



Cross-Strait Relations: Hope for a Breakthrough?

by Ralph A. Cossa

Taipei – Chen Shui-bian clearly heard the warnings issued by Washington and, less subtly, by Beijing prior to his inauguration for a second term as the democratically elected president of Taiwan. Beijing warned that it would “crush their schemes firmly and thoroughly at any cost” if Taiwan’s leaders continued their “dangerous lurch toward independence.” Washington advised Chen to take Beijing’s concerns (and threats) seriously.

Message received! Chen’s May 20 inauguration address was filled with olive branches; it addressed all of Beijing’s (and Washington’s) major concerns. Despite opposition from his own Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and the even more independence-prone Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU) headed by former president (and perennial thorn in Beijing’s side) Lee Teng-hui, Chen agreed to “reaffirm the promises and principles set forth in my inaugural speech in 2000,” in effect reassuring Beijing that he would not declare independence, change the national title, push for “state-to-state” terminology in the Constitution, promote an independence referendum, or abolish the now-dormant but still symbolic National Reunification Council or Guidelines (the five no’s).

Chen even said that he understood why Beijing “cannot relinquish the insistence on ‘One China Principle.’” While China’s formulation – “there is only one China in the world and both the mainland and Taiwan belong to that one and same China” – has been consistently rejected by all major political factions in Taiwan, Chen said that both sides “can seek to establish relations in any form whatsoever.” “We would not exclude any possibility,” Chen asserted, “so long as there is consent of the 23 million people of Taiwan.”

The speech’s positive, cooperative tone, after a bitter election contest that had included a great deal of China-bashing, was a clear signal that Chen understands the difference between campaign rhetoric and the realities of governing in China’s massive shadow. Washington welcomed Chen’s remarks as “responsible and constructive”: “By making clear his administration’s commitment not to take steps that would unilaterally change the status quo, underscoring its openness to seeking accord with Beijing, and reaffirming previous commitments on cross-Strait relations, Chen Shui-bian’s address creates an opportunity for Taipei and Beijing to restore dialogue across the Strait.”

If only this were true. Unfortunately, China’s initial response has been *déjà vu* all over again. In its May 17 pre-election warning, Beijing had held out the possibility of “equal-footed consultations” with its Taiwan compatriots, including a willingness to address the issue of “international living space of the Taiwan region commensurate with its status so as to share the dignity of the Chinese nation.” But,

rather than seeing Chen’s speech as a step in this direction, Beijing announced on May 24 that the inauguration address had shown “no sincerity to improve relations,” repeating Beijing’s long-standing (unacceptable) demand that Chen “acknowledge that Taiwan and mainland China together both belong to a single country.” Rattling a few sabers, China’s authoritative Taiwan Affairs Office spokesman Zhang Mingqing also noted that Chen “has not reduced the possibility of conflict. The threats to peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait continue to exist.” This uncompromising approach has not worked for the past four years; it is likely to fail again.

If there is to be any hope for a breakthrough in cross-Strait relations during the next four years, Beijing needs to pursue a more imaginative, flexible, pro-active approach. Its current policies, President Chen observed, “drive the hearts of the Taiwanese people further away and widen the divide in the Strait.”

The first thing Beijing should do is drop its continued reference to “one country, two systems.” This has always been unacceptable to the people of Taiwan (regardless of their own political persuasion); China’s recent heavy-handed steps to roll back its pledge of greater democracy in Hong Kong makes it even more so. Instead, it should offer a “one nation, two states; one country, two governments” formula that would put meaning behind its offer of an “equal-footed” approach. The Taiwan leadership would be hard-pressed to reject such an approach, even if some elements within the DPP or TSU would not doubt strongly object.

There are many other things Beijing could do to draw President Chen down the “right” path. As I have argued previously, it could support Taiwan’s participation in the World Health Organization (WHO) as a “health entity,” a formulation which would offer Taipei some “international living space . . . commensurate with its status.” Chen has effectively used China’s continued blockage of Taiwan’s WHO participation as a political hammer to beat up those who still support closer cross-Strait cooperation. It is unclear why Beijing thinks it is in its advantage to arm the DPP with such an effective weapon.

Speaking of weapons, Beijing should at least freeze and preferably reduce its missile forces opposite Taiwan. In deciding not to sell the *Aegis* shipborne missile defense system to Taiwan in 2001, the Bush administration indicated that it would reevaluate this decision based on the nature of the threat. Can anyone imagine President Bush, in an election year, ignoring a new Taiwanese request for better missile defenses. The Democrats would have to wait in line behind Bush’s own supporters to criticize another turn-down. 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.

Finally, China needs to demonstrate greater flexibility in non-governmental (track-two) forums. 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. 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.

President Chen has taken the first step. Some pro-active diplomatic gestures by Beijing could now play a major role in setting the tone for future cross-Strait cooperation, if Beijing has the political courage and foresight to wave olive branches rather than sabers toward Taiwan.

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