



Why Beijing Has Got It Wrong

by Laurence Eyton

TAIPEI - Bonnie S. Glaser's analysis (PacNet 5, February 2, 2001) of Beijing's view of Taiwan politics contains two key sentences that may be easily overlooked. "Chinese leaders' present confidence that they can adroitly manage their relationship with Taiwan is not necessarily based on sound reasoning and a sophisticated understanding of the political and economic situation in Taiwan." ... "The continuing failure of Chinese analysts to grasp political and economic development on the island does not bode well for Beijing's ability to correctly forecast and comprehend Taipei's policies and the future course of events."

This is well put and extremely important. While it is useful to understand Beijing's view of possible developments in Taiwan, it is crucial to remember that Beijing's understanding of Taiwan's society and politics bears extraordinarily little resemblance to reality.

Reading the four scenarios detailed by Glaser as representing the views of Chinese "experts," a Taipei-based analyst can only be shocked at how much these scenarios are informed by wishful thinking rather than even a modest dose of reality. Some of the more gross errors and misjudgments are:

Scenario one:

While the new government has been blamed for recent economic instability, this has in no way been connected to its policy toward China. Taiwan's economic downturn is the result of a slowdown in the key U.S. market and a tightening of domestic credit as the government tries to assess the extent of inherited bad loans. Unemployment at just over 3 percent may be high by Taiwan's standards but is low by current developed country averages, and compared to China's.

In addition, ethnic tensions between Taiwanese and the Mainland exiles who arrived in the late 1940s and their offspring are far less serious than they were in the mid-1990s. Taiwan is no more likely to descend into civil war than similarly culturally divided Belgium.

Scenario two:

While it is quite possible that the DPP might lose the next election after a lackluster performance, this will not "eliminate the party for years to come." Taiwan's political transition resembles much of Eastern Europe after 1989, when reformist governments were problem-ridden - largely as a result of inexperience - and after one term were usually defeated by ex-

communists, who in their turn were generally replaced by far more politically savvy reformists after a one-term reprise.

Something of the same is likely in Taiwan. What might upset this scenario is the one thing that Beijing would not want. For internal reasons, KMT has swung from the popular "Taiwan first" principles of ex-president Lee Teng-hui back to a strong reunificationist stance. China is no doubt pleased by this. However, reunificationism has little electoral appeal. The KMT's desertion of the electoral middle ground might lead to the DPP doing better in 2004 than its current disarray would lead one to expect.

Scenario three:

The DPP's possible legislative gains have nothing to do with President Chen Shui-bian's ability to placate China. Both analysts in China and the international media consistently and mistakenly play up the role that cross-Strait relations play in Taiwan elections. There are virtually no concessions in cross-Strait policy that Chen could make which would actually strengthen his party's showing in legislative elections except, perhaps, going ahead with direct transportation, communication, and commercial links with China. Taiwan's reason for this is entirely pragmatic, however - China is Taiwan's second biggest market and everyone would like business costs to be lowered. Also, maintaining the current ban may prove impossible in the light of the upcoming accession into the World Trade Organization.

Taiwan is well aware of the security threat posed by greater economic interaction with China, which is why Lee Teng-hui's administration so strongly supported the direct links ban and restrictions on investment in China. But the idea that economic cooperation will promote political integration contains a large dose of wishful thinking. China is seen as a large neighboring market for Taiwan goods. So is Japan - which has far more cultural influence on Taiwan - but nobody talks of integration with the ex-colonial master. Anecdotal evidence suggests that increased contact with China has caused many Taiwan businessmen to develop a strong aversion to China's political and economic systems.

Scenario four:

This "worst case" scenario is the most plausible. While it envisions Chen dividing the pro-unification opposition, such a division is more likely to be the result of the competing ambitions of the KMT and People's First Party (PFP) leaders - bitter rivals for the past decade - and the fact that staunch reunificationism has little electoral appeal in Taiwan.

One of the greatest ironies is that all four scenarios seem to dismiss as irrelevant concessions that Chen has already made, such as the dropping of the "state-to-state" definition of cross-

Strait relations, the opening of direct links between China and Taiwan's offshore islands, and an upcoming loosening of investment restrictions. While Chinese analysts find these unimportant, this is not the case in Washington where Taiwan's unreciprocated gestures may result in increased confidence by the Bush administration to supply Taiwan with the sophisticated defensive weapons it has asked for - something definitely not to China's advantage.

One of the more interesting questions about the Chinese view, given that personal connections across the Taiwan Strait are far more extensive than is generally realized and Taiwan's mass-market daily newspapers can be read over the Internet, is how Beijing's perceptions of Taiwan realities can be so unrealistic.

The answer is threefold. Many of the person-to-person contacts between Taiwan and China are simply unrepresentative of mainstream Taiwan opinion. Many of the legislators that Beijing talks to, for instance, come from the New Party, the PFP, or the "non-mainstream" faction of the KMT. These groups were, until recently, utterly marginalized from Taiwan political life as ethnic political ghettos of mainlander reunificationist support. It is hard to imagine that these groups have been overly frank about their near-zero value in Taiwan's political equation.

Nor can Beijing expect to get a realistic appraisal of affairs from Taiwan businessmen. Beijing has made it clear that businessmen who manifest pro-independence sentiments will face difficulties doing business on the Mainland. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that the business community will tell the authorities what they wish to hear rather than what they need to know.

Taiwan's media, for the most part, gives no less a distorted view. The media orientation is still a legacy of the island's martial law past when newspaper licenses were given out to cronies of the then unrepresentative group of Mainland exiles who monopolized the island's political life. This means that the two leading mass market dailies, the United Daily News and the China Times, both tend to an old-style KMT reunificationist line. Their market dominance might therefore seem anomalous, but it is due to the fact that readers are prepared to ignore their political spin for their superior coverage of other, especially "soft," news.

There are, of course, Taiwan media that are more representative of mainstream thinking. Ironically, these tend to be discounted by China as unrepresentative. Taiwan politicians with frequent intercourse with Beijing have every reason to encourage this misperception, given the dismissive treatment they themselves receive at home.

But another problem is that in China's political environment some intellectual options simply cannot be considered: there are, in Michael Pillsbury's phrase, "untested ideological taboos" that no Chinese scholar can openly contend. One of these is that the majority of Taiwanese may think of China as a hostile foreign country with which they want as little to do with politically as possible for at least as long as the current regime remains in a recognizable form.

Beyond the one-sidedness of its information sources - or those it chooses to rely on - and ideological taboos which preclude realistic debate and policy formation, Beijing's grasp of

Taiwan affairs is also weakened by its serious lack of understanding of democratic processes.

Beijing is extremely hostile to what it sees as Taipei's development of a national identity separate from China, but fails to understand that many of the measures taken have been a response to public demand. That school textbooks have traditionally been centered on China, leaving Taiwanese with little understanding of the culture and history of their island, has been an issue for more than a decade. That a democratic government would respond to this is hardly surprising.

The abiding weakness of China's thinking is to see cultural and political development as something that is imposed from above along lines determined by the political elite. This is simply not the case in democracies in general and Taiwan in particular. Remember, 70 percent of Taiwanese were supportive of Lee's redefinition of Taiwan-China relations in mid-1999 as "state-to-state" in nature, a position that is seen as highly inflammatory. Because of U.S. concerns that such a plain statement of reality was "unhelpful," both Lee's government in its final months and Chen's since his inauguration have shied away from pursuing this line of thinking.

This means that, far from leading Taiwanese public opinion where it would not otherwise go, Chen's government might be actually misrepresenting that opinion as being more malleable than it really is. It should be remembered that the KMT's election campaign played almost exclusively on the threat of war were Chen to be elected - abetted by pugnacious rhetoric from Beijing - and the KMT suffered its greatest defeat since the end of the civil war.

Perhaps the most worrying of Glaser's analysis is that those Beijing analysts who are prepared to admit that Taiwan might not be willing to reunify "for several decades" seem to see no option other than military coercion. Taiwan is deeply suspicious of China and there is a deep loathing for its government. But apparently China sees no reason to improve its behavior both domestically and internationally. That China prefers rape to wooing is something that should worry the entire East Asian region.

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