

Thinking about a Future DPP Government

by David G. Brown

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Fresh from recent electoral victories and with hopes of more to come, Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) is beginning to think about the possibility of returning to government. Study groups have been named to consider future policy, and Chairperson Tsai Ing-wen has announced plans for a new party platform. Pragmatists hope to avoid repeating the mistakes of the Chen Shui-bian era that saw escalating tensions with China and severely strained relations with the US. On the other hand, some DPP activists appeal for support by sticking their fingers in the dragon's eye or by mobilizing protests against visiting mainland representatives. However, future party policy remains unclear.

Given the normal rhythm of Taiwan's democratic politics, it seems certain that sooner or later the DPP will return to power. If the party returns in the short-term, meaning 2012, it would face key decisions on cross-Strait relations that would, in turn, set the tone for US-Taiwan relations. Since the key to maintaining good US-Taiwan relations is for Taipei to be seen as pursuing stable cross-Strait relations, there are signs the US would be looking for in DPP policy. Some decisions should be easy for the next DPP presidential candidate; others harder.

One key decision would be whether a future DPP government would maintain the newly institutionalized arrangements that have been negotiated between Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF) and Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait (ARATS) – that is the SEF-ARATS agreements and the pattern of regular day-to-day contacts between the two sides that take place under those agreements. A DPP administration would undoubtedly want to change some details, but it would be reassuring to Washington if the existing arrangements were maintained. Another relatively easy decision would be for the DPP presidential candidate to provide reassurance to Washington and Beijing on the parameters within which cross-Strait policy will be pursued – as both Chen and Ma Ying-jeou did in their first inaugural address. These parameters will be set by the DPP candidate in the course of the campaign.

The more difficult challenge for the DPP would be to keep the SEF-ARATS negotiating channels open. To do this, Taipei and Beijing would need to work out a political basis for talks. Inevitably, this will require the DPP to face up to the “one China” issue. The Chen administration, which included current DPP Chairperson Tsai Ing-wen, rejected the “1992 consensus,” which has allowed Beijing and the Ma administration to conduct talks without reaching agreement on the meaning of “one China.” It will not be easy for a future

DPP candidate to accept the “1992 consensus,” but finding a way to do so would be very significant for Beijing and Washington. Alternatively, some in the DPP have considered possible approaches to the “one China” issue. Frank Hsieh has talked of a “constitutional one China,” based on the party's acceptance that the Republic of China constitution assumes “one China.” Coming to grips with this issue would be facilitated if the DPP were to update the 1999 Resolution on Taiwan's Future to reflect the changed circumstances in cross-Strait relations and reformulating the old resolution's explicit rejection of “one China.” Party leaders are understandably reluctant to reopen the issues in the 1999 resolution, but doing this would appear necessary to establish a basis for continuing cross-Strait talks.

Finding an acceptable basis for SEF-ARATS talks would also require China to be flexible. Beijing has been remarkably pragmatic in dealing with Taipei over the past 18 months. Whether it would continue to do so with a future DPP government is uncertain. It is possible that China's risk-averse leaders will look for a way to respond if the DPP moves away from the outright rejection of “one China” and away from its advocacy of *de jure* independence. Regardless of Beijing's response, if Taipei is seen in Washington as pursuing moderate cross-Strait policies, that would help ensure good US-Taiwan relations. However, if DPP cross-Strait policies cause a rise in tensions, a widening gap between US and Taiwan interests and relations would be inevitable.

The DPP's challenge can also be seen in a longer-term perspective. If the party's return to office does not occur until 2020, Taipei would be dealing with a very different China than the one Chen Shui-bian faced in 2000. By 2020, it is likely that China's economy will have doubled in size to account for about 15 percent of world GDP, the modernization of the PLA will have made it the second most powerful military, and China will have become the second country to land a man on the moon. Equally important, the Chinese government and people will likely assume that this increased power will lead others to accommodate China's “core interests.” A greater assertiveness is already evident in some government actions, and a nationalistic public opinion will become a factor that Beijing increasingly will have to take into account in framing policy.

That prospect warrants a fundamental reassessment of long-term goals by the DPP. Is the DPP the party of *de jure* independence or is it a party committed to preserving Taiwan's *de facto* independence by opposing closer integration with China? The latter would mean leaving to other groups the pursuit of the fundamentalists' dream of an internationally recognized independent Taiwan that has explicitly state-to-state relations with China. Continued pursuit of *de jure* independence would set the party on a collision course with a risen China. That the DPP would continue to

assert that Taiwan is sovereign and independent is understood. However, steps such as changing Taiwan's name, altering the sovereignty aspects of the current constitution, or seeking membership in UN organizations under the name "Taiwan" would provoke renewed confrontation with a more powerful China. Americans would likely see such DPP actions as quixotic, dangerously provocative, and contrary to broader US interests as they would threaten to embroil the US in a conflict with China. Assuming otherwise stable US-China relations, the then US administration would likely distance itself from a DPP candidate espousing domestic or international actions to achieve *de jure* independence. This could include the US adopting a policy of explicitly opposing (rather than not supporting) independence. To ensure that US power and prestige were not associated with such steps, Washington would also likely suspend both arms sales and the quiet consultation on defense issues that it now conducts with Taipei. Support for Taiwan in the US Congress declined markedly during the Chen Shui-bian era. Actions by a future DPP government to achieve *de jure* independence would likely further undermine support for the Taiwan Relations Act.

The DPP is wise to consider now the policies of a future government. As democratic leaders, they have the right and responsibility to adopt whatever policies they believe will best advance Taiwan's interests. The litmus test ultimately will be what Taiwan voters will support and relations with the US are but one factor. If the review process moves away from Chen's past pursuit of *de jure* independence that would be welcome. However, if the party remains wedded to pursuing policies to achieve *de jure* independence, it should understand that Taiwan and US interests would increasingly diverge and that Taipei would likely not enjoy continuing support from a future US administration or Congress.