



## **Taiwanese Election Creates New Challenges for Japan on Cross-Straits Relations** by Barbara Wanner

The victory of Democratic Progressive Party leader Chen Shui-bian in Taiwan's mid-March presidential election was hailed in the international press as a "democratic breakthrough" and a "peaceful revolution" since it overturned more than a half-century of rule by the once-dictatorial Kuomintang, or Nationalist Party. Tokyo might have been expected to look favorably on the transformation of Taiwan's political system into one that more closely resembles its own, yet officials responded cautiously to the power shift. Foreign Minister Yohei Kono reiterated the government's commitment to the one-China policy embodied in the 1972 friendship treaty with the People's Republic of China and urged a peaceful settlement of the "issue relating to Taiwan" through a direct dialogue between Taipei and Beijing.

On the acutely sensitive issue of Taiwan's status – Beijing considers it a rebel province that should be reincorporated, while many Taiwanese, including Mr. Chen, have advocated independence from the mainland – Tokyo has toed a neutral line. The care taken by the government during the past 28 years to remain on good terms with both China and Taiwan is motivated as much by economic interests as by security-related concerns. Through private exchanges and what Tokyo describes as "nongovernmental working relations," Japan and Taiwan have developed extensive business ties over the years; Taiwan currently is Japan's number-two export market. At the same time, China ranks second in two-way trade with Japan. The government has committed large amounts of public funds to the economic engagement of China, the idea being that a prosperous China will be more stable and less hostile toward its neighbors. Any deviation from neutrality risks alienating either the mainland or the island and jeopardizing these not-insignificant economic stakes.

Moreover, Japan's geographic proximity to China on top of the latter country's unabashed regional leadership aspirations and often-bellucose rhetoric and provocative actions toward Taiwan has limited its options on cross-straits issues. In view of the buildup of Chinese military power, Tokyo generally has been reluctant to pursue policies that could inflame relations with its massive neighbor, fearing that China would attack Japan or cause a regional disturbance, such as military action in the Taiwan Straits. The possible risk to the safety and the security of the Japanese is alarming in and of itself. But the Taiwan Straits confrontation scenario is just as worrisome for decisionmakers because they basically would be forced to choose between the United States and China. The 1997 revised guidelines for U.S.-Japan defense cooperation oblige Tokyo to provide logistical support to American troops engaged in a nearby crisis – but, in so doing, the government inevitably would incur Beijing's ire.

It was precisely Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji's saber-rattling on the eve of the Taiwanese presidential election, which occurred barely a month after China's defense white paper included a promise to use force if Taipei refused to negotiate on Beijing's terms, and Mr. Zhu's subsequent snub of Mr. Chen's call for a peace summit that put Japanese officials on edge. The fact that Japan and China are going through a period of testy relations following two less-than-spectacular summit meetings also no doubt has influenced Tokyo's measured response to the DPP leader's victory.

At the same time, though, Taiwan's economic accomplishments and democratic transformation clearly have earned it additional friends among Japanese lawmakers. In fact, the lines have blurred between the Diet's pro-Taiwan and pro-China policy groups, as members have recognized the benefits of developing strong relations with both sides. Taipei's sympathizers could complicate Tokyo's diplomatic balancing act by, for example, pushing for a visit by retiring Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui later this year. Experts say, however, that the pro-Taiwan camp will not bring about a change in Japan's one-China policy or compel Tokyo to try and broker a cross-straits accord. Rather, the near-term outlook for Japan's relations with the mainland and Taiwan probably will depend in large part on Mr. Chen's success in engaging Beijing in a productive, nonconfrontational dialogue.

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