

Ma playing politics with vaccines

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
Friday, 19 February 2021 06:49

During a Lunar New Year's Day visit to Xingtian Temple in Taipei, former president Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) on Friday last week told reporters: "If China offers [Taiwan] a [COVID-19] vaccine, the government should not decline the offer."

Putting aside Ma's apparent Freudian slip — referring to "China" instead of "the mainland" — and his jettisoning of convention to engage in politicking during Taiwan's most important national holiday, Ma has once again demonstrated his involuntary "wrecking instinct."

Since his retirement, Ma has become Taiwan's most vocal former president. Regrettably, his frequent interventions are almost always deleterious to the national interest. Perhaps the most egregious example was Ma's assertion in August last year that if China launched an invasion against Taiwan, Taiwan would be steamrolled in a quick, decisive battle — "the first battle will be the last," Ma ominously warned.

This was deeply damaging to the moral of Taiwan's armed forces at a time when Chinese military aircraft are making provocative incursions into the nation's airspace on a near-daily basis.

Ma has also accused President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) of leading a "fascist regime" and said that Tsai's refusal to acknowledge the so-called "1992 consensus" has made the nation "unsafe."

During the initial stages of the COVID-19 outbreak at the beginning of last year, Ma joined forces with Beijing to pour opprobrium on Tsai for implementing a temporary ban on the export of masks to China.

As a former president, Ma's interventions carry weight with a sizeable part of the public. Ma is either consciously, or unwittingly, functioning as Beijing's primary asset in its psychological warfare campaign to break the will of Taiwanese, and it is difficult not to attribute anything but malice to his latest intervention.

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The Chinese Communist Party has a documented poor track record on food and drug safety — the 2008 melamine milk powder scandal is perhaps the best-known and most shocking example. However, two years ago, a Chinese vaccine manufacturer was found to have distributed doses of a defective rabies vaccine and falsified production dates, and in December last year, the Washington Post reported that leading Chinese vaccine manufacturer Sinovac had bribed China's drug regulator to obtain approval for its COVID-19 vaccine. In a country where corruption is rife and there is little-to-no transparency over official data, it is right for the government to exercise extreme caution.

There is also the consideration of national security: Specifically the wisdom of allowing Taiwan to become reliant, at least in part, on a vaccine supplied by the nation's archenemy — a vaccine that would have a direct bearing on the health of the nation's economy and the ability of its armed forces to remain fighting fit. Recent history tells Taiwan all it needs to know: During the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, Beijing demonstrated that it had no qualms about politicizing the supply of personal protective equipment and testing kits to foreign nations.

On Wednesday, Minister of Health and Welfare Chen Shih-chung (陳時中) confirmed that Taiwan was close to signing a contract to secure vaccine doses from Pfizer and BioNTech last year, but the deal was mysteriously halted at the 11th hour, and hinted at interference by Beijing.

Despite the loss of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, Taiwan has secured nearly 15 million vaccine doses, mostly from AstraZeneca, but also through the WHO's COVAX program. Taiwan is in the first group of nations that are to receive vaccines under the scheme.

As Taiwan appears to be on track to receive sufficient quantities of vaccines, Ma is either motivated by malice or sour grapes: Either way it is not a good look for a former president.

Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2021/02/19](#)