



## What's next for China-Taiwan relations?

by Michael Pizzi @michaelwpizzi February 15, 2014 9:00AM ET

Ever since Taiwan and China sent diplomatic representatives to the mainland city of Nanjing this week for their first formal talks since the two sides split amid civil war more than six decades ago, newspapers on both sides of the Taiwan Strait have been plastered with headlines declaring a “new chapter” in relations and a “step toward reunification.”

China still claims self-governing, democratic Taiwan – an island about 100 miles off its coast – as its territory, and has threatened to take it back by force if it takes too many steps toward formalizing its de-facto independence. The mainland keeps about 1,200 missiles pointed at Taiwan, and in 1995 and 1996 fired missiles and conducted provocative military exercises off the Taiwanese coast.

Tuesday’s meeting between Wang Yu-chi, head of Taiwan’s Mainland Affairs Council, and counterpart Zhang Zhijun, director of the mainland’s Taiwan Affairs Office, was the first such encounter between the two sides since the 1949 civil war – in which Mao Zedong’s Communists defeated the Nationalists, who fled to Taiwan.

China’s state-run Xinhua news agency called Tuesday’s meeting “unimaginable” and “the result of deepening mutual political trust,” ambitious assessments that can perhaps be chalked up to the groundbreaking symbolism of the moment for the two sides.

But there was also much enthusiasm from the United States, Taiwan’s principle benefactor and China’s ever-looming rival as both stake out a growing presence in East Asia. In no uncertain terms, the U.S. celebrated this week’s historic shift in the cross-strait “status quo,” even though the tense standoff has long played into American strategic interests.

“The United States strongly supports efforts between China and Taiwan to improve cross-strait relations, and we are glad to see the recent meeting,” said Evan Medeiros, senior director for Asian affairs with the National Security Council.

The prospect of restored cross-strait political ties seemed to have pleased all three parties, a rare event in a region where U.S.-China competition is heating up, and where Taiwan has walked a tightrope between the world's two superpowers.

But analysts warned that the applause echoing around Washington, Beijing and Taipei could belie divergent interpretations of what the shifting status quo means.

Over six decades of fierce China-Taiwan hostility, the U.S. has backed Taiwan and supplied the government in Taipei with substantial defense aid (in 2011, it was the largest purchaser of defense articles from the U.S.). Taiwan has also become a top-10 trading partner of the U.S. in the course of becoming a key U.S. ally in the region.

Taiwan also figures in Washington's nascent "pivot toward Asia," a vaguely-defined policy of greater involvement in the region, so named by President Barack Obama during a 2011 address to Australia's parliament. Just this week, the White House announced that Obama would embark on a whirlwind tour of South Korea, Malaysia, Japan and the Philippines in late April "as part of his ongoing commitment to increase U.S. diplomatic, economic, and security engagement with countries in the Asia-Pacific region."

Many see the U.S. pivot as a move to contain China, economically and even militarily. Maintaining influence in Taiwan is widely seen as a way to work toward physically surrounding China's coastline with U.S. allies that also include South Korea and Japan.

But Richard Bush, director of the Brookings Center for East Asia Policy Studies, believes that U.S. aims are not so underhanded, and that peaceful coexistence is the prevailing motivation for the U.S. in Asia.

"Taiwan isn't directly part of the pivot, but its efforts to create better relations with China are aimed in the same direction, to create mutually beneficial cooperation between entities that haven't exactly gotten along," Bush said.

"It's not a question of rivalry. Taiwan actually embodies the relationship we'd like to see in terms of better trade and security cooperation," said Douglas Paal, a vice president at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the former director of the American Institute in Taiwan, the name the U.S. uses for its diplomatic mission in Taiwan to avoid offending China.

Paal said the U.S. and China need not arrive at any direct confrontation amid their dueling economic and security influences on the island, at least not in the short term.

For now, a China-Taiwan thaw seems in line with everyone's interests. But analysts caution that convergence can also be explained by a fundamental misunderstanding about what the future holds.

While Beijing views this week's meeting as a harbinger of reunification with Taiwan, however far down the road, Taiwan likely hopes diplomatic engagement with Beijing will ultimately lead to an opening for the island to formally declare its independence.

U.S. hopes for Taiwan are more conservative, said Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute.

“What Washington is looking for is a Goldilocks solution where Taipei and Beijing are warm and friendly, but not so close that Taiwan is completely within Beijing’s orbit and the U.S. has little influence,” Carpenter said.

This week’s talks inched the balance closer to that “Goldilocks” medium, hence the U.S. applause. But will Beijing and Taipei go further?

Beijing’s ultimate goal of absorbing Taiwan into the People’s Republic of China is highly unlikely. Polling consistently shows that about 80 percent of Taiwanese are opposed to reunification with the mainland, and experts say there is only so much Taiwan would be willing to sacrifice in the way of autonomy in order to appease China.

But Carpenter said Beijing could nonetheless further draw Taiwan into its sphere of influence by forging stronger economic and cultural ties, even as it permits the island to keep its political distance. Hooking the line of Taiwan’s business elite and agricultural workers to the booming mainland appears to be Beijing’s long game, he said. That could gradually undermine the U.S. pivot.

In fact, economic and cultural interaction between Beijing and Taipei has been gradually improving since the election of Taiwan’s pro-China president Ma Ying-jeou in 2008. China and Taiwan have since signed the Cross-Straits Economic Cooperation Agreement and eased travel restrictions for study and tourism. A total of 19 agreements have been signed between the sides, according to a statement provided to Al Jazeera by Taipei’s foreign ministry.

“We’re moving towards the status Finland once had with regard to the Soviet Union, where it ran its own domestic affairs but there were a number of lines it dare not cross for fear of annoying Moscow,” said Carpenter. “That’s what the PRC (People’s Republic of China) is looking for.”

For now, both sides are enthusiastic about the shift. “We absolutely can’t let the relations between the two sides be turbulent again, and even more, we can’t backtrack,” said Zhang, the mainland’s representative, as quoted by Xinhua. It was “truly a day for the record books,” said Taiwan’s Wan.

But the future is ever uncertain. The window could soon shutter for leaders of the two sides – Taiwan’s President Ma and his mainland counterpart Xi Jinping – to meet face-to-face for the first time, or for full diplomatic relations to materialize. Ma is unpopular in Taiwan, and when he leaves office in 2016 his successor will likely come from the rival, China-skeptic Democratic Progressive Party, which generally leans toward independence and is less keen on appeasing Beijing.

And on Friday, China rejected Taiwan’s request for a presidential meeting at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Beijing this fall, calling the request “inappropriate.” It was an

icy reminder that cross-strait relations remain very much in limbo, and that Beijing holds ultimate sway.

“The initiative is largely with Taiwan, as long as Beijing remains patient,” Carpenter said. “But if there were major domestic problems on the mainland, there could always be the temptation to use Taiwan as the unifying issue and take a harder line against Taiwan’s de facto independence.”