



## Recent Developments in Taiwan: Politics in Command – But at What Cost? by Alan D. Romberg

Recent statements by Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian have given rise to another round of criticism from Beijing and revived U.S. mistrust toward Chen. The proposals that he can carry out would not take him across PRC redlines; those that would cross those redlines he lacks the wherewithal to carry out. So there is not likely to be a cross-Strait crisis. And the United States will not abandon Taiwan. Still, the steps outlined by President Chen underscore that there will be no significant progress in cross-Strait relations during his remaining two years in office. Moreover, if promoted, those steps could create a chill in U.S.-Taiwan relations.

In statements on Jan. 1 and Jan. 29, Chen announced a new, more restrictive approach to cross-Strait economic relations; proposed a “bottom up” approach to revising the constitution with, as he indicated elsewhere, no subjects barred from consideration; and suggested it was appropriate to give “serious consideration” both to abolishing the National Unification Council and National Unification Guidelines (which came into being in the early 1990s) and to applying to the United Nations as “Taiwan.”

Against the background of defeats suffered by Chen’s Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) a year ago in elections for the Legislative Yuan (LY) and the rout experienced in December 2005 local elections, the latest statements appear to stem from Chen’s desire to regain the initiative from the opposition Kuomintang (KMT). He seeks to do this by tightening his identification with “Taiwan consciousness,” heightening the impression of threat from the mainland, deepening the sense of separateness, and tarring his political opponents as capitulationist PRC toadies.

His call for a people-oriented approach to fashioning a “new” constitution is unlikely to bear fruit given the firm opposition by KMT Chairman (and Taipei Mayor) Ma Ying-jeou, whose political coalition controls the LY, where a constitutional amendment needs to be approved by a three-quarters vote. But even if there were agreement on “good governance” amendments (e.g., changing the government from a five-branch to a three-branch government, clarifying roles of the various branches by moving either to a true parliamentary or true presidential system, etc.), there is zero prospect of the LY passing changes that would touch on the so-called “sensitive” issues of sovereignty, territory, and unification/independence.

Moreover, at least two decades of polling show that the people of Taiwan do not want to take chances with their security and well-being, and hence strongly (around 80 percent) opt for “maintaining the status quo.” Thus, there is no prospect that amendments that would clearly bring down

tragedy on Taiwan would garner the required affirmative vote of half of the entire electorate even if they got beyond the LY.

Perhaps Chen’s most controversial proposal is to “seriously consider” abolishing the National Unification Council and Guidelines. It is most controversial because it is the one that he may have the legal authority to bring off on his own.

In his inaugural addresses in 2000 and 2004, Chen made various pledges, including that there “will not be an issue” about abolishing the council and guidelines. But he now believes that the “precondition” he laid down for observing those pledges – that the PRC has no intention to use military force against Taiwan – no longer exists. In his judgment, the PRC now not only has the intention but is actively planning to use force against Taiwan – as seen in the buildup of missiles across from Taiwan, the passage of the Anti-Secession Law in March 2005 that provided for use of “non-peaceful means” to block Taiwan independence, and the report that the PRC has, and is actively carrying out, a three-phase plan for war against Taiwan by 2015.

Chen has not publicly committed to moving ahead to eliminate the council and guidelines, much less to take action on any other proposal that would more directly threaten to cross PRC “redlines” on *de jure* independence. That said, one senses that, while he does not want a crisis with the U.S., Chen might like to move on the council and guidelines to demonstrate that he understands Beijing’s limits better than Washington does and that he does not need U.S. approval for every step he takes on cross-Strait relations.

His lunar New Year proposal to consider applying to the UN under the name “Taiwan” is obviously a political ploy with no prospect of going anywhere. It is designed to show that he is the true protector of Taiwan’s interests and that Ma Ying-jeou, who has spoken favorably of some sort of ultimate unification with a democratized mainland, is not.

Perhaps all of the steps President Chen proposes are also designed not only to set the terms for the 2008 presidential elections, when his successor will be chosen, but also to box in future candidates from his own party, where many members take a more patient approach than he has shown when it comes to pressing a separatist stance.

Beijing’s reaction has been somewhat detached and dismissive. PRC officials take every private opportunity to warn that Americans – and especially the U.S. government – should remain vigilant. They caution that some clever move by Chen might be seen by Americans as harmless but by Beijing as triggering a harsh reaction, thus splitting the U.S. and PRC and leading to a crisis.

PRC analysts understand the limits on Chen. Moreover, the level of outspoken confidence in China today regarding

long-term trends in cross-Strait relations is noteworthy, and a significant change from the anxious and militant mood in late 2003 and early 2004. Indeed, Chen seems to share their assessment that time is on Beijing's side, which is one reason he calls for altering trends by tightening up on cross-Strait economic relations and deepening Taiwanese identity.

U.S. government statements issued after Chen's Jan. 1 speech and Jan. 29 Lunar New Year remarks were measured but unmistakable in their warnings to the Taiwan leader (and their assurances to Beijing) regarding U.S. intolerance of active steps toward Taiwan independence. Private messages from Washington to Taipei were reportedly sterner. The point from Washington's perspective is not whether the Unification Council and Guidelines matter substantively – they are inactive, and, moreover, the U.S. does not take a position for or against unification. Rather, Chen's inaugural pledges are important, and any effort to break them is not justified, in Washington's view, by exaggerating the threat from Beijing. Chen's moves are seen as political mischief at best and perhaps more than that. Significantly, they represent a potential breach of faith with the U.S. regarding commitments made as part of the efforts to restore trust after the boisterous 2003-2004 Taiwan presidential campaign.

The U.S. is not going to walk away from Taiwan. But it could distance itself from Taipei if Chen continues to act in ways that not only surprise Washington but move in directions seen as harmful to U.S. national interests. This is not something anyone should wish for – not even in Beijing.

Chen Shui-bian argues that his proposals are designed to deepen democracy and, as such, merit U.S. support. But democracy is not a license for irresponsible behavior, and while the U.S. stands behind the notion that any agreements between Taiwan and the mainland should be peaceful and meet the approval of the people of Taiwan, support for this level of "self-determination" is not support for independence.

The U.S. strongly supports Taiwan's democratic development. And it respects Taiwan's right, as a democracy, to make its own choices. But the U.S. is not bound to support such choices, and is free to react in ways that serve its own interests.

Taiwan's National Security Council will reportedly examine the issue of abolishing the National Unification Council and Guidelines and make recommendations to President Chen in the next few weeks. One hopes that throughout that process, both the NSC and Chen will reflect on the harm that could be done to Taiwan's interests if a chill develops between the island and the U.S.

Given the stakes, it is hard to see how such a development would serve Chen's political interests, or the interests of the people of Taiwan.

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