

President Lee Teng-hui's Inaugural Address and Cross-Strait Relations

Last summer, Beijing unilaterally suspended talks with Taipei in protest against President Lee Teng-hui's visit to the United States. Thereafter, the regime staged a series of military exercises adjacent to Taiwan to emphasize its dissatisfaction, bringing cross-Strait relations to a low ebb. The Beijing leaders made Lee the scapegoat for the deterioration in relations and said that they hoped he would mention the "one China" principle in his inaugural address on May 20.

However, the true source of the recent tension between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait lies in Beijing's own attitude. Beijing's determined pursuit of unification and its insistence that sovereignty over Taiwan belongs to the People's Republic of China (PRC) conflicts with the Republic of China's (ROC's) quest for survival, a free economy, and democratization.

Since Lee Teng-hui's political ideas are not the ultimate source of trouble in cross-Strait relations, it was unreasonable to look to his inaugural address to improve the situation. Nonetheless, Lee did express a pronounced desire for peaceful and stable cross-Strait exchanges. His reiteration that independence was an impossible option for Taiwan was also aimed at reassuring Beijing. Another sign of Lee's desire to improve cross-Strait relations was his suggestion that he could visit mainland China. All this proves that Lee tried to seize the occasion to create a favorable atmosphere for easing cross-Strait tensions.

It seems doubtful whether cross-Strait relations will improve before the end of the decade. For one thing, Beijing has no confidence in Lee. Secondly, Beijing's own domestic political difficulties and the succession crisis make it difficult for its leaders to grant any substantial concessions to Taiwan. Thirdly, domestic political pressure makes it inevitable that Taipei will continue to expand its diplomatic activities.

If the two sides still cannot manage to achieve a compromise with regard to their objectives, they might, as Taipei has repeatedly proposed, resume their talks as before or initiate talks on direct shipping services through Taiwan's proposed "offshore transshipment centers"; then, cross-Strait relations might be temporarily stabilized. The ball is now in Beijing's court, as Lee Teng-hui has already demonstrated his good will.

(Milton D. Yeh)