

No sooner had Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama left Taiwan than senior Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) officials were breathing a sigh of relief, as if an undesirable guest had forced himself upon an otherwise placid household.

That reaction would have been understandable if, say, it had been hardline Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, or al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden passing through Taiwan, but the Dalai Lama, a proponent of peaceful resistance and icon for universal values of freedom and liberty?

This is not to say that other countries that have welcomed the Tibetan leader have not also felt a certain sense of relief after the charismatic monk had left, especially when Beijing launched rhetorical volleys and threatened retaliation. This notwithstanding, the reaction of those countries was to play down Beijing's threats while embracing the Dalai Lama's visit and portraying it as a positive thing.

What the Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) administration did, however, went one step beyond minimizing the crisis: It showed disrespect to a man of peace, while portraying the visit as a political gambit by the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), as if only pro-independence "troublemakers" were capable of looking up to the Dalai Lama or agreeing with what he stands for. That some media would refer to the visit as an "invitation of the leading opposition [DPP], which favors Taiwan independence from the mainland" only exacerbated this perception.

Ma, members of his doomed Cabinet and Legislative Speaker Wang Jin-pyng (王金平) went out of their way to avoid the Dalai Lama, not because they fundamentally disagree with what he stands for, but rather because their pro-China policies have put them in a straightjacket. Wang's avoidance was more adroit, in that he left it to "fate" to decide whether his and the Dalai Lama's paths would cross while the spiritual leader was in Taiwan, but in the end, the chairman of the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy stayed away from a prominent global voice for democracy.

The Dalai Lama was allowed to come to Taiwan because the Ma administration was under siege over its poor handling of Typhoon Morakot. He came, Ma and the KMT crossed their fingers, sent an emissary to Beijing to repair the damage, and the moment the monk departed they acted as if nothing had happened. By yesterday, Straits Exchange Foundation Chairman Chiang Pin-kung (蔣經國) — the man in charge of cross-strait talks — was saying that "ties [between Taiwan and China] will be able to return to the right track in a slow manner."

In other words, the visit by a peaceful activist was "disruptive" and something negative. At the very least, it was an unexpected bump in the road for what, in their eyes at least, are far more important matters.

There was a time when Beijing's intimidation applied to Taiwan abroad if Taipei sought to

Ma no longer ruler of his domain

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expand diplomatically, gain entry to international organizations, or when former presidents Lee Teng-hui (李登輝) and Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) sought to visit countries that were not diplomatic allies. By adopting an obsequious approach to cross-strait relations from the beginning, the Ma administration has allowed Beijing to bully Taiwanese on their own soil, forcing the president and top government officials to avoid the Dalai Lama as if he were persona non grata.

Not only did this humiliate a great man of peace, but it also widened the divide between the KMT, the government and the public, while falsely projecting the image abroad that only DPP supporters and “splittists” delighted in having the exiled spiritual leader grace our shores.

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