

Taiwan must establish bottom line

Written by Gerrit Van Der Wees
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In an opinion piece this week, London-based magazine *The Economist* said leaders in Beijing have a “bottom line” and are now warning Taiwan — in the run-up to next year’s presidential elections — to adhere to the so-called “one China” principle or otherwise tensions might rise again.

The problem with *The Economist*’s analysis is that it takes the current “seven years of calm” as a norm, and does not ask how it came about. This “calm” represents an artificial absence of tension, which came about because President Ma Ying-jeou’s (馬英九) administration gave the Chinese leadership the erroneous impression that — under his leadership — Taiwan would move toward unification with China.

This approach is regrettably very much akin to former British prime minister Neville Chamberlain’s appeasing “peace in our time” with Hitler in 1938, and has been rejected by Taiwanese: Ma has a popularity rating of less than 10 percent.

Recent developments — the Sunflower movement, and the Chinese Nationalist Party’s (KMT) drubbing in last year’s elections — have shown very clearly that Taiwanese value their freedom and democracy, and do not want to be pushed into a closer economic or political embrace with China.

The general sense among the public is that Ma’s “rapprochement” with China was inescapably leading toward a “too-close-for-comfort” relationship, which would deprive Taiwanese a free and democratic choice over their future.

So, the question *The Economist* should really have asked is this: “What is Taiwan’s bottom line?” The answer to that is threefold.

One, Taiwanese have fought hard to gain their freedom and democracy. They achieved a momentous transition to democracy under former president Lee Teng-hui (李登輝) in the early 1990s. That achievement is a core Taiwanese value, that is also shared by the US and other Western democracies.

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Two, Taiwanese highly value regional security and stability, but not if it is achieved at the expense of the nation's sovereignty. History shows that giving in to expansive powers — whether in Europe in 1938 or in Asia next year — never achieves true stability.

Three, China can only have a reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationship with Taiwan — and its other neighbors — if it respects them and treats them equally as friendly neighbors, and refrains from treating them as tributaries.

At the end of its analysis, The Economist also mentions the US, saying that “America is probably anxious,” as it does not want to be seen in Taiwan as interfering in the politics of a fellow democracy, but that it also “doesn't want to be sucked into a conflict that might erupt should China lose patience.”

The role of the US is indeed a crucial one: It needs to be strongly supportive of Taiwan's democracy, and make it possible for Taiwanese to make a free choice on their future. This means that the US needs to observe the utmost neutrality in these elections, and allow an open and democratic process to play itself out.

It also means that the US government needs to prevail on Beijing to accept Taiwan as it is, and allow it to become an equal member of the international community. This is the only way there will be long-term peace and stability in the region.

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