



Chen Shui-bian Could be Taiwan's Nixon

by Jianwei Wang

As Taiwan's top opposition leaders, Lien Chan and James Soong, embark on separate historical visits to mainland China, President Chen Shui-bian is facing a serious political crisis. Apparently, the negative fallout of the anti-secession law did not completely reverse the emerging "mainland fever" on the island. And the attempt by Chen and his Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) to exploit the ill-timed law to retake the initiative on cross-Strait relations did not succeed.

Chen is caught between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, he is reluctant to let the opposition parties control the direction and pace of cross-Strait relations. Therefore, he does not want to just rubber stamp deals made by the opposition parties with Beijing. On the other hand, with "mainland fever" rising, remaining passive runs the risk of rendering Chen irrelevant in cross-Strait relations.

The DPP government's initial reaction to the new reality in cross-Strait relations did not show signs of a real strategy. The Taiwan authorities tried to put a brake on "mainland fever" by sidelining cross-Strait exchanges. The government even contemplated legal means to forestall the Lien and Soong visits. Only after these efforts were unsuccessful did Chen suspend criticism of the KMT's mainland diplomacy and give his "blessing" to Lien's historical visit.

Like any political leader in his second term, President Chen needs to think of his political legacy. People have reason to believe that initially he wanted to create a "Republic of Taiwan" as his political legacy. He made some headway in nurturing consciousness of the Taiwan identity and pursuing "de-sinicization." But recent changes in the domestic and international political landscapes apparently convinced Chen that he would be unable to deliver Taiwan independence and publicly admitted as much. If that is the case, Chen has to rethink his strategy for the remainder of his term.

Domestically Chen has accomplished relatively little. With the opposition parties continuing to hold a majority in the legislature, it will be difficult, if not impossible, for him to get most of the legislation he wanted. The constitutional reform he desires is also unlikely to be fully achieved. A more stable and peaceful cross-Strait relationship could be within his reach, however. For one thing, this probably is the only issue on which he could count on strong support from the pan-blue opposition parties. Indeed if Chen Shui-bian could adapt his thinking to the new political reality, he might be in a stronger position politically to deal with Beijing.

In this regard, Chen could turn to Richard Nixon for inspiration. Just as the anti-communist Nixon turned out to be the U.S. president able to open the door to communist China, Chen also has the historical opportunity to "normalize"

Taiwan's relations with the mainland. Compared to the pan-blue leaders, Chen does not have the historical baggage related to the mainland and therefore is much less vulnerable to the charge of "selling out" Taiwan's interest to Beijing.

Whether Chen has the courage to use this advantage is unclear. His recent words and deeds regarding cross-Strait relations create more confusion than confidence. Chen could complain that the opposition parties did not consult him before visiting the mainland. He could also complain that Beijing took advantage of the disunity within Taiwan. But in the final analysis, he has only himself to blame for lacking a clear, consistent, and imaginative mainland policy. The way for Chen to retake the driver's seat in cross-Strait relations is not to deny and delegitimize what the opposition parties get from the mainland and to push back existing cross-Strait exchange programs; rather, he should develop an integrated strategy with the opposition parties to strengthen Taiwan's bargaining position vis-à-vis the mainland.

Without Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai's vision and courage, Nixon could not have accomplished one of the most important diplomatic breakthroughs of the 20th century. By the same token, Chen Shui-bian needs a hand from the other side of the Strait. Beijing should realize that granting high-profile visits to opposition party leaders, while making the DPP government look bad, is no substitute for dealing with decision makers in Taiwan. After all, only the DPP has the executive power to turn whatever "consensus" is reached between Beijing and Taiwan opposition leaders into reality. Therefore Beijing still has to figure out a way to deal with Chen and his government, no matter how uncomfortable that may be. Here, Beijing could also learn from Mao and Zhou.

When Mao made the strategic choice to shake hands with Nixon, the U.S. recognized Taiwan as the sole legitimate government of China. Even in the Shanghai Communiqué, the U.S. did not explicitly recognize the "one-China" principle. That, however, did not prevent Beijing from talking and negotiating with Washington. If Mao had insisted that China not deal with Nixon unless the U.S. recognized the "one-China" principle first, then Sino-U.S. relations probably would have never been normalized. Even after Nixon's visit, the U.S. maintained diplomatic relations with Taiwan. But Beijing had no problem setting up a semi-official liaison office with the U.S. In other words, formation of the U.S. "one-China" policy was a long process. During that process, Beijing was willing to take parallel steps to establish relations with Washington.

Chinese leaders often claim that the Taiwanese people are "our flesh-and-blood brothers." If so, why can't Beijing treat its compatriots more magnanimously than it does foreigners? If Beijing truly regards the "five noes" pledge in the Chen-Soong 10-point statement as a positive step toward recognizing the "one-China" principle, there is no reason why

Beijing and Taipei could not resume contact and dialogue between the semi-official ARATS (Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits) and SEF (Straits Exchange Foundation) to encourage him to go further. This is similar to the liaison office approach China took in dealing with the U.S.

I am not suggesting that the relationship between the mainland and Taiwan is the same as the state-state relations between China and the U.S. But the logic in these relationships does share similarities. With all the caveats, we are talking about relations between two separate political entities within the framework of one China. The courageous decisions of Lien and Soong to visit the mainland pave the way for a new era of cross-Strait relations. But it is up to Hu Jintao and Chen Shui-bian to realize substantive cross-Strait reconciliation. If both leaders can draw proper lessons from history and develop some new thinking for the well-being of the Chinese on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, more peaceful and prosperous cross-Strait relations could on the horizon.

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