

What Taiwan people must do while Ma waits for Hu

Written by Taiwan News Editorial
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During the last two decades, the policy positions toward the authoritarian People's Republic of China adopted by Taiwan governments has always been complicated by regional concerns and domestic politics.

Contrary to the Taiwan-centered policy adopted by former presidents Lee Teng-hui and Chen Shui-bian, President and ruling rightist Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang) chairman Ma Ying-jeou has been widely criticized for moving "too fast" toward his PRC counterparts since taking office in May 2008.

Ma has consistently failed to take sufficient consideration of Taiwan's national interests and security or truly uphold Taiwan's sovereignty and democracy in his KMT administration' dealings with the PRC, especially with relation to the controversial "Cross-Strait Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement."

In defiance of democratic norms and heedless of protests by civic and social forces as well as Taiwan - centric parties, Ma and his KMT government stubbornly refused to accept effective legislative or citizen monitoring and arbitrarily rejected petitions demanding that the ECFA be ratified by national citizen referendum.

Shortly after non-governmental agencies for both sides signed the pact on June 29, the PRC began to pressure the Ma administration to enter into political talks on matters ranging from a partial withdrawal of the PRC's 1,600 missiles aimed at Taiwan, military confidence-building mechanisms and a peace agreement.

Amid the security manoeuvring by the U.S., the PRC, Japan and North and South Korea in the wake of the sinking of the South Korean corvette "Cheonan" in March and lackluster campaigns by KMT candidates for the five special municipal mayoral elections Nov. 27, Ma responded to Beijing's push with a "wait and see" posture.

First, Ma sent Mainland Affairs Council Chairwoman Lai Shin-yuan to Washington, D.C., to sell his ECFA agenda in early August.

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In a speech to the American Enterprise Institute August 6, Lai openly called for Beijing to remove two political obstacles for improving cross-strait relations, namely, its continued military expansion and "policies and laws" concerning the PRC's military deployments targeting Taiwan.

Most observers interpreted Lai's comments as referring to the PRC's notorious March 2005 "Anti-Secession Law" in which Beijing abrogates to itself the "legal right" to use "non-peaceful means" to effect "unification."

Beijing reacted with fury to Lai's statement and exerted political pressure on the Ma administration to cancel Lai's planned stop in Los Angeles, while pro-PRC media in Hong Kong slammed Lai as a "Taiwan independence separatist."

Significantly, in an exclusive interview with the vernacular "China Times" daily Wednesday, Ma denied that he had authorized Lai's statement and reiterated that his policy toward China remain unchanged, including his "three noes" of "no unification, no independence and no use of force" and upholding of the "status quo."

Moreover, Ma set his tone of "it's good enough for now" to react to Beijing's pressure for political talks.

Municipal risks

The president's remarks naturally sparked curiosity about how serious his position that Taiwan should hold with the ECFA or whether he simply hopes to delay more controversy on cross-strait relations before the Nov. 27 elections.

After all, despite Ma's disassociation from Lai's remarks, the fact that her speech is still posted on the MAC website and she has not been replaced has fuelled speculation that Ma is using Lai to play the "bad cop" to divert pressure from Beijing for faster political discussions.

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In addition, it is also likely that the U.S. itself has communicated with Ma about its recent military displays in Northeast and East Asia and the South China Sea to counteract North Korea and China's arrogant claim to the Yellow Sea, East Sea and South China Sea as its "core interests."

Obviously, Washington should be concerned that Taiwan not become a "missing link" in the U.S. strategy of revitalizing its security relationships with its Asian allies.

In this context, Lai's statements may have aimed to both convince Washington that Ma is not leaping into Beijing's embrace and to persuade the U.S. administration to sell Taiwan advanced defensive weapons, such as F-16 C/D Block jet fighters, despite Beijing's pressure on Washington to cease arms sales to Taiwan.

However, it is easy to see why Ma would wish to avoid any criticism for appeasement of Beijing given the electoral situation, notably the floundering of KMT Taipei City Mayor Hau Long-pin, who is under fire over incompetent preparations for the Taipei International Flora Exposition and a corruption scandal over the Xinsheng overpass.

Indeed, the prospects of the opposition Democratic Progressive Party to win the mayoralties of three or even four of the five giant municipalities of Taipei City, Sinbei City, Taichung, Tainan and Kaohsiung are rising.

Such a result would exert huge domestic pressures on Ma's re-election bid and thus leave him with little choice but to put off controversial political talks with Beijing until after the 2012 presidential and legislative elections.

This prospect underlies both the risk for Beijing in playing along with Ma's game and the reason why the Taiwan people must not passively "wait and see" but take action with their ballots Nov. 27.

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