



China-Taiwan: Is Creeping Reconciliation Possible?

by Ralph A. Cossa

George Bernard Shaw once said that Americans and Brits were two peoples separated by the same language. This is an even more apt description when describing the Chinese and Taiwanese. A week of visits to Taiwan and the PRC leaves me once again to marvel at how poorly two peoples who share a common language and heritage understand or communicate with one another.

One case in point: A common complaint on the Mainland is that Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian and other senior ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) leaders deny their "Chineseness." This is only partially true. President Chen refuses to state that he is Chinese, for fear that this would be interpreted as "Chinese citizen," which would then be interpreted as "PRC citizen," which would then be interpreted as accepting Beijing's authority over the 23 million people of Taiwan, something no Taiwanese leader regardless of political affiliation could do.

But, President Chen (referred to by Beijing as the "so-called" president or one of the "Taiwanese authorities") has announced that he would like to visit the home of his ancestors on the Mainland, which sounds pretty much like an admission of his Chineseness to me. Instead of praising this comment and perhaps even extending an invitation, Beijing rejects the visit request as a trick or "insincere" and interprets Chen's cautiousness on the heritage issue as further proof that the DPP is pursuing a policy of "creeping independence." Meanwhile, Taipei sees China's continued insistence on acceptance of a "one China" policy, regardless of definition, as "creeping jurisdiction." The casualty in all this is what is really needed: namely, creeping reconciliation.

If Beijing were interested in the latter, it would challenge Chen to take "yes" for an answer by stating that it welcomes any and all Taiwan residents who would like to visit their ancestral homes to celebrate their common heritage. President Chen could be invited "in his private capacity" – a formulation that has allowed for interaction in the past – or even as the head of the DPP (a title Chen is about to assume, primarily to bring some order to his highly fractious party).

Some would argue that this may be too dramatic a step for Beijing to take, especially during a period of leadership transition, as Chinese President Jiang Zemin appears ready to hand over his Party Chairmanship (this fall) and Presidency (next spring) to apparent successor and current Vice President Hu Jintao. But the reverse argument could also be made. What better way for Jiang to solidify his place in history than to host Chen in his ancestral home – this is the stuff Nobel Prizes are made of.

Another opportunity for creeping reconciliation centers around Taiwan's efforts to participate in World Health Organization (WHO) activities. Taipei's latest effort, to gain observer status in the WHO's upcoming World Health

Assembly in Geneva seems doomed to failure, due to Chinese pressure to keep Taiwan out. But, why? China has been firm in expressing its "three no's" policy: no independence; no "two Chinas" or "one China, one Taiwan"; and no Taiwan membership in international organizations involving sovereign states. But Taiwan is not seeking membership in the WHO as a sovereign state. Instead it is seeking observer status as a "health entity," a formulation that expressly takes China's demands into account (demonstrating a certain amount of insight and political courage on Taipei's part).

Instead of blocking Taiwan's participation (as it is almost certain once again to do), Beijing should nominate Chinese Taipei (the terminology used in other international forums) for observer status as a health entity, as an expression of its deep and genuine concern for the health and well-being of the Chinese people on Taiwan – Taiwanese officials allege that their exclusion from the WHO prevented them from being adequately prepared to detect and respond to the enterovirus epidemic that struck Taiwan in 1998, causing the death of 80 children and over \$1 billion in economic loss.

Taiwanese participation in WHO activities as a "health entity" would not only be consistent with China's stated position regarding Taiwanese participation in international organizations, it would actually reinforce it, while also creating a bit of good will in Taiwan toward the Mainland, something which is conspicuously absent today. It would also set no new precedents, since other non-state actors, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, already enjoy observer status in the WHO. It is also consistent with formulations used to permit Taiwanese participation in other international forums, such as the World Trade Organization (a "customs territory") the Convention on the Conservation and Management of Highly Migratory Fish Stocks (a "fishing entity"), and the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (a "member economy").

The time has come for both sides to demonstrate greater flexibility in the name of creeping reconciliation. In Taiwan, a dangerous trend is developing as domestic politics is dividing along ethnic lines, between those born in Taiwan and those of Mainland heritage. President Chen could help arrest this trend by stressing that he is both Taiwanese and Chinese. Greater effort in identifying a "one China" formulation acceptable to both sides is also needed.

Meanwhile, Beijing's continued refusal to seek or exploit opportunities for creeping reconciliation suggests that it has adopted a fourth no: no cooperation with the government of Chen Shui-bian, even in cases where such cooperation is consistent with Chinese preconditions and could foster better relations over time.

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