

Ma's erratic maneuvers put regional ties at risk

Written by Gerrit van der Wees
Thursday, 05 May 2016 07:40

President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) has always prided himself — particularly vis-a-vis the US — that he would follow a low-key approach, and would pull “no surprises.”

However, this appearance was mainly designed for US consumption: the reality is quite different, as Ma has pulled one surprise after another, particularly in relation to US allies in the region, Japan and the Philippines.

The most recent episode is rather illustrative.

After Japan arrested the crew of a Taiwanese fishing boat for fishing in waters off the Okinotori atoll, Ma used unusually strong words to denounce Japan, while his Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) accused Japan of “pirate-like” actions.

If Ma had been statesmanlike, he would have let cooler heads prevail, but instead he played up the issue and ordered the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to lodge a strong protest with Japan over the incident, while he questioned the Japanese position that the Okinotori atoll can be called an island.

This is not the first time that Ma has aggravated a crisis with Taiwan's democratic neighbors: In September 2012 he allowed the Coast Guard Administration to accompany about 40 to 50 fishing boats to sail to the Japan-administered Diaoyutai Islands (釣魚台) — known as the Senkakus in Japan — leading to the infamous water cannon fight with a Japan Coast Guard vessel.

On another occasion, in May 2013, he stoked the fires in a fishing conflict with the Philippines.

After an unfortunate shooting by the Philippine Coast Guard of a Taiwanese fisherman fishing near the Philippine coast, Ma aggravated the crisis by calling the shooting a “cold-blooded murder” — long before any investigation of the event had taken place.

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In all the above cases, the US had to lean heavily on Ma to calm down and to come to a peaceful accommodation with Taiwan's democratic neighbors.

However, Ma's penchant for surprises did not stop: In November last year, he only informed the US a couple of days ahead of his announcement that he would meet with Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平) in Singapore on Nov. 7. Yet another surprise for Washington.

The problem with Ma's words and actions is that he tends to take a tough stance on Japan and the Philippines, but then turns into a purring cat and has a blind eye when there are major issues with China.

A couple of examples shed light on this duality.

While many other countries — including the US — have strongly criticized Beijing for its annexation, build-up and militarization of atolls in the South China Sea, there was hardly a word of protest from Ma.

In addition, when Beijing recently pressured Kenya to deport 45 Taiwanese suspected of telecom fraud to China — instead of returning them to Taiwan — Ma soothingly said this was “not a matter of sovereignty, but rather a matter of division of labor.”

It is sad to see that Ma continues to come down on the wrong side of history by siding with a repressive and undemocratic regime in Beijing, and by alienating Taiwan's democratic friends.

These are the friends that Taiwan would need most in the event that China really started to threaten this freedom-loving nation and its people with economic sanctions, a blockade or worse.

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Fortunately, Ma's term ends on May 20, and Taiwan is to start a new chapter in its relations with its democratic neighbors and friends under president-elect Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文).

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