

China Will Have to Learn to Talk to Taiwan's DPP in the Future

Written by Jerome F. Keating Ph.D.
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A touch of despondency seems to be lingering in the air among some Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) members. A recent conference in Washington D. C. brought unwelcome news as congressional staffers indicated that Taiwan was falling off the radar of US interest in Asia. Frank Hsieh, former DPP premier and failed presidential candidate (2012) boldly challenged the party to reexamine its "failed" China policy. In a speech to academics at John Hopkins University, Hsieh floated his strange "two constitutions" with different interpretations as a basis of "cross-strait engagement." He intimated that the party needed to change its position vis-a-vis China if it expects to win any future presidential elections. Negativity seemed to reign, but should it? I contend that if one really looks at what has been happening at ground level, it is China that must learn to accept and to deal with the DPP and not vice versa.

Some will point to recent elections, and suggest that the DPP has plateaued out at around 44 per cent of the vote, but has it? That has been their range in the past two elections but it is not a permanent plateau. Those results have been influenced by many factors. The first is the Ma mystique. For some time, Ma had relied on image more than substance in presenting the goals of his party, but that has been consistently shattered by reality in the past year. After five years of ineffectual leadership and performance the people of Taiwan doubt that the next three years will be any better. Ma's approval ratings in Taiwan for the past year have hovered at an all time low of 13 per cent, not a good sign for a man who had just been re-elected and is now a lame duck.

The article in the "Economist," which labeled Ma as a classic "bumbler" could be seen as the tipping point. What had been private thought in Taiwan, was now public opinion abroad. Platitudes and promises no longer worked. Even within his party, the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) candidates have both distanced themselves from him in the past election and have been taking an opposite position in matters like the 4th Nuclear Power Plant.

In his efforts to get the economy moving, Ma had consistently tried to link Taiwan to China, but the public while not totally disapproving, has also not been that approving. They are looking for concrete results and not just more hype and talk; hence his low approval ratings continue.

At a recent meeting of businessmen in Taiwan, the question was raised, "Has Ma after being president for five years and with control over the Legislative Yuan accomplished much and does he have a vision for Taiwan?" The resounding judgment was "No" on both counts. If there were any dissenters, they were quiet, either because they were afraid to try and articulate any sense of vision or too embarrassed at what they might think it was.

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With the Ma façade tumbling, the KMT has no strong candidate for 2016 in the wings; they are searching as much as the DPP are. Thus while the DPP may have remained at a consistent 44 per cent, it is a solid 44 per cent that weathered the disaster of 2008 and built upon that. In a democracy with a swing vote as Taiwan has, that is a formidable force that China will have to deal with. Thus far, China's past carrot and stick approach has not been very successful. Examine further the fact that while certain political leaders in the United States of America (USA) have shown Ma deference, that also has not moved the base of DPP support nor improved Ma's ratings. In the future, with the Ma mystique shattered and the growing realization that Ma has been ineffective in rooting out corruption in the KMT, the playing field for 2016 will be much more level. China cannot avoid that.

Look further at the fact that even with an opening up to China with hopes of economic improvement, there has been a solidly increasing sense of Taiwanese identity. Ma's constant referrals to seeing himself in the tradition of the Yellow Emperor and his repeated emphasis on Zhonghua Minzu have been ineffectual in stemming this. Economics is one thing; seeing oneself as Taiwanese is another. The economic links to China are also weakening as salaries increase and regulations become stricter. Some businesses are beginning to vote with their feet and move out of China. Add this to the fact that Taiwanese identity is the DPP strong suit and you have another aspect that China will have to deal with.

Even the matter of Taiwan being off the radar is illusory and temporary. North Korea of course has currently moved to the front burner in Asia, but pundits should consider this. If the USA and Japan have shown a united front against China over such small islands as the Diaoyutais/Senkakus in the past, can they think that these two powers would not be more united over China threatening to take a democratic Taiwan with its 23 million people? Taiwan has both a far greater strategic position than the Senkakus and it would be political suicide for the USA to sacrifice a democratic ally for any material advantages that China might provide or both China and the USA would hope to gain in the future.

For some time, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has tried to handle dealings with Taiwan on a party-to-party basis between it and the KMT. That has not worked in the past, and will not work in the future, even without the DPP gaining a victory in 2016. Whatever way one looks at it, China is going to have to learn to talk to and deal with the DPP and a democratic Taiwan.

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