

Ma plays the same old tune again

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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With great fanfare, the Presidential Office trumpeted the news on Thursday that Taiwan and Singapore would explore the possibility of signing a trade pact before the end of the year. Such a deal could pave the way for closer economic ties with ASEAN, India and Japan, the Presidential Office said, while the government was also looking at Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand as potential targets for trade pact negotiations.

Haven't we heard this all before?

Much was made of the fact that the announcement came in a joint press release with Singapore. The Presidential Office spokesman also intimated that the announcement was proof of President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) "can-do" spirit, since he promised in April that he would lead a task force to push the signing of free-trade agreements or other economic accords after the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) with Beijing was signed. With a straight face, the official spokesman said that Ma was glad to see the task force deliver results within one month of the ECFA being signed.

Apart from the holes in the math — the ECFA was signed on June 29, which means it was signed five weeks and two days before the Singapore announcement — there are many other incongruities.

Take the interview with Ma published in two Singaporean newspapers almost a year and three months ago (May 9, 2009) when he said he expected Taiwan to sign a free-trade agreement (FTA) with the city-state, noting that discussions on such a deal had been in the works before grinding to a halt about five years before. A year ago Ma was talking about an FTA; now he appears to be willing to settle for much less.

Government ministers on Thursday said any deal with Singapore would be economy-to-economy rather than between sovereign states — just like the ECFA, unfortunately — and use Taiwan's WTO name of the "Separate Customs Territory of Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen and Matsu."

One cannot help but wonder if a deal with Singapore has already been given the unofficial nod in Beijing as a sop to Ma for inking the ECFA, especially since the hold-up in signing an FTA with the city-state had been blamed by some officials on the "special situation in the Taiwan Strait in the past."

As Ma himself noted, Taiwan's trade talks with Singapore broke down in 2004. That just happens to be the year Beijing blew a gasket over Lee Hsien Loong's (李顯龍) trip to Taipei in July, just weeks before he took office as Singaporean prime minister. Chinese state media responded to Lee's trip by saying that talks on an FTA deal between Singapore and Beijing could be delayed as a result.

Lee quickly tried to make amends, saying in his first major policy speech in office (on Aug. 22) that Singapore fully supported the "one China" policy and would never support an independent

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Taiwan. Nevertheless, Beijing still made Singapore wait for two years before agreeing to start FTA talks. They inked an FTA on Oct. 23, 2008, and the pact took effect the following January.

One has to assume that Singapore is not going to rattle Beijing's cage by rushing off to sign any kind of deal with Taipei without first getting it approved by Beijing. After all, Singapore began free-trade talks with the EU (its largest trading partner) in March, and the EU's ambassador to Singapore recently said he thought the talks could be completed early next year, which would be uncommonly quick. In that context, it appears a little strange to think that Taiwan could be so hopeful of reopening talks with Singapore and inking a deal in just about four months.

It's enough to make one wonder just who will be doing the negotiating on a Taiwan-Singapore deal — officials in Taipei or those in Beijing.

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