



## **Bush Comments on Taiwan: Did He Go Too Far or Not Far Enough?**

*The following two commentaries present different views on President Bush's recent criticism of Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian's "comments and actions" during Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's visit to Washington. Reader feedback requested (see response form).*

### **No. 51. Bush's Cozying Up to China: A U.S. Betrayal of Commitment to Democracy?** by Daniel Sneider

Conservatives are apoplectic at the sight of President Bush standing next to the premier of Communist China last week and slapping down the democratically elected leader of Taiwan. In an escalating controversy over Taiwan's future status, Bush very clearly sided with China.

Bush opposed Taiwan's plan to hold a referendum on removing Chinese missiles threatening the island – which he implied would be a de facto vote on independence, although Taiwan denies that charge. American critics see Bush's stance as the "appeasement of a dictatorship" and a betrayal of our commitment to democracy. In that view, the United States is tilting toward China because of its preoccupation with Iraq and the need for China's support in dealing with North Korea's threat to go nuclear.

I share much of that sentiment. The United States is blatantly interfering in Taiwan's democratic process, and it is doing so largely at the urging of Beijing. While there is no clear tradeoff, the administration is now overly dependent on China to pressure North Korea.

The president was trying to clean up a mess that he, in part, created. The White House – not wrongly – believes Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian has played a reckless game of stirring up anti-Beijing sentiment in a desperate attempt to shore up his sagging hopes for re-election next March. But Chen has been getting confusing signals from the Bush administration. Now, in trying to rein in Chen, the president used language that upsets a delicate policy that has been in place since Nixon made the opening to Communist China in 1972.

Put simply, the U.S. "acknowledged" that there is one China, of which Taiwan is a part, but insisted that any cross-straits disputes must be resolved peacefully. The United States established diplomatic relations with China but kept de facto ties to Taiwan, including military links. While the U.S. has defended Taiwan against Chinese threats to reunify by force, it repeatedly said that it "does not support" the independence of Taiwan. But it has refused to adopt tougher language that China favors, saying that it "opposes" independence.

The one-China policy has come under increasing stress as Taiwan became a vibrant democracy. Pro-independence

politicians have gained power from the Nationalists, who had fled the mainland in 1949 but still claimed to represent the one China.

Tensions rose during the 2000 Taiwan elections when Beijing threatened dire consequences if Chen won. That backfired and helped him win. This time Beijing has kept quiet, hopeful that the Nationalist-backed candidate would win. But Chen narrowed the race in recent months by talking tough about Taiwan's status. China responded by asking the Bush administration to curb the Taiwanese. The White House obliged, including sending a secret envoy last week to try to dissuade Chen.

The Taiwan president didn't budge – but he can be forgiven for being confused. When Bush came to office, he immediately signaled a readiness to embrace Taiwan, warning that the U.S. would do "whatever it takes" to defend Taiwan and offering to sell it advanced weapons.

Taiwanese officials, who used to sneak into the U.S. for visits, were treated with greater respect. Last month, Chen got unprecedented treatment during a "transit" through New York, including meetings with administration officials and full access to the press. Therese Shaheen, the Washington representative of the American Institute in Taiwan, a semi-official post, reportedly told Chen that Bush was his "secret guardian angel." All of that played well back home and created the impression that Washington was backing his candidacy.

President Bush, in an attempt to correct this situation, went significantly beyond earlier American policy. When Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao said Bush had reiterated U.S. "opposition to Taiwan independence" in their meeting, Bush said nothing. That may be because, according to sources within the administration, the president used that language in private with Chinese leaders on at least two previous occasions, most recently in October.

The message to Chen is now clear. But he has his own re-election to think about. Washington and Beijing may not like that, but after all, isn't that what democracy is about?

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### **51A. U.S.-China-Taiwan: Too Little, Too Late?**

by Ralph A. Cossa

SINGAPORE – President Bush got it just about right last week when he publicly criticized Taiwan's leader during Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's visit to Washington. Accusations from "friends of Taiwan's democracy" notwithstanding, Mr. Bush was not kowtowing to China; he was merely expressing U.S. policy in clear and plain language. I will gladly match my "pro-Taiwan democracy" *bona fides*

with anyone, but my only complaint about the President's comments is that they may have been too little, too late.

Here's what President Bush said: "We oppose any unilateral decision, by either China or Taiwan, to change the status quo." In other words: no use of force by Beijing and no declaration of independence by Taiwan. Nothing new here; this is long-standing U.S. policy. After allowing this message to be translated, Bush continued: "And the comments and actions made by the leader of Taiwan indicate that he may be willing to make decisions unilaterally that change the status quo, which we oppose."

This message was equally clear: when the Bush administration looks at the cross-Strait situation today, it is Taiwan, not the Mainland, that seems most intent on rocking the boat. While Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian's recent talk of referendums and constitutional revisions may serve his domestic political agenda, his efforts to disrupt the status quo do not serve U.S. national security interests.

Let's be perfectly clear on this point: it was Chen Shui-bian's campaign tactics, not Chinese demands, that prompted Bush's remarks. Bush and Wen would have been perfectly content to make their ritualistic "one-China" comments and then move on; it was Chen's actions, immediately in advance of the Chinese Premier's visit, that forced Taiwan to the top of the political agenda. Chen actions also reinforce the growing suspicion that Taiwan leaders see U.S. relations with Beijing and Taipei strictly in zero-sum terms. President Bush believes that his administration can enjoy close relations with both and has little tolerance for attempts by either Beijing or Taipei to undermine the other relationship. Beijing seems to have grasped this; Taipei apparently has not.

While the primary responsibility for the current controversy rests with President Chen, Beijing and Washington are not free of their share of the blame. China continues its diplomatic full press against Taipei, thus raising Chen's frustration level. Beijing's refusal to permit Taiwan's entry into the World Health Organization, even as a "health entity" – a status that reinforces China's "one China" claim – increases the "separatist" feelings China claims to be combating. More importantly, Beijing seems to have concluded that if 100 missiles opposite Taiwan is a good thing, 500 must be five times as good. The point of diminishing returns has long since been passed. At some point, Washington will feel compelled to respond with more advanced missile defense systems (like AEGIS), which will then prompt Beijing to accuse Washington of emboldening Taiwan. Neither Taipei nor Beijing seems to understand the principle of cause and effect.

Meanwhile, comments by administration hard-liners claiming that President Bush is Taiwan's "guardian angel" and that he did not "oppose" independence were enthusiastically interpreted in Taipei as a green light to push the cross-Strait envelop. While Washington remains officially neutral regarding the outcome of the March 2004 Taiwan presidential elections, Chen's supporters have been citing such remarks as "proof" that Washington not only backs Taiwan democracy – which it does – but also President Chen's reelection bid.

Bush's recent comments should help correct this misperception.

(In this regard, while Bush was criticized for his "leader of Taiwan" phraseology, had he said "President Chen" in Wen's presence, this would have been immediately interpreted as a further "endorsement" of Chen, despite the admonition his words contained. Likewise, had Bush made reference to "the Taiwan authorities," he would have handed a major propaganda victory to Beijing. He did neither, staying carefully on message.)

By speaking up when and as he did, President Bush has changed the green light to yellow. The message: time to slow down and prepare to stop. Unfortunately, the more common response, especially among those inclined to drive recklessly, is to stomp on the gas and rush ahead.

It would be unrealistic to expect Chen to abandon his referendum drive completely. The initiative, as currently described – voters will be asked if they oppose the presence of Chinese missiles aimed at Taiwan or the use of force in resolving the cross-Strait issue – is pure politics and nothing more; is anyone in favor of being threatened?

But, having painted himself into a corner once, Chen now seems intent on not allowing the paint to dry. He seems to be openly confronting and antagonizing Washington (as well as Beijing), apparently confident that a little bit of anti-Americanism might also serve his near-term political interests. That this might harm Taipei's long-term interests seems to matter little.

Rumor has it that when Chen was advised recently that he was pushing Washington too far, he replied "once I win, the U.S. will have little option other than to back me." That, of course, presumes that Taiwan's voters will find his current brinkmanship in their national interest. It also presumes that President Bush will not feel compelled to take even more direct steps to express Washington's displeasure. . . or that more publicly branding Chen Shui-bian as a potential "troublemaker" will not cost him votes. Is that a red light ahead?

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### Reader Feedback: What Do You Think?

#### 1. President Bush's comments

\_\_\_\_\_ went too far  
\_\_\_\_\_ were appropriate  
\_\_\_\_\_ should have been stronger

#### 2. Nationality

\_\_\_\_\_ U.S.    \_\_\_\_\_ Taiwan    \_\_\_\_\_ PRC    \_\_\_\_\_ Other

#### 3. Brief Comments (optional):