

As US President Barack Obama prepares for his visit to Japan, South Korea, China and Singapore, it is worthwhile to consider a number of issues that affect US-Taiwan-China relations.

On two of the three sides in this triangle, we have relatively new actors at the political helm: the Obama administration in the US and the administration of President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九).

Obama has the advantage of being at the start of a new chapter in relations with both Taiwan and China. He is relatively unburdened by the inhibitions of the past, and has the freedom to do some out-of-the-box thinking.

But there is already a tendency — similar to that seen in the administration of US president George W. Bush — that the US “needs” China to resolve major issues like global warming, pollution and the financial crisis.

While it is essential to engage China on these issues, we need to ensure that this is not done at the expense of a free and democratic Taiwan. During the past weeks, Chinese spokesmen have called on the US and other international partners to respect China's so-called “core interests.” It would be good if Obama emphasized clearly that it is a core interest of the US that the future of Taiwan be resolved peacefully and with the express consent of the Taiwanese people.

Similarly, in his first year in office, Ma opened a new chapter and started rapprochement with China. While there is broad agreement that a reduction of tension in the Taiwan Strait is desirable, Ma has been criticized for moving too far, too fast and for allowing Taiwan's drift into China's sphere of influence to be accompanied by erosion of justice and a decline in press freedom.

The US' Taiwan policy has traditionally swung back and forth between realism and idealism. The policies of president Richard Nixon and secretary of state Henry Kissinger in the 1970s, president Jimmy Carter in the late 1970s, president Bill Clinton in the mid-1990s and Bush in the period 2001-2004 are all testimony to the fact that the US made significant mid-course changes that were detrimental to Taiwan and that contributed to its international isolation, despite Washington's statements that its policies were “unchanged” and contributed to “stability.”

From an international perspective, Taiwan is an example of a successful transition to democracy. The most rational and reasonable outcome of Taiwan's normalization of relations with China would be acceptance of this young democracy in the international family of nations. This is a process that will need cooperation from all sides; for its part, China will need to see that it is in its own interests to come to terms with a small and democratic neighbor with which it can live in peace.

Pitfalls and possibilities in Obama's Taiwan line

Written by Nat Bellocchi

Monday, 09 November 2009 08:01

Taiwan can justifiably be proud of its achievements, economically and politically, but it needs to stay the course and strengthen its democracy, sovereignty and international relations so that it can be an equal partner in the international community.

Taiwan can also strengthen the fabric of its society by implementing judicial change, improving governance, protecting human rights and finding new niches in the international economy. All of these will enhance the nation's acceptance and respect around the world.

The US can play a constructive role if Obama is willing to apply creative thinking and steer away from the pitfalls of the mantras that were recited in the past. The fundamental values of democracy and human rights, for which the US stands, mandate that we are more supportive of the dream of many Taiwanese that their country be accepted as a full and equal member of the international community. That would be change we can believe in.

Nat Bellocchi is a former chairman of the American Institute in Taiwan and a special adviser to the Liberty Times Group. The views expressed in this article are his own.

Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2009/11/09](#)