

Appeasement, kowtowing or peace

Written by Jerome Keating
Friday, 22 May 2015 10:07

As Taiwan enters the last year of Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) presidency, the nation has much to examine and reflect on. A basic question is how effective Ma's reign has been. In this matter, an issue that deserves special attention is Ma's claim that his policy of non-confrontation — or what some might call appeasement and kowtowing to China — has brought peace to the Taiwan Strait. However, has it?

Peace in the Taiwan Strait is certainly something to be desired. It has been the subject of the droning and repetitive discourse that comes not only from pundits in the US, but even from Ma's presidential office. In this scenario, Ma is painted as the one who has listened to Washington's sage advice and avoided antagonizing the People's Republic of China (PRC), unlike his "erratic" predecessor, Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁).

By heeding this counsel Ma has allegedly avoided rocking the boat and therefore brought peace and harmony to the Strait.

Certainly, there have been some positive cross-strait gains under Ma. The number and frequency of direct flights between the two nations have increased dramatically, granting, of course, that the PRC considers these as domestic and not international flights.

The number of tourists from China to Taiwan has also grown steadily, though that has sometimes created other problems.

However, the real issue that needs examination is this alleged peace in the Taiwan Strait and its influence on the surrounding area.

Does true peace reign here? Ma continually emphasizes that his peace is built on the bedrock and indispensable importance of the so-called "1992 consensus." This is ironic and brings little comfort, since others, especially Lee Teng-hui (李登輝), who was president of Taiwan from 1988 to 2000 has declared that the "1992 consensus" is fabricated nonsense. That is hardly a good bedrock foundation, yet some in the US seem swayed by this nonsense.

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Ma could claim that no missiles have flown as they did in 1996, but then no missiles flew during the eight years of the “radical” Chen either. On the other hand, the number of spies entering Taiwan from China has increased.

So what is the value of Ma’s so-called peace? And has it had any effect at all on the two regional bodies of water joined by this Taiwan Strait, namely the East and South China Seas?

In the East China Sea, the Diaoyutais (釣魚台), or Senkaku Islands as Japan calls them, are a flash point. The islands, which are about 170km from both Taiwan and Japan and 330km from China, are claimed by all three. Questions immediately arise. Has the US cautioned Japan not to rock the boat as it did Taiwan? Has Ma’s harmony in the Taiwan Strait brought additional harmony here? Not quite. In fact, it seems to have done the opposite.

In November 2013, in a swift unilateral move, the PRC extended its air defense identification zone more than 330km out so that it overlapped the islands.

An air defense identification zone claim allows a country to monitor and control aircraft entering this zone and view them as potential threats. The US quickly challenged this by sending two unarmed and unescorted B-52s through this zone, but the answer is clear. Ma’s alleged harmony in the Taiwan Strait has had no influence. If anything, it encouraged China to act without fear of being challenged. In another move, China attempted to redraw and extend the line so its own commercial aircraft can pass closer to Taiwan in the Taiwan Strait.

No, Ma’s alleged peace in the Taiwan Strait brought no benefit to this dispute. The PRC has not slowed in its claims or resorted to further negotiations. And yet, the western pundits have avoided placing the same burden for harmony on Japan that they did on Taiwan.

In the South China Sea we find that China is on the offensive; it wants to make this sea its Mare Nostrum at the expense of all other nations in the region. By this, it more importantly shows it wants to control the shipping lanes that the US, Japan and other countries depend upon.

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On the islands and atolls here, China is pouring sand and concrete into the ocean to build bases to solidify its claims. One naval commentator called it building “the great wall of sand.”

Chinese ships continually challenge the Philippine Navy in the Nansha Islands (南沙群岛). So, is the US cautioning the Philippine president not to provoke China? No, the US has responded by sending ships into the area. And where are the pundits with the droning placating message that the US has tried to foist on Taiwan? Have Ma’s actions had any influence? Has China seen the light and decided that it need not push? The opposite again rings out.

To return to the original question, has Ma brought peace to the Taiwan Strait and the surrounding region? Hardly. Instead, Ma’s peace has provided convenient blinders for everyone to ignore where the real problem and threat to peace lie.

It is time to dump Ma’s droning message and see the real problem. China is pushing in both China Seas. China can push harder elsewhere because it does not have to worry about pushing in the Taiwan Strait.

Some are finally waking up to where the real problem is; some even suggest that the whole problem can be solved if the US abandons democratic Taiwan to China. Such a disastrous move would only exacerbate all problems in the East and South China seas.

As Democratic Progressive Party Chairperson Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) prepares to visit Washington at the end of this month, Taiwanese are certainly hoping that the focus has shifted from the droning message that Taiwan needs to show restraint to one where two democracies must work together. And hopefully, Washington will welcome a person more qualified to represent a changing Taiwan and deal with China than Ma.

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