



## **Taiwan's Communication Problem** by Andrew Yang

Less than two months before the Taiwan presidential election, incumbent Chen Shui-bian finds himself accused of having sunk the U.S.-Taiwan relationship to an historical nadir. Apparent misperceptions of the mood in Washington by Taiwanese policy-makers and advisors have led to their failure to mount an effective campaign to explain their positions. To halt the freefall in its international standing, Taiwan will have to rethink its diplomatic communication strategies and begin engaging Washington more effectively on numerous post-election issues.

Taiwan officials, prominent policy wonks, and advisors known to be in President Chen's inner circle continue to put forward arguments that only elicit rolling eyes and greater concern in the United States. First, they claim that the status quo equals Taiwan independence. Second, they argue China is threatening a stable status quo with its military buildup, especially missile deployments opposite Taiwan. These points, framed carefully, might have some merit. But the arguments continue, asserting that the renamed "peace" referendum, in addition to setting a milestone for Taiwan's democracy, is a legitimate and necessary step that informs the world of the PRC threat and offers a way out of the current deadlock.

Most folks in Washington believe that the referendum is first and foremost an election gambit. That many Taiwanese at home and abroad share this feeling does not help Chen's case. The referendum has attracted other criticisms. Not only are public votes seen as inappropriate for determining critical national security issues, but the content of the referendum is also inappropriate for what it aims to achieve. Its first question asks whether Taiwan should purchase more defensive weapons if China refuses to remove its missiles and renounce the use of force. Apparently, the idea is to defuse a military threat peacefully by threatening an arms race that Taiwan is incapable of waging in any event. This further fuels the belief that the referendum is nothing more than a ploy.

Supporters of the current referenda are unwilling to acknowledge the domestic political dimensions, and insist they are necessitated by international conditions. But since the significance of the referendum in the pan-Green/pan-Blue battle is well known, neglecting this aspect simply breeds even more suspicion in Washington.

When the Taiwanese do connect the referendum to electoral developments, moreover, they are more likely to urge the Bush administration "not to read too much" into President Chen's remarks because he is only speaking in the "heat of the campaign." Perhaps some in the pan-Green camp are unwisely taking a page from German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder. Schroeder, in the midst of a contested reelection bid in 2002, openly opposed Washington's Iraq policy, and rode the subsequent anti-American fury to victory. The Bush

administration has yet to completely forgive him, and for an obvious reason: true allies should not undermine one another's interests for immediate political gains. That Taipei fails to see this further angers the Americans.

This is not to say that Taiwan does not have real gripes. The island's population is clearly frustrated with their limited options. The United States, in the midst of another honeymoon with the PRC, is either ignorant or dismissive of this dissatisfaction. The Chen government seems to believe that shouting is the only recourse when its hands are tied. But the way Taiwan has been voicing its opinions is flawed, and singing the same tune over the past several weeks has proved counterproductive. U.S. officials and experts have given up on new or compelling explanations from Taipei.

In fact, the referendum fiasco is beyond remedy because neither side can afford significant compromises. Chen can no longer even alter, let alone cancel, the referendum without severely damaging his reelection chances and credibility. Washington seems appeased that the content of this public vote has been sufficiently moderated, but it will never come around to an endorsement. The toned-down referendum still looks like an election tactic, and the Bush administration wants to avoid provoking Beijing. Taiwan needs to get over this failed campaign, and begin engaging Washington on other post-election issues such as constitutional reform and a revived cross-Strait dialogue.

Taiwan must learn from past mistakes to improve its communication strategies. First, Taipei must demonstrate sensitivity to American interests and anxieties. This means, for instance, no more one-sided complaints about Beijing or its cozy relations with America in front of U.S. officials who still feel betrayed and want apologies. And rather than blaming Washington for "interfering" with Taiwan's domestic politics and "misreading" President Chen, Taipei should acknowledge U.S. concerns over its intentions before and after the election, and recognize the depth of U.S. support for Taiwan's security and democratic evolution.

The logical next step would be to assure Americans about Taipei's post-election agenda. Chen's sudden moderation in proposing a demilitarized zone, a cross-Strait liaison office, and envoy exchanges with China is a good start. Such gestures accord with a widely held belief in Washington about Taiwan's demands for sovereignty or missile removal. "Do not just complain to us. It is ultimately Beijing's consent that matters, so instead of provoking them, you need to start talking to them."

To further assure the U.S., Taipei could also avoid repeating the idea, broached by one of President Chen's most important advisors, that Chen would void the "four no's and one without" if demanded by a majority of Taiwan voters. Maintaining his earlier pledges will help persuade Washington

that it can still get through to Chen and his closest aides. The Bush administration has rightly felt that, in exchange for its security commitment to the island, it is entitled to some influence over Taipei's decisions that could lead to war. But one of the most often-heard U.S. complaints has been that Chen is impervious to U.S. advice. To have any hope of restoring a positive relationship, Taiwan needs to demonstrate that it is still responsive to American opinions and concerns.

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