President Ma Ying-jeou (□□□) must seek public consensus on the development of cross-strait ties as Taipei-Beijing relations spread into more political areas, some European experts on cross-strait affairs said in interviews with the Taipei Times.

Dafydd Fell, senior lecturer of the department of political and international studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, said Ma needs to be very cautious on the pace of liberalizing cross-strait relations.

“Many of the reforms so far are quite consensual, like direct flights [and Chinese] tourists. They have a clear economic benefit for Taiwan,” he said. “Ma needs to consider public opinion in further moves.”

Taking the Ma government’s plan to sign an economic cooperation framework agreement (ECFA) with Beijing as an example, Fell said the government “needs to open a genuine public debate on the issue and not just complete negotiations in closed-door negotiations.”

“Taiwan needs to seek internal consensus on further developments in cross-strait relations,” he said in an e-mail interview.

The political negotiations with China cannot start at this stage because there is no domestic consensus on the issue, he said.

CHINESE CLOUT

Michael Danielsen, chairman of the Denmark-based Taiwan Corner, is also concerned about China’s economic clout, saying it has made inroads into Taiwanese politics.

He used the boycott by Chinese tourists of southern Taiwan and the screening of a documentary about exiled Uighur activist Rebiya Kadeer as examples to prove his point.

“That is what I call the economic invasion of Taiwan, which turns into political power,” he said via e-mail. “So when President Ma says that the [cross-strait] agreements are only about [the] economy, only ignorant people believe it.”

Nicola Casarini, a Marie Curie research fellow of the European University Institute in Italy, said the Ma administration has every reason to pursue its China policy if it has the support of the majority of the population.

“What is needed at this juncture of Taiwan’s history is to have more consultation with the population, because Taiwan is a country that can ask and has to ask the people about the direction where [it is] to go in the future,” he said during a recent visit to Taipei.

To form a strategic view of itself and balance relations with Beijing, Fell said Taiwan should diversify its external economic dependence. For example, Chinese tourists are an economic asset, but Taiwan must also work on other tourist markets to avoid over-reliance on the Chinese market, he said.

This means it must make significant efforts in marketing Taiwan abroad, but also improve the tourist infrastructure in Taiwan.

Casarini emphasized values, saying Taiwan should continue to engage with Beijing, but at the same time it must keep reminding China that Taiwan cares about such values as democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

So when the two sides form a long-term and strategic partnership, hopefully China would also move closer toward those values that Taiwan thinks are universal, he said.

Danielsen said he was not against engaging with China, but people need to be reminded that China's objective is unification with Taiwan.

If there is any advice he could give to Taiwan, he said he would urge the Ma administration to allow referendums on the agreements signed with Beijing.

Most importantly, he said, the Ma government must uphold Taiwan's sovereignty and the interests of its people.

He also urged the government to engage more with Europe. As the EU has increased investments in Taiwan in recent years, he said Taiwan should take advantage of this.

"China is not the whole world. The world is much larger than China," he said.

Amid concerns about China's military buildup, analysts are debating what Taiwan needs to counter the Chinese threat.

While praising the Ma government for reducing cross-strait tensions, Fell said the government still needs to maintain strong ties with the US to form a critical part of this security equation.

Danielsen said Taiwan's most effective defense strategy was to find consensus among the Taiwanese on what they want Taiwan to be.

Citing Germany as an example, Danielsen said the German government initiated a nationwide campaign in 2004 to make its citizens conscious of national pride. Taiwan could consider adopting a similar approach to develop a new Taiwanese consciousness, he said.

However, military defense continues to be crucial no matter what because that is the reality of the world, he said.

Taiwan has to defend itself, but it will be in the interest of Taiwan to think beyond defense,

Casarini said.

“To depend solely on defense issues is not going to be sustainable in the long term,” he said.

It is time for some creative thinking that goes beyond defense, he said, adding that it is something that the Taiwanese, Chinese and Americans should try to consider together.

ARMS BAN ON BEIJING

The EU has decided to maintain its arms embargo on China. Those who oppose dropping the ban say more reforms are necessary in areas such as human rights and democratic development, including the removal of missiles that target Taiwan and abandoning military force as an option in Taiwan-China relations.

Fell said he saw no reason for the ban to be lifted until China has tackled the original motivations for the EU arms embargo.

Casarini said it was in the interest of the EU to establish a comprehensive strategic partnership with China. But at the same time, it should also remind China that Taiwan has the right to exist and that only by showing its willingness to adhere to fundamental values such as democracy and human rights would it be possible for the EU to lift the arms embargo, he said.

Casarini said the proposal to lift the EU arms embargo was still on the union’s agenda. If the ban was eventually lifted, the EU should undertake measures to ensure that China will not acquire sensitive items and weapons systems that could have implications for the cross-strait military balance.

This should be one condition for the EU to lift the arms embargo, he said.

It does not matter whether China’s missiles are moved because they are mobile, Danielsen said. What matters is Beijing renouncing the use of force against Taiwan and abolishing its “Anti-Secession” Law.

“The EU should declare that we support Taiwan ... and that we are extremely concerned about the military threats to Taiwan,” he said. “We have to draw a line in the sand clearly stating that we have a limit to how much we will accept China’s behavior.”

Both President Ma Ying-jeou (□□□) and former president Chen Shui-bian (□□□) have suggested that the EU could serve as a role model for Taiwan-China relations.

EU NO ROLE MODEL

Fell said there were aspects of the EU model that appeal to both Ma and Chen, but there would be serious problems if the EU model was used for Taiwan.

“I doubt Taiwan would be able to cope with free labor migration from China,” he said. “We

have to remember that while the EU is based on democratic systems, Taiwan and China's political systems are worlds apart."

The Chinese side has never shown any interest in an EU-style model, which would be accepting a "two China" model, he said.

Danielsen said the EU model was not suitable because it was for sovereign states with common values that treated each other equally. While Taiwan was a democracy, China remains an authoritarian regime despite reforms, he said.

"Why should you marry someone who puts a gun at your head?" he said. "It will not be a happy marriage with the 'Anti-Secession' Law in place."

Casarini said the EU model was not suitable for Taiwan — or any other region in the world.

This does not mean that the idea of integrating nations was not a viable one, however, because it was in Taiwan's interests to find a way to develop a closer relationship with China but maintain its independence, he said.

The pundits agree that time is a key factor.

Time is on Taiwan's side if the Taiwanese are ready, Danielsen said. It would require unity among the Taiwanese to send a clear message to the world exactly what they want for their future.

"The next presidential election is crucial for Taiwan," he said. "We are living in a historic juncture in which the EU and US want compromises no matter what price they will pay ... Taiwan could be sacrificed in a compromise for 'peace.'"

Casarini said it was easy to say time was on China's side, but such an assertion was superficial.

While the majority of the Taiwanese prefer maintaining the "status quo," they must pay attention to changes in the world and in China.

"The 'status quo,' I'm afraid, is not going to last," he said. "If we still think nothing will happen in the world, Taiwan will be taken by surprise one day."

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