

## **Mutual Respect: The Missing Ingredient to Cross-Strait Harmony**

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Jane Addams was a political activist and social philosopher who used her powerful mind to grapple with the radical ideas of her age, most notably the ever-changing meanings of democracy. She was a fighter for participation and inclusion, and a crusader for world peace.

Ms. Addams was also the first American woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. In 1933, she delivered a message that resonates to this day; “civilization is a method of living, an attitude of equal respect for all men.”

We can learn a valuable lesson from Ms. Addams on how China and Taiwan can deal with one another and build a more secure and prosperous Asia.

Current cross-strait relations are based upon the premise of “agree to disagree” where China regards Taiwan as a renegade province and subordinate entity, and treats her likewise. Taiwan however, sees herself as a democracy that is on equal footing to China.

The current “agree to disagree” premise creates no opportunity for understanding or acceptance and needs to be dropped. By creating an “agree to mutual respect” premise that reflects current reality, a doorway for dialog could open and the missing ingredient to ensuring stability in cross-strait relations could be provided.

Mutual respect does not imply obedience, but a civilized attitude that rules out dismissive, aggressive and selfish behavior. By making positive overtures of respect and honor, concessions and compromise can be seen as equitable.

This includes treating the current democratically elected government of Taiwan as the legitimate representative of the people of the island. Respecting Taiwan’s leaders directly translates into respect for the people who placed them in office.

We all are familiar with Taiwan’s complex history even though we do not agree on the details, or the interpretation of those details. What we do know as fact is that after years of struggle and sacrifice, Taiwan created her own democracy.

This democracy was not won through war, or enforced by foreign occupation, but born out of the desire of her people. Democracy has become ingrained deep into our souls and is something that cannot be easily forgotten or abandoned.

China should understand that it is difficult for the Taiwanese to accept solutions not reached via democratic means. The people of Taiwan have the right to determine their future, whether it be merging with China, declaring independence or maintaining the status quo. As citizens of a democratic country, Taiwanese are free to choose which option they want to pursue.

This does not mean that China should assume that self-determination for Taiwan automatically translates into independence. However, China is correct in assuming that Taiwan, at this moment in time, does not have any interest in merging.

China's preferred "one country, two systems" model, such as the one in play in Hong Kong, has no attraction for the Taiwanese. China's continued heavy handed tactics such as economic and political isolation, and the massive buildup of missiles, only fuel mistrust and resentment. These tactics will not soften attitudes.

It is also not helpful for Chinese officials to continue to threaten the Taiwanese people, as Sha Zukang, China's Ambassador to the UN, did in August by declaring that there is no compromise on the Taiwan issue. He said, "For China, one inch of territory is more valuable than the life of our people." Such hostility and reckless disregard for human lives do not endear the Chinese government to Taiwan or reassure the Taiwanese people that China holds similar values.

Taiwan's leaders and citizens believe that Taiwan is entitled to legitimate standing in the international community on account of its economic and political accomplishments. They deeply resent China's increasingly intensifying campaign to isolate them. Beijing's mishandling of the 2003 SARS epidemic (which led to infections and economic disruption in Taiwan) and its continued refusal to allow Taiwan any role in the World Health Organization (WHO) elicit widespread anti-China sentiment.

China also lags behind on issues that the Taiwanese people hold dear, including personal freedoms, rule of law, and human rights. Unlike in China, freedom of expression in Taiwan has practically no boundaries, sometimes to our own regret. But it is an important element in who we are as a people, and how far we have transcended from our past repressions. This freedom is essential to us. It is the corner stone of our political system. While China speaks with one voice, a chorus of millions sings the song of democracy in Taiwan.

China cannot hope to win the "hearts and minds" of the Taiwanese people unless they make some serious internal adjustments to their system of government. Freedom and democracy are not just slogans; they are the ideals of mankind. Like the rest of the world Taiwan would like to see China evolve into a more open society.

But Taiwan is not unfriendly to China or to the Chinese people. There are now approximately one million Taiwanese citizens residing in China, and more than 210,000 cross-strait marriages since relations opened in the late 1980s, with 90,000 PRC spouses living in Taiwan. Estimates of trips by the Taiwanese to China are over four million a year.

More importantly, Taiwanese investment and entrepreneurial ingenuity have been an indispensable component to China's development and economic rise. According to a U.S. government report, Taiwanese companies had devoted some \$240 billion in China -- about half of all of China's total direct foreign investments. More than 60 per cent of Taiwan's information technology hardware is currently being produced there. China's need for continued foreign investment to sustain economic growth and maintain political stability creates an opening for continued cooperation between the two sides

Opportunities exist for further understanding through personal interaction and business exchanges at the civilian level. But this is not enough. At the highest level of government, and throughout the military, mistrust and misunderstanding prevail. This in turn influences and

creates negative and dangerous policies, such as last year's passage by China of its Anti-Secession law, which leads to an environment of instability. This state of affairs must change.

Let's be frank. The consequences of a failure to live in peace are horrible to imagine. While China constantly reminds Taiwan and the world that it is prepared to take over Taiwan by force, any military aggression by China would trigger a chain reaction of destruction and instability that would result in catastrophic consequences not only to the two sides involved, but to the entire Pacific Rim as well. The United States, Japan and others would be dragged into a costly conflict resulting in terrible loss of life, as well as economic and political ruin.

Taiwan wants peace. The United States needs stability. And China cannot afford war. It is in the best interest of each of these countries to formulate a strategy that can create a starting point for accommodation, acceptance and understanding to begin. By shedding any preconceived conditions such as a merger or independence, the two sides can talk about possibilities for resolutions that reassure all parties.

I believe that there are two key steps that can be taken in order for the relationship between China and Taiwan to improve. And it is important that the United States play a major role as architect and facilitator in these steps to ensure that they are achieved and executed in a fair, respectful and equitable manner.

#### Step I: Opening Channels of Communication

Cross-strait exchanges, either economically or person-to-person, is not enough to establish a solid framework for trust and understanding. In order to begin building a more stable relationship, the governments of Taiwan and China must communicate directly with one another.

It is imperative that private, unofficial talks take place between representatives of Taiwan and China with the goal of easing tensions, preventing misunderstandings, and possibly averting disaster. There should be no preset conditions in order for the talks to occur, and the most sensitive items of disagreement should be put aside temporarily, in an effort to engage in conversation. To reduce expectations and spur honest engagement, these talks should be off the record, held at a neutral location, and viewed by participants as an opportunity for both sides to come to the table to find common ground. Both parties should agree to interact with a commitment to tolerance, mutual respect, and to settle conflicts without recourse to violence.

The United States should not only encourage China and Taiwan to open a dialog, it should insist that it happen by taking constructive steps to facilitate the conversation. The United States is still the world's superpower and, despite the demands and distractions the country is facing in the Middle East, it is in America's interest that the tension between China and Taiwan not escalate.

American's involvements is critical, since China and Taiwan's view of each other and of the issues are so biased and so limiting, that we cannot always see mutually satisfactory or mutually beneficial options. The United States, bringing its own knowledge and experience, its own perspective, and, of course, its own power and leverage, could make previously overlooked options visible and feasible. The United States must play the role of honest broker to help ensure mutual respect between China and Taiwan.

#### Step II: Creating Goodwill and Breathing Room

It is within China's power to create an environment that is conducive to more harmonious relations. By extending bona fide gestures that don't have strings attached, China can begin building goodwill in the hearts and minds of the Taiwanese people. If China wishes to become a responsible stakeholder, who is respected by the international community, they need to demonstrate their willingness to find solutions that are not based on coercion or force.

China must begin by building a better reputation with the Taiwanese people. The most effective way to do that is to remove their objection to Taiwan's participation in international organizations, such as the United Nations and its agencies. Taipei already participates in the Asia Development Bank, and the World Trade Organization. This would not be considered an unprecedented move and would relax the fears of the Taiwanese people who are concerned that the Chinese are isolating them into a corner.

China should also stop using Taiwanese investments as a weapon to destabilize the Taiwanese government. Taiwanese investment in China has contributed to creating a robust economy much needed by both the Chinese people and the Chinese government. Yet Chinese authorities frequently exert pressure on Taiwan business people to endorse Chinese positions on cross-strait issues. Taiwan should not be treated any differently than other countries that have invested in China's future, but should be under the same protection that other foreign governments receive.

Further, if China engages with the current leadership of Taiwan, it would send a very strong signal that they sincerely want to find a solution to the problems. Regardless of whom Taiwan elects as President in 2008, the sentiments towards China will not improve if China does not demonstrate that they respect the will of the Taiwanese people. The people of Taiwan will not stand by and let their democracy disintegrate.

The Taiwanese people are very friendly and peace loving. With honest efforts by the Chinese, the people of Taiwan can change their perception of China as a hostile bully set on destroying their way of life, and begin to look at that country as a friendly and helpful neighbor.

If one day China evolves into a more democratic society, perhaps the Taiwanese people might even consider a peaceful merger. Even if Taiwan chooses not to merge, China will be rewarded for their efforts by a more welcoming attitude from the people of the Island. It should be stated, that any good faith effort on the part of China towards Taiwan will not be wasted. These gestures would create a win-win situation for all parties and are worthy goals to pursue.

### Conclusion

The issues between China and Taiwan are not rooted merely in misunderstanding. They evolve from fundamental and deep contradictions which require great skill and restraint on both sides to manage. We can debate the issues to infinity, but it is time for both sides to stand down from the rhetoric of war and begin the construction of peace.

Taiwan and China must begin by talking to one another. There is nothing more important to the future stability of Asia than these two sides setting aside their preconceived notions, and old wounds, and begin meeting face-to-face. Interaction and conversation is the only path to understanding and peace.

It is within our power and our sacred duty to our children, our country and the international community, to resolve the issues that enflame us. There are moments of grace in life when one has the opportunity to reach forward, and change the world.

Let us not draw a line in the sand and refuse to rise above our selfish concerns. Taiwan is ready and willing to begin this process. We will approach this with an open mind and heart, and “equal respect for all men.” It is my hope that China will do the same.

Let us learn the lessons of history and envision a future of prosperity for all of Asia that will come when balance, mutual respect, and harmony are restored to cross-strait relations.

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