

Historic China-Taiwan meeting about symbolism, not substance

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Beijing: Saturday's first-ever meeting between the presidents of China and Taiwan presents a formidable challenge: How can they ensure the event's place in history when nothing of substance should happen?

No agreements or joint statements are to be issued and only a vague agenda has been sketched out, a reflection of the extreme sensitivity surrounding the event, especially on the part of Taiwanese wary of Beijing's unification agenda.

Yet the event's symbolism as a moment of coming together is undeniable, putting a strong emphasis on presentation, atmosphere and optics.

The get-together is fundamentally "about recognition, not about results," said University of Virginia China expert Brantly Womack. "The meeting is the message."

China's Xi Jinping and Taiwan's Ma Ying-jeou are the first leaders from the two sides to meet since their territories split during the Chinese civil war in 1949. Ma is the successor to Chiang Kai-shek, whose Nationalists retreated to the island, while Xi now leads Mao Zedong's victorious Communists, who set up government in Beijing.

Already, arranging the meeting has required extraordinary flexibility and patience.

According to Taiwan, planning for Saturday's meetings began two years ago, complicated by the need to meet conditions consistent with China's refusal to recognize Taiwan's government and insistence on the "one-China principle," stating that Taiwan and China are part of the same nation.

Ma's government, meanwhile, needed to be highly mindful of public sentiment in Taiwan, where the Nationalists took a drubbing in local elections last year, due in large part to their pro-China policies. They're now struggling ahead of presidential and legislative polls in January and a negative response to Saturday's meeting could deal them a knockout blow.

Ma had already committed to not traveling to China, while Beijing had ruled out meeting at multilateral forums such as the annual Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation economic leaders' meeting. In the end, they settled on the neutral ground of mainly ethnically Chinese Singapore, whose government is close to both Taipei and Beijing.

The two will meet in the afternoon at the luxurious Shangri-la Hotel and attend an evening banquet. It's not clear what contact they'll have with the horde of Chinese, Taiwanese and international media descending on the Southeast Asian city-state for the event.

Mutual non-recognition requires a particular set of protocols and government agencies. Because they don't recognize each other's titles, Xi and Ma will refer to each other as "Mr.", rather than "President."

Unheard-of for a meeting of heads of state, no flags will be in view, at least where cameras are present. Although Taiwan is more relaxed about the matter, even low-level Chinese delegations to Taiwan threaten to cancel events unless the island's flag is removed from meeting venues.

Confirmation of the visit on the Chinese side came not from Xi's office or the Foreign Ministry, but the Cabinet-level Taiwan Affairs Office, in keeping with Beijing's insistence that issues involving the island are an internal affair, not

foreign relations. Sticking to those ideological guns, China's Foreign Ministry this week referred all questions about the event to the Taiwan Affairs Office, even though the country's president is holding a high-profile meeting on foreign soil.

When China's state broadcaster CCTV showed a portion of a news conference Ma held Thursday in Taipei to discuss the meeting, it blurred out his Taiwan flag lapel pin.

With neither leader serving as host, and given the sensitivity over any sign of attempted dominance, the photo opportunities and other events will have to be handled like musical theatre: carefully choreographed, with the proper sets, and, most importantly, careful execution of the script.

And as always, there's the question of the handshake.

In 2005, at the first meeting between Taiwan Nationalist and mainland Communist leaders in 60 years, Beijing arranged for the two men to walk ceremoniously across a vast hall before meeting in the middle for their historic grip. The Nationalists did not hold the presidency at the time, but the act of reconciliation set in motion the move toward closer ties under Ma.

Given the historic weight of Saturday's meeting, the sides will no doubt be looking for a scene no less epic.

- AP