

Helping Tibet would help Taiwan

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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Although it is unlikely that Taiwan, under the leadership of President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九), will ever support Tibetan independence, Taipei could give a real boost to the beleaguered forces fighting for Tibetan human rights in China with one simple and long-overdue move — dropping the Republic of China's (ROC) claim to Tibet.

The ROC Constitution is an anachronistic document that claims more territory than even the People's Republic of China (PRC), which has at least dropped its claim to Mongolia, an independent country with a seat in the UN.

The ROC claims Tibet, Mongolia, Xinjiang and other border regions of Russia, Vietnam, Nepal and Pakistan that are already recognized as not belonging to China.

Without getting into why the ROC claims territory that it has no chance of ever controlling, it is suffice to say that Taiwan, Tibetans and the Tibetan government-in-exile would benefit if Taipei were to drop its claim to Tibet.

If the ROC did so, officials from Tibet's government in Dharamsala would be able to visit Taipei on government-to-government exchanges, Taiwan's status as a sovereign entity would gain international traction because of the Tibetan government-in-exile's political clout and Taiwan would gain the moral high ground.

Tibetans are in desperate straits. Not a week goes by these days without a monk or a some other Tibetan setting his or herself on fire in protest at what they say are Chinese policies to uproot Tibetan culture. Beijing, of course, blames these protests on foreign-backed secessionist forces, but these self-immolations have a lot more to do with Chinese nationalistic suppression of Tibetan culture, the economic erosion of Tibetan self-sufficiency and the transformation of Tibetan icons into Disney-like attractions for Chinese tourists — Beijing built a musical fountain in Lhasa's Potala Square.

Taiwanese media rightly pay attention to what is going on in Tibet, because the situation faced by Tibet represents an extreme to which Taiwan might itself be subjected if China were ever to take control like it did Tibet in the 1950s.

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However, the ROC government is being hypocritical whenever it defends Tibetans' rights because it continues to claim sovereignty over Tibet.

That would not be the case if Taipei dropped its claim. Such a move would give a boost to the thousands of Tibetans fighting for respect within China and would strengthening their resolve to struggle on.

Beijing's claim to the territories of neighboring nations would likewise receive a blow, even though Taiwan is not recognized as a nation by the UN.

In addition, dropping the ROC's claim to Tibet would bring one other major benefit for Taiwan — it would kick-start much-needed constitutional reform.

Taiwan can never be an independent nation as long as the ROC Constitution lays claim to China. However, the PRC would balk at any move to drop ROC territorial claims to China, as that would be viewed as a step toward de jure independence. If Taiwan were to start piecemeal, by dropping its claim to Tibet and the already-independent nation of Mongolia, the ROC Constitution would become more reality-based, making it a much better document on which to base the government of an independent Taiwan.

By helping the Tibetan people, Taiwan can help itself — an actual win-win scenario.

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