

China, Taiwan presidents meet for 1st time ever, shake hands

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Singapore: The leaders of Taiwan and China shook hands today at a historic meeting marking the first top-level contact between the formerly bitter Cold War foes since they split amid civil war 66 years ago.

Chinese President Xi Jinping and Taiwanese President Ma Ying-jeou came together on neutral ground in the Southeast Asian city-state of Singapore, walking toward each other in a hotel ballroom in front of a backdrop of yellow - a traditional colour of Chinese emperors - and flanked by palm trees.

The two men smiled broadly as they shook hands for more than one minute, turning slightly to the side to accommodate a host of photojournalists in the ballroom. No national flags were present - a necessary work-around to overcome China's refusal to recognise Taiwan's sovereignty or its government's formal legitimacy.

In brief opening remarks in front of reporters before going into a closed-door meeting, Xi alluded to China's long-cherished goals of unification with Taiwan, saying "We are one family" and "No force can pull us apart." Ma said, "Both sides should respect each other's values and way of life."

When they split in 1949, both sides aspired to absorb the other, and Communist Party-ruled China still demands that Taiwan eventually unify, while many citizens of democratic Taiwan increasingly prefer to simply maintain the separate status the island has carved out over six decades.

Critics of Ma in Taiwan are wary that his meeting with Xi will pave the way for Beijing to assert control over the island.

Each leader hopes to seal his legacy as one who helped bring decades of division and mistrust to a mutually acceptable end. But the meeting was more about the symbolism of coming together than about substance. Both sides had said no agreements would be signed or joint statements issued.

Three decades of hostilities followed the 1949 split, occasionally bursting into warfare in the Taiwan Strait-including over the once heavily militarised Matsu and Kinmen island group - making dialogue all but impossible.

Tensions eased after China shifted to endorsing the option of "peaceful unification" alongside military threats in 1979, although it wasn't until 1992 that representatives of the two governments met in Singapore to establish the groundwork for future talks.

While subsequent talks achieved little, they began bearing fruit after Ma's election in 2008, resulting in 23 agreements on trade and technical matters.

Although that has failed to produce Beijing's desired progress on political matters, today's meeting was seen as moving the relationship into a new stage.

"It is because of what has been accumulated over the past seven years, that the two sides of the strait can take this historic step today," Xi said.

- AP