

## Smart Talk No. 18

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This product presents a policy-oriented summary of the Smart Talk.

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## Taiwan's Political Security in an Era of Cross-Strait Détente

July 29 2011

On July 15, 2011, the East Asia Institute hosted a Smart Talk Seminar with Professor Lowell Dittmer (University of California, Berkeley) who presented an overview of Taiwan's security, focusing on the strategic triangle between Taiwan, mainland China, and the United States. He also elaborated somewhat on the prospects for 2012, a period of leadership transition in all three countries.

### Summary of the Seminar

Taiwan, one of East Asia's main flashpoints, has the unusual distinction of facing its main trade and investment partner as its number one national security threat.

Due to the rapid rise of China, Professor Dittmer argues Taiwan's security can no longer be a bilateral force equation but a calculus of relations between its chief prospective security threat and its sole remaining military supporter, the United States. This relationship of three actors can be depicted as a strategic triangle.

Taiwan needs U.S. support to avoid falling into China's orbit while China needs at least passive U.S. acquiescence in order to incorporate Taiwan without entailing unacceptable risks. In the context of these contradictory demands, Washington's relationships with Taipei and Beijing have been mutually contingent.

When compared to the former "great" strategic triangle between Moscow, Washington, and Beijing, those states had very different motives. Today, China wants to incorpo-

rate Taiwan, for its part Taiwan wants to preserve and enhance its autonomy, while the United States wants to improve its relations with China without upsetting the other. Moreover, this strategic triangle is also made of unequal actors with the United States as the dominant heavyweight. As a consequence, the cost of playing the outcast, which is avoided by the other two players, becomes prohibitive. Professor Dittmer then outlined the three different periods from this triangle.

From 1990 to 1995, following the events at Tiananmen Square and the end of the Cold War, China's international isolation led it to strengthen its relations with Taiwan, developing trade and initiating the SEF-ARATS (The Straits Exchange Foundation - the Association for Relations Across The Straits) talks. Washington also tilted to Taipei which all resulted in a "romantic triangle" forging between Taiwan, China, and the United States.

From 1995 to 2005, following the Taiwan Strait crisis, relations worsened between Taipei and its two partners. As a result of the independence brinkmanship of Presidents Lee Teng-hui and Chen Shui-bian, cross-strait talks were suspended and Taiwan was alienated by both China and the United States, becoming the pariah of the triangle. A stable marriage then existed only between the two big powers.

Since 2005 but mainly from 2008 with the election of Ma Ying-jeou, cross-strait talks have resumed, trade has boomed, and relations thawed with China. Professor Dittmer, evocating a "ménage a trios," explained this n-

ew set of relations using three main arguments. First, domestic political competition gathered in these countries. Despite China's rising nationalism since 1989, Professor Dittmer highlighted the conciliatory line adopted by China facilitated by the 2005 mainland visits by Taiwan's Pan-Blue party leaders Lien Chan and James Soong, the Kuomintang's (KMT) return to power in 2008, and Washington becoming less involved. Second, economic globalization brought Beijing and Taipei closer. China now represents 40% of Taiwan's exports, Taiwan's trade surplus with China is US\$77 billion, and the recent ECFA (Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement) signed in 2010 will only reinforce this trend. Taiwan is thus becoming an "international economic dependent country". Third, China's military power is rapidly modernizing and as a consequence, the balance of power in the Taiwan Strait is now clearly in favor of Beijing.

As a result of this "ménage a trios," the "three links" - direct flights, trade/investment, tourism - developed, and a diplomatic truce has been indirectly implemented and confidence built upon this. It also has had a positive impact in creating "linkage communities" which increases the costs of conflict but reduces the independence-seeking expressions of Taiwanism (*wenhua re*).

Professor Dittmer though acknowledged that the outlook in the long term is bleak for Taiwan, highlighting three main elements. First, an impartial analysis of the real benefits from the recent ECFA could provoke disappointment among Taiwanese and reduce the KMT's popular support. Second, the "identity" issue could come back as a main issue in the 2012 presidential election campaign, an issue President Ma got around in 2008 by focusing on the economy. Recently, the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) candidate, Dr Tsai Ing-wen, stated that national identity will be the main issue for her party. Third and from a long term perspective, Taiwan seems to be becoming more and more dependent on China. Thus, the result of the 2012 Taiwan presidential election will have a huge impact on whether the current "ménage a trios" survives or if Taiwan goes back to the pariah position it had from 1995 to 2005.

During the discussion, it also was noted that com-

pared to South Korea, Taiwan is only focused on national security rather than unification. In this regard, Taiwan is losing its bargaining power in the case of reunification due to its asymmetrical relationships with the mainland.

Looking ahead, there is a pessimistic outlook about the year 2012 as China's assertiveness and Taiwan's nationalism will emerge again and potentially clash. ■

## About the Speaker

### Lowell Dittmer

Professor Dittmer received his Ph.D. from The University of Chicago in 1971. His scholarly expertise is the study of contemporary China. He teaches courses on contemporary China, Northeast Asia, and the Pacific Rim. His current research interests include a study of the impact of reform on Chinese Communist authority, a survey of patterns of informal politics in East Asia, and a project on the China-Taiwan-US triangle in the context of East Asian regional politics. Professor Dittmer's recently published books and monographs include *Sino-Soviet Normalization and Its International Implications* (University of Washington Press, 1992), *China's Quest for National Identity* (with Samuel Kim, Cornell University Press, 1993), *China Under Modernization* (Westview Press, 1994), and *South Asia's Nuclear Crisis* (M. E. Sharpe, 2005).

## Discussants

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