

President Ma disappears the PRC

Written by J. Michael Cole 0000
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Based on recent comments by President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九), it would seem that the cross-strait “diplomatic truce” he initiated soon after coming to office either enfeebles the mind, or cannot be explained by anything other than contradictions.

During a roundtable on Monday, Ma was all wisdom when, channeling ancient Chinese philosopher Mencius (孟子), he said the best means by which two countries can get along was for the smaller country to be smart and flexible in dealing with the bigger one.

By smart, we can conclude that Ma meant keeping a low profile, being conciliatory and willing to compromise and not rattling the diplomatic cage — all things that his administration has managed with considerable success.

Just as the churning waters in the Taiwan Strait looked like they might be pacified by Ma the wise, however, the president on Wednesday told visiting Japanese academics that the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) signed in late June was not a treaty signed between two states. The reason?

“We do not recognize China as a state, so our relationship with each other is not one of country-to-country,” Ma said.

So in Ma’s alternate universe, former presidents Lee Teng-hui (李登輝) and Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) — who both recognized the existence of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as a sovereign state — were “troublemakers,” and yet the man who would deny Beijing’s legitimacy, and the government of its 1.3 billion people, is somehow a “peacemaker.”

Only in the hallucinatory world of Ma’s cross-strait politics could insulting the larger neighbor by denying its existence be equated with wisdom and peacemaking.

It was under Lee, who like Ma was from the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT), that the Two-State Theory was formed, while under Chen relations were seen as falling under the “one country on each side” principle, which grants de jure recognition of China as a country. Yet Ma is Beijing’s man, while Lee and Chen were the object of its hatred.

Ma’s comments further beg the question: Who, exactly, is the “we” that he refers to? Just about everybody in Taiwan agrees that the PRC is a sovereign country that meets all the requirements of a Westphalian state — it has a government, a constitution, a currency, an army, relations with other states and (with the exception of irredentist claims), it has clearly defined borders. Whether one is of Chinese descent or one of the many different ethnic groups living in Taiwan, no one questions the legitimacy of China as a state or the considerable accomplishments of the Chinese people in consolidation of their state, through sweat and blood, over the decades.

Ma’s “we,” therefore, cannot claim to represent the 23 million people in whose name he is ostensibly speaking, including the great majority of KMT supporters who voted for him. It is,

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rather, the voice of a tiny retinue of old-guard politicians who have failed to modernize with the times and would take us back to the 1950s and 1960s, when Chiang Kai-shek (蔣經國) sought to reclaim China.

Their view stems from the by now largely discredited illusion that the Republic of China (ROC) remains a valid political entity representing the whole of China. It is, furthermore, predicated on an illusion that freezes us in time and that threatens the very existence of democratic Taiwan by sucking it into the vortex of an unsettled — but certainly avoidable — battle. There is no future for the KMT in a “reunified” ROC that encompasses the Chinese Communist Party. It is a dead-end street, one that can only lead to political suicide and the end of Taiwan.

The president’s comments are not only an affront to the Chinese people, they equally denigrate decades of hard work and sacrifice by Taiwanese to create a modern, democratic state of their own, one that is built on its own idiosyncratic history.

With very few exceptions, “we” in Taiwan recognize China and seek to coexist peacefully and prosperously with the giant next door. It is “they,” with a few exceptions, who deny Taiwan’s right to exist. By turning the tables, Ma seems to be attempting to create a moral equivalence in the Taiwan Strait that simply does not stand up to scrutiny and that trivializes the tremendous challenges facing Taiwanese today.

History has a long line of infamous politicians who, rather than look to the future, chose to revisit the past. More often than not, this resulted in catastrophe. Given Taiwan’s fragile situation, it cannot afford a leader who would turn to an atrocious, unsettled past to build our future.

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