

China and Taiwan: Normal is the new normal

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The talks were the first official meeting since the end of China's civil war in 1949.

Two Chinese men met for an early supper Saturday in Singapore. Xi Jinping, age 62, of Beijing was in the area for a series of meetings with regional heads of state. Ma Ying-jeou, age 65, lives in Taipei but was born in Hong Kong to Chinese refugee parents. Ma flew to Singapore specially for the meeting.

The menu included crispy pig, lobster, and coral trout. The dinner lasted one hour, a substantial portion of which was taken up with an 80-second handshake. It was the first time they had ever met. They split the bill.

Ma is president of the Republic of China (ROC), also known as Taiwan. By their own admission, they had no expectations of any substantive breakthroughs from this meeting. No further meetings are planned.

So why did they meet at all? With January elections looming in Taiwan, Ma's critics accuse him of trying to influence the vote. Taiwan's main opposition leader, Tsai Ing-wen, went so far as to say that the meeting was "damaging to Taiwan's democracy". The leaders of Taiwan's smaller parties were even more forceful in denouncing the talks.

Polls show Ma's ruling Kuomintang (KMT) party lagging far behind the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), led by Tsai. The KMT has been in turmoil, replacing its presidential candidate on October 17 - just three months before the election. Ma himself is barred from running for a third term.

With Ma out of the running and the KMT almost certain to go down in defeat, it seems unlikely that Ma and Xi would stage an unpopular and unproductive summit as an intervention in Taiwan's elections.

The meeting was in the making for at least two years. Perhaps we should take Ma's words, that it is simply about normalising ties between the two countries.

Nations, states, countries

The word "country" should be used advisedly. Both China and Taiwan control territories, collect taxes, and issue passports. Obviously, China governs a territory that is much larger than that governed by Taiwan, but Taiwan is no tiny speck of a Pacific island. It is roughly the size of Belgium and is home to more than 23 million people.

In turbulent economic times, normalcy is what the region needs most of all. Given the scale of cross-strait interactions, the presidents of China and Taiwan should be meeting several times a year, every year.

Many people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, maintain that the Chinese and Taiwanese governments represent two parts of a single Chinese "nation" - a position echoed in the US' one-China policy. Within Taiwan itself, the currently governing KMT party generally endorses this view. But the population of Taiwan increasingly dissents from this view.

Taiwan is neither an unambiguous component of the Chinese nation nor quite a nation in itself. China's claims that Taiwan has always been part of China are flimsy at best. But Taiwan's claims to statehood are not widely recognised by the other countries of the world. They are certainly not recognised in Beijing.

In a strange twist of history, the ROC makes no claims to statehood as the government of Taiwan - it claims statehood as the government of all of China, a position it effectively renounced in 1991.

China has threatened to attack Taiwan if it ever claims statehood on any other grounds, though it clearly lacks the capacity to do so. China's military build-up is much more focused on securing oil in the South China Sea than on invading Taiwan.

Xi simply does not wake up every morning worrying about Taiwanese independence. He has bigger problems on his mind. China narrowly escaped a joint declaration by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' defence ministers condemning its aggressive island-building in disputed waters.

On the day before the Singapore summit, Vietnam announced joint naval exercises with Japan. With its economy sliding and financial markets in disarray, China needs all the help it can get.

Two countries, one system

The economy is the key. Taiwan's economy is stagnating as China's rapid growth engine grinds to a halt. China is cutting growth targets every year, and still, Western economists are suspicious that the published numbers don't add up. China can't afford a cross-strait crisis. Neither can Taiwan.

What is little-known outside the region is that Taiwan is deeply integrated into the Chinese economy. In many ways, Taipei is the new Hong Kong: a command-and-control centre for companies that control billions of dollars of investment and employ tens of millions of people throughout China. Some two million Taiwanese businesspeople (Taishang) live and work in China in high-skilled managerial positions.

When Xi said that the two sides shared the flesh and bones of a single body, he might as well have been talking about the economy as he would about any family ties.

In turbulent economic times, normalcy is what the region needs most of all. Given the scale of cross-strait interactions, the presidents of China and Taiwan should be meeting several times a year, every year. The Singapore summit opens the political door for the next president of Taiwan to do just that.