



## **President Lee is No Troublemaker**

by Lo Chih-cheng and Bo Tedards

The recent remarks by Taiwan (ROC) President Lee Teng-hui and the government's confirming comments that cross-strait relations are "state-to-state" in nature has sparked a wave of discussions and much controversy. This is evident both in the domestic and international media, and among policy-makers in Taiwan, China, and in third powers, especially the United States. However, we feel that the propaganda war that is now well under way has not produced a clearly articulated explanation and interpretation of both the timing and the meaning of this announcement. To help to redress this imbalance, we would like to try to set out what we feel are the main points that ought to be taken into account.

First, Lee's remarks have not, in themselves, altered the substance of the status quo between the two sides of the strait – no declaration of independence by Taiwan and no use of force by China. All he has done is to alter the terminology that the government here will use to describe it; thus, what Lee is offering is a redefinition, not a revision, of the status quo.

Second, the new terminology serves only to clarify Taiwan's policy toward China, but does not change its content. The most striking example of this is the Mainland Affairs Council's clear statement that its position on talks with China has not changed. In fact, the only change that can so far be identified is that the scope of such talks could be expanded. The new conceptual framework appears to have allowed Taipei to consider, for the first time, the possibility of direct political talks with China.

Third, in the past, Beijing has always reacted to serious disagreements with Taipei by shutting down the channels for talks or other communication. Taiwan is now saying, more clearly than ever, what we have felt to be true for a long time, which is that increased disagreements create an urgent need for increased talks, not reduced ones. Thus, everyone has strongly, and apparently sincerely, urged Wang Daohan not to cancel his visit. Instead of "exchanging views" through the press and third parties, we would prefer to express our views directly to the other side.

Fourth, in addition to domestic factors, it must be acknowledged that Lee's statement is a result of external pressures. On the one hand, China has stepped up its big-power tactics against Taiwan, forging as many partnership agreements as possible to free its hands to compel Taiwan to come to the negotiating table under Beijing's version of the "one China" principle. On the other hand, China has been pushing Taiwan's potential friends, notably the US and Japan, to accept the new "three no's" formula. This policy is apparently yielding results,

swinging the world position against Taiwan. The most notable example has been the sudden willingness of the US to entertain the "interim agreements" idea. Until very recently, the US had consistently refused to be drawn into the substance of any cross-strait talks, but with leading figures such as Harvard's Joe Nye – with his "one country, three systems" proposal – weighing in on Beijing's side, the US seems to be modifying its policy, in a way that puts significant new pressures on Taiwan.

Fifth, so far the government has taken pains to emphasize, by explicit references to the German experience of "one nation, two states," that Lee's statement has not closed the door on future reunification. Indeed, many in the government have even asserted that it should help the process, by building trust on a foundation of equality. Whether or not it will have this effect, of course, depends on many factors and, no matter what, will take a considerable length of time.

Sixth, it is a simple fact that any and all agreements or arrangements or even adjustments to the cross-strait status quo must receive the consent of Taiwan's people; if not, they will be illegitimate and unsustainable. Despite the difficulty in polling in Taiwan, it is clear that a majority of Taiwanese agree with Lee's definition. All policy-makers, whether in Taipei, Beijing, or Washington, must take this fact into account. It worries us that some in Washington only pay lip service to this idea, expressing confidence that Taiwanese voters will choose "responsibly" (i.e., conveniently for them) while appearing to be spooked by other possibilities.

Finally, we would like to point out that Lee's comments, whatever else they might be, are not reckless or radical. In fact, many supporters of Taiwan independence reject his compromise formulation of "one nation," and their numbers are increasing steadily. If Lee was trying to "push the envelope" or "make waves," he might easily have made the conceptual leap to independence, but he did not. Furthermore, as far as the domestic political environment is concerned, this statement could have been made at least as early as 1997, if not before. By waiting until now, Lee has displayed more conservatism than rashness and more consideration for international opinion than disregard. We hope that the international community will not overreact, but honestly sit down and evaluate the true state of affairs.

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