Taiwan’s Viable Diplomacy in Times of Uncertainty

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Abstract

Taiwan constitutes a unique case in international affairs. Currently, Taiwan’s ties with its 22 diplomatic allies and unofficial relations with major countries in the world make the island politically exist in the international arena, and Taiwan as a capitalist economy is vibrant in trading with others. President Ma Ying-jeou’s approach, dubbed “viable diplomacy,” has contributed to this positive outcome. Since 2008 Taiwan has been reconciled with mainland China, and forged close ties with Japan, and, most importantly, restored mutual trust with the United States. Nevertheless, the external environment in which Taiwan operates has experienced certain changes since 2008, and regional tensions have arisen in the East and South China Seas and on the Korean Peninsula.

This paper examines Taiwan’s approach of “viable diplomacy” and argues that, amidst regional uncertainties, it is the most feasible and cost-effective strategy for Taiwan. After an introduction to “viable diplomacy” as a strategy, this paper discusses the current tensions in East Asia, including those in the South and East China Seas, on the Korean Peninsula, as well as China’s assertiveness and U.S.-China relations. These tensions present opportunities and challenges to Tai-
wan’s “viable diplomacy,” and Taiwan has to find ways to advance its national interests in times of uncertainty.

**Keywords:** Viable Diplomacy, Meaningful Participation, ECSPi, ADIZ, U.S.-China Relations

### I. Introduction

Taiwan constitutes a unique case in international affairs. Currently, Taiwan’s ties with its 22 diplomatic allies and unofficial relations with major countries in the world make the island politically exist in the international arena, and Taiwan as a capitalist economy is vibrant in trading with others. President Ma Ying-jeou’s approach, dubbed “viable diplomacy,” has contributed to this positive outcome. Since 2008 Taiwan has been reconciled with mainland China, and forged close ties with Japan, and, most importantly, restored mutual trust with the United States. Nevertheless, the external environment in which Taiwan operates has experienced certain changes since 2008, and regional tensions have arisen in the East and South China Seas and on the Korean Peninsula. Therefore, some pundits and analysts begin to question whether “viable diplomacy” is still a feasible policy choice for Taiwan.

This paper aims to examine Taiwan’s approach of “viable diplomacy” and argues that, amidst regional uncertainties, it is the most feasible and cost-effective strategy for Taiwan. This paper proceeds as follows: First, the author introduces the concept of “viable diplomacy” and documents how this approach has helped Taiwan restore relationships with major countries since 2008. Then, the paper discusses the current tensions in East Asia, including those in the South and East China Seas, on the Korean Peninsula, as well as China’s assertiveness and U.S.-China relations. These tensions present
opportunities and challenges to Taiwan’s “viable diplomacy.” The paper concludes with policy suggestions for ways to advance Taiwan’s national interests in times of uncertainty.

II. “Viable Diplomacy” in Retrospect and the Regional Security Context since 2013

The Republic of China (ROC; Taiwan) and the People’s Republic of China (PRC; mainland China) have been competing severely on the diplomatic front since 1971 when the mainland took over the seat in the United Nations (UN) representing China. At the end of 1971, the PRC had roughly 40 diplomatic allies while the ROC had official relationships with 56 countries. The number increased on the China side but reached a new low on the Taiwan side, especially when China requested all potential allies to abide by the “One China” principle and to sever their ties with Taiwan. From 1988 to 2000, due to Taiwan’s approach of flexible diplomacy aiming to deepen official ties with diplomatic allies and to expand unofficial relationships with other countries, Taiwan secured about 30 diplomatic allies, remained in close relations with major countries, and participated in important international organizations such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum. Between 2000 and 2008, however, Taiwan’s foreign relations were stalled by a relatively tense relationship across the Taiwan Strait, together with the lack of mutual trust with the United States.

One of the main concerns behind “viable diplomacy” is the growing cloud of the influence of China. Taiwan and mainland China had been in a cut-throat competition for diplomatic recognition and the number of Taiwan’s diplomatic allies dropped from 28 in 2000 to 23 in 2008. In the meantime, Taiwan inefficiently spent a large amount of money to secure or develop ties with other countries, and foreign
media accused Taiwan of conducting “dollar diplomacy” that put diplomatic recognition before good governance, oftentimes leading to corruption and failed governance in the target countries.¹ China’s opposition also delayed Taiwan’s bid for participation in functional inter-governmental organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO).

Considering Taiwan’s limited hard-power vis-à-vis China, a cutthroat approach in competition proved costly and ineffective. In 2010, China overtook Japan as the second largest economy by gross domestic product (GDP) in the world, with a 15% share of world GDP (adjusted for purchasing-power-parity) in 2012. Taiwan constitutes about 1% by the same account. In terms of military strength, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) calculates China’s expenditure as 9.5% of the world share in 2012, while Taiwan constitutes only 0.6%.² Waging a war with China therefore is clearly not a shrewd choice for Taiwan, and how to effectively allocate limited resources and strike a balance between foreign relations and domestic development needs has become the key policy of the Ma administration.

Therefore, President Ma Ying-jeou proposed the concept of “viable diplomacy” when he assumed the presidency in 2008: to conduct foreign policy according to the principles of dignity, autonomy, pragmatism, and flexibility. As President Ma has illustrated, “Soli-

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¹ A detailed analysis of Taiwan’s competition with China on diplomacy can be found in Timothy S. Rich, “Status for Sale: Taiwan and the Competition for Diplomatic Recognition,” *Issues & Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 4, December 2009, pp. 159-188.

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Refining official diplomatic relations, expanding friendships, preserving our dignity, and taking part in the international community are overarching objectives that will not change.”3 On occasions, President Ma further elaborated five roles for Taiwan to assume in international affairs, namely, peacemaker, provider of international humanitarian aid, promoter of cultural exchange, creator of new business opportunities and technology, and standard-bearer of Chinese culture.4 Among these five self-identified roles, being a peacemaker is the foundation for the other four roles and for reconciliation with mainland China while restoring mutual trust with the United States constitutes a condition necessary to Taiwan’s survival.

The feasibility of “viable diplomacy” and the ways to shoulder the responsibility of peacemaker are indicated in Taiwan’s foreign policy. For instance, Taiwan resumed semi-official talks with mainland China while retaining its 23 diplomatic allies since 2008, though Gambia decided to sever official relations with Taiwan in 2013. In addition, Taiwan began to participate meaningfully in the World Health Assembly (WHA) in 2009 and the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) in 2013. More importantly, the United States continues to see Taiwan as a partner while rebalancing its foreign policy to Asia. Nevertheless, in 2013, political power transitions in Japan, South Korea, and China, led to another round of rivalry in the region, and the extent to which “viable diplomacy” can make Taiwan

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4. One latest account for making these roles explicit is President Ma’s interview with The Economist. Please refer to “Interview with Taiwan’s President: Straight from Mr. Ma’s Mouth.” The Economist, March 28, 2014, <http://www.economist.com/node/21599879/print>. 
secure has been called into question.

"Viable diplomacy" has contributed to restoring stability and peace across the Taiwan Strait, but leadership transitions along with heated tensions in the Asia-Pacific region have put this strategy to the test. Several issues deserve more discussion: maritime disputes in the East and South China Seas, the current situation in the Korean Peninsula, and China’s proposal of establishing a new model of great power relationships with the United States.

Before proceeding to each issue, military expenditures in the parties involved are worth noting. Table 1 provides this background knowledge: the U.S. champions among others, followed by China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, while Vietnam and the Philippines lagged behind in 2012.

Table 1: Military Expenditure Data by Country in East Asia, 2000-2012

(in millions of constant US$ of 2011)

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>394,155</td>
<td>397,334</td>
<td>446,142</td>
<td>507,761</td>
<td>553,441</td>
<td>579,831</td>
<td>598,837</td>
<td>604,292</td>
<td>649,010</td>
<td>701,087</td>
<td>720,386</td>
<td>711,402</td>
<td>668,841</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>[37,040]</td>
<td>[45,422]</td>
<td>[52,832]</td>
<td>[57,390]</td>
<td>[63,560]</td>
<td>[71,496]</td>
<td>[84,021]</td>
<td>[96,949]</td>
<td>[106,774]</td>
<td>[128,869]</td>
<td>[138,467]</td>
<td>[146,134]</td>
<td>[157,603]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>60,189</td>
<td>60,128</td>
<td>60,565</td>
<td>61,422</td>
<td>61,199</td>
<td>61,246</td>
<td>60,928</td>
<td>60,583</td>
<td>59,345</td>
<td>59,534</td>
<td>59,530</td>
<td>59,246</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>[20,031]</td>
<td>[20,609]</td>
<td>[21,177]</td>
<td>[21,898]</td>
<td>[22,859]</td>
<td>[24,722]</td>
<td>[25,613]</td>
<td>[26,773]</td>
<td>[28,525]</td>
<td>[30,110]</td>
<td>[29,912]</td>
<td>[30,884]</td>
<td>[31,484]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>10,384</td>
<td>10,195</td>
<td>9,860</td>
<td>9,765</td>
<td>9,782</td>
<td>9,412</td>
<td>9,030</td>
<td>9,555</td>
<td>9,729</td>
<td>10,479</td>
<td>9,903</td>
<td>9,988</td>
<td>10,513</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>1,246</td>
<td>1,321</td>
<td>1,396</td>
<td>1,471</td>
<td>1,507</td>
<td>1,572</td>
<td>1,850</td>
<td>2,386</td>
<td>2,350</td>
<td>2,581</td>
<td>2,878</td>
<td>2,686</td>
<td>3,397</td>
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<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>[2,186]</td>
<td>[2,062]</td>
<td>[2,171]</td>
<td>[2,419]</td>
<td>[2,279]</td>
<td>[2,322]</td>
<td>[2,401]</td>
<td>[2,630]</td>
<td>[2,630]</td>
<td>[2,532]</td>
<td>[2,657]</td>
<td>[2,701]</td>
<td>[2,815]</td>
</tr>
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</table>


III. The East and South China Seas

Marine territorial disputes have become salient in the Asia-
Pacific region since the early 1990s and have been discussed comprehensively in recent years. The South China Sea issue caught our attention once and again in 2010, when U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton formally addressed the U.S. position of not taking sides on territorial claims to islands in the South China Sea asserted by China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Taiwan, and Brunei. The U.S. reasserted its national interest in freedom of navigation, and the expectation that all claims to rights in waters need to be based on land-based claims valid under international law. However, China’s foreign minister, Yang Jiechi, on the same occasion articulated a strong response to argue that there was no problem in the area and intimidated ASEAN countries not to seek outside or multilateral support.

As a major part of the islets in the South China Sea, the Pratas Islands are under the effective control of Taiwan. Besides Taiwan, the PRC and Vietnam have their own claims over the Paracel Islands in the northern part of the sea. Sovereignty claims over other islands and island chains are asserted by China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Taiwan, and Brunei, while each party except Brunei exerts more or less effective occupation of at least one islet or shoal in the


South China Sea. Indonesia’s maritime claims in the South China Sea lie to the southwest of China’s nine-dash line, and therefore do not collide with those made by China.  

In responding to other claimants in the South China Sea, China has flexed its muscle and exerted its administrative rights so as to demonstrate its resolve. On July 24, 2012, China established Sansha City on Yongxing Island as the center for the civil and administrative work of the Spratlys, Paracels, and the Macclesfield Bank. This is considered a reaction to Vietnam’s passage of its “Law of the Sea” in June 2012. In the meantime, China advanced its cordial relationship with ASEAN countries to diplomatically prevent any statement concerning the South China Sea disputes in the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting. The Philippines submitted its dispute with China to the UN for international arbitration on February 1, 2013. In December 2013, Hainan Province issued new fishing regulations in the South China Sea requiring all foreign vessels that seek to fish or conduct surveys in Chinese waters to obtain advance approval from the “relevant and responsible department” of Hainan. These rules, considered a challenge to sovereignty claims made by others in the South China Sea, became effective on January 1, 2014.

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The root of the disputes in the East China Sea dates back to the 19th century and was reignited in 2012 when the Japanese government decided to “nationalize” the Senkaku islands/Diaoyutai island. This gesture was considered a response to Japan’s domestic nationalism in a time of economic downturn and inevitably invited China’s strong protest and possible escalation of the crisis to a military confrontation between the two countries. China reorganized its State Oceanic Administration (SOA) in March 2013, and in July 2013, the first ship of the “China Sea Police” came into service.

In November 2013, mainland China unilaterally declared the establishment of an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea, further complicating the situation in the region. Domestic political considerations and nationalism within each party involved are narrowing the window for cooperation and peaceful resolution. However, after the establishment of the ADIZ, China is seen by many in the region as a destabilizing factor for peace and stability. The U.S., for instance, for the first time asked China to clarify its claim in terms of land features rather than from historical nine-dash lines. Jeffrey A. Bader notes the U.S. interests in this issue as follows:

- to ensure freedom of navigation as an international right;
- to prevent use of force or coercion to resolve claims either to

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territory or to maritime rights;
• to advocate respect for international norms and law for resolving all such issues;
• to ensure that all countries, including the U.S., have the right to exploit the mineral and fish resources outside of legitimate Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs);
• to prevent a U.S. ally, the Philippines, from being bullied or subject to use of force;
• to ensure that the rights of all countries, not merely large ones, are respected.

These recent developments indicate that the U.S. aims to reassert its influence in the East and South China Sea issues.

In his line of “viable diplomacy,” on August 5, 2012, Taiwan’s President Ma declared the **East China Sea Peace Initiative (ECSPI)** based on the idea that “sovereignty” and “resources” can be dealt with separately, where sovereignty is indivisible, but resources can be shared. This guiding principle aims to shelve disputes and pursue peace and reciprocity. When China’s announcement of its ADIZ once again exacerbated the regional security environment, Taiwan proposed a “Statement on East China Sea Air Space Security” in February 2014 to lower the tension. In this statement, Taiwan hopes all parties will abide by the principles of international law and cope with disputes peacefully, and ensure air space security in the spirit of the ECSPI.

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IV. The Korean Peninsula and the China Factor

Recent changes on the Korean Peninsula mainly include two issues. The U.S.-ROK alliance was formed six decades ago after the signing of a Mutual Defense Treaty in 1953. The U.S. perceives this alliance relationship as one of the pillars sustaining its military presence and political influence in the Asia-Pacific region, and the Republic of Korea sees this dyadic relationship as the cornerstone of its national security given the complications put forth by North Korea.\textsuperscript{14} The other key issue relates to North Korea. The phrase “on again, off again” best captures the situation of the Six-Party Talks, first convened in 2003 to deal with the nuclear issue in North Korea but now seemingly sentenced to death. This nuclear crisis can be dated back to the 1990s, since North Korea has been trying to gain legitimacy from the U.S. and sideline the political influence of South Korea.

The U.S.-ROK alliance was adapted in the Lee Myung-bak era. In February 2008, Lee assumed the presidency in South Korea and proposed that this alliance should be transformed into a “twenty-first century strategic alliance.” This is a sounding promise to President Bush who was trying to have allies share more burdens on global issues. In June 2009, Lee and Obama adopted a “Joint Vision for the Alliance of the Republic of Korea and the United States of America,” in which both sides agreed to build a comprehensive strategic alliance of bilateral, regional and global scope, based on common values and mutual trust.

While South Korea and the U.S. aim to cope with the North Korea crisis, China factors into the equation. China under Xi Jinping

remains unclear about its North Korea policy. Xi has maintained that North Korea should renounce its nuclear programs and welcome all parties to resume the Six-Party talks. And yet, the efficacy of this policy remains to be seen.

Despite the uncertainties, South Korea takes a more proactive role in shaping the Korean Peninsula and the Northeast Asia. In September 2011, Madam Park Geun-hye published an article in *Foreign Affairs* to elaborate her policy toward North Korea, in which “building trust” is the key issue to inter-Korean relations. President Park visited the U.S. and then China in 2013, indicating the significance of these two countries to South Korea’s plan for the Korean Peninsula. In the meantime, she proposes to use *trustpolitik* to cope with North Korea and the Northeast Asia Peace Initiative to nurture peace and stability in the region. These two issues undoubtedly involve the U.S. and China.

It is wise for President Park to adopt this tit-for-tat strategy vis-à-vis North Korea given the latter’s track record on nuclearization since the 1990s. For the United States, whether President Park’s *trustpolitik* will be going too far and the extent to which South Korea’s ambition to take the lead forging a new security architecture would have an impact on U.S. leadership in Asia remain to be seen. In other words, the U.S. tries to cool the heat between two Koreas to prevent being trapped by the U.S.-ROK alliance, and yet in the meantime it needs to make sure South Korea will not go too far to reconcile with the North and thus trigger an abandonment problem in the U.S.-ROK dyadic relationship. However, while China is eager to formulate a “new type of great power relations” with the U.S., it remains to be seen whether, and to what extent, this policy would affect the Korean Peninsula. The Obama administration undoubtedly puts an emphasis on denuclearization, while maintaining close cooperation with South Korea on economic and non-traditional security issues.15 It is worth
noting that China’s unilateral establishment of the ADIZ also angered South Korea, and the latter revised its own ADIZ promptly as a response in December 2013.

V. China’s Assertiveness and the New Model of Great Power Relations

In recent years, we have witnessed that China has become more vocal in international affairs, oftentimes with the specific mention of “core interests” since 2010. Thus, media, pundits, and academic circles have begun to describe the diplomacy of China as “assertive” and to suggest that China has dropped Deng Xiaoping’s status quo-oriented mantra of “hide one’s capabilities and bide one’s time” (taoguang yanghui) and begun to assume a more assertive role internationally.16 China’s official statements also reflected this change, in which “continuously keep a low profile and actively get something done” (jianchi taoguang yanghui, jiji yousu zuowei) has become the mainstream description for China’s diplomacy.17 Along this path, many analysts contend that a possible collision is in the making between China as a rising power and the United States as the status

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Xi Jinping assumed office as the top leader of China in 2013, and analysts and pundits were watching closely as to whether China would continue its assertive approach in diplomacy. In the meantime, Chinese scholars and analysts attempted to figure out what “assertiveness” really meant in Chinese and at a later time defined the term “assertiveness” as “self-confident and unyielding” (zixin er qiangying).19

As Alastair Iain Johnston aptly points out, assertiveness in international politics can be defined as “a form of assertive diplomacy that explicitly threatens to impose costs on another actor that are clearly higher than before.”20 Yet, Johnston suggests that the noticeable shift in Chinese foreign policy may be misleading because China was rigid on the issues of sovereignty and territorial integrity long before 2010. In other words, it is not a novel fact that China is assertive in diplomacy, and China is now in most cases defending existing interests. However, it is China’s policy behavior that raises concerns about possible destructive outcomes if it employs coercion.

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against others in disputes.\textsuperscript{21}

Before making a prediction of the future of China’s assertive diplomacy under Xi Jinping, we need to note the roots of this assertiveness. Many Chinese analysts suggest that China’s assertiveness is inevitable due to the growth of its overall national capabilities vis-à-vis the U.S. and other major powers.\textsuperscript{22} China does have the potential to become the largest economy in the next decade. Overtaking Japan in terms of nominal GDP to be the world’s second-largest economy in 2010 further boosted China’s self-confidence. In addition, China’s military spending was already more than twice as much Japan’s in 2013.\textsuperscript{23}

In addition to a growth in economic capability, Thomas Christensen pertinently argues that China’s assertive diplomacy is deeply rooted in a mix of confidence on the international stage and insecurity at home. Since the financial crisis of 2008, though top leaders remain sober in their assessment, Chinese citizens, netizens and nationalist commentators in the media and Internet have often exaggerated China’s rise and the


\textsuperscript{22} Dingding Chen, Xiaoyu Pu, & Alastair Iain Johnston, “Correspondence: Debating China’s Assertiveness,” pp. 176-183. William Callahan details how Chinese intellectuals perceive the strategic future of China, in which Liu Mingfu, a professor from China’s National Defense University, articulates that China should have a “military rise” after economic success and to contest U.S. hegemony. Please refer to William A. Callahan, “China’s Strategic Futures: Debating the Post-American World Order,” \textit{Asian Survey}, Vol. 52, No. 4, July/August 2012, pp. 617-642.

decline of the U.S. These relatively hawkish voices have created a heated political environment for the Chinese government such that it is not able to back down from disputes. The U.S. is usually the target of feverish criticism and popular nationalism, and sometimes the Chinese top leadership is also carped for being too soft.\(^{24}\)

Problems of regime legitimacy constitute another source of China’s assertive diplomacy. Wealth and power seem reasonable for China to pursue, and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has set the goal of economic development to justify its rule in China. As Orville Schell and John Delury maintain, the CCP has completed a great achievement in that it helped the Chinese people to be wealthy, and yet it is now facing tremendous pressure over how to continue its reign with legitimacy.\(^{25}\) A possible economic downturn, corruption, social injustice and inequality, environmental degradation, and even party politics have a negative impact on the CCP’s image. Moreover, the civil-military relationship between the CCP and the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) remains opaque and thus gives rise to speculation that it is in the leadership’s interests to flex China’s muscle abroad.\(^{26}\) In all, overconfidence in economic growth, the rise of popular nationalism, and legitimacy problems seem to make China’s assertive diplomacy appear to be rational.

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\(^{25}\) Orville Schell & John Delury, *Wealth and Power: China’s Long March to the Twenty-first Century* (NY: Random House, 2013). This is one among many articles discussing the legitimacy problem of the CCP in recent years.

Together with its growing assertiveness, China wishes to develop a special relationship with the U.S. When the U.S. proposed to set the “G-2” conception to build up a cooperative relationship with China, the latter tacitly declined. The strange death of the G-2 conception may look not so strange after a close examination of China’s latest proposal for a “new type of great power relations.” This idea first appeared in October 2009, when Chinese State Councilor Dai Bingguo conveyed that “We are part of the efforts to build a new model of relationship between two major countries, a relationship rooted in mutual respect, harmonious coexistence and win-win cooperation in an age of globalization.” In February 2012, Xi Jinping visited the United States and stated “China and the United States should establish a ‘new type of great power relations,’ which is unprecedented and informs the future.” Hu Jintao, three months later, in his opening speech for the Fourth U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED), included the words “advance mutually beneficial, win-win cooperation, develop a new type of great power relations.” In June 2013 in meeting with Obama at Sunnylands, Xi Jinping summarized the contents of the “new type of great power relations” with three phrases: (1) neither a confrontation nor a conflict; (2) mutual respect; and (3) win-win cooperation. This is a further attempt in the Chinese leader’s clarification of the concept which Ren Xiao dubbed as “Xi’s three points.”

Many discussions in China and abroad keep on finding out what this phrase really means and the extent to which this really has an impact on policy formulation. After all, too many slogans and too much jargon have appeared one after another since Xi has assumed the presidency of China. It seems that China’s proposal of a “new

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type of great power relations” has several major differences with “G-2.” First and foremost, this is a Chinese initiative, suggesting China’s becoming more confident, if not assertive, over the years. “G-2” as an American proposal, was unappealing at best and looked suspicious to China.

Second, this “new type of great power relations” focuses on strategy and intention, suggesting that China and the U.S. should work together because they share the same benign intention in pursuit of stability and of a win-win situation. The calculation behind “G-2,” to Chinese officials and analysts, is related to the distribution of national power and capabilities. In other words, even though these two concepts share the common ground that cooperation is possible, “G-2” is utility-oriented.

Third, in line with this utilitarian thinking, the U.S. has invited China to share the burden and provide the public good for the international society, but China focuses more on how to protect its core interests rather than the public good. When it comes to policy choices, this “new type of great power relations” focuses more on regional issues while “G-2” has more global concerns.

Last but not least, the U.S. proposal of “G-2” exclusively applies to U.S.-China relations, but a “new type of great power relations,” though with a focus on the U.S.-China relationship, can be applied to other dyadic relations with major powers such as Russia, India, and others.

China under Xi also seeks effective responses to heated regional issues, which leads the U.S. and other countries to question whether China’s desire for this new model of great power relationships would prevail over its assertiveness. The coordination problem within
Chinese governmental departments deepens others’ suspicion. The declaration of the ADIZ in November 2013 was a case in point, in which the Ministry of National Defense (MND) played a significant role. The PLA is certainly one of the political power bases for Xi, but whether the military will enjoy more influence over foreign policy in the future is still debatable. In all, the CCP-PLA consensus on regime stability is a common ground for civil-military relations in China, while the PLA can exert its influence on security/military-related foreign affairs through formal institutions such as the Central Military Commission (CMC).

For the nuclear crisis in the Korean Peninsula, China’s assertiveness may lead to another path. In mid-February 2014, Chinese vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin visited Seoul after completing a four-day visit to North Korea. It is seen as rare for a Chinese official to visit South Korea immediately after visiting North Korea. This visit is of course in China’s interests, and is believed to be a response to U.S. pressure demanding China’s cooperation over North Korea. It is noticeable that this was the first time that the CCP delegated this type of visit to the MFA and made it public. Whether China’s change in style in coping with North Korea would lead to a shift in policy content remains to be seen, but this may be in response to the U.S. expectation of how to “operationalize” the new model of great power relations.

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VI. By Way of Conclusion

Regional tensions present both challenges and opportunities yet I argue that “viable diplomacy” is still a feasible policy for Taiwan, allowing it to thrive and live in times of uncertainty. Challenges include instability in the Korean Peninsula, and the possible escalation of crises in the South and East China Seas, and if China decides to assertively coerce Taiwan into its orbit by force. Nevertheless, the U.S. plays a significant role preventing the situation from worsening. And Taiwan’s “viable diplomacy” serves the first function to maintain a cordial relationship and mutual trust with the U.S.

Second, “viable diplomacy” serves to stabilize cross-Strait relations. Domestic sources of China’s assertive diplomacy will continue to exist in the near future, and overconfidence in economic growth and popular nationalism may continue to feed China’s assertiveness. In light of this, Xi’s consolidation of political power is a sign for cautious optimism. Regional partners and stakeholders around the world should work closely to pay heed to China’s definition of “core interests” and how the Chinese plan to defend those interests. China needs to be informed of the rationale behind the threatening image perceived by others, and via “viable diplomacy” Taiwan can encourage China to discuss its concerns with the world, not to simply define those concerns as “core interests” and defend them proactively with unilateral actions.

Third, “viable diplomacy” helps Taiwan highlight its role of peacemaker in regional affairs. Maritime disputes in East Asia can be a litmus test for the idea, and Taiwan’s proposal to shelve sovereignty disputes while exploring resources as indicated in the ECSPI can serve as a point of departure for cooperation.
From a utilitarian perspective, Taiwan’s role of peacemaker and its use of “viable diplomacy” can serve the interests of all parties involved, including regional great and middle powers alike.

- In the spirit of the ECSPI, a serious discussion can function as a starting point for dialogue among parties. This is conducive to information sharing and can help set the foundation and platform for further cooperation.
- It would be unrealistic if parties involved expect to settle the sovereignty issue immediately, but dialogue at this moment is beneficial to each party if it aims to lower the tension. Once responsive and positive interaction can be established to deal with the East China Sea issue, then we can expect to see a more institutionalized mechanism that can monitor and reward cooperation among China, Taiwan, and Japan for resource exploration.
- Taiwan can play a role in different contested issues in the region, and this is definitely in line with the interests of other regional stakeholders. For instance, with careful reading, we can discover that the spirit of the ECSPI to uphold peace and stability is also revealed in the “Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative” proposed by Korean President Park Geun-hye. In other words, a desire for peace and stability is the common ground shared by many countries in the region. Countries which share this ultimate goal shall work together to develop regional peace initiatives and find possible solutions.
- For the U.S. and leading powers, this is the moment not only to encourage parties to talk, but also to demonstrate political will to facilitate the process. Negotiations in world politics are never an easy task, and if parties involved can begin to discuss the current situation and even reach a consensus, the situation will be very different from what it is at present.
- Foreign policy is the extension of domestic politics, and Taiwan
is no exception. “Viable diplomacy” as an approach deserves scrutiny, and how to prioritize the issues concerning Taiwan is the paramount task. The Taiwanese government needs to further generate a domestic consensus on the ways to help Taiwan thrive in times of uncertainty.

As indicated in the above discussion, Taiwan as a peacemaker is and will be contributing to regional stability even in disputed areas. Taiwan’s “viable diplomacy” can facilitate cooperation among concerned parties and further ensure peace and stability in East Asia.


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