

Cross-Strait Relations after the 2004 Presidential Election

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Presented at the Brookings-FICS conference

“Taipei-Washington-Beijing Relations after the Presidential Election”

Taipei, May 23, 2004

Revised July 25, 2004

Cross-Strait relations have entered a period of instability after the 2004 presidential election. The rise of a Taiwanese consciousness has not only deepened the fissure between major ethnic groups within the island, which makes it harder for the government to come up with a coherent set of policies towards China, but has also heightened the tensions between Taiwan and China. The promise made by President Chen Shui-bian during the electoral campaign to push for a new constitution through a referendum in 2006 and then put this new constitution into effect two years later is a worrisome development for the Beijing authority.

Facing this stern situation, Beijing has resorted to an array of new measures to curb the trend that it has deemed as provocative. Three days before Chen was to be inaugurated as the new president, the Taiwan Affairs Office, under the auspices of both the State Council and the Communist Party, issued a harsh statement urging Taipei to wisely choose to “rein in on the precipice and stop activities of splitting [the motherland]” instead of continuing to “play with fire.”¹ It was announced that the People’s Liberation Army would launch a large-scale military exercise on Dongshan Island in Fujian Province in July 2004, just 150 miles away from Taiwan’s Penghu Islands, with the aim of “seizing air superiority over the sky of the Taiwan Strait.” The drill was said to be “active, initiative and offensive” in nature as opposed to the deterrent nature of war games conducted in the past.²

Facing mounting pressure, President Chen Shui-bian made conciliatory overtures in his inauguration speech on May 20, 2004. The President promised to amend the constitution instead of writing a new one, and to carry out the amendments through constitutional mechanisms rather than resorting to a referendum.³ He also implied that the “five noes” policy that he included in his first inaugural speech four years ago;⁴ no declaration of independence, no change of the official designation of Taiwan, no amendment to the old constitution to accommodate the “state-to-state” theory, no plebiscite to decide Taiwan’s future, and no abolishment of the National Unification Guidelines and the National Unification Council; would remain unchanged.

The inauguration speech has virtually brought the two sides back from the verge of confrontation and the situation appears to be calm for now, but many problems remain. The next four years will be critical in deciding the state of relations across the Taiwan Strait. Taiwan’s democracy and Beijing’s belligerent postures have lessened the likelihood for a stabilized cross-Strait relationship in the foreseeable future.

The Rise of a Taiwanese Consciousness

The Taiwanese consciousness was greatly strengthened during the election. President Chen’s victory has been widely acclaimed as a victory for Taiwan’s consciousness and identity. Poll after poll indicates that the number of people who identify themselves as “Taiwanese” has

¹ *Zhongguo shibao*, May 17, 2004, p. 1.

² *People’s Daily* online, July 8, 2004.

³ Chen’s inaugural speech can be found in *Zhongguo shibao*, May 21, 2004, p. A10.

⁴ Chen Shui-bian said on May 20, 2000 that as long as Beijing does not resort to using military force against Taiwan, he would not declare independence, change the official designation, amend the old constitution to accommodate the “state-to-state” theory, or hold a plebiscite to decide its future. He also said that the National Unification Guidelines and the Nation Unification Council would not be abolished.

climbed to new heights. In the opinion of many, Chen's victory can be explained by his successful embrace of Taiwan's mainstream opinions. Likewise, the loss of his opponents, a joint ticket of KMT Chairman Lien Chan and People First Party Chairman James Soong, resulted from their failure to develop a discourse more reflective of local values and interests.

Because the election was viewed as an important battle for "defending the sovereignty of Taiwan," the DPP victory was interpreted as proof that Taiwan has walked out of the shadow of China, rendering the "one China framework into the dustbin of history."⁵ For many, Chen's victory is more than a consolidation of Taiwan's democracy; it is a victory for Taiwan as a nation. The old order has become to be seen as representative of the "greater China" thinking brought over by the "alien regime" from China that is out of touch with reality. These views are part of a campaign to "nationalize Taiwan."

Deepening Nativization and Polarization

Localization was responsible for the advent of Taiwan's democracy, but it has also aggravated the fissure that has existed among different political parties and ethnic groups on issues related to China.

Localization started off as a political expedient to force redistribution of political powers and wherewithal that skewed unevenly in mainlanders' favor at the central level of the government. As the mainlanders were successfully driven off from the central political arena, it began to spill over to other areas. During the last years of Lee's presidency, a debate raged over whether Taiwanese culture was independent from Chinese influence or not. Starting from 1993, calls to "reformulate the society as a whole" and to "localize the education" came to the fore. Consequently, history and geography textbooks at the elementary and secondary schools were rewritten, bringing more Taiwan-related knowledge and stories into students' life. Chinese history is no longer categorized as "domestic history." It was thought that past education that had encapsulated values and orientations of China was obstacle to the forming of Taiwan's own identity.

If China has ill intentions, then the Pan-blue camp that adhered to the "one China" position, according to the ROC constitution, must be condemned for siding with Beijing. The Pan-blues were accused of "opposing the people of Taiwan and the Taiwan-first policy and a disrespect of the Taiwan identity" when they opposed the referendum, citing fear of a reaction from Beijing and apprehension that the referendum was held in tandem with the presidential election in order to corral votes for Chen. The advice to put aside the disputes over sovereignty was disparaged as "not in line with the dictum of Taiwan sovereignty" and as an attempt to "denationalize the country."⁶ The suggestions that Taiwan should take advantage of China's immense market and cheap labor and speed up the "three direct links" are brushed aside as conspiracy to "marginalize" Taiwan and support China's tactics to "facilitate unification through economic

⁵ "Both Ruling and Opposition Parties Should Take Good Care of the Interests of the People and the Future of Democracy," *Liberty Times* (Taipei) editorial, March 26, 2004; "To Oppose Referendum Is Tantamount to Opposing People First and Taiwan First," *Liberty Times* editorial, March 13, 2004.

⁶ "A Display of Will and Determination of the People Is the Most Effective Way to Deter Annexation by China," editorial, *Zhiyou shibao*, March 4, 2004, p. 2.

means.”

The Pan-Blues’ Quandary

The 2004 election has witnessed the further weakening of the KMT. Unless the party manages to find a way to regain the trust of the voters, it’s possible that we will see this once dominant force drift further apart and wither away. The gaining of strength of the Pan-greens does not bode well for cross-Strait relations, at least not from Beijing’s point of view.

The Pan-blues have been forced to be defensive in this political game of winning the hearts of the whimsical Taiwanese voters. Localization has become such a precious commodity that politicians and political parties are competing against each other in order to prove their love to the people and the land. It is also something to which the KMT and its Pan-blue allies, the PFP and the New Party, have found difficult to respond. They are forced to make concessions and accept policies that have compromised their traditional positions. As a result, Taiwan’s policy towards China has been driven to become more radicalized.

When Trong Tsai, a DPP legislator, proposed in 1993 to legislate a referendum law, he failed to win any support from the KMT. However, signs that the party was about to abandon its past position and embrace the popular voting mechanism that they considered to be synonymous to Taiwan independence came after the first presidential election. In April 1996 former Speaker of the National Assembly Chen Chin-jang made clear that the referendum was one of the four issues that the chamber, which was empowered to write and amend the constitution, should tackle. One of the recommendations that the task force that was formed in August 1998 to “Strengthen the Sovereign Status of the ROC” presented to President Lee was the enactment of a referendum law that would allow major issues that concern the future of the country to be decided through popular votes. In a speech delivered in January 1999, then-Vice President Lien Chan suggested that the KMT administration would study ways to “institutionalize the referendum.” Finally, the KMT decided to completely support the referendum legislation in a dire attempt to escape the label of “anti-democratic” as the March 2004 presidential election approached. They never found a way to effectively counter the DPP accusation that they represented “alien interests and values.” The Referendum Law, passed in November 2003, was based on a draft prepared by the Pan-blues. The right to hold a referendum has finally emerged as a unified policy supported by all political forces across the ideological spectrum.

The Pan-blues find themselves in the same dilemma with the issue of the new constitution. Refusing to be sidelined, Wang Jin-pyng, Speaker of the Legislative Yuan, announced that efforts are under way to amend the constitution.

Hostility towards China

The widespread negative feelings towards China among the Taiwanese voters no doubt played a critical role in Chen Shui-bian’s victory in the 2004 presidential election. Taiwan’s policy towards China is not likely to be conciliatory as politicians are trying to build nationalism on the antipathetic feelings of China.

Because of its diplomatic suppression and unification policy, China is highly resented by the Taiwanese. Some even name its heavy-handed policy as the primary cause of the rise of the “mainstream consciousness” in the island. Taiwan’s new identity is to a large degree a reflection of this hostility and aversion towards China. President Chen has repeatedly rejected the “one China” formula as the embodiment of the spirit of “one country, two systems” and believes that acceptance of this formula would mean the degradation of Taiwan to a status not dissimilar to that of Hong Kong. This is why the “one China, different interpretations” reached between the Strait Exchange Foundation and its Chinese counterpart, the Association of Relations across the Strait of Taiwan, in November 1992 is unacceptable. This is also why Lien Chan and James Soong were condemned as “pro-China.” The “Holding Hands” campaign held on February 28, 2004 in which two million Taiwanese around the island were mobilized by the DPP to link their hands was described by the President as “safeguarding Taiwan and resisting China.”⁷

Writing a New Constitution

Nothing explains the Taiwanese people’s desire to change the status quo better than rewriting the rules of games that have formerly regulated the politics of Taiwan and its relations with China. It is argued that although Taiwan is an independent, sovereign county it is not a normal country. This is because the country has not been able to fully function in the international arena nor does it have the autonomy to decide its future. The constitution that is bestowed on the island republic is one major stumbling block on the road towards normalcy.

President Chen has repeatedly suggested that because the current constitution was written in China in 1946, it is ill-suited to the needs of the reality. It has also been suggested that two thirds of the old legal code needs to be revamped. At the center of the argument is the lack of clarity concerning whether the political system is a presidential system or a parliamentary system. The five-branch government designed by Sun Yat-sen has been condemned as ineffective and incompatible with the Western constitutional tradition.

The ruling party, the DPP, has been publicly promoting a presidential system similar to that of the U.S. Although Taiwan’s political system has been dubbed a semi-presidential system, the powers of the president have been immensely enhanced after six rounds of constitutional amendments in the 1990s. Some even contend that the powers endowed to the president, after having been enlarged by the amendments, surpass those of the U.S. president. At any rate, the current constitution is not so unworkable as to warrant writing a new one. The desire to change Taiwan’s political reality is clear.

It is not unreasonable, then, to assume that to what the president and his followers object are the facts that the constitution was enacted in China and that two branches, the examination and the control, which were added on top of the three branches of the government in line with the Western political experience, were derived, according to Sun Yat-sen, the author of the “Three Principles of the People” on which the constitution was based, from China’s political tradition.

For Beijing, a rewriting of the constitution is tantamount to de jure independence.

⁷ President Chen used the words when meeting with a delegation from the United States. See *Zhongguo Shibao*, April 5, 2004.

Beijing's Reactions

Taiwan's new political landscape and desire to change the status quo have put Beijing in a difficult situation. Tactics of intimidation have picked up steam lately. A few days before President Chen was to be sworn in for a new four-year term, China's Taiwan Affairs Office issued a stern statement warning that Taiwan will meet its destruction by "playing with fire." In the same statement, Beijing also lashed out at Chen for violating the "five no's," "mustering all separatist forces for a drive for Taiwan independence" and bringing cross-Straits relations to the brink of danger. Talk about the possibility of a surgical military operation is gaining popularity. Has unification with Taiwan been forced upon Beijing's political agenda and given top priority as a result of what has happened in Taiwan?

For China, Chen's actions in the past four years have been no less than a strategy "to gradually move to de jure independence." Chinese scholars have reached the conclusion that Chen Shui-bian has adopted a three-phased program to achieve full independence: the referendum, the restructuring of the legislature through an election to be held at the end of 2004, and finally the writing of a new constitution in 2006. It seems that Beijing is moving to manage the crisis in an attempt to stop the trend that it sees as uncompromisingly splitting Taiwan and China.

First, Beijing's "bottom line" is emerging as observers have made unequivocal warnings that an exclusion of the mainland from the territories contained in Article 4 of the current ROC constitution is tantamount to de jure independence. There is clearly a sense of urgency. In his political report to the 16th Party Congress convened in November 2002, Jiang Zemin, who gave up the post of the CCP General Secretary at the political convocation but retained the chairmanship of the Central Military Commission, suggested that the Taiwan issue "will not be allowed to drag on sine die."

The conviction that military options might not be excluded has been reinforced, too. Luo Yuan, director of the Research Department at the Chinese Academy of Military Science, suggested that China must "pay necessary dues," including disruption of the 2008 Olympics, economic development in the coastal areas and degradation of relations with certain foreign countries, etc., to fight against Taiwan independence and safeguard territorial integrity.⁸

Calls for the enactment of a "Unification Law" have been made. PRC Premier Wen Jiabao accepted this proposal during a trip to Europe days after the European Union was enlarged to include ten more new members in May 2004. It has also been suggested that the National People's Congress, the parliament of China, should declare that the country will be in a "state of war" should an independence program be implemented in Taiwan.

In the Taiwan Affairs Office's press conference, spokesman Li Weiwei belittled the "peace and stability framework" that Chen put out as "deceiving" and called the move to write a constitution a "timetable for independence."

⁸ Luo made the remarks in *Liaowang* and they were reported by the Hong Kong media on December 2, 2003.

The “three direct links” may be the first victims of deteriorating relations across the Taiwan Strait. In its policy statement released in December 2003, the links were defined by Beijing as “cross-Strait lines” and “internal affairs of the Chinese across the Taiwan Strait.” However, in the first press conference given after the presidential election, Li Weiyl reverted to the original line that they are “internal matters of a country.” The statement issued by the Taiwan Affairs Office on May 17 put the realization of the three links under the premise of the “one China” principle. It remains to be seen if Beijing’s position on the issue is irrevocably reversed.