

Beijing pushes Ma to dump Taiwan democracy

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Following on the heels of the signing of a controversial cross-strait trade agreement, the authoritarian People's Republic of China is now pressuring President Ma Ying-jeou's rightist Chinese Nationalist Party government to explicitly "oppose Taiwan independence" to maintain "the foundations for mutual trust" across the Taiwan Strait.

Ma has repeatedly declared his intention to "put economics first and politics later" and deal with "easier issues first and harder issues later," but Beijing clearly has its own agenda and timetable in the wake of the June 29 signing in Chongqing of the "Cross-Strait Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement" by Taipei's Strait Exchange Foundation Chairman Chiang Ping-kun and Beijing's Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait Chairman Chen Yunlin.

The latest display of Beijing's urgency to put political issues on the cross-strait agenda was the high-profile address by ARATS Vice Chairman Li Yafei August 11 at a conference on "Cross-strait Peace and Wealth Creation" sponsored by the Want Want China Times Group.

Li stressed that the calm in the Taiwan Strait was "based on the achievement of mutual trust" between Taipei and Beijing since May 2008 on the foundation of "opposing 'Taiwan independence' and 'upholding the 'Consensus of 1992'" and directly described Beijing's definition of the so-called consensus as "separately use verbal statements to express the one China principle" instead of the KMT's "one China with separate expressions."

Li Yafei's statements are the latest sign of Beijing's intention to put political issues directly on the cross-strait negotiations agenda in the wake of the ECFA signing and followed the July 30 statement by PRC defense Ministry Spokesman Gen Yansheng that "under the one - China principle, China will be willing to discuss the issue" of withdrawing some of its estimated 1,600 missiles aimed at Taiwan.

The PRC side is evidently motivated by two deadlines to nail in place a substantive cross-strait political arrangement in addition to the fostering faster economic integration through the ECFA and other agreements.

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The first deadline is internal, namely the fact that PRC State Chairman and ruling Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Hu Jintao will conclude his decade at the helm of the ruling CCP in September 2012 and undoubtedly desires to have the framework for cross-strait unification, in substance if not in form, in place for his historical legacy.

Beijing's urgency is undoubtedly heightened by its evident lack of full confidence in the capability of Ma's KMT government to win re-election in the 2012 presidential and legislative elections and its concern over the unwelcome possibility of the return of a Taiwan-centric (or "Taiwan independence") DPP government.

Li's aggressive articulation of Beijing's "one China principle" in Taiwan confirmed that Beijing has no intention of permitting the Ma government to freely maintain that "the Republic of China is the one China" even within Taiwan, much less on the China mainland or in international fora where PRC leaders and diplomats consistently insist that the only "one China" is the PRC itself of which Taiwan is a part.

Carrots and sticks

The stark contrast between Li's frank and public definition of the "Consensus of 1992" as being based on "one China principle" contrasted dramatically with the craven failure of KMT party leaders or SEF negotiators to articulate the phrase "one China with separate expressions" or state that "the Republic of China is the one China" reinforced his message that "my house is my house and your house is my house."

Li's high-profile appearance also provided an ideal platform for the ARATS vice chairman to preempt any possible attempts by the KMT government to link discussions of missile withdrawal, military confidence-building measures or an pact to "end hostilities" between the KMT and CCP with a commitment by Beijing to abandon the use of force against Taiwan or to revoke the March 2005 "Anti-Secession Law."

Li's stress on the centrality that the Taiwan government continue to "oppose Taiwan independence" constituted a veiled threat that the ECFA and other "concessions" will be called into question if the Taiwan government is recaptured by "Taiwan independence forces" and was thus an "encouragement" for Taiwan citizens to vote for "peace and prosperity" by

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re-electing Ma.

But Li's accent on "joint opposition" to "Taiwan independence" also laid a dangerous trap for Ma, whose KMT government heretofore has only formally agreed to uphold the "Consensus of 1992."

Indeed, acceptance of Li's new precondition would be tantamount to agreement to unification as Taiwan's "sole option," comprise a public negation of Taiwan's democracy and thus the KMT government's own legitimacy and mark a public renunciation of Ma's own campaign vow to uphold the principle that "only Taiwan's 23 million can decide the future of Taiwan" in the run-up to critical municipal mayoral elections in November and presidential and legislative polls in 2012.

Given the lack of backbone in the Ma government, the only counterweight to the PRC's push will be the support for Taiwan-centric candidates at the ballot boxes and on the streets.

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