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**The impact of the Sunflower Movement on Cross-Strait Relations**

Mathieu Duchâtel

Stockholm International Peace Research Institute

# The impact of the Sunflower Movement on Cross-Strait Relations

*Mathieu Duchâtel*

The ‘Sunflower movement’ that occupied the Legislative Yuan in Taiwan between March 18 and April 10 has resulted in a temporary interruption of the process of ‘institutionalization of cross-strait relations’ – the key question being for how long. The Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA) signed in June 2013 in Shanghai between SEF and ARATS will not be ratified by the Taiwanese legislature until ‘Cross-strait agreement monitoring regulations’ (两岸协定缔结条例) are enacted. A highly divisive and politicized process subject to intense political competition between the KMT and the DPP, it is also under strong scrutiny by civic organizations that demand high transparency standards. In this context, the capacity of the Ma administration to advance its cross-strait agenda is seriously hindered and perhaps even paralyzed until the end of Ma Ying-jeou’s mandate in 2016.

The ‘Sunflower movement’ may be a turning point in cross-strait relations, although it is too early to come to terms with its full long-term implications. It has brought to international attention some of the tensions at play in Taiwan as a result of cross-strait economic integration and its impact on the Taiwanese society, economic organization and to some extent way of life and even the functioning of Taiwan’s democratic system. The movement is a direct challenge to the top-down cross-strait integration favored by the KMT and the CCP. The rise of political activism outside the structure of party politics is forcing the KMT, the DPP and the CCP to review their current cross-strait policies in preparation of the 2016 presidential elections in Taiwan and most immediately, the seven-in-one municipal elections in November 2014. The paper discusses some of the defining features of the Sunflower movement and its impact on the cross-strait policies of the Ma administration, the DPP and Beijing.

## 1. Some characteristics of the Sunflower movement

### *1.1 The emergence of an anti-capitalist left wing in Taiwan*

In a party system structured by the independence/unification cleavage, social and domestic economic issues are less salient than identity and cross-strait relations. At the same time, years of growing income inequality and stagnating wages are issues of great concern in Taiwan. A specificity of Taiwan is that problems perceived in other post-industrial economies as intimately linked with international

capitalism and globalization are now understood by many as a consequence of cross-strait economic integration.<sup>1</sup> Under the leadership of Tsai Ying-wen, the DPP has developed a narrative linking Ma's Mainland policy to the rise of new socio-economic inequalities. Many Chinese experts see politics in Taiwan through the lens of a "class struggle" and point to the contradiction between the winners and the losers of cross-strait economic integration.<sup>2</sup>

However, opposition to Ma's cross-strait policies is not simply a matter of not benefiting directly from economic opportunities. The occupation of Parliament started as a due-process issue triggered by a procedural problem at the Legislative Yuan. The students accused the KMT's legislative caucus of maneuvering at the review committee to avoid a full item-by-item review of the CSSTA and expedite the ratification of the agreement in plenary session. With "black box politics" the primary target, the demands of the students focused on the construction of procedures of accountability to monitor cross-strait relations. A first demand is the question of the functioning of the Taiwanese democracy, in direct filiation with the civic activism that helped precipitate the democratic transition in Taiwan.

In addition, some of the demands raised by the Sunflower movement would clearly be labeled left wing and anti-capitalist in a Western democratic context. One of the main critics against the CSSTA was that it benefited large corporations at the expense of small and medium enterprises, in typical KMT state capitalism fashion. Another was that the pact would pave the way for unfair competition between giant Chinese State-Owned enterprises and smaller Taiwanese service companies.<sup>3</sup> This line of thinking was encapsulated in the formula describing the Sunflower movement as a "struggle against nepotism".<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that even though the DPP is culturally the closest political force to that line of thinking, none of the main political forces in cross-strait relations – neither the DPP, nor the KMT or the CCP – have platforms or programs to adequately address these concerns.

## *1.2 The rise of activists in Taiwan's democracy*

The Sunflower movement was spearheaded by a core group of activists who despite their youth were called by commentators 'seasoned veterans' or

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<sup>1</sup> 'Taiwan's Sunflower Movement, a Q&A with Shelley Rigger', *Dissent Magazine*, 11 April 2014, [http://www.dissentmagazine.org/online\\_articles/taiwans-sunflower-protests-a-qa-with-shelley-rigger](http://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/taiwans-sunflower-protests-a-qa-with-shelley-rigger).

<sup>2</sup> For example 今马讲马军：反服贸背后的台湾社会四大矛盾, 23 March 2014. [http://www.guancha.cn/Ma-Jun/2014\\_03\\_23\\_216135.shtml](http://www.guancha.cn/Ma-Jun/2014_03_23_216135.shtml).

<sup>3</sup> Glenn Smith, "Taiwan's Sunflower Movement", *Foreign Policy in Focus*, 29 May 2014. <http://fpif.org/taiwans-sunflower-movement/>.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Cole, "Does the Sunflower Movement Have (or Even Need) an Exit Strategy?", Blog post, 29 March 2014, <http://fareasternpotato.blogspot.tw/2014/03/does-sunflower-movement-have-exit.html?spref=fb>.

‘professional activists’.<sup>5</sup> They gained experience since 2012 in a series of protests related to social justice, the environment and the anti-media monopoly. The anti-media monopoly was the defining moment in the creation of this core group.<sup>6</sup>

The maturation of a group that cut their teeth on various social issues explains the strong organizational and logistical skills they displayed during the occupation of the Legislative Yuan, which for them clearly marked a major escalation compared to previous actions. The students organized small teams to arrange for medical and food supplies and even organized waste sorting to maintain high standards of hygiene and social responsibility. They developed a public relations policy to handle domestic and international media. They were also able to raise funds from supporters and sympathizers, as shown by the full-page advertisement they bought in the *New York Times*, at a cost of \$153,000.<sup>7</sup>

The movement took full advantage of the possibilities offered by social networking applications. Many steps were planned through Facebook and Line groups and the students mostly attracted support through diffusion of their actions on Facebook. The Internet even became a theater for a cat-and-mouse game with law-enforcement authorities. The students planned the occupation of Executive Yuan outside their Facebook or Line groups to avoid monitoring by government agencies.<sup>8</sup>

An important outcome from almost a month of occupation of Parliament is that the Taiwanese civil society now has charismatic young leaders and a sound structure. The “Black Island Nation Youth Alliance” (黑色島國青年陣線) was the main group behind the occupation of the Legislative Yuan but it operated on the basis of close ties with or mobilization of like-minded civil society organizations, such as the Green Citizens Action Alliance. Student leaders Lin Fei-fan and Chen Wei-ting have gained great fame in Taiwan, while other leaders were selected to brief audiences in the US at the invitation of FAPA, suggesting that they are being nurtured as the next generation of political figures on the island. One of the main achievements of the students was to generate public support far beyond their core group, with 500,000 persons demonstrating in support of their action on March 30, 2014. At the same time, they divided public opinion in Taiwan, with many – including among young generations – blaming them for creating disruption of social order.

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<sup>5</sup> “New Generation of Activists Step Forward”, *Taipei Times*, 23 March 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Cole, “Does the Sunflower Movement Have (or Even Need) an Exit Strategy?”, *op.cit.*

<sup>7</sup> Vincent Y. Chao, “How Technology Revolutionized Taiwan’s Sunflower Movement”, *The Diplomat*, 15 April 2014.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

### *1.3 The movement's agenda and views on cross-strait relations*

The main leaders of the Sunflower movement Lin Fei-fan and Chen Wei-ting have publicly expressed their support of Taiwan independence. For some of their opponents, these statements confirmed that the Sunflower movement was essentially a pro-Taiwan independence movement in disguise, with the DPP pulling the strings in the shadow.<sup>9</sup> Reports that both Lin Fei-fan and Chen Wei-ting had been DPP members or worked for Tsai Ying-wen reinforced the conspiracy theory on the links between the DPP and the Sunflower movement but they appear to be groundless and were vehemently denied by the DPP.<sup>10</sup>

Civic organizations, including the Black Island Nation Youth Alliance, operate as independent entities outside the realm of the DPP. Although there are strong social links between individuals, especially through the DPP Youth Department, the youth organizations are jealous of their independence and have maintained that they will focus on issues rather than support the positions of the DPP on all aspects of cross-strait relations. Lin Fei-fan even argued in an interview that the force he represented “would compete against the major political parties”.<sup>11</sup> However, in Taiwan's party structure characterized by a limited offer, it is extremely likely that the DPP will attract the support of these groups in future elections.

## 2. Impact on the policies of the main actors in cross-strait relations

### *2.1 Impact on the government's Mainland policy and on the Kuomintang*

The Sunflower movement has left the Ma administration paralyzed and has widened the division within the KMT. The CSSTA was designed as a major step in the liberalization of cross-strait trade, following up on ECFA, a framework agreement planned to gradually give birth to the equivalent of a full-fledge Free-Trade Agreement.

As it prepares for the November seven-in-one municipal elections, the Kuomintang is in a state of disarray. An intra-party struggle that started as a rivalry between Ma Ying-jeou and Wang Jin-pyng over the 2005 KMT chairmanship elections and intensified in 2013 over Ma Ying-jeou's failed attempt to strip Wang from his KMT membership. Some analysts argue that the CSSTA review at the Legislative Yuan was among the sources of conflict between Ma Ying-jeou and Wang Jin-pyng, the President accusing KMT party members, including Wang, to provide insufficient support of the government's cross-strait

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<sup>9</sup> 陳為廷、林飛帆 自承台獨分子, *China Times*, 8 April 2014.

<sup>10</sup> 學運被抹綠 段宜康駁：不要臉的髒東西, *Apple Daily*, 25 March 2014.

<sup>11</sup> “Student leader Lin disagrees with DPP”, *Taipei Times*, 1 August 2014.

policies, including on the CSSTA.<sup>12</sup> The skillful role played by Wang Jin-pyng to facilitate a peaceful end of the Parliament's occupation has also intensified its rivalry with Ma Ying-jeou.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, voices critical of the Ma administration within the KMT are not a classical problem – for the KMT – of lack of party discipline, they suggest a deeper fracture. To give only one example, KMT legislator Alex Tsai as quoted saying the government was “to blame for the effects of its failure to defend its policies adequately and giving completely unconvincing responses to the criticisms leveled about the trade pact”.<sup>14</sup> As a result, the KMT faces a major leadership crisis. However, the content of Ma's Mainland policy is not subject to major criticism – the question is more leadership style and public relations.

At the same time, all items on Ma's Mainland policy agenda are now conditioned to the adoption of “monitoring regulations” to enable better public and legislative scrutiny of cross-strait relations. The Ma administration has already conceded to civic organizations that deals negotiated with Beijing could be revised by the Legislative Yuan and sent back for renegotiation if not ratified.<sup>15</sup> Bones of contention include the length of the review process, penalties for government officials if they are found to jeopardize Taiwan's interests, the degree and *modus operandi* of public scrutiny, the balance of power between the Legislative and Executive Yuans, and as always in cross-strait relations, the language used to describe the relationship between the two sides of the Strait. The negotiation of the final text is very likely to be extremely contentious. In such a context of polarization, the Ma administration is in no position to conclude on the mutual establishment of representative offices or the meeting with Xi Jinping. The sacking of MAC Vice-Chairman Chang Hsien-yao further engulfs the KMT in unproductive infighting and impedes its ability to conduct cross-strait negotiations.

## *2.2 Impact on the DPP's platform and cross-strait agenda*

In this context, the DPP appears to be the main political winner. Many media and expert comments, including from China, note that the DPP is now in good position to win the presidential elections in 2016. However, DPP officials have remained cautious and prefer to highlight the shortcomings of the party, which they note has been out of touch with social movements. A key word in Taiwan to describe the DPP in the Sunflower movement has been ‘marginalization’ (邊緣化). Hsieh Chang-ting noted for example that the protests brought the party's flaws to the

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Cole, “Sunflower in Springtime, Taiwan's crisis and the End of an Era in Cross-Strait Relations”, *China Brief*, vol. 14, no. 7, 9 April 2014.

<sup>13</sup> “Calls emerge in KMT for Ma-Wang rapprochement”, *Taipei Times*, 30 August 2014.

<sup>14</sup> “Protests Hurt KMT, DPP: Members”, *Taipei Times*, 10 April 2014.

<sup>15</sup> “Ma Administration unveils bill to oversee China pacts”, *Taipei Times*, 3 April 2014.

fore.<sup>16</sup> Among these flaws, one could point to the incapacity of the DPP to provide satisfactory oversight in Parliament, to make the CSSTA review salient in the public debate, and to articulate a convincing narrative regarding liberalization of trade with China.

If the DPP did not initiate the Sunflower movement, it came in full support of the occupation of Parliament, with party heavyweights attending demonstrations and making statements of support. But the strong opposition to cross-strait economic integration came to prominence exactly when the DPP is rethinking its cross-strait policies, with the view that it needs a realistic formula to continue cross-strait interactions if it is to ever regain power. This double balancing act – on the one hand, between the DPP’s advocacy of Taiwan’s independence and its ambition to work with Beijing, on the other hand, its temptation to be more moderate but to benefit from the students movements that in many ways holds radical views – is a challenge for the green party. Liu Shih-chung, from the party’s think-tank, has noted the potential difficulties in living up to the expectations of the civic organizations if the DPP wins the presidential elections in 2016, taking the example of the supervision of cross-strait ties. If the DPP operates on standards of transparency that are lower than requested by civic organizations because it needs to accommodate the realities of exercising power, it may also face civic opposition.<sup>17</sup>

As a result, the DPP is still hesitating on the best course of action for reforming its cross-strait policy. The review process that ended in January 2014 resulted in a reaffirmation of the 1999 Resolution on Taiwan’s Future, the most moderate version of the party’s vision for cross-strait relations and Taiwan’s status.<sup>18</sup> During the Sunflower Movement, Former DPP Chairman Su Tzeng-chang stated that advocating Taiwan independence was no longer a viable strategy for the DPP.<sup>19</sup> A freeze of the independence clause in the Party Charter was raised for the first time at a high-level of the party, but is unlikely to be adopted as a policy proposal during the 2016 campaign. The DPP is a passive beneficiary of the weakness of the Ma administration and infighting within the KMT. The incentive to adjust is more external than domestic. The United Front policy deployed by Beijing towards the DPP has to some extent contributed to the current DPP approach, firm on the principles regarding Taiwan’s current status and identity, but non-

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<sup>16</sup> *Taipei Times*, 10 April 2014, op. cit.

<sup>17</sup> 劉世忠: 小英不能只想吸收太陽花學運, <http://www.taiwanus.net/news/news/2014/201407011101311437.htm>.

<sup>18</sup> Democratic Progressive Party, China Affairs Department, “2014 China Policy Review, Summary Report”, 9 January 2014. <http://fr.scribd.com/doc/198143800/DPP-2014-China-Policy-Review-Summary-Report>.

<sup>19</sup> 台獨夕照太陽花, Lianhebao editorial, 15 April 2014.

confrontational, flexible on the language and willing to work out a formula for cross-strait communication.

### *2.3 Impact on Beijing's policy on Taiwan*

Although analyses in the mainstream press have accused the DPP of being behind the movement, the expert view seems to be more nuanced regarding the links between the Sunflower Movement and the DPP. For example, Guo Zhenyuan notes that the DPP was never in a “leading position” (主導地位) and was relatively marginalized during the occupation of Parliament.<sup>20</sup> He perceives the movement as an alliance of “professional activists”, anti-China and pro-independence forces but outside the control of the DPP. Nevertheless, the conclusion reached in Beijing regarding the nature of the movement is that it was “anti-Ma Ying-jeou and anti-China” (反中反馬).<sup>21</sup>

The movement occurred in the aftermath of an adjustment of China's policy towards Taiwan under the new Chinese leadership in order to accelerate cross-strait integration. The Taiwanese think-tank FAPS noted three major changes, all included in Li Keqiang's work report to the National People's Congress in March 2014: (1) from the 1992 consensus to a ‘one-China framework’; (2) reversing the order of importance between political and economic issues to prioritize politics through diversified communication channels, (3) pushing the new concept of “cross-strait family” (兩岸一家親) to describe relations with Taiwan.<sup>22</sup>

The difficulty of working with a weak Ma administration suggests that new tactical priorities will be stressed to achieve progress in the next two years. Leng Bo argues that the Mainland should “be psychologically prepared” that cross-strait relations have entered a period of adjustment during which the Taiwanese civil society will play a greater political role. During that period, he advocates a proactive policy to retain the strategic initiative, circumvent new resistance and achieve some positive outcomes. For example, he argues that the newly established high-level channel between the MAC and the TAO should be further experimented. At the same time, Beijing can exploit the position of openness displayed by the DPP during the visit of Zhang Zhijun to Taiwan. The DPP's struggle to convince the moderates of its ability to manage cross-strait relations is potentially a tactical opportunity for China. Finally, Leng Bo argues that there is another structural advantage enjoyed by Beijing. Regardless of developments in

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<sup>20</sup> 郭震遠：台灣反服貿行動彰顯深水區之深，8 July 2014. <http://hk.crntt.com/crn-webapp/mag/docDetail.jsp?coluid=61&docid=103276530>.

<sup>21</sup> 社評－「太陽花」對兩岸關係的正面訊息，editorial, Wang Bao, 14 April 2014, <http://www.chinatimes.com/newspapers/20140414000932-260310>.

<sup>22</sup> 王智盛，中共兩會對臺政策解析，亞太和平月刊第 6 卷第 4 期，<http://www.faps.org.tw/issues/subject.aspx?pk=411>.



the next two years, the KMT will play the cross-strait relations card against the DPP during the next presidential campaign.<sup>23</sup>

This relative optimism and the perception that time is still on China's side explain why China's main response to the Sunflower movement was to reaffirm existing policies. The meeting between Xi Jinping and PFP Chairman James Soong in early May 2014 in Beijing was the first occasion for the Chinese top leadership to issue a statement on Taiwan's policy after the end of the occupation of Taiwan's Parliament. According to Zhu Weidong (CASS), a number of points stressed by Xi are of particular significance. First, Xi argued that China's confidence should remain strong in face of new obstacles in cross-strait relations. Second, he affirmed that China's policy would remain the same along the line of promoting "peaceful development" of the relationship. Third, he argued that economic reforms in China created new opportunities for Taiwan and would have a positive impact on cross-strait relations. Finally, Xi Jinping pledged greater efforts to understand and meet the demands coming from the Taiwanese society, in particular from the youth.<sup>24</sup>

The main adjustment in Beijing's approach was to add the "Youth" on the list of targets of China's efforts to reach out to broader and restive segments of Taiwan's society, an evolution encapsulated in the term 三中一青. A report of the NPF, the KMT's think-tank, notes that efforts in direction of the "three middle" (the middle class, populations in middle and south Taiwan, and small and medium enterprises) had already been prioritized and were in full display before the Sunflower Movement.<sup>25</sup> Although Chinese interpretations of events in Taiwan stress political interests and agendas, some analysts have paid attention some to the features of the Taiwanese youth that help explain the intensification of social activism. A key concept in this regard is the "quest for modest happiness" (小確幸). The notion describes the inclination for simple pleasures of life by opposition to a more consumerist approach.<sup>26</sup> It helps explain why a number of young Taiwanese are not convinced by the argument that cross-strait integration is a positive development for them as a source of economic growth: the argument is only convincing if the accumulation of wealth is defined as a goal.

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<sup>23</sup> 冷波：未來兩岸關係要在困局中找突破，22 July 2014, <http://hk.crntt.com/doc/1032/9/9/1/103299198.html?coluid=7&kindid=0&docid=103299198>.

<sup>24</sup> 朱衛東：習近平最新涉台講話釋放四大明確信號，8 May 2014, <http://www.CRNTT.com>.

<sup>25</sup> Lee Ying-ming, Kao Shun-teh, 大陸對台「三中一青」政策之觀察評析，14 July 2014, <http://www.npf.org.tw/post/1/13849>.

<sup>26</sup> 郭震遠, *op.cit.*

### 3. Conclusions

The two years leading up to the presidential elections are likely to be a period of tactical pause for all sides, during which the CCP, the KMT and the DPP will need to draw lessons regarding their policies during six years of “institutionalization of cross-strait relations” and adjust their platform. During this period of slowdown of cross-strait integration, each side will face a major challenge: the leadership crisis for the KMT, the elaboration of a credible cross-strait policy for the DPP, and exploring new channels at the MAC-TAO and CCP-DPP levels for Beijing.

High expectations for greater transparency standards are likely to continue influencing the course of cross-strait interactions and should now be considered a structural challenge for CCP-KMT led “peaceful development of cross-strait relations”. Whether public scrutiny of cross-strait exchanges will put an end of the top-down approach that has prevailed so far in KMT-CCP ties will depend to a large extent of the bill adopted by the Legislative Yuan, but also of Beijing. It seems to be in the interest of Beijing to accept higher standards of transparency and a more inclusive approach to cross-strait integration that not only convinces existing supporters but also active opponents.

A key issue for the future of cross-strait relations is clearly China’s image in the young Taiwanese generation. It should be noted here that although it is a welcome development that the issue was taken up by the TAO and the leadership in Beijing, a proactive top-down approach may not yield the results expected in Beijing if ambitions are set too high.