait Relations: Strategic Implications for the Philippines

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Introduction

Since 1949, Taiwan has been governed independently from China, having established its own government called the Republic of China (ROC). Despite this, the People's Republic of China (PRC—mainland China) still continues to view Taiwan as one of its provinces.

Over the years, there have been differing views with regard to Taiwan's status and relations with mainland China. Nonetheless, the tension between ROC and PRC, though having existed for decades, did not stop the two from having strong economic relations. However, the friction between the two governments continued to worsen with Taiwan's new leadership, led by President Tsai Ing-wen. In contrast to the previous administration, President Tsai's government appears to be leaning towards sentiments favoring an independent Taiwan.¹ This is highly in contrast with President Xi Jinping's policy of Taiwan adhering to the one China policy.

Thus, this paper aims to discuss the geopolitical dynamics of Cross-Strait relations and its strategic implications to the Philippines. In particular, this paper seeks to address the following questions: (1) What are the historical underpinnings of the Cross-Strait relations?; (2) What is the trajectory of the PRC-ROC ties?; (3) What are the interests of the Philippines in Taiwan?; and (4) What are the policy considerations with regard to Cross-Strait relations for the Philippines?

Historical Overview

In 1912, the Qing dynasty—China's millennia-long imperial period, has officially collapsed. Following this downfall, the rule of a group of nationalists led by Dr Sun Yat-sen, and later by General Chiang Kai-shek, started. These nationalists established the Republic of China in 1912. However, China was soon engulfed in civil war—which later coincided with World War II (WWII)—between the nationalists (under the banner of the Kuomintang or KMT), and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which was led by Chairman Mao Zedong. By 1949, the nationalists, having lost in the civil war, then fled to Taiwan. Despite this, General Chiang insisted that it will be his government (ROC) who will continue to represent all Chinese people—both on the island and the mainland.² Consolidating his control of the mainland, Chairman Mao proclaimed the establishment of People's Republic of China (PRC).

Both PRC and ROC claim to be the sole government of the whole China (i.e. the Mainland and Taiwan). The PRC constitution states that **"Taiwan is part of the sacred territory of the People's Republic of China.** It is the inviolable duty of all Chinese people, including our compatriots in Taiwan, to accomplish the great task of reunifying the motherland."³ Under its law entitled "Act Governing Relations between Peoples of the Taiwan Area and the Mainland Area," Taipei defined the territory ruled by the CCP as the **"Mainland Area' [that] refers to the territory of the Republic of China outside the Taiwan Area."**⁴

During the early years of the Cold War, most countries gave international recognition to

ROC as the government of China. In fact, even after the defeat of the nationalists in the mainland, Taiwan (ROC) held the seat of China in the United Nations (UN), including the Security Council. At the time, Washington and most influential Western states asserted the KMT's stance by refusing to recognize the Communist government in Beijing. This, however, did not last because as the years went by, several of the states had their position reversed. For instance, it was during the Nixon administration when Washington's position began to change. Back-channel diplomacy resulted in Washington's formal recognition of the PRC in 1979. Consequently, the ROC lost its seat representing China at the United Nations in 1971 to Beijing.⁵ As Henry Kissinger argued, "A country of the magnitude of China could not be kicked out of the international system indefinitely."⁶

Albeit transitioning from authoritarian to democratic rule, ROC has since become increasingly diplomatically isolated with only a few countries maintaining formal ties with Taipei. Currently, only 17 countries continue to have diplomatic relations with Taiwan.⁷

In accordance with its constitution, PRC has adopted a "One China Policy" in its diplomatic relations with other countries, i.e. a country establishing formal ties with PRC "recognizes the Government of the People's Republic of China as the sole legal government of China, fully understands and respects the position of the Chinese Government that there is but one China and that Taiwan is an integral part of Chinese territory."⁸ In other words, no state can establish diplomatic relations with both PRC and ROC. In 1975, the Philippines has adopted the "One China Policy." Thus, the country has committed to "remove all its official representations from Taiwan."⁹

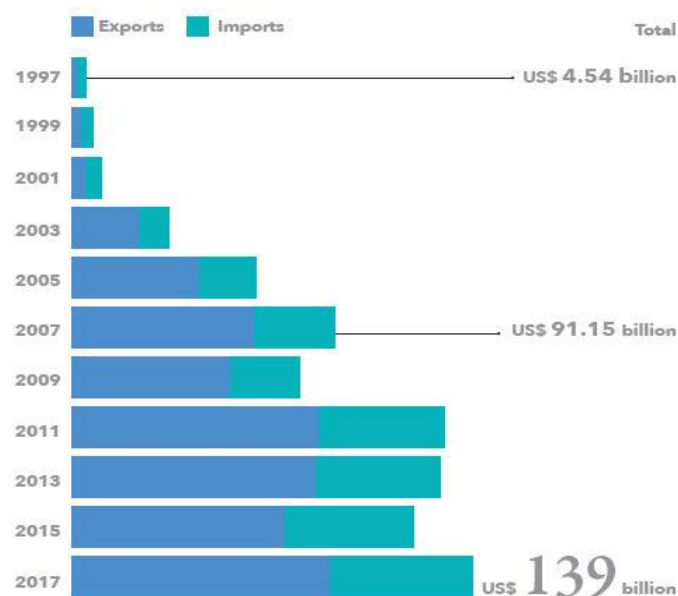
In 1992, CCP-led PRC and the KMT-led ROC government reached a "consensus" that there is only "One China" but allows for different interpretations of both sides—an understanding that was subsequently called as the "1992 Consensus." For Beijing, its apparent interpretation is its "One China Policy." For Taipei, "One China" means the ROC, with "two areas"—"Mainland Area" and "Taiwan Area."¹⁰

However, there have been elements in Taiwan advocating for "Two Chinas" by calling for an independent Taiwan. Indeed, such independence tendencies have been the cause of tension between PRC and ROC. During the 1990s, Beijing launched military exercises in the Taiwan Strait. With a special relationship with Taipei under its Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), Washington responded by dispatching two aircraft carriers to deter China.

Although PRC continues to pursue development with ROC through trade and high-level people-to-people exchanges, it has refused to renounce the use of force as means to resolving the dispute over the island's status.

Figure 1¹¹

CROSS-STRAIT TRADE



Source: Customs Administration, Ministry of Finance

In 2005, Taiwan was ruled by the independence-leaning Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). The DPP was founded in 1986 and became legal in 1989 after a ban on opposition parties was dropped. The DPP aims for a de jure independent Taiwan as a separate political entity from China. In response to the DPP's rule, China passed the Anti-Secession Law "for the purpose of opposing and checking Taiwan's secession from China by secessionists in the name of 'Taiwan independence,' promoting peaceful national reunification, maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Straits, preserving China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and safeguarding the fundamental interests of the

Chinese nation.”¹² Reaffirming the “One China Policy,” the law reaffirmed that “In the event that the ‘Taiwan independence’ secessionist forces should act under any name or by any means to cause the fact of Taiwan’s secession from China, or that major incidents entailing Taiwan’s secession from China should occur, or that possibilities for a peaceful reunification should be completely exhausted, the **state shall employ non-peaceful means and other necessary measures to protect China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.**”¹³ The law further states that “Solving the Taiwan question and achieving national reunification is **China’s internal affair**, which subjects to no interference by any outside forces.”

Cross-Strait relations improved when the KMT returned to power in 2008. And in 2015, ROC President Ma Ying-jeou and PRC President Xi Jinping met in Singapore—the first time when Mainland and Taiwan leaders met since the establishment of PRC in 1949. However, Cross-Strait relations took a downward turn with the 2016 election of DPP President Tsai Ing-wen, who refused to endorse the 1992 consensus. Recently, tensions between China and Taiwan escalated when Beijing announced in April 2018 live-fire military exercises in the Taiwan strait. As one news outlet reported: the exercises took “place within a 162-square-kilometer no-go zone, some 20km from the coast and about 40km from Taiwan’s Kinmen (Quemoy) islands. The exercises [were] the first by China in these waters since 2015, and come just days after Chinese President Xi Jinping conducted the largest review of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Navy in the history of the People’s Republic, involving 48 warships, 76 aircraft, and more than 10,000 sailors and soldiers.”¹⁴

Cross-Strait Relations: Quo Vadis?

Mindful of the recent developments in Cross-Strait relations, it may be of use to examine the trajectory of the PRC-ROC ties. **First, there is a possibility of maintaining the status quo under the 1992 Consensus.** Although shrouded in ambiguity, the 1992 Consensus nevertheless provides some measure of stability in Cross-Strait relations. Any move towards the formal

establishment of an independent ROC will undoubtedly cause consternation in Beijing. As noted earlier, China has expressively stated that it will use force, if necessary, to prevent such separation from taking place. Indeed, an independent Taiwan could have repercussions on the territorial integrity of Mainland China itself, such as in the areas of Tibet and Xinjiang among others.

In a keynote address held in Washington last 2017, Taiwan’s Deputy Minister of the Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) Lin Cheng-yi highlighted the government’s efforts and perseverance to maintain the status quo of Cross-Strait peace and stability. He noted that this status quo is based on mutual benefit for both sides. This will then allow Cross-Strait relations to further develop on the existing foundation and track. Lin also emphasized that “the development of Cross-Strait relations is not a one-sided responsibility, but rather the shared responsibility of both sides.”¹⁵

This possibility of maintaining a status quo was also supported by the European Parliament (EP) through a resolution that they have adopted this early December. The resolution includes a provision which encourages PRC and ROC to resume their bilateral talks. Furthermore, the resolution reiterated the European Union’s (EU) support for Taiwan’s meaningful participation in international organizations, mechanisms, and activities. Nevertheless, it calls for PRC and ROC to resolve differences through peaceful means and to cease from taking unilateral action that will change the status quo, including in the East and South China Seas. This provision on Cross-Strait relations by the EP stresses that the strengthening of regional security in the Indo-Pacific region is of utmost importance to the EU and its member states.¹⁶

“A peaceful cross-strait relationship is central to the stability and prosperity of the Asia-Pacific region.”

Second, there is a possibility of a peaceful reunification of China and Taiwan through the application of the “one country, two systems” formula. Developed under the leadership of the late paramount leader Deng Xiaoping, the “one country, two systems” framework was adopted in Hong Kong and Macao, which were former colonial holding of the United Kingdom (UK) and Portugal respectively.

For Beijing, a peaceful reunification of Taiwan and Mainland China is the most preferred outcome. The “one country, two systems” could be used as a formula to achieve such peaceful unification. From Beijing’s perspective, this framework upholds China’s state sovereignty, while allowing for also the specific conditions of Taiwan. Through this framework, though “One China” will be practiced, mainland China will continue with its socialist system while Taiwan will carry on with its existing capitalist system, as well as the way of life of the people residing in that island. This framework is highly doable since it brings about China’s goal of reunification and upholding of its sovereignty, as well as taking into full consideration the history and realities of Taiwan. As stated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC, “To practice “one country, two systems” will facilitate the reunification of China, the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and peace and development in the world.”¹⁷

Third, the forced reunification of Taiwan with the Mainland is the possibility that could most likely endanger regional peace and stability. Should Taiwan declare independence, China will respond possibly with an invasion of the island. Ian Easton, author of the “The Chinese Invasion Threat: Taiwan’s Defense and American Strategy in Asia,” described a possible situation: “In 2008, Taiwan’s Military Intelligence Bureau reportedly discovered that their adversaries across the Strait had secretly developed a new blueprint to topple Taiwan’s seat of government. What’s worse, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) had already begun conducting exercises to test and refine this war plan. These drills simulated surprise amphibious assaults along Taiwan’s northwest coast, specifically targeting the Port of Taipei.”¹⁸

Also, since President Xi came into power, he launched the “Chinese dream” campaign which is focused on achieving national rejuvenation. In his speech before the 19th Communist Party Congress, President Xi emphasized that Beijing would never allow “any individual, any organisation, any political party, at any time or by any means, to split any single piece of the Chinese territory.”¹⁹

With regard to the support that the United States has been giving Taiwan—including initiating the idea of U.S. naval visits to the island, Chinese Li Kexin, a minister at the Chinese embassy in Washington, forewarned that port-of-call exchanges between the US and Taiwan is deemed unacceptable for PRC.²⁰

“The day a US Navy vessel arrives in Kaohsiung is the day that our People’s Liberation Army unifies Taiwan with military force.”

This possibility is the situation which defense and security establishments in the region, including the Philippines, should plan and prepare for.

Philippine Interests in Taiwan

While formal diplomatic relations was severed in the 1970s, economic and cultural ties between Taiwan and the Philippines have continued. Cognizant of the recent developments in Cross-Strait relations and the need to design for a contingency plan in the event of an outbreak of armed hostilities between PRC and ROC, there is a need to examine Philippine interests in Taiwan. After all, it is imperative for the Philippines to come up with a response in the event that tensions between China and Taiwan escalate into a full-blown armed conflict.

First, the need to maintain peace and stability in Cross-Strait relations. The situation in and on both sides of the Taiwan Strait is arguably one of the potential flashpoints in the

Asia-Pacific region. Armed conflict in this area will most likely draw in the major powers, including the US and Japan. ROC remains steadfast on its position to maintain peaceful cross-strait relations. According to the ROC government, "Peace, prosperity and development in Asia are common responsibilities of all countries in the region. Therefore, Cross-Strait issues are connected to regional peace. Taiwan will fulfill its responsibilities of safeguarding regional security by continuing to extend goodwill and maintaining stable, consistent and predictable Cross-Strait relations."²¹

Nonetheless, the Philippines has a major interest in maintaining the stability and peace of Cross-Strait ties given the country's geographical proximity with Taiwan. Indeed, Taiwan and the Philippines share a maritime border. It thus becomes crucial to avoid the Philippines becoming drawn into the conflict, as well as protect its nearby territory.

Second, the protection of Filipino nationals in Taiwan. Taiwan is one of the most preferred country of destinations of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) in Asia. According to the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), **3.8 %** of the total number of OFWs or approximately **89,000** OFWs are in Taiwan as of 2017.²² In terms of cash remittances, OFWs in Taiwan have recorded **401,163 USD** for the year 2017.²³ This makes Taiwan as one of the Philippines' largest source of remittances in Asia. Taiwan is also a preferred country of destination for our OFWs because of the safety it entails. Filipinos comprise the third-biggest group of foreign workers in Taiwan. Hence, the Philippine and Taiwanese governments have worked hand-in-hand to ensure the safety of the OFWs. For instance, the Manila Economic and Cultural Office (MECO) remains to be the only representative office in Taiwan which maintains two other satellite offices, in Taichung and Kaohsiung, to attend to the needs of Filipinos working outside Taipei. Other countries, despite having more migrant workers in Taiwan, only have one representative office. With this mechanism, there is a more proactive approach in attending to the OFWs' calls for assistance.²⁴

Clearly, the welfare of the OFWs in the event of conflict is a major concern for the Philippines. After all, the protection of Filipinos overseas is one of the three pillars of Philippine foreign policy.

Third, the Philippines and Taiwan share relatively good economic relations. According to data of the Philippine Statistics Authority, Taiwan was Philippine's 8th largest trading partner, 10th largest export market, 8th biggest source of imports, as well as the 2nd biggest foreign direct investor in 2017.²⁵ On the other hand, Taiwan is the Philippines' 8th trading partner, 10th export market, and 8th import source. In 2016, exports to Taiwan were \$2.060 billion, as compared to \$2.010 billion in 2015. In 2016, imports from Taiwan were \$5.066 billion, as opposed to \$5.840 billion in 2015. Bilateral trade with Taiwan decreased to \$7.122 billion in 2016, from \$7.850 billion in 2015. In 2015, total recorded Taiwanese investments in the Philippines amounted to \$35.6 million. In 2016, total recorded Taiwanese investments in the Philippines amounted to \$147.7 million, which is a 314.90% increase or our 3rd fastest growing investment source. Majority of these investments went to transportation and storage, manufacturing, and real estate activities. These economic relations play a vital role with regard to Philippines' interest in the Cross-Strait relations. An armed conflict between the ROC and PRC will impede the Philippine economy because both China and Taiwan are large training partners of the Philippines, 4th and 10th respectively. Thus, millions of investments may be hampered for quite a while due to armed conflict. This will then affect Filipinos because their jobs may be on the line.²⁶

Policy Considerations

Heedful of the need to prepare for the consequences of rising tensions between China and Taiwan, the Philippine Government may consider the following courses of action.

First, the Philippines must not abandon the One China Policy in the event of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. Otherwise, Manila would effectively cut diplomatic ties with Beijing

which may risk further escalation of tensions in the region. Nevertheless, the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) may issue a statement that includes the following elements: 1) call for the restoration of peace and stability in the area; 2) call on parties concerned to settle their differences through peaceful means; and 3) emphasize that the Philippines does not take sides in the conflict. It may be difficult for the Philippines to “condemn” the attack since it recognizes Taiwan as part of China. Hence, such condemnation from Manila may be interpreted by Beijing as an interference in its internal affairs—an act that must be avoided at all cause.

Second, in cooperation with its ally and partners, Manila must help prevent the conflict from spilling over the country and the region. Given the proximity of the Philippines with Taiwan, there is an imperative to prevent the conflict from spilling over to the country and the rest of the region. Indeed, as earlier mentioned, the Cross-Strait relations issue could involve external powers. As such, should an armed confrontation happen that is triggered by miscalculation, the conflict may spiral out of control. Furthermore, as members of the United Nations (UN) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Philippines must use such diplomatic initiatives in calling for the restoration of peace and stability with regard to cross-strait relations.

Third, develop contingency plans for the OFWs in Taiwan. In relation to the ongoing tension between China and Taiwan, it is crucial to reiterate key principles that will serve as a guide for the Philippine government in formulating plans and strategies considering the possible ramifications of the conflict for the Philippines. As noted earlier, one of the pillars of Philippine foreign policy is the protection of the rights and promotion of the welfare and interest of Filipinos overseas. Also, this pillar must be understood in the context of foreign policy realities which recognize the critical role of OFWs in the economic and social stability of the Philippines.

Specifically, the Philippine government, through the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), should closely monitor the situation of OFWs in Taiwan and emphasize the priority of the

government in ensuring the safety and welfare of OFWs. The DFA should raise the appropriate alert level depending on the gravity of the situation for the safety of Filipinos.²⁷ Should the tension escalate into the worst situation, the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) may implement a deployment ban in Taiwan to prevent any more adverse effects of the conflict to OFWs.

Meanwhile, the Department of National Defense (DND) may give support in the contingency plans and strategies prepared by the concerned agencies, pursuant to the National Crisis Management Core Manual. Should there be an order for an evacuation of OFWs in the country, the DND may provide logistical support in the conduct of the evacuation. This assistance may help the government in cutting down the cost of the evacuation. In particular, the C-130 of the Philippine Air Force may be used to bring the OFWs in distress, home. The DND may also assist in locating various OFWs if there are cases of undocumented OFWs in the country. Equally important, the DND may help the concerned departments and agencies in disseminating the importance of repatriation. There might be OFWs in Taiwan who would refuse to go back to the Philippines in fear of absence of an economic incentive upon arrival to the country. However, it must be emphasized that in such times, getting them to safety is more important. This reflects the prime duty of the Philippine government to serve and protect its people. The DND, possibly in close coordination with DOLE, may inform the OFWs of the assistance and aid that may be provided by the government to ensure that job opportunities will still be given to OFWs despite the financial repercussions that returning in the Philippines would entail.

Fourth, prepare for a possible influx of Taiwanese in Northern Luzon. The Philippines has been consistent in its commitment to work with other countries and international organizations to provide safe and humane environment for refugees, asylum seekers, and stateless persons. The Philippines has always been in close coordination with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to address the ongoing global concern of increasing number of people victimized by

armed state conflicts, natural calamities, and other forms of destructions that prevents people from having safe and humane lives.²⁸

In this regard, certain actions need to be taken by the Philippine government—while cognizant of the One China Policy—to fulfill its responsibility in providing support for Taiwanese nationals who will be affected by the conflict between China and Taiwan and will take refuge in the Philippine territory. Specifically, the Philippine government shall mobilize the concerned department and agencies that will be responsible in fulfilling the duties and responsibilities of the Philippines as one of the signatories in the 1951 Refugee Convention.²⁹

“What makes Filipinos special is that they seem to naturally and intuitively understand and empathize with people who have been uprooted from their homes by war, conflict, violence, persecution, and calamities.”

The government, through the Department of Justice (DOJ) and Bureau of Immigration (BOI), may achieve this responsibility by properly documenting the influx of Taiwanese in the Philippine territory particularly in Northern Luzon.³⁰ Meanwhile, the DND may adopt plans and strategies concerning the actual arrival of Taiwanese in the region. The DND may increase the number of military personnel designated in the northern part of Luzon to provide logistical support and assistance for the maintenance of order in the area and for the safety of both locals and Taiwanese nationals.

Thus, the Philippines must be prepared for the possible influx of Taiwanese refugees should an armed conflict break out. Possible areas where settlement camps will be built must be properly arranged by the government. Also, as per the Department of Justice (DOJ) Circular No. 058 -

Rules on “Establishing the Refugee and Stateless Status Determination Procedure,” groups of refugees and stateless persons who would like to apply for a refugee or stateless status in the Philippines, will be given access to an efficient process application.

Conclusion

Since the assumption of the current ROC government, the Cross-Strait relations continued to worsen as President Tsai stands firm on her position of not endorsing the 1992 Consensus. As a result, the following are the trajectories of the PRC-ROC ties: (1) possible maintenance of the status quo under the 1992 consensus; (2) implementation of the “one country, two systems formula”; and (3) forced reunification of Taiwan with mainland China which may result to armed conflict that will endanger regional peace and stability. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that in resolving the conflict between these two political entities, use of peaceful means must be given priority. This will ensure that regional peace and stability will be maintained.

It is in the interest of the region, including the Philippines, that cross-strait relations must remain peaceful and stable. Aside from safeguarding regional security, the Philippines must also protect its interests in Taiwan, particularly the safety of its OFWs and its economic relations with Taiwan.

Should there be consequences with regard to the worsening cross-state relations, the Philippines must be prepared with the following courses of action: (1) Philippines to not abandon the “One-China Policy” so as not to further escalate the tension with PRC; (2) in cooperation with its partners, Philippines must prevent the conflict from spilling-over to the other parts of the region; (3) protect its OFWs in Taiwan; and (4) develop plans for the possible influx of refugees due to the armed conflict.

It is, however, important to note that prevention of armed conflict will only be successful if both parties involved are willing to settle their differences through peaceful and diplomatic means. In the end, both Beijing and

Taipei must take responsibility for avoiding a crisis.

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Notes

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