

**MR. XI MEETS MR. MA FOR A SINGAPORE FLING:
SYMBOLIC SUMMITRY, DIFFICULT POLITICS,
AND THE FUTURE OF CROSS-STRAIT RELATIONS****By Jacques deLisle**

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When China's President Xi Jinping and Taiwan's President Ma Ying-jeou met in Singapore on November 7, 2015, it was an event freighted with symbolic significance but with limited substantive impact on the often-fraught but, in recent years, steadily warming cross-Strait relationship. The more-than-one-minute-long handshake between Xi and Ma began the first face-to-face encounter between the leader of the Chinese Communist regime and the leader of the government that it ousted from the Mainland since the 1945 Chongqing meeting between Mao Zedong and Chiang Kai-shek. It was the first meeting ever between the heads of the People's Republic of China government, established in 1949, and the Republic of China government, which retreated to Taiwan that same year. And it was framed as a meeting between the two men as equals—something that was telling and complicated in light of Beijing's long-standing resistance to moves that might seem to accord Taiwan an international status higher than any other "part" of China, much less a sovereign entity on par with the PRC.

Although understandably drawing much attention from the media, political classes, and general publics on both sides of the Strait and in the wider world, the hour-long summit in Singapore was a dramatic but incremental and still-limited extension of the trajectory that cross-Strait relations have been following since Ma took office in 2008 and—more broadly and with much greater volatility—for more than two decades. During Ma's soon-to-end second term, the two sides had become engaged in relatively extensive government-to-government contacts, in large part to work out the implementation of the many follow-on agreements to the 2010 cross-Strait Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA). In the run-up to the historic Xi-Ma meeting, the two governments appeared to be close to a deal to establish the equivalent of consulates in one another's jurisdictions. The heads of the PRC State Council's Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO), Zhang Zhijun and Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council (MAC), Wang Yu-chi, had undertaken reciprocal—and, in Taiwan, controversial—visits in their capacities as government officials in 2014.

Senior ROC leaders, including Ma's then-vice-president-elect Vincent Siew in 2008 and former vice presidents Lien Chan in 2005 and Siew in 2014, had met with incumbent top Chinese leaders Xi and, before him, Hu Jintao. In the early 1990s, when a newly democratic Taiwan and a China embarking on a second major wave of economic reform and opening began to develop economic ties, the two governments had established formally unofficial but de facto government-representing bodies—the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait (ARATS, on the Mainland side) and the Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF, on the Taiwan side). ARATS and SEF had been the vehicles for negotiating ECFA. In a role it would reprise and expand in the 2015 Xi-Ma summit, Singapore played host to the first meeting between the two bodies' heads (Wang Daohan and Koo Chen-fu), conducted on the basis of what has since become known as the "1992 Consensus" that the

Mainland and Taiwan have taken as the essential basis for cross-Strait relations since Ma came to power.

Viewed against this backdrop, the Xi-Ma summit is still a singular event, especially in the realm of cross-Strait politics, where symbols of status loom uncommonly large. But, notwithstanding inflated rhetoric from *People's Daily* (among others), the meeting did not show—or even portend—a transformative shift in the relationship. Even its symbolic impact was softened by the unsurprising arrangement that Xi and Ma would address one another as “Mr.”—something the PRC required because “President Ma” would too strongly suggest sovereign equality for Taiwan, and something Ma was constrained to accept both by Beijing’s position and by the backlash in Taiwan that would greet labeling the meeting as one between leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Kuomintang (KMT). That model had been used for the meeting of formal equals between the CCP’s Hu and the KMT’s Lien in 2005. But it would not work for the Xi-Ma meeting because it would unacceptably (in Taiwan) cast a sitting president as the representative of a political party (and a currently unpopular one)—rather than as an elected representative of the whole people—when engaging in exchanges potentially laden with implications for Taiwan’s security and sovereignty. The template of a party leaders’ meeting was made still more untenable by Ma’s having earlier yielded the position of KMT party chairman to Eric Chu—who has also become the KMT’s presidential nominee for 2016, having replaced the party’s floundering initial nominee, Hung Hsiu-chu.

Whatever one makes of its symbolic impact, the Xi-Ma Singapore summit was not supposed to produce substantive agreements. Ma had stated publicly that there would be no agreements. And the meeting lived down to these expectations. Given the controversy that inescapably attends any cross-Strait discussions that touch upon political aspects of the relationship, questions of sovereignty, or the premises on which relations are based, the two leaders unsurprisingly reiterated familiar positions on fundamental questions and confined talk of future plans to relatively anodyne calls for deepened exchanges, cooperation for mutual benefit, and avoidance of conflict. Thus, Ma reaffirmed the 1992 Consensus, which is defined in Taiwan as a principle of “one China” but with “respective [and differing] interpretations.” Xi, too, embraced the 1992 Consensus—predictably, without the “respective interpretations” gloss. He also spoke of people on the two sides of the Strait as being members of the same family (a step beyond Ma’s reference to their rootedness in a common Chinese ancestry) whose bonds could not be severed by a long period of separation—language that, however warm in tone, derived from Beijing’s unwavering principle that Taiwan is, and consistently has been, part of a single sovereign China.

Ma referred broadly to each side’s respecting the other’s distinctive ways—vague language that could be compatible with everything from the Hong Kong-style “one country, two systems” arrangement that is favored by Beijing but largely anathema in Taiwan, to an open-ended tolerance for the cross-Strait status quo of profoundly different and separate political systems and social orders. Ma raised the issue of Taiwan’s enjoying secure opportunities for participation in the international system and Taiwan’s objection to Beijing’s deployment of missiles that Taiwan quite explicably regards as a threat to its security. Xi predictably gave no ground. He reaffirmed Beijing’s tolerance for Taiwan’s enjoyment of international stature so long as it remained consistent with a “one China” principle—a stance that specifically did not preclude Taiwanese NGOs’ participating international activities or Taiwan’s membership in the PRC-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. And Xi insisted that the missiles did not target Taiwan. This was a questionable proposition that was largely beside the point, given, first, the ease with which the missiles could be removed and then reinstated, and, second and more fundamentally, Beijing’s long-stated position that it will not tolerate moves toward formal independence by Taiwan and reserves a claimed right to use force to prevent such developments (which would be, in Beijing’s view, secession). The meeting seemingly did nothing to advance talks on political aspects of cross-Strait relations (which Beijing has been seeking), to take up the question of a cross-Strait peace accord (which Ma had floated as a medium to long-term possibility during his 2012 reelection campaign, before retreating in the face of heated criticism in Taiwan), or to enhance the prospects for passage of pending cross-Strait economic agreements (which have stalled since the protests associated with the Sunflower Movement in Taiwan derailed the passage of the Cross-Strait Trade in Services Agreement (TISA) in 2014).

The most notable near-deliverable from the Xi-Ma meeting was an agreement to create a hotline between the TAO and the MAC. To be sure, building better channels of communication between the two governments, especially in the event of a crisis, is a positive step. But it was not part of a larger package and did not signal a change in the terms of the relationship. The in-principle commitment to a new crisis-avoidance or crisis-management mechanism was in the same vein as already-established government-to-government ties, addressed only a rather narrow and at most obliquely political set of issues, and—although such hotlines are commonly arrangements between states—did not imply anything beyond the degree of equality between the two sides signaled at the summit more generally and in other recent developments in cross-Strait relations.

The lack of movement on substantive issues in conjunction with Xi's and Ma's Singapore session is not surprising. The much-noted "historic" quality of the two leaders' public handshake and brief dialogue was perhaps as much as could be extracted from such an unprecedented meeting. The potential for tangible outcomes was weaker still because the meeting reportedly came soon after protracted negotiations finally secured Beijing's agreement to a meeting that Ma had long sought, and because Ma's capacity to strike deals was limited by the impending end of his tenure and the strong prospect of an opposition party victory in Taiwan's January 2016 elections.

Other impediments to cross-Strait relations' proceeding much farther along the path blazed during Ma's presidency are more entrenched and unlikely to have been altered by the Xi-Ma meeting or its foundations or fall-out. Daunting hurdles exist on both sides of the Strait. On the Mainland side, Xi's agreement to the meeting predictably prompted analyses of his likely motivation. Xi did take some risks, or incur some costs, in agreeing to the meeting on the terms that the Mainland accepted, including that the two men would engage one another as equals (although not as equal officials) and that Taiwan would not have to satisfy preconditions (such as moving beyond the 1992 Consensus or agreeing to address cross-Strait political relations). Plausible explanations saw Xi as having a dim—if not grim—assessment of the prospects for cross-Strait (or broader external) relations, which made it potentially worthwhile for Xi to acquiesce in previously unattractive conditions.

Several worries might well have been in the mix. The Ma-era momentum toward ever-closer ties across the Strait had petered. This pattern had been particularly disconcerting for China after the Sunflower Movement, and broader popular discontent in Taiwan with the pace and consequences—both political and economic-distributional—of cross-Strait economic integration stymied the Ma government's efforts to steer TISA through Taiwan's legislative process. As those developments in part reflected and as much polling in Taiwan indicated, Mainland authorities have reason to worry—and reportedly are worried—that mainstream opinion in Taiwan is overwhelmingly against unification, and perhaps increasingly intractably so. Years of Beijing's offering economic "carrots" and exhibiting "patience" on political issues (in the form of tolerance of the status quo), did not seem to be winning hearts and minds in Taiwan, especially among younger people. The PRC's recently troubled relations with maritime neighbors and heightened tensions with the United States—with issues related to Beijing's claims of sovereignty over disputed territory and related rights figuring prominently in both cases—could only make closer political ties with the Mainland seem even less appealing to the many skeptics and opponents in Taiwan.

The relatively high probability of a Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) win in the upcoming Taiwan elections surely introduced a "now or never (or, at least, much later)" urgency to deliberations among the top CCP elite over whether Xi should meet Ma. To some observers, Beijing's agreement to the Xi-Ma summit looked like a long-shot effort to reduce the chances of that outcome or, at least, to ameliorate its consequences. On this view, the meeting was a gift to Ma and the KMT, in hopes of bolstering the party's claim to Taiwanese voters that the KMT was better than the DPP at handling the vital issue of cross-Strait relations. If the DPP were to win, a Xi-Ma symbolic meeting might still serve Beijing's agenda by helping to embed more firmly an interpretation of the cross-Strait status quo—which DPP presidential candidate Tsai Ing-wen has pledged broadly to preserve—that Ma could be counted upon to endorse at a summit and that was relatively appealing to Beijing.

In this setting, it seemed plausible for analysts to suggest that Xi and his circle of advisors thought it wise to chance a high-profile conciliatory gesture and a targeted charm offensive toward Taiwan. If that was the case, the apprehensions behind the move were close to the surface—so much so that they risked muddling any positive message from the meeting: Immediately following the two leaders' Singapore meeting at a press conference that Xi eschewed, TAO chief Zhang cited Xi when declaring that Taiwan independence forces and their "splittist" activities were the biggest threat to the remarkable gains that had been achieved in the peaceful development of cross-Strait relations since 2008. So too, Xi himself at the Singapore meeting reprised a familiar and prickly warning that the United States should keep out of Mainland-Taiwan issues, with Xi's point only thinly veiled as a warm assessment of cross-Strait relations: as Xi put it, the people of the Mainland and Taiwan had shown, through the rapprochement and progress achieved since 2008, that they can handle their own issues.

As all of this suggests, Beijing could not expect Ma to deliver much at the late-arranged summit. On the Taiwan side, the political constraints on attempting significant steps forward in cross-Strait ties are formidable indeed. Like Xi, Ma might hope that the high-profile and "historic" meeting could entrench more deeply (and thus make more binding on his successor) his version of the status quo in cross-Strait relations (a goal Ma strongly suggested in pre-meeting statements). Ma could hope to do this by articulating that view jointly with Xi or—more ambitiously and less promisingly—by relying on a summit to boost the KMT's electoral prospects for 2016. Such possible real-world impacts—along with the mere fact of the meeting with Xi—were likely key concerns for a soon-to-retire president concerned about his political legacy. Whatever his hopes, Ma's options for steering future developments in cross-Strait relations through commitments at the summit were severely limited.

He had only six months left in his presidency and only two months until the elections that would make him fully a lame duck. His approval ratings were persistently dismal. Partly because of a severe feud with Wang Jin-pyng, his party's leader in parliament, the KMT's large majority in the Legislative Yuan had not led to effective inter-branch cooperation or legislative backing for Ma-backed cross-Strait initiatives (most notably TISA) in the relatively recent past.

The secrecy with which the Singapore meeting was necessarily arranged had heightened suspicions among his critics in Taiwan and stiffened political opposition to his striking any deals with his Mainland counterpart. In the immediate run-up to the summit, Ma responded to fierce criticism in Taiwan of the upcoming meeting by promising that no agreements would be made. More broadly, Ma had earlier pledged not to move more rapidly on cross-Strait relations—especially on political issues—than was supported clearly by the people of Taiwan. Also, Ma surely had not unlearned the bitter lesson he learned from floating the idea in 2012 of possible negotiations over a peace accord with the Mainland. And he surely realized that any dramatic gesture to accelerate development of cross-Strait relations would have limited, or strongly counterproductive, impact on the KMT's fortunes at the ballot box in January 2016.

These Taiwan-side impediments to a summit with more substantial outputs were partly based on some basic features of current Taiwanese politics. As the Sunflower Movement and the DPP's persistent lead in pre-election polls reflect, support for rapid development of cross-Strait ties has waned and many in Taiwan have become concerned that under Ma the pursuit of closer relations with the Mainland has been going—or at least threatens to go—too far too fast. Distancing herself from the so-called “pro-independence” agenda of Taiwan's only previous DPP president and venerable DPP positions, DPP 2016 standard-bearer Tsai appears to be winning over median voters with a platform of accepting the basic contours of the status quo in cross-Strait relations forged during Ma's presidency, but pledging to redress some of deepened integration's perceived adverse consequences and promising a slower pace, more careful scrutiny, and a more transparent and consensus-based approach for future steps.

Several factors likely have contributed to such a message's appeal to many Taiwanese. The inherent logic of Ma's proclaimed cross-Strait strategy of “first economics, then politics” and “first easy, then difficult” pointed, almost ineluctably, toward this result: as discussions with Beijing moved toward political questions and addressed more difficult issues, proposed arrangements enjoyed less wide-spread support among Taiwan's politically diverse and often-polarized citizenry. The rapprochement and agreements with the Mainland achieved under Ma have disappointed many in Taiwan, who perceive the economy as still underperforming (at least relative to their high expectations), who see economic openness toward the Mainland as having mostly benefited a wealthy elite in Taiwan while threatening local jobs (for the college-educated as well as the relatively low-skilled), and who worry about Beijing's ability and possible will to use its economic leverage to coerce Taiwan on political issues.

Viewed in this context, the Xi-Ma meeting leaves us with the open question of what it implies for Beijing's approach to Taiwan's 2016 elections and the prospect of victory by Tsai and the DPP. As noted earlier, Xi's willingness to hold the meeting with Ma and the terms on which it was convened likely reflect, at least in part, Beijing's attempt to limit the adverse consequences of that electoral outcome and, more ambitiously, to reduce its likelihood. The Mainland's attempts to influence the outcome of democratic elections in Taiwan have a checkered history and teach ambiguous lessons. When China engaged in missile tests near Taiwan and triggered a cross-Strait crisis and a crisis in U.S.-China relations, China's overweening moves redounded to the benefit of Beijing's “splittist” *bête noire*, incumbent Taiwanese president Lee Teng-hui, in the 1996 election. Four years later, Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji's finger-wagging warning to Taiwanese voters not to cast their ballots for the DPP's Chen Shui-bian, and an official PRC White Paper's threat that Beijing could resort to force if Taiwan sought independence or indefinitely delayed negotiations concerning reunification, failed to achieve their desired effect and, on most assessments, helped Chen win a plurality in a three-way race. In 2004, Beijing further moderated its tactics, but its support for Lien Chan and a reunified KMT ticket appeared to be still too ardent, feeding worries among some voters that the KMT would be too eager to build ties with the Mainland. This Beijing-fueled perception quite possibly helped Chen to a narrow win in his bid for a second term in a closely contested and hotly disputed election.

In the elections that Ma won in 2008 and 2012, Beijing's attempts to affect the results were even more restrained. The Chinese regime made clear that it preferred the KMT and that the potential for improvement in cross-Strait relations—and attendant economic and other benefits for Taiwan—would be significantly greater if Ma were to win. But such a moderate stance was relatively easy for Beijing to adopt, given the well-founded expectation that Ma would win easily.

For 2016, China's choice is not so simple, with a KMT victory appearing unlikely. In many respects, the Xi-Ma meeting pointed toward continued moderation and restraint in Beijing's approach to Taiwan's next election. At the Singapore mini-summit, the Mainland side praised progress in the "peaceful development" of cross-strait relations during the past eight years, relatively warmly embraced the status quo, and held out the prospect of greater mutually beneficial developments ahead (so long as Taiwan's leaders behaved acceptably). These statements came in the context of Beijing's apparent efforts to hedge against the downside risks of a Tsai presidency (including by trying to lock-in the cross-strait status quo—or a favored interpretation of it—by expounding on that status quo in the high-profile setting of the Singapore meeting), and against the background of quieter but more sustained efforts over many months to engage more extensively with representatives of the DPP.

On the other hand, reminders of the possibility of a return to a much harder-edged, pre-2004-style approach could be found in TAO head Zhang's immediately post-summit, Xi-quoting cautions about the potentially serious threats posed by pro-independence elements in Taiwan, and in longer-running reports of a fairly wide range of views about Tsai held in the Mainland's Taiwan policy circles—ranging from some who are resigned to a Tsai presidency and relatively accommodating, to many who see a temporary post-inauguration chill in relations as necessary to make clear that there are consequences for disregarding Beijing's preferences, to some who paint Tsai as no better than Chen Shui-bian, and perhaps worse.

Tsai's reaction to the Xi-Ma meeting would seem to provide grist for the mills on both sides in the presumed Mainland debate over whether to take a relatively moderate and accommodating, or a tougher and more demanding, approach to the election that the DPP and the KMT would soon contest and to the Tsai presidency and DPP-led government that might well follow. Tsai expressed support for communications across the Strait that are more robust, help to preserve peace, and are conducted on the basis of principles of equal respect and without political preconditions—all standards that, on Ma's account (if not in the view of many in the DPP), the Ma-Xi meeting satisfied. At the same time, Tsai (along with other DPP sources) denounced the lack of transparency in arranging the meeting, characterized it as damaging to Taiwan's democracy, criticized Ma for not referring at the meeting to Taiwan's democracy and the existence of the ROC, and cautioned that only the opinions of the people in Taiwan—expressed through the ballot box—can decide the future of Taiwan and cross-strait relations. She also attached conditions of democratic procedures, transparency, and legislative monitoring (as well as equal respect and no political preconditions) to any meeting she might have with Xi.

How Beijing reacts to the views expressed in Tsai's and the DPP's reaction to the Xi-Ma meeting—and to Tsai's campaign and seemingly likely electoral victory in the months ahead—will do much to shape the prospects and terms for a possible Xi-Tsai meeting. If such a meeting does occur, it will lack the history-making quality and symbolic breakthrough that characterized Mr. Xi's and Mr. Ma's meeting in Singapore. But a meeting between Mr. Xi and Ms. Tsai could be a good deal more significant—in what it shows and what it accomplishes—for the future of cross-strait relations.