

Cross-strait Negotiation Needs Peace and Democracy

| Shih-chung Liu

Despite its official policy of non-interference and its desire for a peaceful resolution of cross-strait disputes, there is no doubt that the US exerts influence in cross-strait interactions.

In a recent statement, Joseph Donovan, the principal deputy assistant secretary of the Department of State, underscored the implications of current Taiwan-China relations.

“Future stability in the Strait will depend on open dialogue between Taiwan and the People’s Republic of China (PRC), free of coercion and consistent with Taiwan’s democracy. In order to engage productively with the mainland at a pace and scope that is politically supportable by its people, Taiwan needs to be confident in its role in the international community, and that its future will be determined in accordance with the wishes of its people. The United States has a constructive role to play in each of these areas,” he said.

Donovan’s statement was a timely reminder of the ongoing negotiation of an economic cooperation framework agreement (ECFA) between President Ma Ying-jeou’s administration and the PRC.

As the deadline for signing an ECFA approaches, Beijing has increased pressure on the Ma government through both diplomatic

and political means.

While Ma has tried to convince the public that signing an ECFA will help pave the way for the negotiation and signing of free trade agreements (FTAs) with other countries, the Chinese foreign ministry has rejected any such opportunities with China’s diplomatic allies.

The Referendum Review Committee also vetoed an ECFA referendum proposal by the opposition Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU). The Chinese influence is clear and has complicated Taiwan’s democratic debate on an ECFA, largely because Ma lost his bargaining power when he set this month as a deadline for signing an ECFA.

As domestic opposition to China’s influence and Ma’s ECFA agenda grows, we need to evaluate whether the negotiations with China have been democratic or legitimate.

First, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and other groups have criticized the lack of transparency in negotiations between the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), as well as any semblance of effective legislative oversight or checks and balances. The closed nature of KMT-CCP dialogue is the number one problem with the Ma administration’s handling of the trade deal.

Second, Beijing’s threat to block future

FTA talks between Taiwan and its allies was not only a slap in the face for Ma, but also an attempt to coerce Taiwan into making further concessions and killing the TSU's referendum proposal.

Third, it is constructive for US president Barack Obama's administration to reiterate the principle of decisions being "politically consistent with Taiwan democracy" when it comes to the "pace" and "scope" of cross-strait negotiations. The fact that more than half the people still do not understand the content of an ECFA or are concerned over Ma's hasty China-centric policy, demonstrates the need for more openness in cross-strait talks.

On the other hand, the opposition's criticisms can also be used by Ma as leverage in negotiations with Beijing. The Ma administration should not sign an ECFA simply for the sake of meeting a deadline.

Finally, the US official reiterated something former US president Bill Clinton said in 1999, namely that future cross-strait relations must gain "the assent of the Taiwanese people." For Taiwan to be more confident in the international community, as Donovan said, its future must be determined in accordance with the wishes of its people.

However, Washington should also bear in mind that the lack of confidence in Ma's handling of cross-strait policy is driven largely by weak leadership and failure to win public trust, though Beijing still possesses and has utilized coercive means to put pressure on Taiwan.

How can Taiwan be more confident if the Ma administration continues to overlook the potential risks of negotiations with China?

It is not about whether Taiwan needs an ECFA, rather, it's about whether Taiwan can be in an equal and balanced negotiation position given the political, economic and military imbalance between the two sides.

Lessening tension, increasing dialogue and promoting economic exchange across the Taiwan Strait meet both the expectations of international society and Taiwan. Ultimately, however, this is not just a question of peace, but also democracy. **B**