



Taiwan Elections: Time for Diplomatic Gestures from Beijing? by Ralph A. Cossa

Kyoto – The outcome of the March 20 presidential election in Taiwan will have a profound impact on cross-Strait relations. Much will depend, of course, on who wins. But equally important will be how Beijing responds. Will Beijing let the next Taiwan leader – be it incumbent President Chen Shui-bian or challenger (and former Vice President) Lien Chen – set the tone? Or will it be more pro-active and help set a positive agenda?

Beijing clearly has its favorite in this race, based more on its lingering distrust for the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) than on expectations that pursuing its reunification goals will be any easier if the Kuomintang (KMT) returns to power. The reality is that no Taiwan leader will accept Beijing's "one country, two systems" formula or its definition of "one China" under Beijing's authority. But a few olive branches from the direction of Beijing could help set the direction of future cross-Strait relations over the next four years, regardless of who wins.

If the KMT returns to power, one would expect some positive gestures from Beijing. But if the DPP wins, Beijing is more likely either to once again take a "wait-and-see" approach or to engage in some saber-rattling to remind Chen that Beijing is watching. Either approach would be wrong!

Instead, Beijing should consider a more pro-active, four-pronged diplomatic approach, immediately after the election, and regardless of which side wins.

First, Beijing, while keeping true to its "one China" principle, should nonetheless announce that it respects the wishes of the Taiwan people and express its willingness to work positively with the "chosen leader of the Taiwan people" to bring about closer cross-Strait ties today, as well as the eventual peaceful reunification of the Chinese Motherland.

Second, to demonstrate its concern and genuine feelings for the people of Taiwan, Beijing should quickly announce that it is prepared to support Taiwan's participation in the World Health Organization as a "health entity," a formulation which would extend WHO benefits to the people of Taiwan while still addressing China's sovereignty concerns. Should Lien win, the DPP could hardly object to his accepting this formulation, since it was originally put forth by President Chen. If Chen wins, we will see early on if he is truly prepared to take "yes" for an answer from Beijing.

Third, Beijing should first freeze and then gradually, but visibly, reduce its missile forces opposite Taiwan. The incoming president will have a mandate to increase Taiwan's defenses in response to the growing missile threat from China. There will be pressure on any incoming administration to seek greater missile defense capability, and similar or greater

pressure on the Bush administration in an election year to respond positively to a Taiwanese request.

In deciding not to sell the AEGIS shipborne missile defense system to Taiwan in 2001, Washington indicated that it would reevaluate this decision based on the nature of the threat. Beijing should ask itself if its objectives are better served by 400 missiles opposite Taiwan (as opposed to today's estimate of almost 500) under current conditions or by 600 missiles confronting an AEGIS-equipped Taiwan.

A missile reduction is more than a good will gesture; it makes strategic sense, if Beijing wants to avoid a Taiwan march in the direction of enhanced missile defense (and/or offensive missile) capabilities.

Fourth, China should look for ways consistent with its own "one China" policy to give Taiwan more "international breathing space" – a longstanding, bipartisan Taiwanese goal. WHO participation would be one example. Greater flexibility in non-governmental (track two) forums would be another. In recent years, China has become increasingly inflexible and heavy-handed in this regard, refusing to participate and/or walking out of academic meetings in which scholars from Taiwan had been invited to participate. Almost every think tank in East Asia has experienced Chinese bullying in this regard, as Beijing has even tried to block bilateral academic exchanges between Taiwan institutes and their counterparts in Southeast Asia and elsewhere. This needs to stop, not only to set a more positive tone for cross-Strait relations, but because China is undermining its own diplomatic efforts to prove that it is a good, responsible neighbor when it engages in such actions.

At the end of the day, it will take two to tango (or to tangle). Some positive gestures will also be needed from whoever wins the Taiwan election. This will be especially true if President Chen is reelected. Beijing and Washington will both be closely watching to see if, like four years ago, he tries to set a positive tone or if he pursues a more confrontational approach. But some pro-active diplomatic gestures by Beijing, immediately after the election results are announced, can also play a major role in setting the tone for future cross-Strait relations, if Beijing has the political courage and foresight to wave olive branches rather than sabers at the new Taiwan president, whoever he might be.

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