

Taiwan's Representative to the United States, Mr. Jason C. Yuan National Strategy Forum Event Summary

By Eric S. Morse

On August 20, 2009, the National Strategy Forum and TECO In Chicago hosted Taiwan's Representative to the United States, Mr. Jason C. Yuan.

The U.S.-Taiwan-PRC relationship has improved significantly since the tense relations during former President Chen Shui-bian's administration. Under this previous administration, Taiwan's foreign policy probed for weaknesses in the PRC's political façade in its push for independence. This antagonistic policy with the PRC was not only unsuccessful but also created tension in the U.S.-Taiwan relationship by placing unnecessary diplomatic pressure on the U.S. to maintain its favorable Taiwan policy.

Since winning the Taiwan presidential election in 2008, President Ma Ying-jeou's administration has pursued a new direction in U.S.-Taiwan-PRC relations. Taiwan has shifted away from an overt independence policy to a modulated pragmatism, a foreign policy that considers the interests of the PRC and other countries in relation to Taiwan's interests. In other words, President Ma is pursuing a "diplomacy of the possible" by focusing on issues and interests that are achievable and aligned with the interests of both the U.S. and the PRC. National interests are not created in a vacuum, but are instead calibrated to find common, achievable goals that can be successfully negotiated.

This policy change is producing results. Since 2008, the PRC and Taiwan have successfully concluded negotiations on increasing trade between the two countries, opening investment opportunities for Taiwan and Chinese investors, and improving tourism by allowing direct flights from the mainland to Taipei. These steps are part of an overall strategy to engage with the PRC on mutual interests and to build sustainable long term continuity in relationships that may open the possibility for further improvement.

However, despite this conciliatory shift in foreign policy, the new administration's strategic plan for the future is designed to create a mutual non-denial political relationship with the PRC. These plans follow two paths.

On the one hand, Ambassador Yuan suggested that Taiwan should negotiate with the PRC from a position of strength. Improving Taiwan's defense forces is one method of building a position of strength. With a sense of improved security, Taiwan would be capable of engaging mainland China with greater confidence.

On the other hand, Taiwan will continue to pursue pragmatic engagement with other countries, principally the U.S. The U.S.-Taiwan relationship is an enigma to most Americans of the younger generations who do not understand why this relationship is important and why it should continue. For this reason, Ambassador Yuan, in conjunction with twelve other Taiwanese cultural offices in the U.S., is working to educate the

younger American generation and policymakers about the need for close U.S.-Taiwan ties.

Securing Taiwan's future requires a careful balancing of strategic objectives. The immediate results of President Ma's policies have been improving relations among the U.S., Taiwan, and the PRC and a reduction in Taiwan Strait tensions, which is in the interest of all three parties.