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Yet another 'historic' meeting between Mainland China and Taiwan > The two sides are finally talking on a governmental level but there is no cause for celebration

The recent meeting between ministers from Mainland China and Taiwan has been widely hailed as historic. Such an evaluation is premature at best. In reality, the road towards a true reconciliation between the parties to the Chinese civil war is as long as ever.

On 12 February, the Mainland Affairs Minister from Taiwan, Wang Yu-chi, met with the Taiwan Affairs Minister of Mainland China, Zhang Zhijun, in Nanjing. While it is true that this was the first official meeting between two ministerial-level representatives from the two political entities both representing 'China', it was by no means a meeting of particularly great practical or even symbolic importance.

First of all, the channels for practical cooperation have already been in existence, and have been developing, for over two decades. Secondly, the meeting did not signal the recognition by the Mainland of the continued existence of the Republic of China on Taiwan.

On the contrary, the meeting which took place on Mainland Chinese soil was conducted on Mainland China's terms. The Mainland Chinese media did not call the Taiwanese representative 'minister' nor did they refer to him as coming from a republic or country of any description. From the Mainland Chinese viewpoint, Taiwan is and has always been a part of China, and therefore there cannot be a state council with ministers on the island.

Curious as it may sound, it is exactly this understanding—Taiwan is a part of China—that made the

meeting possible. The Kuomintang Party currently in power on Taiwan also subscribes to this understanding. According to the so-called 1992 Consensus, there is only one China, but each side of the Taiwan Strait is free to form their own interpretation of what this means.

Unfortunately, there is no real consensus on the content of the said Consensus. Mainland China has never really admitted that it believes in anything but the first part, the existence of one China, and the freedom of interpretation is an interpretation favoured by the Taiwan side alone. As for the Taiwan side, if the Kuomintang loses its position once again to the opposition, the Democratic Progressive Party, the consensus will most likely be lost altogether.

The meeting was not without positive and constructive elements, however. It has allowed both parties to emerge as victorious in the eyes of their own constituencies. Mainland China did not yield to recognizing a rival government, but rather magnanimously overlooked even the blurb of the Taiwanese minister to refer to the continuing existence of the Republic of China in a public speech. On the other hand, the Taiwanese side can celebrate the fact that their minister was able

to meet with a Mainland minister face-to-face on an equal basis, even if the equality was only in the eyes of the beholder. This was the whole point of the meeting. Mainland China wants to lure the Kuomintang into making any concessions which might weaken its claim for equality. The Kuomintang, in turn, is using this perceived goodwill from China to prove to the Taiwanese population that they are capable of dealing with the Mainland in a manner which is beneficial for the island's economic interests. In these regards, the recent meeting repeated the pattern of the—also dubbed 'historic'—1998 meeting when President Jiang Zemin graciously received the head of Taiwan's semi-governmental Mainland affairs organization, Mr Ku Chen-fu, in Beijing.

The media can be forgiven for hailing the importance of the meeting. The so-called Taiwan Issue is extremely complicated, and it is almost impossible to explain its essence using simple newspaper language. There is no 'China and Taiwan' but there are also no 'two Chinas'. With the lack of mutual recognition in the style of the two Germanys, one cannot even talk of 'two governments'. Instead, there is one China with the government of the People's Republic exercising de facto control over the

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Mainland, and the government of the Republic exercising de facto control over the island of Taiwan. A great majority of world nations only recognize the former but still engage in commercial and cultural activities with the latter. The United States recognizes the People's Republic but keeps Taiwan simultaneously under its security umbrella.

While both the Kuomintang and the Communists talk of reunification, they do so on completely different terms. The Taiwanese will never, not even under a Kuomintang government, accept a reunification under Mainland China's terms, which would demote them into a mere autonomous province with no real guarantees of the continuation of the democratic system that is in place today. For the Kuomintang, any sort of reunification can only be reached through negotiations between two equal governments, which would mean that the Communists would have to recognize the existence of the Republic. Unless new and innovative thinking emerges, these fundamental issues are likely to impede any political reconciliation.

The fact that the meeting took place signals Mainland China's desire to help the Kuomintang stay in power. The alternative, a return to power by the opposition, might

put any further cooperation on ice, especially if the voices demanding independence as a 'Republic of Taiwan' were to become more influential again.

While it is likely that ministerial-level meetings will continue, and economic cooperation and integration will deepen, it is unlikely that political cooperation will develop much further. This is bad news for East Asian security, because the Taiwan Issue carries implications for great power relations, and has a bearing on territorial disputes in the East China Sea and South China Sea.

Given the nature of Taiwanese society, a reunification is probably a more unrealistic option than Taiwanese independence. Therefore, the international community should brace itself for the consequences of the latter rather than rejoice over superficial progress towards the former.

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