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## Why China and Taiwan should set their sights on 2072 for implementing an agreement on unification

- Tom Plate says instead of escalating cross-strait tension, Beijing and Taiwan should focus on coming to an agreement on the '1992 consensus' and working towards a settlement in time for the end of Mao Zedong's 100-year waiting period

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Tom Plate

I woke with a start from one of those awful dreams – something eerie about Taiwan and China, in which leaders from both sides had been screaming at each other, all the while yelling at me to shut up and stay out of it. A nightmare.

I know, most people have normal neurotic dreams in which they are hounded by wolves, unable to find their way home, or end up sobbing over a missing cat. I have those dreams too but sometimes weird psychodramas about cross-strait battles, the third world war and global destruction push the lost cat out of the psychic picture. Probably this comes with the well-mined territory of writing columns about Asia, including China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. That has got to dent one's psyche.

Consider that a Chinese ministry of state security agent once asked me over dinner: "Do you really think the American people care enough about Taiwan to go to war over it?" I braced myself for a moment, considering the implications of the conversation.

In the course of my work, I had come to befriend this "media and cultural attaché" and grown to like him immensely. He was smart, patriotic, cosmopolitan – and he listened. I wanted to answer very carefully. My reply: "I see what you are getting at, but it would depend on our domestic politics at the time – it might especially depend on who our president was." The official took this in with a sense of deep reflection.

Now, what if the United States had a uniquely undependable president? One who proposed to [pull out of Syria](#) one day and on another said this could take a [long time](#). What if he also wanted to move US troops [out of Afghanistan](#)? Both are withdrawals many Americans would cheer. Why would Americans grab their rifles and head straight to Taiwan to oppose a cross-strait assault by the People's Liberation Army? How many would lust for all-out war with China (population 1.4 billion) to preserve Taiwan (population 23.5 million), especially at a time when the US has Mr Unsteady – President Donald Trump – as commander-in-chief?

But who knows? Beijing has tried diplomacy. In November 2015, in Singapore, Chinese President [Xi Jinping met Ma Ying-jeou](#), then Taiwan's elected leader. The meeting was face to face – a concession in the deeply protocolled mind of Beijing. Xi's aim was to add another lane to the cross-

strait diplomatic bridge, well aware that the island's next head was likely to be [Tsai Ing-wen](#) from the feisty independence-leaning Democratic Progressive Party. Tsai was utterly dismissive of the meeting. While Xi's symbolic Singapore gesture will not make the shortlist for the Nobel Peace Prize, did it not merit more than a rude about-face, given what's at stake?

First things first: war is not an option that anyone should want, whether you're in Beijing or Taipei, and it must overshadow [posturing politics](#) on the island as well as [fire-breathing](#) on the mainland. Perhaps the tide of Taiwanese opinion is turning towards reality. Tsai's party suffered a [crushing defeat](#) in local elections that included the loss of two major mayoral seats.



(Supporters of Kuomintang Party mayoral candidate Han Kuo-yu celebrate as his win in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, is announced on November 24, 2018. Photo: Reuters)

Meanwhile, Beijing has made it clear that the so-called [1992 consensus](#) that emerged from a bilateral negotiation in Hong Kong is still relevant. Parallel to the 1972 Shanghai Communique between the US and China, the “1992 consensus”, for China, has as its basis a unitary Chinese sovereignty that encompasses Taiwan.

In Singapore, in a closed-door meeting, Ma, an underrated leader, stressed to Xi the continuing value of the “1992 consensus”. Although the precise definition of the consensus remained in dispute, these two mature figures

knew better than to try to firm up its meaning at that moment. In diplomacy, consensual vagueness is close to godliness if it can keep friction from sparking armed conflict.

The major issue now is one of optics, for Beijing is far more feared than loved. If Beijing's image in Hong Kong could be burnished, it would go a long way towards making the Xi government's understanding of the "1992 consensus" more appealing to Taiwan. I accept that this assertion probably seems laughable to many, but if there is any magic formula to preventing a cross-strait war, keeping faith with extant "one country, two systems" deals will aid Beijing exponentially.

While Macau's transition to Chinese sovereignty [was smooth](#), Hong Kong's was never going to be easy. Why don't Beijing and Taipei get a new ball rolling with long-term, serial strategic negotiations that start with agreement on the "1992 consensus" and work to nail down a settlement to take effect in, say, 2072? On both sides of the strait, there are ideas that are much sillier than this.

A famous but controversial man of history, still rated in China as having been about 70 per cent wise, was said to have remarked back in 1975 to US statesman Henry Kissinger that Taiwan's unification with the mainland could wait 100 years. The figure was hardly meant to be exact and was more a flourish of speech, but this man knew that China's needs were many and great, that good relations with the US were paramount – and, I add, will always be needed. That man was Mao Zedong. Not to rely too heavily on Mao's numbers, but add 100 years to that time and we get 2072.

In fact, in 1996, Kissinger asked then Chinese president Jiang Zemin if Mao's putative 100-year marker still held true. Jiang responded that given the passage of time, "it's no longer true ... now we can only wait 76 more years." 2072 appears to be the year to watch.

**Columnist Tom Plate is a professor and author of books on Asia and China**