



## **Taiwan's Election: A Wake-Up Call to China**

by Derek Mitchell

Taiwan's historically close presidential election on March 20 remains subject to a possible recount, but regardless of the outcome, the results are in: China lost.

Although the two contending political camps each received about 50 percent of the vote, President Chen Shui-bian increased his share of the electorate by about 10 percent over the 2000 election, continuing a steady trend for his independence-minded Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in every national election since becoming Taiwan's first legal opposition party in 1986.

More critically, the 2004 election was conducted on its terms; defending and promoting Taiwan nationalism and separateness. The debate was joined only on the degree of separation from China, the pace of economic engagement with the mainland, and how best to promote Taiwan's national dignity both on the island and internationally.

This is bad news for China's current strategists. China says it reserves the option to use force but remains committed to peaceful unification with Taiwan. Yet clearly its tactics toward this latter end have proved counter-productive.

Its Hong Kong-style "one country, two systems" formula for reunification is outdated, and consistently rejected by Taiwan as inappropriate for its context. Meanwhile, China's self-proclaimed "hearts and minds" campaign toward Taiwan in reality consists of a typically heavy-handed Chinese "united front" effort that reaches out to like-minded Taiwanese while seeking to isolate or punish those on the island perceived as insufficiently "patriotic".

In addition, China's so-called "patient" and "peaceful" approach to Taiwan has entailed leveraging growing economic and social ties between the two sides, while isolating the island internationally. China blocked Taiwan's petition to observer status at the World Health Organization (WHO) in the wake of the SARS epidemic, with the PRC representative coldly dismissing the idea by commenting "who cares about Taiwan?" Hardly the stuff to reach an islander's heart.

At the same time, China is developing a military capability directed almost solely at Taiwan, including more than 500 missiles aimed at the island that may soon enable, and therefore tempt, the mainland to strike multiple key targets with great quickness, precision, and lethality. China calls this a deterrent; Taiwan's people may be forgiven for viewing it otherwise.

China's rigid approach has resulted in a Taiwan population increasingly nationalistic, alienated, and mistrustful of the mainland. If this continues, Chinese frustration over a perceived failure of its "patient" approach may give way to

other less-peaceful approaches over time. Given long-time U.S. commitment to Taiwan's security, the United States has a profound stake in averting such a decision.

China must change its fundamental approach to Taiwan, urgently matching the creativity and flexibility displayed in other areas of its foreign and domestic policy to address the impasse. It is a common Chinese diplomatic tactic to absolve itself of responsibility for action, alternately telling an interlocutor that "the ball is in your court," "the time is not ripe" for Chinese action, or the natural course of events will automatically move things in their direction. However, China can no longer afford to fall back on these convenient methods of self-absolution.

Instead, China must take the initiative, even if seemingly counter to its instincts after the recent election. Beijing must honestly reach out to the people of Taiwan and demonstrate openly, through its rhetoric and action, respect for their achievements. It must credibly display its good faith, not by isolating Taiwan but by welcoming the island into the international community as a constructive player – perhaps in a limited capacity, for instance, as an observer in the WHO.

China should also take action to unilaterally reduce its military threat and begin a process of establishing military confidence-building measures with Taiwan to reduce the likelihood of miscalculation or misunderstanding leading to conflict.

Perhaps most importantly, China should drop its preconditions and accept serious high-level discussions between the two sides to reduce tensions and devise a roadmap for increased economic, social, and perhaps eventual political ties across the Taiwan Strait.

To do so would put the onus on Taiwan to respond likewise with constructive action and avoid any provocation of its own that could lead to increased friction and conflict.

The severe temptation for China after an election as divisive and disturbing (to China) as last Saturday's may be to increase the military threat or fall back on traditional united front tactics to further divide Taiwan society. They may also try to convince themselves that the failure of election-day referenda is evidence to support their old shibboleth that a majority of Taiwan citizens support unification or oppose Chen's policies to promote greater separation. Doing so, however, will lead to decisions that only repeat the counter-productive mistakes of the past.

If China indeed seeks to adhere to Deng Xiaoping's maxim that the mainland can wait 50 years for unification, Beijing should not fear the development of Taiwan society or its desire for greater international space to assert its interests. If China is truly committed to winning over the Taiwan people and to a peaceful political resolution, it must engage in a true

hearts and minds campaign, not a thinly veiled coercion strategy.

Indeed, China should do this not because it is in U.S. or Taiwan's interests but its own, to promote continued regional stability that has served its internal and international interests, and promote the possibility of peaceful resolution with Taiwan in the future.

It is perhaps understandable that a nation built on authoritarian principles will not be used to winning over hearts and minds. However, to paraphrase President John F. Kennedy: "Those who make peaceful resolution impossible will make violent resolution inevitable." Taiwan's election on Saturday should serve as a wake-up call to Beijing to reconsider its current course. China, the ball is in your court.

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