

An Analysis of Retired Chinese Military Leaders' recent talks on the Establishment of Cross-Strait Military Confidence Building Measures

Le-yi Chi

China Times Senior Reporter

2009.12.22

1. Introduction

The 8th International Symposium on Sun Tzu's Art of War was held in Beijing from November 2 to 3, 2009, and an academic conference entitled "60-year development of cross-Strait relations" held by the Pacific Culture Foundation in Taipei on November 13 and 14. I was honored to attend these two seminars and talked to several retired military leaders from the Mainland in private. My personal analyses are as follows.

2. The Fundamental Difference Between the Two Sides of the Strait

There is a fundamental difference between Taiwan and China on the issue of the establishment of military confidence building measures. Retired Chinese military leaders took Hu Jintao's 'six points' as guidelines, pointing out that the military CBM issue is now addressed as 'a particular situation that the nation is still not united', and it should be discussed only on the premise that both sides of the Strait believe unification is the ultimate objective. However, the Ma administration emphasizes on 'putting aside disputes' when promoting military CBM talks and consultation. The goal is to avoid conflict and seek peaceful

development across the Strait.

Retired Chinese military leaders think that President Ma's policy of 'no unification, no independence and no use of force' implies 'maintaining status quo permanently.' Thus they doubt the purpose of Ma's 'putting aside disputes'. They think the true intention under which is to 'delay and wait for change'. Beijing needs more strategic assurance and political guarantees from President Ma. The PLA's major general Luo Yuan, representing most people's unspoken opinions in the army, criticized that Ma's 'three nos' policy as one of 'peaceful split'. Internet surfers in Mainland China overwhelmingly support Luo on the China Military Online, the web version of PLA Daily. Net users contended that Beijing should 'knock and wake Ma' if necessary and should warn Taiwan's that their illusion is not realistic. Nevertheless, considering Beijing's current policy towards Taiwan, Luo's comment is obviously more extreme. We are not sure whether Luo was saying these words under the authorization from higher ranks. Maybe he was investigated or admonished for his statements, or maybe not. We need to watch subsequent events carefully.

As for the roles of the US and Japan, retired Chinese military leaders claim unanimously that external forces should be prevented from intervening in cross-strait affairs, but they have different opinions in terms of the practical application. General Pan Zhenqiang, former director of the Institute of International Strategic Studies at the National Defense University, believed that the U.S. and Japanese scholars and experts could participate in cross-strait "Second Track" dialogues, showing respect for their roles as stakeholders. However, involvement in

first track negotiations is absolutely impossible. Lt General Li Jijun, former deputy director of the Military Science Academy, considered that external forces should be excluded from the establishment of military confidence building measures across the Strait, no matter in which linkage. Their different viewpoints showed that retired military leaders agree on policy principles, but they hold different thoughts on practical application.

It is worth noting that retired military leaders highlight the importance of ‘the public opinion of the Chinese people’ at times. For example, on the issue of the removal of missiles aimed at Taiwan, Beijing argued that if missiles were removed without the negotiation process, Chinese public opinion would not accept it. Therefore, missile removal can only be an issue to be discussed but not a premise. It is predictable that in the future they will frequently resort to ‘mass public opinion’ in China to suppress ‘small public opinion’ in Taiwan, which will become Beijing’s new legitimate discourse in dealing with the Taiwan’s sovereignty issue.

3. Beijing’s doubt

Although the cross-Strait relationship has entered a new phase of ‘three links’(direct transportation, trade and postal services), retired Lt General Li as well as other Chinese retired generals still worry about the cross-Strait situation, especially in the following three aspects. First, will the Ma administration sustain its China policy? Second, will the DPP win the presidential election and take power again? Third, will the Ma administration hesitate its policy if external forces such as the U.S. and Japan intervene ? These retired military leaders expected President Ma to

offer more assertive strategic and political reassurances in order to set the table for political and military talks across the Strait. They also advocated that President Ma oppose Tibetan and Xinjiang independence in public to improve mutual political trust between China and Taiwan.

According to anonymous sources, people in charge of the Taiwan issue in the PLA have studied the current situation and concluded that Taiwan seems to retreat and act passively about the establishment of cross-Strait “peaceful mutual trust”. Beijing cannot understand Taiwan’s true intention towards the future development of cross-Strait relations, especially the Ma administration’s stance and attitude. In my opinion, this uncertainty will make Beijing intensify its Taiwan policy and pose more pressure during Ma’s tenure, seeking to find a symbolical breakthrough and achieve some kind of consensus or framework for cross-Strait political and military dialogues. Beijing’s goal here is not to accomplish an essential success; instead it hopes to expand the depth of cross-Strait talks and fortify cross-Strait economic and cultural cooperation to avoid the three links being affected if the DPP regains power.

4. Consensus between Taiwan and China

Although there is a fundamental difference on the issue of CBMs between China and Taiwan, both sides have a consensus on conflict prevention and management. Beijing thinks that difference between the two sides is wide, but it will not prevent engagement and dialogue. Li suggested that China and Taiwan could cooperate in defense of the South China Sea and East China Sea, protecting the existing territory of the ethnic Chinese. Even if the issue involved international law and the regional strategic balance, Li considered that Taiwan and China’s

cooperation would not provoke an over-reaction from neighboring countries. Li's was making propaganda, but we cannot rule out the possibility that when accidents or incidents occurred in those areas, Beijing would ask Taiwan to take action together, to show Taiwan's determination to cope with a 'national calamity.' How should Taiwan react then? We need to maintain good relationships with neighboring countries whilst not being thoroughly pro-China. We should prepare in advance and draw up plans as soon as possible.

In terms of practical measures, retired Chinese military leaders proposed that China and Taiwan could collaborate in compiling a history book of the Sino-Japanese War, which is the least cost and easiest method to reach a consensus between both sides of the Strait. China is looking forward to taking "the first step of concrete cooperation" on the CBM issue and making a breakthrough. In addition, they also suggest that a "Traffic Separation Scheme" be adopted in the Taiwan Strait to avoid maritime accidents. Considering the three link era across the Strait, the latter is a pragmatic suggestion, so Taiwan can accept to show its goodwill and sincerity.

An intriguing episode occurred during the "60-Year Development of Cross-Strait Relations" seminar. Before the conference was held, Chinese participants deemed that following President Ma's negotiation principle of 'economics first, then politics', it would be a stretch for Taiwan and China to engage in political talks. Therefore, Chinese participants had always intended to discuss diplomatic and military issues, but to avoid controversy, they downplayed it by calling diplomatic issues 'foreign affairs' and military issues 'security affairs', which were combined and labeled as 'general affairs'. In the closing session, Chinese participants

insisted on using ‘one China principle’ while Taiwanese participants argued for use of ‘one China, different interpretations’, and in the end, both sides made concessions and agreed on ‘1992 Consensus’. Similarly, ‘peaceful unification’ proposed by China was opposed and ‘peaceful development’ agreed as a compromise. Was the consensus reached due to practical concern or temporal tolerance? It is still too early to tell. We can assume, however, that only negotiation could bring the possibility of a consensus, which can not be achieved without contacts and exchanges between the two sides.

5. Suggestions for the Taiwan Authorities

Cross-Strait exchange is an unstoppable trend. The Taiwan authorities should integrate key government divisions and organize a kernel team to raise an elaborate discourse on military confidence building measures, including analyses and researches on beyond-military (political mutual trust), pure-military (strategy and tactic), quasi-military (non-traditional security), and paramilitary (political and other aspects) issues. As for subjects related to an end of hostility across the Strait, the establishment of military confidence building measures and signature of peace accords and an integrated statement and position are needed as well.

To show its sincerity, Taiwan should consider holding a quasi-military joint drill to provide humanitarian aid for a maritime accident in the mini three link channel, which should be limited to the non-traditional security area and there is no timetable for further cooperation across the Strait.