



Taiwan Referendum: Waving a Red Flag

by Ralph A. Cossa

TAIPEI – Is President Chen Shui-bian trying to provoke a crisis with the PRC in the run up to the March 2004 presidential elections in Taiwan? Taiwan government spokesmen say no, but there is a growing perception among cross-strait watchers that Taipei is purposefully baiting Beijing in hopes of provoking a hostile response (a la the 1996 missile “tests”) that will cause the island’s public to rally around the flag (and the ruling Democratic Progressive Party) in the name of Taiwanese nationalism.

There is virtually no argument that domestic politics lies at the base of Chen’s controversial referendum initiative. The DPP first tried to pass legislation that would authorize referendums as an “expression of democracy” to gain some political momentum against the rival Kuomintang (KMT)/People First Party (PFP) “pan-blue” coalition that controls the Legislative Yuan and presents a serious challenge to President Chen and his “pan-green” alliance (with the Taiwan Solidarity Union or TSU, headed by former President Lee Teng-Hui). Rather than fight this initiative, the blues cleverly outmaneuvered the greens by enacting legislation that severely limited the government’s ability to actually call referendums. The new law did, however, include a provision (article 17) allowing the president to call for a “defensive referendum” on national security issues in the face of an external military threat to Taiwan’s sovereignty or national security.

The defensive referendum actually handed the Chen administration a powerful cross-strait management tool, if cross-strait dialogue and countering PRC intimidation tactics were the overriding objectives. It (seemingly) removed the ability to capriciously introduce independence-related referendums, thus reducing Beijing’s near-term concerns about such actions by “splittist troublemakers”; a fact that did not go unnoticed by Beijing. On the other hand, it also served notice to Beijing that hostile actions would almost certainly guarantee a referendum on, and subsequent formal declaration of, independence. By deciding to invoke the defensive referendum clause due to the threat posed by Chinese missile forces opposite Taiwan a clear subversion of the spirit and intent of the Referendum Law President Chen has squandered this leverage and left himself open to the charge that he is putting domestic politics ahead of national security.

The decision to invoke the defensive clause was almost certainly an emotional knee-jerk reaction by Chen Shui-bian to the pan-blue’s one-upmanship. Government spokesmen here are still trying to figure out just what the referendum will be about, with one DPP official claiming that the wording was being left open for now so that “people in all walks of life can express their creativity and wisdom” a strange way indeed to

respond to an alleged imminent threat to one’s sovereignty. Invoking Article 17 also continues to wave a red flag in Beijing’s eyes, which reviews any referendum as another step down the slippery slope toward “creeping independence.”

Beijing has thus far refused to take the bait. While Chinese military officials have warned that an independence referendum would push the island toward the “abyss of war,” Beijing has thus far refrained from taking actions that would play into Chen’s hand. Unfortunately, the more restrained Beijing becomes, the more Taipei seems inclined to push the envelope. This has had the (unintended?) consequence of also straining Taipei’s relations with Washington as well.

Chen Shui-bian’s willingness to test Washington’s patience seems to be based on one or more of the following assumptions: that Taiwan has a “green light” from Washington to push as far as it wants without consequences (an impression many in Washington unfortunately seem eager to reinforce); that the neocons in Washington (especially in the U.S. Congress) will come to Taiwan’s rescue even if other elements of the Bush administration (perhaps even the President himself) become alienated; that the end (Chen’s reelection) justifies any means, even if relations with Washington or Taiwan’s national security are temporarily put at risk; or, most disturbingly, that some harsh words from Washington might actually play to Chen’s advantage recall his admonition that Taiwan was neither a province of China nor America’s 51st state. It may be too much to imply that Chen is consciously trying to alienate Washington, but he certainly does not appear too concerned if this occurs.

Those surrounding President Chen are concerned, however, and are valiantly trying to do damage control, a task made considerably more difficult by a lack of clarity as to logic behind (much less the content of) the defensive referendum. Ironically, many here are now expressing concern about Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao’s impending visit to Washington. They fear that President Bush may publicly utter the “three notes” no support for Taiwan independence, no support for “two Chinas” or “one China, one Taiwan,” and no support for Taiwan participation in international organizations or, worse yet, that he will go beyond the standard “does not support” to the more definitive formulation that the U.S. “opposes” Taiwan independence. What they fail to grasp (or at least to admit the law of cause and effect is frequently suspended in Taipei) is that President Chen’s domestic politicking has made such a U.S. pronouncement both more likely and more appropriate.

Ralph A. Cossa is president of the Pacific Forum CSIS. He can be reached at pacforum@hawaii.rr.com