

Beijing wants Xi-Cheng meeting to send an important message

It hopes the talks will buttress Kuomintang leader Cheng Li-wun's position and present China as a defender of peace and order.

Qi Dongtao

A decade after his last meeting with the top Kuomintang (KMT) leader, Chinese President Xi Jinping sat down with the head of Taiwan's main opposition party last week. Both sides clearly hoped the encounter would produce political gains. But while the meeting was symbolically important, its practical effect is likely to be much more limited.

The meeting allowed Beijing to send an important message to the global community: whatever its differences with Taipei, it is still the party seeking peace rather than escalation. That image matters even more as China seeks to distinguish itself from a United States that is once again acting as a muscular strategic competitor.

Peace in the Taiwan Strait is a central priority for Beijing. At a time when war in the Middle East has unsettled energy markets and many countries in Asia are increasingly anxious about a possible cross-strait military conflict, China has stronger reasons to project itself as a defender of stability and order.

THE CHENG FACTOR

Beijing has long insisted that peaceful unification remains its preferred option, even while it reserves the use of force. It has continued to improve conditions for Taiwanese to study, work, invest and settle on the mainland, even after 2016, when Taiwan came under Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) rule. Opposition politicians, especially the KMT leaders, and groups that oppose Taiwan independence have also continued to engage

with Chinese officials in China.

Yet, these efforts have not reaped much international credit for Beijing. Outside mainland China, they are often ignored, dismissed as "united front" work, or overshadowed by China's expanding military pressure on Taiwan. That is the core contradiction Beijing cannot escape: every signal of peace, including the Xi-Cheng meeting, is weakened by the coercive backdrop against which it is delivered.

This is why Mr Xi's meeting with KMT chairwoman Cheng Li-wun matters, but also why its impact is constrained. One reason for the lack of such a leader-to-leader meeting in the past decade is that after the KMT lost power in 2016, its chairmen, while publicly opposing Taiwan independence, were far less willing to embrace the "1992 Consensus" unequivocally.

They understood the domestic political cost. The problem was that the so-called 1992 Consensus – an intentionally ambiguous formula under which both sides acknowledged "one China" while differing on its meaning – is now widely regarded in Taiwan as language that benefits Beijing more than Taipei. Many Taiwanese even believe, incorrectly, that the 1992 Consensus was essentially Beijing's proposal of "one country, two systems".

Ms Cheng, by contrast, has taken a much firmer line on both opposition to Taiwan independence and acceptance of the 1992 Consensus. From Beijing's standpoint, that made her a more reliable interlocutor and better vehicle to reaffirm those political premises in Taiwan.



Chinese President Xi Jinping receiving Taiwan's main opposition party leader Cheng Li-wun (left) at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on April 10. The meeting, a decade after Mr Xi's last with a top Kuomintang leader, comes as Beijing seeks to signal to Washington that it retains influence in Taiwan, says the writer. PHOTO: AFP

But that is precisely where Beijing is likely to meet the limits of its strategy. The KMT leadership's own caution over the past decade has revealed a basic political fact: most Taiwanese voters are not comfortable with the 1992 Consensus as Beijing defines it. Ms Cheng's explicit insistence on that formula, and on a broader Chinese identity instead of a narrower Taiwanese identity, has made her deeply controversial within her own party and even less attractive to the wider electorate. Recent polling trends suggest her leadership of the KMT may have even weakened the party's appeal.

Nevertheless, the meeting with Mr Xi may strengthen Ms Cheng's standing within the KMT and allow her to wrest the initiative on cross-strait relations from figures such as former president Ma Ying-jeou. That is not trivial. In Taiwan politics, and even in dealings with Washington, the ability to communicate directly with Beijing is an important form of political capital. But it does not follow that such capital can be converted into mass electoral

support.

Beijing has tried to enhance the meeting's impact by announcing 10 new policy measures favourable to Taiwan. Even so, these are not likely to be material to Ms Cheng or the KMT in local elections later this year.

Some measures, such as the reopening of tourism, expansion of more direct flights, or construction of infrastructural links with Taiwan's outlying islands, will face resistance from the DPP government. Others are not new benefits and are more of a partial restoration of earlier arrangements, such as market access for selected Taiwanese agricultural and fishery products.

Taiwanese voters, broadly speaking, still welcome economic opportunities linked to China. But they have also become more wary of the security risks that come with deeper dependence. Over the past decade, and especially under President Lai Ching-te, Taiwan has built a stronger legal and political framework to counter Chinese influence and pressure. That has helped create a more confrontational public climate in which Beijing-linked

initiatives are viewed with greater suspicion.

In addition, the mainland's new incentives appear targeted mainly at relatively narrow and politically weak groups. They may raise support for the KMT at the margins, but are unlikely to change the island's broader political balance.

THE U.S. FACTOR

The timing of the meeting was also important. With a Xi-Trump meeting looming, Beijing plainly wants to send a signal to Washington: it still has meaningful influence inside Taiwan. The KMT remains stronger than the DPP in local government. In the legislature, it has also worked with the Taiwan People's Party to constrain parts of the DPP government's agenda, including on defence-related spending. From Beijing's perspective, this gives Mr Xi a stronger hand as he heads into talks with US President Donald Trump.

Even so, Mr Xi remains the more defensive player in the larger US-China contest.

Washington, not Beijing, has set the pace on tariffs, export controls, investment restrictions and arms sales to Taiwan. That said, China still has retaliatory tools of its own, such as rare earths. And if the KMT can obstruct defence appropriations legislatively, that too may be seen in Beijing as a useful bargaining chip.

If anything, a more confident Mr Xi may emerge from the Xi-Cheng meeting less willing to compromise on Taiwan and more inclined to press Mr Trump to scale back support for Taipei. But Taiwan's strategic value to the US remains too high for Mr Trump to make major substantive concessions.

All this marks a sharp contrast with the Xi-Ma meeting in Singapore in 2015. Then, the KMT had been in power for about seven years and cross-strait political relations were at their warmest in decades. The world was not preoccupied with the possibility of a Taiwan contingency. President Barack Obama's US still saw itself as a stabilising force in the international order and broadly welcomed the then Taiwanese President's effort to improve ties with Beijing.

Beijing had hoped the Xi-Ma summit would improve support for Mr Ma's cross-strait policy within Taiwan and perhaps help the KMT electorally ahead of the 2016 presidential election, especially when the KMT had lost the preceding local elections badly. It's clear those hopes did not materialise.

The context today is very different. The KMT has been out of power for a decade. Although it remains strong at the local level and influential in the legislature, it has trailed the DPP in islandwide support for years and has struggled to defend its cross-strait position in a political environment shaped by growing distrust of China. Over a decade of DPP rule, Taiwan's political, legal, economic and cultural distance from Beijing has widened. Anti-China sentiment has become more mainstream.

In that setting, Mr Xi's meeting with Ms Cheng is primarily meant to shape international perceptions and sharpen the distinction between Beijing's "peace" narrative and Washington's harder strategic posture, and hopefully, help the KMT domestically.

The lesson from 2015 is sobering. The Xi-Ma meeting was historic, but it did not save the KMT from defeat in the 2016 presidential and legislative elections. Mr Xi's latest outreach may again generate headlines, strengthen a particular faction inside the KMT and give Beijing a talking point abroad. But it is less likely, on its own, to deliver the political shift that Beijing wants.

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