



The China Factor in Taiwan's Presidential Election

by Chih-cheng Lo

As the countdown for the presidential election narrows, the competition between the pan-blue and pan-green camps is reaching a boiling point. As if to top things off, on Feb. 28, there was a peace rally to form a human chain "hand in hand across Taiwan," and of course, then there is also the forthcoming public referendum. How is Beijing likely to view all of this?

We have already seen a range of more flexible tactics from Beijing, be it the explosive disclosure of the so-called Taiwanese "spies," the subtle and indirect pressuring of Taiwan by other countries (such as the U.S., Japan, and others), and the establishment of the pan-blue support group in mainland China.

Beijing has come to realize that the policy differences between the pan-blue and pan-green camps may not be so huge after all – especially once that party has become the ruling party. Nonetheless, from an ideological point of view, China clearly prefers the pan-blue ticket. Interestingly enough, leaders in Beijing have so far refrained from doing things they did in Taiwan's past elections, and thus harsh words, saber rattling, and military intimidation have been largely left by the wayside. This is only because these very actions have proven to be counterproductive measures that only help elect the candidate that they do not like. That does not mean that China does not intend and has not already tried to influence the election outcomes in Taiwan. As a matter of fact, China's attempts to sway the election in Taiwan are so evident that they have already caused Beijing some trouble.

China's policy toward Taiwan over the period leading up to and during the presidential elections has become more sophisticated, subtle, and at times, somewhat more flexible. One of the most obvious changes is the shift in strategy. In the past, China has chosen to take a direct approach, as was seen in 1996 with the missile tests, and also in 2000, in the lead up to the last presidential election, with the various military exercises. Nowadays, China is taking a much more indirect approach.

First, it is apparent that China is pressuring other actors to carry out its wishes. Particularly in recent weeks, the U.S. has quite effectively been pushed to the forefront in pressuring Taiwan on the referendum issue, while China takes a backseat. In fact, it would seem that the criticism directed toward Chen by President Bush hit the mark quite nicely and it must have pleased China to see that President Chen was hurt by these remarks. Then, French President Jacques Chirac attacked Taiwan's proposal to hold the public referendum, going so far as to say it was a "grave mistake" and "provocation."

Yet another area in which China prefers to take an indirect approach is with respect to the united front strategy. By pandering to Taiwanese business people living in China that are even slightly open to the notion of unification, or even to

those who are dissatisfied with cross-strait policy, China has managed to find an avenue through which to exert influence upon Taiwan's domestic politics. The establishment of the pan-blue support group in mainland China is proof of the continuance of such tactics, since without the approval of China, there is no way that this could have occurred. But since it has become apparent to all that China is not a detached observer, the united front strategy has begun to backfire in Taiwan. By taking steps to outlaw the support group, Beijing has extricated itself to some degree, but in fact these pan-blue support groups are still active in the mainland.

A second aspect to China's policy toward Taiwan is the effective freeze on cross-strait relations. The overall aim of this strategy is to try not to give the incumbent Chen any credit when and if there is some progress in cross-strait relations. Beijing's rejection of Taiwan's proposal for direct charter flights between the two sides is a good case in point. Yet another example is the influx of illegal immigrants into Taiwan from the mainland – China could control this but instead it has allowed this development to get worse. Both examples reflect a strategy of creating situations that make President Chen appear unable to handle cross-strait relations.

China has other tactics to compliment this approach. There is the attempt to generate insecurity and a sense of threat among Taiwanese business people in the mainland. It is increasingly apparent that Taiwanese business people needing to file claims to the Mainland Affairs Council are often dissatisfied and that even where lawsuits are won this does not mean that the courts in China will execute the judgment. Similarly, many in Taiwan have come to the conclusion that the arrests of the so-called 24 Taiwanese "spies" in December and the recent charging of the two Taiwanese "spies" in Nanjing are meant to further discredit Chen, and that the latter is Beijing's response to President Chen's having noted with some accuracy "there are 496 missiles targeting Taiwan."

Finally, it almost goes without saying that the newspapers and radio stations in China continue to go all out criticizing Chen and the proposed referendum. This is done in as harsh a manner as in the year 2000, and yet, there is a subtle difference, since it is carried out in a more low-profile way.

In sum, the leaders in Beijing have their preferences and they have tried to sway the election. On the surface Beijing has demonstrated a "take no action" and "wait and see" policy. Look a little farther and it is obvious that Beijing has tried everything it can to influence the outcome in its favor.

Chih-cheng Lo is associate professor at Soochow University. This article originally appeared as a "Taiwan Perspective e-Paper," Feb. 26, 2004. He can be reached at lo@mail.scu.edu.tw