

Beijing's Reaction to Vice President Lien Chan's Trip to Ukraine

After an official visit to the Dominican Republic, ROC Vice President Lien Chan made a detour to Ukraine by way of New York on August 19 for a five-day unofficial visit. In order to avoid any suppression or hindrance from Beijing, Lien's planned visit was kept at a very low profile in advance. According to the vice president himself, he was invited by the president of Ukraine's Kiev University to accept an honorary Ph.D. degree and deliver a speech to the university's School of International Relations. However, it has been widely reported that Lien also had an unofficial meeting with Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma. Although Lien did not publicly confirm such a report at the press conference on his return to Taiwan, he did express the hope that the ROC and Ukraine can enhance cooperation in high-tech sectors such as aerospace and metals. In this sense, Lien's trip can be regarded as an important step in Taipei's promotion of pragmatic diplomacy.

Since the People's Republic of China (PRC) has diplomatic relations with Ukraine, Beijing's shock at Lien's visit and a furious response were expected. After news of the trip was made public, the PRC's Ministry of Foreign Affairs immediately delivered a note of protest to Ukraine's ambassador in Beijing on August 21. Beijing charged that the mere fact that Ukraine had approved Lien's trip was a violation of the promise Ukraine made regarding the "Taiwan question" when it established diplomatic relations with the PRC. It then proceeded to accuse Lien Chan of going to Ukraine for a clear political purpose. However, protest has been one of Beijing's common diplomatic practices, and in general, its reaction was mild, as it did not take its protest to the Ukrainian government further nor adopt drastic measures, such as calling back its ambassador or lowering the relations between the two countries. The only tangible result was the cancellation of a scheduled visit by an official delegation led by PRC State Councilor Li Tieying to Ukraine from August 21 to 26.

These moves might be explained by the following factors:

First, Beijing might have recognized that its previous retaliatory measures toward Taipei for the latter's efforts to establish "practical" relations with other countries has harmed the PRC's international image. In addition, not only has retaliation failed to prevent Taipei from pursuing pragmatic diplomacy, but it also has increased disputes between Beijing and its diplomatic allies.

Second, Lien visited Ukraine, not the United States or other Western powers. Ukraine was an important industrial, military, and nuclear weapons base in the former Soviet Union. After the latter's disintegration, Beijing has placed more emphasis on maintaining friendly relations with the independent republics, including Russia and Ukraine, due to security and economic concerns. Therefore, Beijing probably did not want to displease Kiev too much following Lien's visit.

The most important reason for Beijing's low-key response is that Ukraine handled Lien's trip in a fairly low-key manner. In a sense, it did not violate the PRC's "one China" policy; indeed, it has reassured Beijing that it will observe the "one China" policy. The Ukrainian government also denied that Lien had met with President Kuchma and that ROC air force pilots had test-flown Su-27 fighter jets in Ukraine, stating that it would conduct an investigation on how Lien was able to obtain a Ukrainian visa. Although Ukraine's Foreign Ministry believed that Beijing had overreacted, it also reiterated that it did not want Lien's trip to have any negative impact on the friendly relations between the PRC and Ukraine. All this was enough to save Beijing's face.

All the same, Beijing has not relaxed its opposition to Taipei's pragmatic diplomacy. Since President Lee Teng-hui's visit to the United States in June 1995, Beijing has launched a series of verbal and military threats on Taiwan. Nevertheless, though the *Wen Wei Po* and *Ta Kung Pao*, the PRC's mouthpieces in Hong Kong, published editorials accusing President Lee of engaging in separatist activities during Lien's private trip, Beijing was essentially silent this time. As mentioned above, this is probably because Beijing perceived that costly retaliatory measures would not pay off. Moreover, it was Lien Chan, not Beijing's archenemy Lee Teng-hui, who visited Ukraine. In addition, while Lien was in Ukraine, the PRC's Ministry of Communications promulgated the "Regulations Governing Shipping Across the Taiwan Strait," followed by its Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation instituting the "Regulations Governing

Cargo Shipping Agencies Across the Taiwan Strait.” These measures indicate that Beijing is attempting to create a favorable situation for unifying the two sides of the Taiwan Strait through economic means, such as actively promoting the “three links.” Therefore, Beijing does not want to make drastic moves to suppress Taipei and ruin the atmosphere it has been attempting to create for the development of cross-Strait relations.

(Chang Ya-chun)

