Taiwan and the Peace Process in Northern Ireland: Parallels and Divergences[1]

Kerry Brown
Chatham House

Introduction

The unresolved conflict between the Republic of China in Taiwan (RoC, hereafter Taiwan) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) remains one of the world's great potential flash points. While largely contained over the last six decades by, amongst other things, the involvement of the United States, which supplies a security blanket in the region, the PRC still maintains the right to use force if necessary to deal with any unilateral declarations of independence on the part of Taiwan. Meanwhile, Taiwan maintains a *de facto* independence, while trying to carve out its own international space under significant military and diplomatic pressure from Beijing.

   In the last decades, policy makers on both sides of the Taiwan Straits have looked at models that might potentially offer some sustainable resolution to this inherently destabilizing situation. This paper will look at what lessons from the long negotiations over the status of Northern Ireland in the UK might give to resolving the issues between Taiwan and the PRC. While there is much dissimilarity, the handling of Northern Ireland does show the final need for a political process beyond the threat of the use of military or other forms of violence. And it also offers some specific policy measures that might be transferable to other areas of conflict. While all conflicts like this are necessarily very specific, there are certain key elements that they share. This paper will attempt to identify those.

Northern Ireland: The Long March to Peace

The modern conflict in Northern Ireland has its source in centuries of complicated migrations, political, religious and social conflicts, and mismanagement by local, and mainland British, elites. The historian Norman Davies, discussing the mass migration, over the space of only a decade, of settlers originally from Scotland into the six northern counties of the island of Ireland after the conquest of the territory

during the Tudor period in the sixteenth century, calls this a 'fatal harvest'. Supported by the government in London, new settlers set up crown colonies and implemented segregation against the local inhabitants. They came with different religious and cultural values, and created a new economy. But as Davies wistfully comments, the conflicts created by this process were to be deep and long-lasting: 'Nearly four hundred years later, the fatal harvest is still being reaped' (Davies 1999: 482).

These conflicts ebbed and flowed over the coming centuries, but the strong desire for independence, at least in the southern part of Ireland, led to the Home Rule movement in the nineteenth century, and, after a guerrilla war from 1919 to 1921, and Civil War from 1921 to 1923, to the creation of the Irish Free State, largely autonomous from the mainland British government. It adopted its own constitution in 1937, and assumed the status of the Republic of Ireland in 1949. The six counties of Northern Ireland were also largely self-governing over this period, operating as a division of the United Kingdom under the Government of Ireland Act 1920. Large parts of its population, mostly descended from Protestant settlers, opposed moves to Home Rule and unification with the southern part of the island because of the fear that they would be a minority overwhelmed by 'Catholic hegemony'. The province maintained its own parliament and prime minister till 1972, when direct rule was imposed from Westminster.

The roots of this modern period of unrest can be found in long-simmering discontent about discrimination practised against Catholics in the province, from housing, to work, to education. Tied to the protest movements elsewhere in Europe in the 1960s, these found widespread support amongst the Catholic population. One march in 1969 ended in violence, which, as it spread, caused the government in London to send in the British Army to restore order. This ushered in the era of the Troubles, which were to take over 3,500 lives. From 1970, the army was to play an increasing role in the security control of the area. Ironically, while they had first been involved in order to protect the Catholic population from Loyalist attacks, they were to become the main focus of aggression and anger afterwards from Catholics, and cited as proof that the province was in fact under illegitimate occupation.[2]

Northern Ireland under direct rule was to enter a bitter period of almost three decades of bloodshed and conflict. The main body agitating for full independence, the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA), was initially able to fund armed attacks against the local security forces, and against Loyalist opponents. Its main political supporting arm was the political party Sinn Fein. In the late 1970s, and into the 1980s, violence continued, and any political settlement eluded a succession of British Prime Ministers. Only with renewed attempts to negotiate with Sinn Fein in the early 1990s under the leadership of the then-British Prime Minister John Major did the possibility of a political resolution to the problems in the province become greater. This was pursued by Tony Blair on his election in 1997, resulting in the Good Friday Agreement a year later, providing the framework for a model of devolution and power-sharing between the various political parties and interest groups in the province. The elements of this will be discussed below. A local devolved parliament was set up in 2001, and existed until its suspension in 2005,

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[2] For a brief account of the start of the Troubles, see Marr (2007: 315 onwards).

after which it was finally re-established in 2007. In 2010, one of the most important landmarks was passed, when responsibility for courts and security was handed over to the Northern Ireland Assembly leaders. Alongside the IRA declaration of the end of the armed struggle in 2004, and an acceptance of pursuing their objectives through the political process, this has contributed to a cessation to most (but not all) of the violence, and stable governance in the area. Tony Blair's dogged, persistent commitment stands out as perhaps his most important achievement. 'Peace in Northern Ireland was Tony Blair's crowning claim to have achieved something of enduring historical greatness with his premiership', as one political commentator has written, summarizing his period in power in the UK (Rawnsley 2010: 433).

Taiwan and the PRC

The island of Taiwan, off the southeast coast of mainland China, had become a part of the Qing Empire (1644–1911) during one of the empire's most expansionist periods in the late seventeenth century (Rowe 2009: 76–78). Annexed by the Japanese from 1895, the island returned to the victorious Nationalist (KMT) government on the mainland for a mere four years from 1945, while the Nationalists fought a bitter civil war with the Communists (CCP). This was to end in 1949 with the defeat of the KMT, and the flight of over a million of their people, and the leadership itself, to Taiwan. From here, the KMT leader Chiang Kaishek claimed sovereignty over the whole of China, and took China's seat at the United Nations. Neither the CCP in Beijing, nor the KMT in Taipei, ceded defeat, and both maintained their own specific version of the Cold War throughout the 1950s and 1960s, from time to time coming close to outright conflict without ever actually tipping into war. While the PRC under Mao Zedong was preoccupied with various massive internal political struggles, like the Great Leap Forward from 1958 to 1961, and the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, the KMT in Taiwan enjoyed recognition and protection from the United States, and the ability to build up Taiwan's economic capacity. By the 1970s, Taiwan was one of the best-performing economies in the region (Brown 2009: 2–3).

A major setback for Taiwan was the reestablishment of diplomatic links between the US and the PRC in 1972 with the visit or President Richard Nixon to the PRC, and the loss by the KMT of its seat at the United Nations only the year before. With the shifting of formal diplomatic recognition away from Taiwan to the PRC in 1979 by the United States, the only consolation was the passing of the Taiwan Relations Act, which committed the US to helping Taiwan defend itself in the event of a military attack from the PRC. In the 1980s, Military Law was lifted, and opposition parties were tolerated, leading in 1996 to the first ever direct elections on the island. By 2000, one of the opposition parties, the DPP under Chen Shui-Bian, had won power, forcing the KMT into opposition for the first time in six decades. Taiwan had made the transition to a full democracy.

The conflict with the mainland, however, continued, causing frequent diplomatic hiccoughs and conflicts. From 1972 and the Shanghai Communiqué, the US and much of the rest of the world had started to adopt a 'One China Policy', stating that 'there is one China, and Taiwan is part of China'. This avoided taking sides in the conflict, and allowed for the maintenance of the *status quo*. But both Taiwan and

the PRC proactively attempted to win diplomatic recognition from third parties throughout the following years, as at least one sign of legitimization. The PRC, as its own economic opening-up and reform policy from 1978 started to have impact, took increasingly assertive positions on the status of the island, even undertaking major military manoeuvres in the Taiwan Straits during the 1996 elections. This may have had the unintended consequence of increasing Li Teng-Hui's share of the vote.

There remains no peace treaty between the two. In addition, their political systems have become increasingly different from each other. The PRC, in the words of the US Department of State *2008 Human Rights Report on China*, has a government structure which is 'an authoritarian state in which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) constitutionally is the paramount source of power. Party members hold almost all top government, police, and military positions. Ultimate authority rests with the 25-member political bureau (Politburo) of the CCP and its nine-member standing committee.' It is one of only five remaining states in which a Communist Party maintains a monopoly of power. Taiwan, on the other hand, has held a series of elections which have been notable for their openness, competitiveness, and stability. Power returned to the KMT in 2008 with the election of Ma Ying-Jeou. There is an independent judiciary, and a free media.

Northern Ireland and Taiwan: Differences

The issue of sovereignty lies at the heart of the conflict in Northern Ireland, and also over Taiwan. For Northern Ireland, it is a case of one significant portion of the population of the six counties saying that it wants self-determination and independence, and opposing the sovereignty of the government of the United Kingdom in Westminster. The Republic of Ireland also claims sovereignty over the North, in its constitution. In Taiwan, it is the case of a territory with *de facto* sovereignty which is threatened with military action and reprisals if this is asserted, and which is also denied international space within which to assert sovereignty. These remain two different aspects of one issue. Sovereignty and self-determination also relate to the recent conflicts in the Aceh province of Indonesia, and the Occupied Territories in Israel. There are plenty of other, less high profile, examples.

In terms of the internal impact of this, there are significant differences. For Northern Ireland, from 1970 onwards there were high levels of violence, suffered by all sides in the dispute. The willingness of the IRA and Loyalist paramilitary groups to deploy violence for political ends gave the conflict its distinctive characteristics. It also made it particularly dangerous and destabilizing. The IRA was able to secure funds internationally from the USA, and from other terrorist groups, to arm themselves, and to build up a powerful capacity. While the military activists may never have numbered more than a few hundred, there were enough to cause huge economic disruption, and to allow for the waging of a number of bombing campaigns on the British mainland. The IRA was also able to assassinate major political figures from the UK, including Earl Mountbatten, the Queen's cousin, in 1979. Conservative MP Airey Neave was murdered by a Republican splinter group, the Irish National Liberation Army, the same year. As a self-described 'liberation' movement, these groups were able to establish a

sophisticated and very real security threat, seen most dramatically in the bombing of the Brighton Grand Hotel in 1984 during the Conservative Party conference, while Margaret Thatcher and most of her cabinet were in the building. The British internal intelligence service made combating the IRA one of their main objectives throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, and the IRA's campaigns had a significant economic impact (see Andrew 2009: 734–752).

Between Taiwan and the PRC, while there has been the continual threat of violence, and, in the early period from 1950, skirmishes involving both sides over islands lying off the coasts of the PRC, there has not been any overt movements of pro- or anti-unification forces in Taiwan, or anti-Taiwanese independence forces in the PRC, that have mounted campaigns, or which had either the capacity or the desire to assassinate, bomb, or use disruption and violence for political ends. The threat of violence has been government-to-government, between the Beijing and the Taipei regimes, through the huge build-up of military capacity along the Fujianese coast. In Northern Ireland, it has largely been the army of the central British state pitted against that of the IRA or other para-military groups. These are absent in the conflict between Taiwan and the PRC. This is not to say that violence has not figured in the recent history of the PRC and Taiwan. In 1989, for instance, there was the bloody suppression of the student demonstrations in Beijing, and in Taiwan under martial law there were several clampdowns from 1949 and into the 1980s. But these were internal incidents, rather than related to the question of the relationship between each other, and their separate statuses.

Nor does religion enter into the Taiwanese–PRC situation, as it does in Northern Ireland. While there were significant numbers of native aborigine Taiwanese on the island when the KMT established its government there in 1949, they have become a minority in Taiwan today, and the PRC in its language about Taiwanese 'compatriots' likes to stress that they are of one blood, and one culture. They certainly share large linguistic similarities. In Northern Ireland, however, religion has been a dominant issue, with those largely supporting independence being Catholic, and those wishing to remain in the Union being Protestant. This has given deep ideological and cultural traction to the differences between the conflicting parties.

Finally, while Taiwan and the PRC remains a dispute between two parties over who has legitimate rights over the sovereignty of Taiwan, the dispute in Northern Ireland involves four parties: there are those in Northern Ireland who are pro-independence and those who are against independence and wish to remain within the Union of the United Kingdom, as well as the central British state and the Republic of Ireland state.

Conflict Resolution

Despite these significant differences, there is nevertheless a feeling that conflict reduction and resolution measures that worked in one case might be useful in another. This motivated Sinn Fein leaders to offer to help negotiators in the Palestinian–Israeli conflict in the 1990s and 2000s. Mediation through the Finnish Institute of International Affairs was effective with getting the Indonesian government and the Acehnese resistance groups around the negotiating table in 2004, leading to what has turned out to be an enduring peace agreement over an

area that had known deep, and violent, conflict since 1976. Can the Northern Ireland peace process have any implications for others looking to resolve long-term conflicts, in particular that between Taiwan and the PRC?

To answer that, one must look at the basic agreement between all sides, embodied in the Belfast, or Good Friday, Agreement, which was signed on 10 April 1998 after months of negotiations. To get to this stage, there had been big compromises on the part of Sinn Fein and the Ulster Unionist Party. For Sinn Fein, there was a realization that armed conflict through the IRA had run out of steam, and was unable to deliver the final outcomes that were desired. These were a political settlement, one that would be sustainable, and the route for that, as Gerry Adams (Sinn Fein's main leader and a key supporter of the whole peace process) said at the time, was through the ballot box. For the Ulster unionists there was also a feeling that continuing with zero-sum confrontations was leading nowhere. People in the province were tired of over two decades of constant violence, and of its economic impact. Many of the old divisions and bigotries had weakened, and in some places disappeared. The highly tribal element of some groups in society had diminished. While the rest of the UK and Europe were enjoying a continuing economic boom, Northern Ireland felt that its economy was still performing badly, with high unemployment and over-reliance on central government and EU, assistance. Public pressure and international diplomatic pressure on the leadership of both sides was increasing. With Tony Blair's focus on resolving the issues in the province, the final piece of the jigsaw puzzle fell into place, and the conditions for reaching an agreement were finally reached.

The Good Friday Agreement addressed a number of concerns. A high priority was given to starting a process of reconciliation, along with doing something about the continuing existence of weapons and arms being used in the province. A third priority was to create the political structures that would give all parties in the dispute a fair voice and an opportunity to put across their views, through proportional representation in the province and constitutional guarantees of inclusive governance. The Agreement, therefore, set out firstly the existence of a Northern Ireland Assembly, elected by local people, with devolved powers. Proportional representation methods were used to ensure that the full complexity of public opinion in the province was recognized. There were a range of other issues dealt with in the agreements:

- Release of prisoners from organizations observing the ceasefire;
- Establishment of a human rights commission;
- Legislation to promote equal opportunities between Catholics, Protestants, and other sectors of the population;
- Reform of the police and security services, agreement for the cantonment of weapons, and the demilitarization of the province;
- Commitment by all parties to use democratic and peaceful means and to strive for cross-community consensus;
- Agreement with the governments of the Republic of Ireland and the UK over cross-border issues.

There were a number of elements in the agreement that addressed the repeal of previous legislation, such as the Government of Northern Ireland Act 1920, and the

sensitive use of language about the actual name of the territory.[3] In order to carry legitimacy, the agreement was put before the public of Northern Ireland and Ireland in the form of a referendum in May 1998, and passed with large majorities in both (71 per cent in Northern Ireland in favour, 94 per cent in the Republic).

The Mainland and Taiwan Proposals for Peace

The Good Friday Agreement was the result of painstaking negotiations between two widely divergent sides, with a number of other partners in between, in order to forge political consensus on how to handle the status and governance of Northern Ireland. The key agreement, however, was to use 'democratic and peaceful means' and to deal with issues through the ballot box and the political process rather than through violence, with the objective of arriving at cross-community consensus. Without acceptance of this on the part of all those involved, nothing would have been possible. One of the most successful strategies of the agreement was to put the most difficult and contentious issues down for discussion later in the process. The first steps were simply to agree to talk, within a broad political framework. I remember, in looking at the Northern Ireland Peace Process as a potential model in some respects for the Aceh conflict in Indonesia while working as a Foreign Office official, interviewing officials from the Northern Ireland Office in 2004. One of their observations was that beyond the acceptance of the peace process, the key objective was to stop violence, to have an agreed framework for political settlement, and to deal with issues like 'obnoxious legislation' (the freeing of those formerly imprisoned for terrorist acts) and cantonment of weapons. All of these were eventually achieved, and helped build confidence between the various parties in the peace process.

For Taiwan, there is an overarching framework for agreement between the two sides across the straits. This was first reached in 1992 during meetings between officials from the PRC and Taiwanese governments, when they agreed that there was only one China. Of course, depending on which side, there is the massive issue of which part of China has sovereignty over the other: the PRC or Taiwan. But this very informal agreement, subsequently called the '1992 Consensus', at least gave the basis for future discussions by parking the most difficult issue of all, and remains in place, despite disagreements from independence-supporting groups in Taiwan, to this day. It has been referred both by former president Chen Shui-Bian and current president Ma Ying-Jeou as the basis for any future discussions on the status of relations between the two entities.

On the part of the PRC there have been two major policy statements about the approach to resolving cross-straits issues. One was made by the former President of the PRC, Jiang Zemin, in January 1995. This has been called the 'Eight-Point Proposal'. These points are:

a) Adhering to the principle that one China is the basis and prerequisite for peaceful reunification. China's sovereignty and territorial integrity must never be allowed to suffer division;

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[3] The full text of the agreement can be found on the website of the Northern Ireland Office.

b) Allowing for the development of nongovernmental economic and cultural ties between Taiwan and other countries;
c) Holding negotiations with Taiwan authorities on the peaceful reunification of the motherland;
d) Aiming to achieve the peaceful reunification of China, since Chinese should not fight Chinese, but willing to use force to resolve the issue if necessary against foreign forces who intervene;
e) Developing economic exchange and cooperation between the two sides separated by the Taiwan Straits;
f) Promoting cultural tie keepings;
g) Respecting the rights of Taiwanese;
h) Welcoming and encouraging leaders of Taiwan to visit the mainland and mainland officials to visit Taiwan.[4]

These eight proposals combine a series of what can be called 'hard' and 'soft' measures to bring the two sides together. Cultural and logistic links belong to the latter. Developing political links is also important. However, the key provision in this proposal is the non-relinquishment of the right to use force, and the firm commitment to maintaining the issue of Taiwan as a domestic, and not international, issue. The link between international support and the resolution of crisis in a domestic conflict does have some parallels with Northern Ireland, and is something that is worth reflecting on. The UK government did regard the status of the province as a purely domestic issue. However, funds for the IRA in their struggle, and their supply of arms, came from supporters outside of the province, and indeed outside of the UK. There were constant issues of funds coming from Irish-Republican sympathizers in the US, and frequent high-level representations by the British government to stop this happening. There was also in the 1980s supply of arms and funds from the regime of Colonel Gaddafi in Libya. This meant that there was an unavoidable international aspect to the situation, and one which had to be acknowledged by including international actors like the US and the EU in the final process. Only with the final control of these, and other, international sources of support was a political settlement in Northern Ireland made possible, and indeed the involvement of the US through an independent observer was maintained throughout the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. While the PRC has resolutely asserted its desire not to see the issue of Taiwan 'internationalized', therefore, one thing it might learn from the Northern Ireland peace process is that the outside world can be the source of solutions as well as problems. The main issue is how to include it in the whole process.

That the PRC has not renounced force in the issue of Taiwan remains a major symbolic block to pursuing deeper proposals for political dialogue. The vision of policy makers around paramount leader Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s was that 'one country, two systems' could be used to resolve the issue. However, this was in the end brought to solve the issue of Hong Kong's status after reversion to PRC sovereignty in 1997 from the British. Once Taiwan had become a fully functioning democracy by 1996, this model became much harder to envisage ever working. Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, to this day, remains only a partial

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[4] For a full summary of the text, see *People's Daily Online* (2007).

democracy, with a proportion of its legislative council elected, and the rest appointed. Arguments continue over the introduction of universal suffrage for the position of Chief Executive, something which was promised in 2012, and which has now slipped to 2018, and may go even further.

Current President Hu Jintao has also made a six-point 'Proposition on Taiwan', supplementing the issues put forward by Jiang Zemin over a decade earlier, and pulling back from the more strongly pro-unification impulses in the previous president's thinking. These included: (1) reaching a common understanding on the principle of one China; (2) ending hostility and reaching peaceful agreements under the one-China principle; (3) starting discussions between the two sides about political relations as a preliminary to reunification; (4) stepping up contacts on military issues 'at an appropriate time'; (5) developing transport and communication links across the Straits; (6) promoting cultural exchanges.

With the return to power of the KMT in the presidential elections in March 2008, the new President Ma Ying-Jeou was seen as pursuing a more conciliatory path with Beijing, and Hu's points have, at least in terms of creating transport and communication links between the two sides, been partially implemented. But this goes hand-in-hand with the deployment of over 1,000 missile launchers on the Fujian coast opposite Taiwan, emphasizing that President Jiang's threat to deploy force if necessary has still not been renounced.

Ma's own position on the status of cross-states relations was contained most recently in his National Day Address in October 2009. There he states that the objectives of policy towards the PRC were:

- Acceptance of the 1992 Consensus;
- Support for links through visits to Taiwan by mainland tourists, direct air, sea, and postal links, food safety inspections, and cross-strait legal assistance;
- An attempt to extend these into the economic realm with a free trade agreement;
- Defence of Taiwanese national sovereignty and interests, in particular protections of its democratic system;
- Development of friendly relations with both Taiwan and mainland China and the promotion of 'flexible diplomacy';
- A national defence strategy of 'effective deterrence and resolute defence' developing a professional military based to protect the security of Taiwan.

(summarized from Ma 2009)

Despite high-level contacts over the last two years, however, there has been no major breakthrough, simply because the main issue, resolving the conflict over the sovereignty of Taiwan, remains hugely contentious. Some of the feelings aroused by this whole issue were clearly illustrated soon after President Ma's election, when a high-ranking envoy dealing with the Taiwanese issue from the PRC was attacked while visiting Taipei on 21 October 2008 (BBC News 2008a). This preceded the visit by the head of the Mainland Chinese Association for Relations Across the Straits, Chen Yulin, in November, the first visit ever by someone in this position (BBC News 2008b). Agreements on direct air, sea, and postal links were

made. But with President Ma's fall in popularity over 2009 because of the state of the Taiwanese economy, momentum behind drawing closer to the PRC has dropped. Talks, for instance, of a free trade deal in the form of an Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement have proved difficult to progress, though it now seems that these are close to finalization.

The greatest impediment, however, to any immediate resolution of the issue of possible discussions over reunification between the PRC and Taiwan remains that they now have two wholly opposed political models. The PRC remains one of the world's last countries (there are only four others) where a Communist Party continues to enjoy a monopoly of power. Taiwan has undergone a largely successful transition to a democratic model, where there has been a major shift in power from one party to another and back again, without any social unrest. This is a remarkable achievement. It means that while some Taiwanese might emotionally like the idea of reunification, they cannot be relaxed about any final settlement with a system which is so different from their own, and where many of their hard-won freedoms might be jeopardized. This is reflected in public opinion surveys in Taiwan. Were Taiwan and the PRC to start talks about unification tomorrow, what sort of model would they use? How would their separate political structures be combined, when they are so radically different? How would Taiwan be able to assert itself against a country which is many times larger, economically now becoming much more powerful, but with very different values and systems, not least around those of the rule of law and civil society? It seems that the consensus in Taiwan remains, therefore, that until the PRC fundamentally changes its political system, talk of deeper unity has to be put on hold. And, being realistic, a harmonious unification looks more and more unlikely. Meanwhile, a generation has grown up with a much stronger sense of being Taiwanese, who find talk of being 'of the same blood and family as the PRC' increasingly mysterious. The sort of family links that existed between those of their parents' and grandparents' generations have become much weaker with the PRC. To this generation, talk of reunification comes down finally to what might be in it for Taiwan, and what they seem to gain and lose. On those grounds, the PRC offer is too vague, and has decreasing appeal. This remains a unique characteristic of the Taiwan–PRC dynamics.

Conclusion

Tolstoy famously said at the start of his novel *Anna Karenina*, 'Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.' The same could be said of conflicts between and within countries. This paper has shown that the Northern Ireland issue had very specific roots, and that the final agreement to resolve these issues came after a long, painful, and sometimes very bloody process. The unique feature of the Northern Ireland problem was the community within a territory broadly divided along religious and historic lines. These created social and economic injustices, which in the 1970s provoked protest and led to an independence movement, and the imposition of direct rule and military intervention. Searches for a political solution remained elusive until the 1990s, when the political commitment of both Prime Ministers John Major and Tony Blair finally brought about a framework agreement. The implementation of that, and the

renunciation of violence with the creation of a local assembly and devolved power, have taken over a decade.

There are, however, a number of practical lessons that the Northern Ireland process does give. These can be summarized as follows:

- The need to have an overarching political framework agreed by all sides in a dispute, where issues are sequenced, and the methods of discussion are accepted. The Good Friday Agreement supplied this, and meant that parties with a long history of distrust and hostility were at least able to sit down and use a common language to try to resolve their differences. Without this framework, discussion would have been impossible;

- The crucial need for top-level political support on both sides of a dispute. Prime Ministers John Major and Tony Blair, and even Gordon Brown, over the issue of transference of security powers to the Northern Ireland devolved assembly in 2010, gave the peace process their full support, and put immense political capital into it. Prime Ministers of Ireland also supported it, along, finally, with key members of the international community. Therefore, for any discussions to be meaningful across the Straits, the support of leaders on both sides would be necessary. As of 2012, it is hard to see President Hu Jintao or the other key leaders of the CCP being in this position where they would be able, and would have the political will, to offer this kind of support. They are hugely preoccupied with other issues. This means that they are content to support the *status quo*. Any future moves to closer dialogue and discussion would need the absolute support of key political figures. And for that, the CCP in particular would have to be highly unified in its detailed policy on the treatment of Taiwan, something that is not the case at present;

- The involvement of the international community has to be factored into any process. Any moves by the PRC towards Taiwan become, in effect, moves that bring in the US. The US remains committed to supporting Taiwan's security through the Taiwan Relations Act 1979. It sent aircraft carriers to the region during a difficult period when the first elections were held in Taiwan in 1996. According to one analyst I spoke to in 2008, `While Taiwan is a democracy and the PRC remains as it is, it would be impossible for the US to stand by if the PRC were to make aggressive military moves against the island.' On the other hand, as the Bush presidency showed with Chen Shui-Bian, any declarations from Taiwan's leaders leading towards talk of out-and-out independence would also not be supported. While the leadership of the CCP in the PRC might, therefore, be highly resistant to involving the international community, and suspicious of its role, they should also see it as playing a potentially positive role.

For Taiwan and the PRC, inter-communal violence and religious differences have not been important. The main issue has been the status and sovereignty of Taiwan, and its right to have self-determination. Since 1949, both sides have sparked low-level clashes, especially on some of the smaller islands within Taiwan's territory, but there have not been any outright hostilities. Instead, there has been increasingly intense diplomatic movement, with the PRC largely eroding

Taiwan's international space, taking its seat at the UN, winning US diplomatic recognition, and then circumscribing and controlling Taiwan's international space. Allowing observer status for Taiwan at the World Health Authority in 2009 was considered a major compromise on behalf of the PRC.

All this, as stated above, is due to the huge differences between their political models. If and when this issue is resolved, most likely through the PRC introducing political reforms, then perhaps a reconciliation process and the sorts of structures introduced in Northern Ireland might be possible. But that is a huge 'if' and is unlikely to happen any time soon.

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Address for Correspondence

Mr Kerry Brown, Asia Programme, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE, UK.