



Time to Seize the Cross-Strait Opportunity

by Ralph A. Cossa

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TAIPEI. "Be careful what you wish for." This Chinese proverb came repeatedly to mind when listening to incoming Taiwan President Ma Ying-jeou's forward-leaning inauguration address that sent so many olive branches toward Beijing that even some of his ardent supporters feared he had "gone too far" and protesters almost immediately took to the street in Taipei warning against "selling out" to China.

The big question now is can Beijing, after hearing "no" for the past eight years, now take "yes" for an answer. Ma called on Beijing to join him to "launch a new era of cross-Strait relations," based on his previously articulated "three no's" policy: no unification, no independence, and no use of force. He talked about "one China, respective interpretations" and the "1992 consensus" (under which both sides agreed to disagree over how to define "one China") and made several references to "our mutual Chinese heritage." He also committed to maintaining the status quo across the Strait, noting at one point that, "in a young democracy, respecting the Constitution is more important than amending it" his predecessor's attempts to amend the constitution was a main source of tension between Taipei and Beijing.

In a truly unprecedented gesture, Ma also made specific positive reference to Chinese President Hu Jintao's remarks on cross-Strait relations "building mutual trust, shelving controversies, finding commonalities despite differences, and creating together a win-win solution" stating that "his views are very much in line with our own."

Ma laid out the normalization of economic and cultural relations with the mainland as immediate goals, but warned that "Taiwan doesn't just want security and prosperity; it wants dignity." Herein lies the rub!

It should be relatively easy for Beijing to respond positively to Ma's calls for direct weekend charter flights and visits to Taiwan by mainland tourists and other economic and cultural exchanges. Some security gesture, such as a visible drawback of missiles opposite Taiwan, is also doable without dramatically changing the security calculus. But, is Beijing prepared to make significant gestures aimed at truly improving Taiwan's sense of security and relieving its international isolation?

A failure by Beijing to respond positively to Ma's olive branches will seriously undercut the new Taiwanese leader as he tries to build consensus at home in support of his forward-leaning cross-Strait policies. His address is already being

labeled by the opposition as "naive" and "wishful thinking." Will Beijing prove this to be the case?

For its part, the Chinese leadership is preoccupied with other things right now earthquake relief, Olympics preparations, unrest in Tibet and elsewhere even while breathing a sigh of relief that its main nemesis, now-departed President Chen Shui-bian, is finally gone. Beijing appeared almost paranoid about Chen springing an 11th hour surprise; a fear exacerbated by its lack of understanding about how democratic transitions work. This one worked flawlessly, as Chen himself had promised!

Beijing immediately opted to pass on its first chance to make a positive political gesture by once again blocking Taiwan's bid for observer status in the World Health Organization (WHO). Chen's decision to apply as "Taiwan" rather than "Chinese Taipei" regrettably made it easier for Beijing to once again block this request, but it could have asked the WHO to postpone consideration of Taiwan's bid for a few days to allow for a reformulation of the application, rather than quickly excluding it from the agenda. As a result, Beijing needs to quickly find some other venues to provide the dignity that Ma seeks and Taiwan richly deserves.

It appears that Beijing is still struggling to figure out how to deal with a potentially friendly government in Taipei after years of just saying no to everything and branding every positive gesture by the Chen administration a "splittist trick." The real concern, as some Chinese candidly expressed to me during a recent visit to Beijing, is finding ways to improve Taiwan's "international breathing space" without further enhancing its status as a sovereign independent entity (or dare we say "country"). Fear that gestures once made would be exploited were Chen's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) to return to power were also cited as a reason for moving slowly, even though moving too slowly (or not at all) will increase the prospects of a DPP return.

Other distractions notwithstanding, it is important for Beijing not to wait too long before making some significant gestures in response to Ma's controversial overtures. For starters, it can observe Ma's call for a "truce" in the international arena. In recent years, Beijing has taken great delight in humiliating the Chen administration by spiriting away Taiwan's few remaining allies, normally through a shameless bidding war that has leant little dignity to either side. This must stop. If no one recognizes the Republic of China (Taiwan's official name), why shouldn't it just declare itself the Republic of Taiwan now and end the "one China" charade?

A more dramatic military gesture is also needed. Merely withdrawing some easily redeployed mobile missiles is not enough. Beijing needs to deactivate and plow over some of the

1,000+ missile sites it has poised opposite Taiwan as a true goodwill gesture.

The semi-official cross-Strait dialogue between Beijing's Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait (ARATS) and Taipei's Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF) also needs to resume, if for no other reason than to facilitate the institution of the economic "three links" that both sides profess to support. Dialogue should also begin, either through ARATS-SEF or through a quasi-official "track two" gathering, on cross-Strait confidence building and conflict avoidance measures. Beijing also needs to loosen restrictions it has imposed on Taiwan in the WHO as a first step toward allowing Chinese Taipei to gain observer status as a "health entity" next year.

Beijing also needs to stop its heavy-handed pressure aimed at blocking participation by Taiwan scholars at academic gatherings like the annual ASEAN ISIS Roundtable and should take steps to help elevate Taiwan's status in the nongovernmental Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) and other track-two organizations, while also supporting higher-level Taiwan participation in the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders Meeting and other forums.

Ma Ying-jeou took a big political risk in reaching out so dramatically to Beijing in his inaugural address. Beijing needs to respond. Washington also needs to respond positively to Ma's gestures, while strongly encouraging Beijing to make significant positive gestures sooner, rather than later, to seize the opportunity presented by the change of government and attitude in Taipei.