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'Leaders' as 'Persons': Analysing Xi Jinping's Meeting with Ma Ying-jeou

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Chinese President Xi Jinping successfully concluded his state visits to Vietnam, Singapore as also his 'informal' meeting with Taiwan President Ma Ying-jeou recently. On November 7, 2015, Singapore facilitated a landmark meeting between President Xi and Taiwan President Ma, though the two leaders did not meet as the representatives of China and Taiwan respectively. It was the first time in more than 60 years that Chinese leader met with a Taiwanese leader. Though no joint communique was issued at the end of the meeting, both sides, in an interview to the press, pledged "to preserve the status quo". It was reported in the media that President Xi told Taiwan's President Ma that the two sides are "one family" and cannot be pulled apart; whereas Taiwanese President Ma urged President Xi that the two sides should practice mutual respect and should respect each other's values and way of life.¹

Joint Communique was not issued for the obvious reason that the two leaders did not

represent China and Taiwan- which do not recognise each other as a separate nation and have claims over each other. The other explanation for this confidentiality might be that both leaders fear the speculated protests over their meeting in their respective countries specifically in Taiwan where questions have already been raised over Ma's somewhat Beijing-friendly stance. Ma and his party Kuomintang (KMT) are known for their softer stand on China as against the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) of Taiwan.

The Ma-Xi meeting is a clear departure from the past practices. Though nothing concrete seemed to have been discussed between the two leaders, but a sense of warmth was seen during the meeting. Before the visit, Chinese official position was that Xi's meeting with Ma is aimed at "exchanging views on promoting the peaceful development of cross-Strait relations".² However, it seems that China has vested interests in strengthening cooperation with Taiwan and this

was not remotely related to the immediate reunification of Taiwan.

First, on the economic front, China is closely engaged with Taiwan, and to push for greater economic integration and economic interdependence is in China's interests. China is Taiwan's biggest trading partner. While China's trade with Taiwan constitutes at least 25 percent of Taiwan's total foreign trade, Taiwan's investment in China is very impressive. Taiwan has invested far more than the official figure of some US\$60 billion in the mainland economy, perhaps as much as \$200–300 billion.³ In addition, Cross-Strait tourism has flourished, and more than a million Taiwanese are living and working in China, most around the Shanghai area,⁴ thereby, boosting the economy of China. In all probabilities, China may extend an invitation to Taiwan to join Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and China-led 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR). However, this is still a far-fetched observation. Involvement of Taiwan in OBOR may invite scathing internal criticism.

Second, China is deeply involved in the South China Sea dispute and the matter has become all the more complicated with the involvement of the United States in the dispute. It is true that China does not seem to be giving up any of its territorial claims any time soon especially on Taiwan- an issue which is much more than mere sovereignty claims. There is a greater truth than this and that is, China cannot afford to fight with all its opponents at the same

time. At present, China has to deal with the United States, the Philippines and Vietnam. While Beijing's assertiveness is being met with equal assertiveness from Vietnam and the Philippines, China does not want to be confronted with anymore opponents and desires to minimise tensions on other fronts. Partial or short-term rapprochement with Taiwan may be considered as a step in this direction.

The meeting should also be seen in the context of upcoming elections in Taiwan. China has substantial stake in the politics of Taiwan particularly as the nationalistic party, the DPP is expected to win the elections.

On the strategic front, the meeting was no assurance of China giving up its claims on Taiwan and eventually on the reunification with the Chinese motherland. From Taiwan's side, it is important to open dialogue with China as the direct confrontation is in the interests of neither party. Moreover the situation may become precarious as Ma's tenure as the President of Taiwan will be over next year. Nevertheless, no matter what is there in store, the meeting has given a fillip to Cross-Strait relations. The flexibility shown by Xi Jinping in being able to sit across the table and discuss issues of importance with Ma Ying-jeou shows the growing maturity in China in dealing with Taiwan. Whether the next President of Taiwan would be able to show the same enthusiasm in dealing with China would determine the future path of Cross-Strait relations.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ Bill Birtles, "Chian-Taiwan Summit: Xi Jinping and Ma Ying Jeou Hold Forst Leaders Meeting in 66 Years", *ABC*, November 7, 2015, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-11-07/china-taiwan-leaders-shake-hands-in-historic-meeting/6921644>, accessed on November 7, 2015.

² Tom Phillips, "Historic Meeting Of Chinese And Taiwanese Presidents Prompts Hope And Suspicion", *The Guardian*, November 4, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/04/historic-meeting-chinese-taiwanese-presidents-hope-suspicion>, accessed on November 4, 2015.

³ Robert A. Manning, "Deciphering the Big China-Taiwan Meeting", *The National Interest*, November 11, 2015, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/deciphering-the-big-china-taiwan-meeting-14311>, accessed on November 11, 2015.

⁴ Ibid.