

Why must Ma correct media reports?

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) has been busy meeting foreign media in recent days. At the same time he and his administration have also been busy correcting reports following the interviews. Reported misquotes and mistranslations might have been simple mistakes by reporters, but they could also be justified inferences. If the inferences were valid, the government's corrections show that it has engaged in opportunistic and double-faced tactics, and exposes how it has helped drive the country into a corner.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs last week chided the "over-interpretation" of a Chinese-language report by Deutsche Welle, which was not among the media outlets that interviewed Ma, for "misquoting" the president as saying he aims to learn from the experience of East Germany and West Germany in their "realizing ultimate unification."

The "unification" spoken about in the report was indeed "of the two Germanys," as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has clarified and according to the transcript provided by the Presidential Office after the hubbub. Ma extolled the setting up of mutual embassies and called the 1972 agreement between the two Germanys "a good move" because it "went so far as to recognize [the two side's mutual] territory ... but short of recognition of sovereignty."

The president further underlined that even though the word "sovereignty" was not used in the agreement, former German "chancellor Willy Brandt "wrote a letter to his East German counterpart, attached to the agreement, saying that whatever was said in the agreement would not affect the eventual unification of the two Germanys."

Ma called it "a delicate maneuver" and said he has replaced the idea of "one Germany, two states" with "one China, with respective interpretations."

Deutsche Welle is hardly to be blamed for saying that Ma is learning from Germany's history of unification, after all, the president praised the agreement and said that eventual unification was not hindered by it.

Ma's long-standing principle of "one China, with respective interpretations" puzzles the world. If it does not prescribe the eventual unification of "one China," what does it mean? Plural

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interpretations do not make for separate “Chinas” — if “one,” as in unity, is all that matters.

It is an “over-interpretation,” the government said, sternly refuting the reports when facing legislators and local reporters. However, how is it an “over-interpretation” when the Chinese Nationalist Party has insisted that the Republic of China’s territories include “the mainland” and, to add to the surreal nature of it, the now-independent Mongolia?

It might not be a big problem for a political party to defend outdated tenets, but being hypocritical about them is. In a democratic country, being pro-unification is certainly tolerated, as the existence of high-profile pro-unification parties shows, but being evasive and to shun questions from the public, knowing the idea is widely rejected, is reason to criticize.

While Taiwanese and various groups are fighting against Chinese aggression and Beijing’s unilateral claim of sovereignty over Taiwan, it is most unfortunate to see the government pushing in exactly the opposite direction, canceling the efforts to remain separate from China.

The administration corrected a report by al-Jazeera, which mistranslated the president’s “ethnic Chinese society” (華人社會) as “China.”

It might have been a bit hasty for al-Jazeera’s translator to infer that the term could be translated that way, but it was not entirely out of context considering how enthusiastically Ma has been pitching “one China.”

Why the corrections then? The party and the administration know why, and so does the electorate.

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