In the Wake of the Sunflower Movement: Exploring the Political Consequences of Cross-Strait Integration

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I. The Sunflower Movement and its Revelation

The procedural frictions between opposition and ruling parties’ legislators in reviewing “the cross-strait service trade agreement,” which was signed on July 3, 2013, triggered the outbreak of a 24-day long occupation of the Congress by around 300 protesters, most of them students. The episode stirred a round of ferment discussions on the agreement per se as well as broader concerns on the pace, content, and direction of cross-strait integration. The service trade agreement was currently shelved and is not expected to be put on legislative agenda until an oversight mechanism of some sort is created and legalized, which was demanded by protesters and specifically set up to scrutinize cross-strait legal acts. The so-called “sunflower movement” has revealed some deep-seated undercurrents beneath the seemingly smooth water of cross-strait cooperation and integration beginning in 2008. Although in the name of protesting “procedural injustice” and “negotiation in black box,” the movement, in the nutshell, unleashed a mixed sense of anxiety, hostility, and fear towards China as a collective response to the cross-strait development in the past six years. This movement is basically a backlash against cross-strait integration. During the period, a substantial degree of mass support of the movement and a more cautious undertaking of cross-strait affairs at the high point, from 50% to 70% as various opinion surveys revealed, sent an alarming signal to the Taiwanese government and the Beijing authority as well. The polarization between pros and cons of a trade agreement in the period was escalated to a high politics level of national security that is beyond the trade liberalization politics in general.

But oddly enough, as Julian Kuo dubbed as “a return of the conservatives,” a poll conducted in June 12 by Taiwan Indicators Survey Research suggested that, less
than three months after the sunflower movement, those who opposed the service trade agreement have dropped from 56.3% (March) to 43.8% (June), whereas supporters of the agreement have increased from 22.3% (March) to 38.9% (June). Over 50% of people who live in Taipei support the agreement, meanwhile over 50% of those who have college degrees are in favor of the agreement (http://www.tisr.com.tw/?p=4235#more-4235). The gap between pros and cons has been narrowed to the margin of 4.9% in June. The radicalization of the movement, in which rallying against a police station and blocking traffic on one of the busiest street in Taipie, for example, in part accounts for the weakening support of the movement. Beyond this, does this “conservative turn” demonstrate that the polarization over cross-strait integration is a floating phenomenon, which is not so much rigidly crystallized? In a survey conducted on July 24 by Want Daily (2014/8/7), nearly 60% percent of people are dissatisfied with two major parties’ mainland policy. 59% of disapproval rate goes to the KMT; and the dissatisfaction toward the DPP is as high as 60%. If the dissatisfaction was equally directed to two major parties, does this mean that the majority of people is not as polarized as partisan rivalry? Is it possible that, in the wake of the sunflower movement, a reconciliatory stance that balances open up policy and democratic oversight may be the emerging consensus? These are questions that take time to be answered.

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This paper aims to providing a preliminary sketch of multiple lines of cleavages revealed from the service trade controversy, but their roots may come from deep-seated or cumulated divisions of conflicts. The social cleavages may be real, potential, or exaggerated. The analytical angle focuses on how the mobilization of
pro-integration and anti-integration clashes is exploited for political gains by major parties and political forces. In addition, this paper would like to explore why cross-strait cooperation and integration does not alleviate the perception of China as a threat and why ostensibly the minor procedural violation exploded a deep political crisis in Taiwan. Puzzles are raised and addressed in this paper, yet a complete picture of political consequences will take some time to surface and for us to decipher. The rapidly changing external environment, such as Hong Kong’s combative protests over universal suffrage on its chief executive and Beijing’s response, will cast more uncertainties on Taiwan’s inconclusive decisions regarding cross-strait affairs for some time to come.

II. Multiple lines of Cleavages Unraveled

A. Blue-Green Partisan Divide

The chasm of policy stances toward mainland China between the KMT and the DPP has been one of the fundamental sources of polarization in Taiwan. The KMT has pushed for normalization and liberalization of cross-strait trade and investment; the accomplishment of ECFA was a remarkable breakthrough for integrating Taiwan and mainland market. The routinely held and gradually institutionalized economic talks have generated 21 agreements up to date, including the stalemated service trade agreement. The DPP has been marked by its anti-integration position that is exemplified by its uncompromising refusal to accept “the 92 consensus,” and resistance to deeper integration proposals. The “Blue-Green” partisan divide has been prevailed in Taiwan’s party politics and, to a significant degree, polarized the electorates. The conventional partisan cleavage still largely dominates the policy positions on service trade controversy, which is demonstrated in the DPP’s backing
for the Sunflower movement to pursue the “procedural justice.” Nevertheless, the DPP has been ambiguous about its position regarding the agreement. On April 4, 2014, amid the turmoil of protests, DPP’s delegate to the U.S. promised the United States to support free trade, market opening, and claimed that DPP is not completely opposing the service trade agreement. Several important party figures, including mayors of Tainan and Kaohsiung City, expressed the similar position toward the agreement. Among the respective camp of supporters, majority of blue supporters favor the service trade agreement. In contrast, majority of green supporters oppose the agreement.

The DPP has been relatively marginalized role in cross-strait affairs since 2008. Decline to take the 92 consensus as the bottom line of negotiations has been interpreted by Beijing as an implacable signal of independence inclination. Although Beijing has continuous contact with the DPP, the fundamentalists within the DPP have been able to hold the entire party in hostage on crucial decisions. The proposal of “freezing” the party’s independence platform was only recently rebuffed. The DPP believes that, boosted by the sunflower movement, the anti-integration forces have gained momentum; once regime turnover comes true in 2016, Beijing will be forced to adjust its intransigent stance. In line of this political calculation, service trade agreement, oversight mechanism legalization, as well as the commodity trade agreement under negotiation will be extremely difficult to be approved in the legislature by 2016, the year of next presidential election, as the DPP will be determined to barricade the advance of cross-strait integration.

B. Class Antagonism? Conglomerates versus the Small-medium Sized Enterprises?
As an insider of the movement claimed in a press interview (Liberty Times, 2014/4/14), the cause of the protesters is to block the privilege coalition between the KMT and the CCP from further reaping and monopolizing the political and economic interests unleashed from cross-strait negotiations. In their propaganda against this coalition, conglomerates are portrayed as part of the vested interest group to move across the strait, whereas small-medium sized enterprises are relegated to the victim position, who will suffer from the flood of Chinese inbound investment in a small service market. Labor, of course, will lose job to the Chinese immigrants. The narratives of contestation in this protest also point out, as more conglomerates accept economic concessions made by China, they are either acquiescent or in rapport with China. In any case, economic cooperation and integration with China extends Chinese government’s constraints on Taiwan’s political choices. This line of contention has displaced the class/sector conflicts with a political division of pro/anti China campaign. The ruling KMT was suddenly removed from the centrist position where it has occupied along with the process of cross-strait reconciliation to an awkward position where it needs to be vigilantly watched over by the DPP.

This movement was, therefore, a political action. Although in the name of fighting for potential losers in trade opening, the movement was not witnessed much class (sector) partners as trade agreement protests usually solicited. Industrial associations and labor unions were almost invisible, if not completely absent, in the protests. The portrayed class antagonism is not real as numerous Taiwanese enterprises who benefits from the opening up and huge Chinese market were small-medium sized at the very beginning. Given that the class configuration of winners and losers in trade liberalization is complicated, to sidetrack the cross-strait integration, class mobilization is less effective than stirring up broad resentment over
the privileged coalition, in which the KMT and the CCP are in collusion with conglomerates by selling Taiwan to China. Trade in services agreements hit the nerves on weary sectors and classes at first, yet the anti-integration coalition got the upper hand by leaving the narrow battlefield sector cleavages, then waging a war on approval or repudiation of the selective cross-strait winners. With the experience of Hong Kong in mind, the general public has greatest concerns of the aftermath of Chinese investment on real estate speculation and massive migration. Grappling the sweeping atmosphere of drift, protesters’ calling for erecting a specific oversight mechanism for scrutinizing cross-strait agreements has won public support. Partisan disputes on the substance and procedures of the oversight mechanism will create another battlefield in the legislative process. The service trade agreement was successfully shelved and new barricade on the road of deeper integration was set up.

C. Regional Disparity: Places where are Left Out

The regional disparity is also reflected in the pro and con distribution of cross-strait integration. For those regions, notably the rural areas, where are either left out from the momentum of cross-strait cooperation or irrelevant to the dynamics of globalization, service trade liberalization would not generate much benefits for them. Only tailor-made cooperation schemes would have enticed their support. To little surprise, majority of Taipei residents are in favor of service trade agreement, in which the pro-integration inclination is embodied. On the contrast, rural counties in the central and southern Taiwan do not have much economic linkage with China. Their main economic interest is concentrated on promotion of their local specialties of agricultural products. Politically, they would be more likely to side with the Pan Greeen’s anti-integration stance.
D. Generational Differences: Is the Sino-phobia the DNA of the young generation?

The young generation constitutes the mainstay of the sunflower movement. Their leadership echelon shows a dogmatic ideological inclination toward the DPP’s independence stance. This seems inconsistent with some previous studies on the political attitudes of Taiwan’s young generation, in which the young generation was presented as a generation with flexibility and pragmatism on cross-strait relations (Rigger, 2006). A tentative explanation, to be tested against more empirical research, is that this particular circle of movement activists was born after the 1996 cross-strait missile crisis and was raised in the high tide of native consciousness, or “Taiwanese nationalism.” They take democracy, freedom, and rights of various kinds for granted. The insider groups under the movement, the so-called civic groups, have affinity with the DPP and former members of wild lily movement, who were students advocated for full-fledged democracy in the late 1980s. The wild lily movement has found its reincarnation on the young generation to whom they have passed the protest experience and organization skills on. The DPP also treats the new generation of citizens as their turf in terms of electoral support and political partners.

Like the angry young people around the world, they exhibited anti-politics characters, crying for justice of various sorts with distrust over political authority and hostility towards globalization and developmentalism. Unlike their counterparts in other countries, Taiwan’s young protesters projected their rage to a rising power, China, and tried to resist mainland China’s influence with close-door approach. I had an informal exchange in classroom with some of movement participants in the turmoil of protest. When asked about their opinion on the TPP’s liberalization project, they
expressed an equally opposing attitude on opening up and market liberalization. When asked about the obligation under the WTO that Taiwan would eventually have to grant fair treatment to the mainland, they appeared indifferent to and ignorant of international commitment. The differences between the young and elder generations are profound in the sense that their disregard for the aftermath of Taiwan’s marginalization, their hostility toward globalization and liberalization, as well as their disdain for the priority of economic developmentalism. The only guiding belief is “democracy,” yet unlawful occupation of Congress and an attempt to break into the administration office were violation of “the rule of law.”

The anti-everything attitude, however, does not point to a viable alternative path to prosperity and security. This is the typical impasse with which protest movements encounter; in the best case scenario, the movement may transform itself into an extremist populist party on the fringe of political spectrum. The anti-establishment orientation is also demonstrated by the movement’s decision to keep an arm’s length with the DPP and the participants’ penchant for grass-root organization and for identifying themselves as “civic groups” above party politics.

It still needs more empirical support to make conclusions on young generation’s political attitude. Whether the preference for “Taiwan independence” (or in the form of Sino-phobia) is inscribed into the DNA is still uncertain. Nevertheless, the generational differences on cross-strait relations cannot be overlooked.

III. Hurdles to Deeper Integration
The sunflower movement is a blow and a brake on the momentum of cross-strait integration over the past six years. The anti-integration coalition is assembled and the resistance to the rapidly expanding Chinese influence becomes the glue. Why the perception of China as a threat suddenly surges that fuels the appeals of the anti-integration coalition? This can be explained from the following perspectives.

First, the outlook of deeper integration with China is perceived to aggravate Taiwan’s economic malaise. There are all kinds of worries, such as worry about the job loss due to Chinese investment in the local service sector. The concern over the stagnant wage increase and soaring real estate prices are all related to China. Fear of China is not completely imagined or fabricated. China’s rapid rise has been sustained by its scale, state-subsidized exports and technological innovation, strategic industrial policies, and prudently steered liberalization. Taiwanese industries and business, be located on island or settled on the mainland, are all exposed in the huge pressures of competition. There will be more competition than complementariness across the Strait as China is nurturing its leading firms in private sector to catch up with global competitiveness in IT-related, lens, green energy industries. The assembling of so-called “red chain of supply” that China is currently embarking on casts grave challenges to Taiwan’s industry.

Second, uneven distribution of peace dividend is another explanation. Those who benefit from cross-strait integration are perceived as “the few” at the costs of those who are not incorporated, “the many.” After the sunflower movement, Beijing quickly got the message and declared that it will reach out to people who live in the central and southern Taiwan,” who are “under-middle class” and small and medium-sized business, in spite of steering more communication with the youth. It
can be anticipated that China will disperse more economic interests to previously marginalized or neglected class, sector, and region as elements of its coping strategy, hoping that injected economic interest can realign two coalitions.

Third, the disjunction of politics and economics in integration process may be another line of clash across the strait. Economic integration in the past has been pushed in large part by market forces in the emergence of cross-strait production network. Industrial and product complementation between Taiwan and the mainland made economic integration irresistible and inevitable. Regarding political integration, most people think that it is not in hurry. However, the agenda of deeper integration in Beijing’s mind is involved with overarching institutionalization of cross-strait negotiation, confidence-building and political talks on the timetable of unification. The push through political integration is going to stir up mode of reservation or of resistance, as the majority of people may favor economic integration and socio-cultural exchanges before rushing into political conclusions, in particular with which China has a very clear and intransigent bottom line, the “one country two systems.” The ruling KMT has not clearly articulated on what cross-strait political talks are to be negotiated and where they are heading for. Probably with the experience of European integration in mind, China expects the spillover effect generated from economic to political integration to spur the unification agenda. The European model of integration may be ill-suited to the cross-strait situation at this point as European integration has been based on a set of convergence criteria under which political, economic, and social institutions of each party are compatible.

The lack of an appealing vision and a roadmap of action is detrimental to any political integration agenda to move on. In the short run, the concept of “security
community” of some kind (Adler and Barnett, 1998: 29-65), which allows a gradual process for confidence-building, mutual trust and eventually a collective identity of community, may be a more feasible reference framework than the conventional scheme of “one country two systems.”

Finally, a crucial development in Taiwan’s domestic politics in the wake of the sunflower movement would be if the new political players, the so-called civic groups in consists of social movement activists and student organizations, give rise to a changing landscape of party system? Would they remain a radical wing of pro-DPP force on the fringe of the political spectrum? It looks like, on the cross-strait affairs, the DPP is circumscribed by the pressure of fundamentalists from within, as well as new civic forces from without. The KMT’s situation is no more optimistic given its centrist position in managing cross-strait development has been threatened as people question the KMT’s governing ability to carry out social compensation programs for assisting the disadvantaged against the loss of trade liberalization. In addition to the governing ability, to win and to secure a centrist position on cross-strait affairs would require political parties to demonstrate a skill of articulating a clear vision of cross-strait integration meanwhile safeguarding Taiwan’s best interests, and most crucially, an ability to displacing the disadvantageous line of cleavage with favorable line of cleavage (Schattsneider, 1960) in order to consolidate a winning coalition under the majority rule of democracy. This is what late political scientist William H. Riker dubbed “the art of political manipulation” (Riker, 1986).

IV. Manufactured Polarization? Political Manipulation of the China Factor
Amid writing this paper, the “Occupy Central” protest broke out in Hong Kong. A sense of similarity strikes me that the factor of China has been played in domestic politics and both societies are divided by this. Political manipulation of polarization can be witnessed in two major parties’ defense of their cross-strait policy. The KMT always presents a rosy picture about integration in line with a purely economic logic. They have been proud of the ECFA as a great accomplishment, as a mirror to Hong Kong’s CEPA. The economic integration with China is regarded as a breakthrough for Taiwan’s isolation in the wave of regional integration in Asia. On the contrary, the DPP always highlights the negative political consequence of integration, such as Hong Kong’s current “dismal” situation due to too much dependence on economic concessions from China. The selective and one-sided reading of the Hong Kong’s experience seems to bolster the anti-integration camp. In particular, the current protest in Hong Kong damages the credit that “one country two system” has promised and presents as a warning on the political and social costs of economic integration.

Taiwan’s polarizing party politics has been in place for long time. But polarizing over relations with China by virtue of upsetting trade liberalization is unfortunate as the regional production network in Asia has undergone great transformation: the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) will be in sight next year. The ASEAN is connecting with China with massive Chinese capital injected into infrastructure and transportation construction; and the truth is that Taiwan has already been integrated into this economic network. If the mass is divided over pro- and anti-integration with China due to political manipulation, the economic prospect would be the price to pay. Opening up to the whole world, not just to China, seem to be the best counter strategy for averting dependence on China across the board. Striving to liberalize and seeking to join the TPP negotiation may be an impending
task for Taiwan to offset the devastating consequences by the delayed structural reform and stalled negotiation with China.
Figure 1. Mass Attitude on the Cross-strait Service Trade Agreement

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