

Beijing's latest bid to lure voters

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China on Monday announced the latest in its efforts to open its markets for Taiwanese companies and investment, saying new 26 measures would more closely reach its ideal of equal treatment between Chinese and Taiwanese “compatriots.”

The 26 measures are basically an extension of the 31 incentives introduced in February last year, and — like those — are clearly an attempt to prime Taiwan for the “one country, two systems” model.

However, the timing of Beijing's move, a mere two months before the Jan. 11 elections, carries with it a distinct whiff of electoral manipulation.

Is this move wrong-footed, or could it actually work in Beijing's favor? Is it an act of desperation, an attempt to repeat a technique that worked before, but is doomed to failure in the current international climate?

China's arms-open approach to Taiwanese business and investment that started in the 1990s worked spectacularly. It helped China soak up Taiwanese capital, technology and talent, and contributed to it becoming the world's second-largest economy.

China still needs this input, but the situation has changed. Foreign governments are increasingly wary of Beijing's unfair business practices and the uneven playing field on which overseas companies have to compete with Chinese firms, while the US-China trade dispute and the government's New Southbound Policy have helped companies and investment migrate out of China, not the other way round.

This is a concern for Beijing, and the new measures are unlikely to go that far in mitigating this trend.

However, the initiative will still work if it affects Taiwan's elections in the way that Beijing hopes.

The public is well aware of the link between this effort and Beijing's aim of applying the "one country, two systems" model to Taiwan, and in this regard the timing seems woefully ill-advised.

The Taiwanese were never likely to accept this system, and the ongoing protests in Hong Kong, which are turning darker and more violent by the day, certainly do not make the idea any more palatable.

It will be easy for the Democratic Progressive Party and President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) to exploit this initiative to refocus voters' attention to the threat that Beijing represents, and in this way its move could be interpreted as a gift to Tsai's re-election campaign.

That said, the new measures are not explicitly intimidatory: They are all carrot and no stick. Voters already fearful of China's machinations will not be fooled by them, and they are unlikely to change the way they vote because of them. However, people more favorably disposed to voting for Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) and its more pro-China policies might be swayed.

For Tsai's campaign, a more worrying angle — whether this was Beijing's intent or not — is how the introduction of economic incentives this close to voting day could shift the focus from the personalities of the candidates to the issues and policies of Tsai and her KMT rival, Kaohsiung Mayor Han Kuo-yu (韓國瑜).

Han's opinion poll ratings are already falling, mostly because voters perceive him as unreliable, with a penchant for exaggerations, fabrications and unrealistic policy proposals. His campaign has welcomed the new measures.

The Tsai campaign should allow the voters to make up their own minds about Han's reliability, or lack thereof. He is doing an exemplary job of that unaided. It should concentrate exclusively on Tsai's policies, vision and achievements, and not risk allowing Beijing to shift the focus of the campaign.

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