



## **Illusions, Misperceptions, and Political Spin in Taipei** by David G. Brown

In Washington there is concern that mixed messages to Taipei from within the administration, Congress, think tanks and paid consultants may be creating confusion about U.S. policy toward Taiwan. A four-day visit to Taipei in early December confirmed that U.S. policy is being seen through politically tinted lenses and transmitted to the public by a bewildering array of official spin-masters, party-affiliated papers, six 24-hour news channels, and more than a dozen political talk shows. While some seasoned analysts have an accurate reading of U.S. policy, the politically charged presidential election campaign is occasioning some serious illusions and misperceptions of U.S. policy.

Despite frequent media attention to U.S. government statements concerning President Chen's campaign moves, there is a widespread impression, particularly amongst those sympathetic to the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) that U.S.-Taiwan relations are as good as ever. Washington's concerns about Chen's referenda and constitutional initiatives, U.S.-Taiwan differences over IPR and other trade issues, frustrations over the pace of Taiwan's Defense procurements, and Washington's concerns over Chen's apparent disregard for U.S. interests seem to get filtered out to leave a rosy picture of the relationship. Why?

One factor is a perceptual time lag. Old impressions from 2001, the first year of the Bush administration when U.S.-Taiwan relations were then better than at any time since diplomatic ties were broken in 1978, have not been up-dated to reflect current events. President Bush's April 2001 statement that the U.S. would do whatever it takes to help Taiwan defend itself remains the dominant element. The Defense Department's (DOD) steadily growing support for Taiwan's defense is good news that is easily remembered. And, in this campaign season, it is natural that President Chen is emphasizing the positive as he did during his New York transit when he repeatedly called the U.S. Taiwan's best friend. Unfortunately, these elements are not the whole picture and the public illusions are neither accurate nor a sound basis upon which to sustain the relationship.

What is more surprising and dangerous is the view heard across the political spectrum in Taipei that the Bush administration favors President Chen's reelection. Repeated official statements of U.S. neutrality in the election have not registered. One might speculate that the U.S. actually favors the Pan-Blue ticket led by Lien Chan because its platform proposals for economic revitalization, non-provocation of Beijing, restoration of cross-strait dialogue, and the facilitation of cross-strait economic ties are quite compatible with U.S. policy. So why is the opposite view prevalent?

The most important explanation is the way President Chen's New York transit was portrayed in the Taiwan media. The picture was that, despite his recent statements about a new constitution to make Taiwan a normal and complete country, President Chen was treated extremely well by the U.S. government. President Chen himself repeatedly noted that the treatment he received in New York was better than on his previous transits. This was interpreted in Taipei as support for Chen and his policies. The fact that the planned meeting of a senior State Department official with Chen in New York was dropped got lost in the positive media coverage.

Adding to this impression were press reports that AIT Chairwoman Therese Shaheen had told Chen in New York that President Bush was his "secret guardian angel." Not surprisingly, President Chen repeated this remark to the Taiwan media on his return trip to Taipei. People in Taiwan understandably have difficulty distinguishing between the free-speaking Shaheen's private and officially authorized comments. The international human rights award that Chen received in New York made him look like the pro-democracy candidate, when in fact all candidates are vigorous proponents of democracy in Taiwan.

Then there is the question of how the recent string of increasingly explicit U.S. policy statements on Chen's referendum and constitutional proposals have been heard in Taipei. The hard hitting statement that NSC advisor Rice made shortly after Chen's announcement of his plans for a new constitution, including Rice's call for Taipei to abide by a "one China" policy, has all but been forgotten. When Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Schriver gave a balanced restatement of U.S. policy, it was his message addressed to Beijing – that the use of force is unacceptable – that got the headlines in Taipei. Essential as that message was, his message addressed to the Chen administration – that Taipei should avoid provocative steps or moves to unilateral change the status quo – was buried down in the text. Similarly, when State Department spokesman Boucher reiterated U.S. policy concerns in very explicit terms on December 2, his remarks were downplayed by the Presidential Office spokesman as nothing more than what one would expect the U.S. would have to say on the eve of PRC Premier Wen Jiabao's visit to Washington. While it is hardly unusual for a campaign organization to hear what it wants to hear and to spin U.S. statements to serve its interests, the result is confusing and misleading the Taiwan public about U.S. policy.

The public picture is further confused by conspiratorial speculation about secret back channel messages from "friends" in Washington who reportedly advise discounting official policy statements. The conspiratorial speculation is buttressed by right wing media attacks in Washington on officials responsible for conveying President Bush's policy. One theory, said to be widespread among Legislative Yuan

members, is that the U.S. secretly supports Chen because he is the candidate who can ensure Taiwan's continued separation from China, which is believed to be the hidden U.S. agenda.

Washington is struggling to address these misperceptions and to get through the twin messages that Beijing must not use force and that the Chen administration should avoid provocative steps that would unilaterally change the cross-Strait status quo. The recent exceptional series of explicit public statements were supplemented by a detailed not-for-attribution briefing given to Hong Kong's Phoenix TV by a senior NSC official. According to media reports, NSC Asia Director Moriarty made a discreet visit to Taipei on Dec. 1 to meet with Chiou I-jen, the Presidential Office Secretary General and Chen's campaign chief, and to deliver a private message from President Bush.

Nevertheless, these misperceptions seem deep-rooted and the campaign will likely occasion continuing self-serving political spin about U.S. policy that could affect the electoral outcome. More will need to be done. At some point, President Bush will need to add his unquestionably authoritative voice to cautions about any unilateral steps to change the status quo and to do so in a way that makes clear that Taipei does not have a blank check that could drag the U.S. into a conflict with China [This was done at the White House on Dec. 9.] In addition, official statements will need to be backed up by actions, such as adjustments in the pace and scope in U.S. defense cooperation that can send a clear political message that there will be costs to ignoring stated U.S. policy. It is particularly important that such actions not be so subtle as to be invisible to the public because it is in the public arena in Taiwan that the seriously misleading perceptions of U.S. policy exist.

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