

Going from soft to sharp

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
Thursday, 05 April 2018 06:34

Beijing was not happy about Premier William Lai (賴清德) reiterating his support for Taiwanese independence at the legislature on Friday last week. The state-run Global Times published an editorial lambasting Lai for his “presumptuous” words. It also suggested the Chinese government consider initiating a new avenue of attack against Taiwanese independence advocates.

Taiwanese commentators have criticized what they feel is the excessive nature of this suggested approach, and of its implications for free speech and sovereignty. However, what is also interesting is the editorial’s frank description of the context of Beijing’s “united front” strategy.

The editorial calls for Beijing to issue an international arrest warrant for Lai, as part of the next step in “united front” warfare consisting of “precision strikes” against individual pro-independence Taiwanese politicians. Lai would then be prosecuted under China’s criminal code and its “Anti-Secession” Law.

Since the “Anti-Secession” Law is pertinent to the context and assumptions of the “united front” tactics informing the editorial’s premise, certain details are worth pointing out.

First, it is based on the principle that Taiwan is not a sovereign country and belongs to China. Article 4 says that accomplishing unification is “the sacred duty of all Chinese people, the Taiwan compatriots included.” If you want presumption, look no further than that.

Second, it states that peaceful means to achieve this are preferred.

Third, it explicitly states the way this is to be achieved. Article 6 lists measures to promote cross-strait relations, including encouraging and facilitating personnel exchanges, economic exchanges and cooperation, as well as exchanges in education, science, technology, culture, health and sports, and cooperation in combating crimes.

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While these sound harmless, indeed desirable, their presence in the law, constituting one-fifth of the entire text, suggests that they are intended to lay the groundwork for eventual unification, rather than being desirable ends in themselves.

Which makes perfect sense when you read the rest of the editorial.

It says that, following the development of closer cross-strait ties and “the mainland’s” continuously expanding influence on “the island,” China’s encircling of Taiwan is almost complete.

It then talks of how China’s sanctions against pro-independence Taiwanese entertainers and artists have clearly borne fruit, evidenced by how their ability to perform in Taiwan has been curtailed.

The time is ripe to tighten the grip and exert similar sanctions — “precision strikes” — against specific pro-independence Taiwanese politicians, the editorial says.

“Following the increasing “mainlandization” of economic and social life within Taiwan, we can surely now find or pro-actively initiate ways to sanction” these politicians and “to create an entirely new battlefield,” it says.

Lai will be the first, and he will serve as an example to cow not only other pro-independence politicians, but any Taiwanese with independence leanings who desire in any way to develop their business or career in the Chinese market, the newspaper said.

Previously, the two-pronged approach of a state to exert influence in the world has been the combination of soft (cultural, social and economic) and hard (military) power. Add to this now a third category, that of sharp power: The attempt to penetrate the political and information environments in certain countries.

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Beijing is effectively presenting traditionally soft power approaches as a desirable alternative to hard power interventions, but intentionally exploiting the environment cultivated by this soft power to encircle, strangle, penetrate and strike.

The Global Times editorial is a prefect summary of how it has gone about this.

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