



Tyrone Siu, Reuters

Syaru Shirley Lin

How are cross-strait relations shaping up under Taiwan's one-year-old administration?

By **Shannon Tiezzi**

May 20 marked the one-year anniversary of Tsai Ing-wen's inauguration in Taiwan. It's been a rocky year for the relationship between Taipei and Beijing, with the mainland refusing official contacts with Tsai's government and excluding Taiwan from various international fora. For a closer look at the first year of cross-strait relations under Tsai, The Diplomat spoke to Syaru Shirley Lin, founding faculty member of the graduate program in Global Political Economy at the Chinese University of Hong Kong

and author of the 2016 book *Taiwan's China Dilemma*, for a look at both the current reality and historical perspective.

How would you evaluate the state of cross-strait relations one year after Tsai Ing-wen assumed office?

Since Tsai Ing-wen assumed the presidency, Beijing has made it clear that it will not maintain official channels of communication with the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) unless Tsai reaffirms the 1992 consensus. Despite Tsai's extending several olive branches, Beijing has ignored Tsai. During her inauguration speech, she declared that cross-strait affairs would be conducted according to the Republic of China Constitution and the Act Governing Relations Between the People of the Taiwan Area and the Mainland Area, both of which implied Taiwan's adherence to a one China principle. Tsai did not overplay her phone call to Trump on December 2, 2016, and remained cautious about U.S.-Taiwan relations. But Beijing has not reciprocated these gestures, and Tsai has been subjected to increasing criticism in Taiwan, especially within her own party, for being overly accommodating to China without receiving anything in return.

On Beijing's side, I do see some restraint but the trend is not encouraging. After Tsai's inauguration, Beijing doubled down on its hard line strategy through additional economic and other sanctions, such as barring Taiwan from participating in the International Civil Aviation Organization and the World Health Assembly, which Taiwan was allowed to attend under [previous] President Ma.

Militarily, Beijing has become more assertive in demonstrating its ability to attack or blockade Taiwan, while Taiwan is trying to complete the purchase of American arms approved under the Obama Administration.

In your book, *Taiwan's China Dilemma*, you find that a strong sense of Taiwanese identity allows political space for flexibility on ties with the mainland. How is this dynamic playing out under Tsai?

My book shows how a polarized sense of national identity made extreme policy options and leaders more appealing to Taiwanese

because the definition and assertion of identity trumped all discussions of economic policy. But as national identity became consolidated and a majority of those living in Taiwan see themselves as exclusively Taiwanese and support autonomy from China rather than unification, Taiwanese became more focused on how economic integration with China could strengthen Taiwan's economy. A majority of Taiwanese then supported the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) in 2010 as a way of institutionalizing and expanding the cross-strait relationship.

However, if that sense of national identity is threatened again, the issue of identity can become salient once more. In a backlash against the pro-Beijing policy of the Kuomintang (KMT), there was a widespread perception that the government was colluding with big businesses to reap the benefits, which were not distributed broadly in Taiwan. Therefore, students reacted strongly when President Ma signed a service trade pact without wide-scale public consultation. Students felt it would potentially introduce large-scale Chinese investments and large numbers of immigrants to Taiwan and threaten Taiwanese way of life. The 2014 Sunflower Student Movement, as it was called, successfully halted the ratification of the agreement.

How do mainland scholars and policymakers interpret the rise of a distinct Taiwan national identity and its implications for cross-strait relations?

The mainland scholars and analysts I have met know the situation on the island quite well and are willing to discuss their assessment of Beijing's Taiwan policy candidly. In fact, most of them are very familiar with the polls on national identity. Their interpretation of the survey data, however, differs from other scholars in Taiwan and elsewhere in that they believe top-down identity politics and the promotion of de-sinicization are the real drivers of the change in national identity.

Such analysis cannot explain why Ma Ying-jeou's effort at re-sinicization only strengthened Taiwanese identity. Beijing hopes that it can pressure the Taiwanese government to restore a Chinese identity but they ignore the bottom-up societal forces driving the

consolidation of Taiwanese identity. The younger generation sees integration with China as not only creating socio-economic problems like stagnating wages and youth unemployment, but also threatening Taiwanese values such as democracy, the rule of law, and freedom of speech, the press, and assembly.

Your book identifies four main “opinion clusters” in Taiwan when it comes to cross-strait relations: Extensive Restriction, Moderate Restriction, Moderate Liberalization, and Extensive Liberalization. Which of these four best matches mainstream public opinion in Taiwan at the moment?

Tsai understands that her landslide victory and mandate were based on the assumption that she could both revitalize the Taiwanese economy and also manage cross-strait relations so as to protect Taiwan’s national identity. As one of her earliest policy proposals, Tsai called for diversifying Taiwan’s economic relations with other countries in order to lessen dependence on China, such as the “New Southbound policy” that is reminiscent of Lee Teng-hui’s “Go South policy” in 1993.

In my book, I identified oscillations in Taiwanese economic policy toward China, alternating between restriction and liberalization in four different episodes since 1996 because of changes in Taiwanese public sentiment. Tsai’s current policy represents the Moderate Restriction cluster by seeking to scale back policies under the Ma administration that reflected Extensive Liberalization. While Tsai’s policy has met with skepticism, Beijing’s economic sanctions, including reducing the number of Chinese tourists to Taiwan, have actually shown Tsai’s approach to be prescient. But the debate continues over whether Tsai’s policy will be effective in making Taiwan’s economy more competitive and dynamic. So the cycling between restriction and liberalization may continue.

To what extent does Beijing’s approach to Tsai echo its approach to the only previous DPP president, Chen Shui-bian? How does Taipei’s response compare?

Yes, there are similarities with how Beijing dealt with Chen Shui-bian during his eight years in office. Despite opposition from his own party, Chen was eager to reach out to Beijing in the first two

years of his first term and actually tried to liberalize cross-strait economic relations with the help of Tsai Ing-wen, who was then heading the Mainland Affairs Council. But when Beijing turned a deaf ear to Chen, he reversed course and became more restrictive in his cross-strait policy. Beijing's strategy during Chen's eight years term failed to reverse the trend toward a Taiwanese identity and was also perceived as having exacerbated socio-economic problems in Taiwan.

Tsai has tried to signal that she is not Chen Shui-bian, but Beijing has not acknowledged her measured approach. If Beijing does not change course and if Tsai's popularity continues to slide, she may try to appease the hardliners in the DPP by taking a harder stance toward Beijing. Meanwhile, Chinese scholars who have said that Tsai has been conciliatory have been sidelined and talk of "unification by force" is on the rise both among netizens and in policy circles.

There is a vicious cycle here. Beijing pushes hard; Taipei leaders who don't want to look overly compromising in the eyes of their constituents then make incendiary pronouncements, which produce more assertive postures in Beijing, which then further strengthen Taiwanese support for a more restrictive policy toward China.

Beijing seems to feel that adopting a hardline stance on cross-strait relations can force change in the political expression of Taiwanese identity – for example, an embrace of the 1992 consensus, which holds that there is only one China. Do you think this strategy is feasible?

Most mainland Chinese experts know that Beijing's policy over the last three decades has failed to reverse the trend toward a separate Taiwanese identity. If history offers any lessons, continuing this approach will only deepen the polarization between the Taiwanese who are willing to see further economic integration with China and those who want to restrict it. Although Beijing claims it also wants to reach out to small and medium businesses, workers, southerners, and young people – all of whom are increasingly anti-

China – so far, there is no sign of real engagement at the societal level.

While Beijing has become more creative in domestic policy innovation, its Taiwan policy has remained frozen in time, providing benefits mainly to KMT sympathizers who have lost the support of Taiwanese. People who have good ideas about how to implement a long-term strategy to reverse young people's sense of identity are either afraid of speaking up or simply marginalized. At the same time, there is little possibility that any leader in Taiwan can embrace the 1992 consensus because a majority of Taiwanese voters are against it.

Without reaching out to Taiwanese society, Beijing will be disappointed – not only by the backlash among Taiwanese but also by the extent to which Taiwanese government follows, rather than leads, public opinion. I am hopeful that after the 19th Party Congress Beijing will adopt values shared by both sides so that young Taiwanese can come to see a Chinese identity as embracing, rather than threatening, Taiwanese values.

The Author

Shannon Tiezzi is Editor-in-Chief of The Diplomat.