



## Sigur Center for Asian Studies

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

# Taiwan Conference: “Cross-Strait Political Dialogue: Challenges and Opportunities”

The Sigur Center co-hosted a conference with the 21st Century Foundation of Taiwan on February 27 entitled “**Cross-Strait Political Dialogue: Challenges and Opportunities.**” The first panel focused largely on the prospects of bilateral forums and dialogue between China and Taiwan for improving political and security relations across the Taiwan Strait. Panelists included Dr. Su-Po Kao of the 21st Century Foundation, **Dr. Teng-Chi Chang** of National Taiwan University and **Joseph Bosco** of the Center for Strategic and International Studies. The second panel focused more on Washington’s role in cross-Strait dialogue and security and featured **Dr. Fu-Kuo Liu** of National Chengchi University, **Dr. Chih-Chieh Chou** of National Cheng Kung University and **Dr. Robert Sutter** of the George Washington University. Full audio transcripts of both panels can be found [here](#).

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### The Benefits and Limitations of the Peace Forum

**Dr. Su-Po Kao** opened the first panel with an overview of the first Peace Forum held in Shanghai in October of 2013 and how the Foundation helped to make this forum a success. Kao described how Taiwan’s current approach to cross-Strait policy is to start by addressing easier issues, such as economic dialogue with the hope of proceeding to political dialogue, which is more difficult. Kao described economic issues as “the low-hanging fruits” of the cross-Strait dialogue and argued that they have already been “picked,” or successfully addressed. He then made the case that political achievements such as the 1992 Consensus (in which Beijing

and Taipei agreed that there is only one China in the world, but disagree on what that “one China” is) are based on wise designs and help both sides to avoid political embarrassment. However, these designs are running into increasing political pressure in light of the upcoming 2016 elections in Taiwan and are “running out of gas.” It is for this reason that many observers and political elites think it is time to move beyond the 1992 Consensus. This, argues Kao, is where the Peace Forum plays an important role.

For one, the 21st Century Foundation which is instrumental in organizing the Peace Forum is seen by both the DPP and KMT parties in Taiwan as providing a fair platform to discuss various issues. In addition, the Forum is the only one of its kind to focus on political issues, and political issues only. Admittedly, focusing on such “high-hanging fruit” ensures a relatively heated atmosphere of debate. The end result is a memorandum written after the Forum that lists in a very frank manner all of the issues and problems that exist in the cross-Strait relationship. Kao declared that this memorandum was one of the more honest statements that exist regarding the cross-Strait relationship today.

Elaborating on a key aspect of this memorandum, **Dr. Teng-Chi Chang** focused on the concept of “perpetual peace.” Chang argued that “there is no such thing as a perpetual peace or status quo,” and that “peace within such an asymmetrical relationship as that between Taiwan and China [referring to uneven balance of military power between the two sides] can only be dynamic and evolutionary.” In other words, a sustainable peace doesn’t necessarily require a crisp and clear-cut end-game as defined by mainstream IR wisdom, but rather, it must be built on a dynamic, flexible and inclusive framework, allowing for policies to change and adapt to developments as they occur.

**Joseph Bosco** concluded the first panel by applauding the efforts of the 21st Century Foundation to foster cross-Strait dialogue through the Peace Forum while adding his own note of caution. Bosco stressed that the *content* of any dialogue between the two sides will be critical. He also expressed doubts about the promise of the recent high-level meeting between representatives of Beijing and Taipei held in Nanjing. Bosco pointed to the lack of any discussion about the Anti-secession Law (ASL) passed by Beijing in 2005, which reserves to Beijing the right to use military force if Taiwan does not accept “peaceful reunification.” A major problem, noted Bosco, is the ambiguity regarding what constitutes the red line that Taiwan could cross that would serve as a pretext for an attack by Beijing. Most ominously, the ASL could theoretically justify the use of

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force against Taiwan simply as a result of peaceful reunification not having been achieved, or not occurring fast enough. Bosco then criticized the policy of “Strategic Ambiguity” as counter-productive and argued that the U.S. should state *unequivocally* that there are *no circumstances* under which the use of force by Beijing against Taiwan would be justified, short of the unlikely event that Taiwan initiates a military conflict on its own. Bosco concluded that ultimately, until the ASL is no longer in place, the efforts of the 21st Century Foundation may not yield any fruitful results.

### Washington’s Role in Cross-Strait Dialogue

Dr. Fu-Kuo Liu turned the focus of the conference to security issues and security cooperation. Liu pointed out that of the 19 agreements reached between Beijing and Taipei over the past several decades, not one has been related to security. What the Peace Forum accomplished, he argues, was to encourage discussion by both sides on security issues including CBMs (confidence building measures) and maritime security issues such as the South and East China Seas. Remarking on the U.S. role, Kao used the phrase “old friendship, new understanding.” By this he was referring to the increasing U.S. criticism of China over security issues like the South China Sea, which Taiwan must learn to accommodate in light of the fact that Taiwan and China have overlapping sovereignty claims in that area.

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Adding to a few points raised by Kao, Dr. Chih-Chieh Chou emphasized the significance of the first Peace Forum. The resulting memorandum provided concrete suggestions for cooperation and established a useful procedural precedent for future cooperation between the KMT and DPP when dealing with Beijing. Chou then devoted most of his time to the existence of the ROC in the international community. He argued that the current practice of “mutual non-recognition of sovereignty” by China and Taiwan only serves to trap Taiwan. This is because most countries currently respect Beijing’s discourse regarding China’s sovereignty, including the U.S., a reality which creates space for Beijing to employ a double-standard strategy. Chou argued that Taiwan should instead shift to mutual sharing of the external sovereignty of Chinese statehood in international society through negotiations carried out on equal grounds. In other words, the concept of “under one great roof” should be followed in which the ROC *and* the PRC are both recognized as “part of China.”

Finishing off the panel as a discussant, Dr. Robert Sutter provided his insight on the U.S. role in cross-Strait relations and perspectives from

Washington. Sutter described the reaction of Washington to recent developments as “very careful, low-key and relatively quiet.” Furthermore, Washington views recent developments as mostly positive. Regarding the U.S. rebalance to Asia, Sutter concluded that Washington is not making any efforts to involve Taiwan in this new strategy. He then cited a few specialists on Taiwan and East Asia such as Richard Bush from the Brookings Institution who has warned of the dangers of China’s coercive approach and Taiwan’s lack of self-strengthening or any unified approach to Beijing.

Regarding reaction to the recent government-to-government meeting in Nanjing, Sutter thought that it has been mostly muted. However, he cited a few commentaries, including one from Daniel Blumenthal of the American Enterprise Institute which expressed concern at the perceived inevitability of Taiwan’s reunification with the mainland and the negative consequences that this would have for the region. In sum, there is certainly interest from specialists, and to a lesser extent the U.S. Congress in recent cross-Strait developments. However, Sutter stated that there has been little in the way of public statements or action from administration officials which reinforces the perception that Washington is content with the trajectory of cross-Strait relations.

This conference highlighted the exciting new initiative by the 21st Century Foundation in fostering unprecedented discourse on cross-Strait relations. At the same time, it recognized that there may be many challenges and pitfalls that lie on the road to the eventual goal of consensus.

*By Mike Bouffard, Program Coordinator, Sigur Center for Asian Studies, GWU*

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serve as the nexus for educating a new generation of students, scholars, analysts and policymakers.

The Sigur Center for Asian Studies is an international research center of The Elliott School of International Affairs at The George Washington University. Its mission is to increase the quality and broaden the scope of scholarly research and publications on Asian affairs, promote U.S.-Asian scholarly interaction and

Sigur Center for Asian Studies  
Elliott School of International Affairs  
The George Washington University  
1957 E St. NW, Suite 503  
Washington, DC 20052

TEL 202.994.5886  
EMAIL [gsgur@gwu.edu](mailto:gsgur@gwu.edu)  
<http://www.gwu.edu/~sigur>