

The myth of Taiwan's China policy

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
Tuesday, 21 January 2014 08:32

Asked about the Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) China policy in an interview with Radio Taiwan International last week, DPP Chairman Su Tseng-chang (蘇貞昌) responded with two concepts: "Seagull on the beach" and "China plus one."

Su said the cross-strait relationship should be like "a seagull on the beach" because "a man on a beach should learn how to watch a seagull and appreciate its beauty from a distance. If he tried to catch it, it would fly away." He also urged Beijing to create a "China plus one" situation by stopping the oppression of Taipei's international space and respecting it in bilateral engagements, so that both sides could coexist in the international community.

His comments immediately drew criticism from party members and supporters, with some saying that the seagull would have to fly away eventually and others arguing that the description of China as a human being and Taiwan as a bird was belittling.

Neither did China have a nice word to say about it, as a Taiwan Affairs Office spokesperson said the DPP remains supportive of Taiwan independence and no shortcut should be taken.

Su had to dispatch the DPP's representative to the US, Joseph Wu (吳敦義), to Washington to elaborate on and explain the concepts. The DPP's effort in seeking a replacement for the Chinese Nationalist Party's (KMT) so-called "1992 consensus" as the foundation of cross-strait engagement and summarizing its China policy with a simple term or set phrase appears to have failed once again.

However, the situation is not unprecedented, as former DPP chairperson Tsai Ing-wen's (蔡英文) failure to impress the US with her "Taiwan Consensus" initiative during the 2012 presidential campaign resulted in Washington's blatant interference in the election and the DPP's eventual loss.

Beijing and Washington's requirement for Taiwan's China policy to be summarized in a simple term is the greatest myth as well as one of the greatest dangers in interpreting Taiwan's cross-strait strategy.

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The demand for such a term appears to have come from the Chinese, and in particular, the Chinese Communist Party's habit of naming its national goals and propaganda campaigns — such as the Great Leap Forward, the Destruction of Four Olds and “one country, two systems.”

While political ideology and campaigns are often presented in a simple way for the public to understand, in Taiwan's case, an oversimplification of those ideas, especially for winning endorsement and praise from foreign governments, would be ignoring the heart of the matter.

President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) administration was able to impress China and the US while accelerating cross-strait engagement through the KMT's “1992 consensus” initiative, which, ironically had earlier been rejected by Beijing and was always loosely defined — the same reasons Washington viewed Tsai's initiative as unappealing. The results of using the “1992 consensus” term over the past five years, which the US praised as a reduction of cross-strait tensions, has been Taiwan's increasing alignment with China in almost every policy area. Whether the term serves the US' strategic interests in the Asia-Pacific region is up for debate.

It is arguable, given the complexity of cross-strait engagement following the developments under the Ma administration and the ever-changing dynamics in the Asia-Pacific region, that the Taiwan-China policy could be summed up by an oversimplified phrase. The DPP would have to convince and persuade the public that it is capable of managing cross-strait relations at least as good as, if not better than, the KMT.

The livelihoods, interests and political aspirations of 23 million Taiwanese are too great to be summarized in a word or a phrase.

Beijing and Washington should understand that.

Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2014/01/21](#)