



TAIWAN UNDER PRESIDENT MA YING-JEOU

By Jacques deLisle

I. A HORSE OF A DIFFERENT COLOR? DEMOCRACY AND DISTRUST IN TAIWAN

Following a seventeen-point victory in Taiwan's presidential election on March 22, 2008, Ma Ying-jeou took office on May 20 with an inaugural address that reiterated his priorities: reconciliation in Taiwan's politics, repairing ties with Washington, and improving cross-Strait relations. Achieving these goals requires overcoming the distrust that has come to pervade Taiwan's politics and external relations, especially during the second term of Ma's predecessor, Chen Shui-bian. Most of the relevant actors seem to recognize how costly mutual mistrust had become, and so the new president has striking opportunities, but also daunting challenges, on these fronts.

In his inaugural address, Ma pledged a political environment that is pluralistic and "fosters political reconciliation." He promised to rebuild political trust and seek cooperation among all parties. Ma's electoral mandate and standing within the KMT as the man who led his party back to power gave him political resources to pursue his commitment to rebuild trust. Still, bringing his party in line will not be easy. Since the KMT won a supermajority in the legislature in January, its legislators have already showed signs of independence. And despite its inclusive elements, Ma's inaugural address contained much that could seem to confirm DPP fears, such as its pledges to build on post-election momentum to move quickly on cross-Strait engagement.

The presidential campaign revealed, and worsened, KMT or "Blue" distrust of the "Green" DPP. Many in the KMT feared that the DPP could steal the election with "dirty tricks" (*aobo*), by affecting voters' preferences or turnout. In the campaign's final days, four KMT legislators undertook an ad hoc investigation of rumors that the DPP campaign was using space on which it was not paying proper rent. When their uninvited site visit brought a telegenic confrontation and a political windfall to the Hsieh campaign, some KMT sources suspected a DPP trap.

With Ma facing accusations that he held a U.S. green card (a measure, in his critics' view, of Ma's incomplete loyalty to Taiwan), KMT distrust toward the DPP extended to the United States' complicated role in Taiwan's politics. Distrust also extended to policy. According to one common KMT charge, Hsieh was a false moderate on cross-Strait issues, who would continue Chen's "pro-independence" or "anti-China" agenda--thus continuing to imperil cross-Strait stability and harm Taiwan's economy. These attacks cut deeper in a contest marked by mutual accusations that the other side's victory would threaten vital national interests.

Ma's boldest early gesture to rebuild trust faced a frosty reception in some KMT quarters. He named as head of the Mainland Affairs Council Lai Hsing-yuan, a former legislator from the Taiwan Solidarity Union (a party founded by former President Lee Teng-hui, allied with the DPP and associated with strongly pro-independence positions). Notwithstanding Lai's assurances that she agreed with Ma's principles on relations with China, some in the KMT denounced the appointment. (Ma rebuffed calls to drop Lai.)

An issue that potentially could be as costly for Ma is the issue of whether to pardon Chen, who faces prosecution on corruption charges. Many in the KMT still regard Chen as an illegitimately elected president and are outraged at corruption they see reaching the president and his close aides and relatives. They distrust Ma for not having joined in publicly rejecting Chen's 2004 reelection. Ma has emphasized "clean politics," but he himself had to fight corruption charges brought against him during Chen's presidency. Moreover, there may not be much support from within the DPP for pardon, as many seek to distance themselves from the scandals that tainted the later Chen years.

It's Not Easy Being Green

Ma's rhetoric of reconciliation reflects his recognition of the problem he faces with many of the 40 percent of Taiwanese voters who generally vote Green, and post-election developments within the DPP have been modestly encouraging. Hsieh, vice

presidential candidate Su Tseng-chang, and other prominent DPP leaders accepted defeat gracefully, and it appears that the loss has made the party recognize the imperative to put its own house in order and move toward the political middle. However, for the DPP as for the KMT, the 2008 election brought forth familiar fear and anger about procedural improprieties or unfair advantages benefiting the other party. DPP complaints focused on the KMT's perceived advantage in financial resources and the organizational resources that come with control of key government institutions.

Much suspicion and alarm on the DPP side focused on policies that a Ma administration would pursue. Continuing well after the election, Green sources—including Lee and Chen—attacked Ma's support of the "1992 Consensus," under which Taipei and Beijing agreed that there was "one China" but each held to its own interpretation, and significant contingents within the DPP and among the Greens more broadly take a dim view of Ma's commitment to reducing political distrust.

Seeing Red and Turning Teal

Ma's challenges extend beyond issues with relatively ardent members of the Green or Blue camps. They include securing the support and trust of median, moderate voters, many of whom have grown alienated from Taiwan's politics. Although many factors account for the KMT's electoral successes, a significant component appears to have been popular sentiment that was more against Chen, the DPP, and recent "politics as usual" than it was pro-KMT. Taiwanese blamed the DPP for a struggling economy (in comparison to Taiwan's high baselines), and the stalemated cross-Strait relations that marked Chen's years in office as impeding greater economic integration with the mainland, which is widely seen to be a key to economic recovery. Public weariness and resentment of divisive politics seem to have been another primarily anti-DPP phenomenon.

Ma engaged the issue of divisive politics, especially identity politics and loyalty-questioning. Throughout the campaign and in his inaugural address, Ma acknowledged the well-known fact that he was born in Hong Kong to a "mainlander" (*waishengren*) rather than a "Taiwanese" family. He stressed his ties to and love for Taiwan and, most vitally, his quest for a Taiwanese identity that was neither narrowly ethnically based nor defined in opposition to a Chinese identity.

Ma, the Harvard-trained lawyer and former justice minister, also spoke of the constitution in ways that departed markedly from Chen's controversial approach. Chen had sought a new constitution and constitutional amendments that sought to make the document more purely Taiwanese, that implied an assertive position on Taiwan's state-like international status and that might someday include a change in the national name from Republic of China to Taiwan. In contrast, Ma stressed the constitutional process for a smooth transfer of power after a democratic election, in rejoinder to Chen's quickly dropped suggestion that he might not cede power to a successor who held a U.S. green card. In his inaugural, Ma declared that "respecting the constitution is more important than amending it" and characterized the constitution as providing a "framework" for maintaining the cross-Strait status quo. On substantive policy, these positions moved toward the middle of Taiwan's Blue-to-Green political spectrum. This could both appeal to the median voter and assuage the fears of "light Green" constituents.

Ma's stated positions on key policy issues are generally much less "Blue" than those recently put forward by the KMT. Presidents and aspiring presidents from the KMT had not offered such strong statements of identification with Taiwan, rather than the ROC. On cross-Strait issues, they had not explicitly pushed the possibility of unification with the mainland so far off into the indefinite future—a future that is non-negotiably beyond Ma's first and probably second terms, and that includes both a democratic PRC and democratic approval from the people of Taiwan. They had not made safeguarding the island's separate "sovereignty" so core a principle of foreign policy.

Other positions in the Ma repertoire fit more easily with the recent KMT playbook: moving quickly to advance cross-Strait economic relations, resuming cross-Strait negotiations under the framework of the 1992 Consensus, eschewing movements toward formal independence, seeking expanded international participation but being willing to do so under names other than Taiwan, and repairing frayed ties with Washington.

Assets in Trust

More than one might expect for a president who won in a landslide and whose party holds a supermajority in the legislature and local governments, Ma and his administration have reason to focus on securing support and trust within the KMT, across Taiwan's partisan political divide and among disaffected and ambivalent constituencies.

Looking ahead, Ma and the KMT face a DPP that might either wither into a permanent minority party, or alternatively, it could move toward the middle, compete effectively for the many voters with malleable loyalties or doubts about KMT cross-Strait or economic policies, pounce on KMT errors and vices, and appeal to voters' unease with single-party rule. Because of Taiwan's KMT-dominated authoritarian past, that concern has continuing resonance, as Ma recognized when he noted in his inaugural that "absolute power corrupts absolutely." Such fears could again surpass voters' frustration with the gridlock produced by divided government during the Chen years. If such a DPP recovery occurs, the KMT will need to compete for voters' support and trust in a manner familiar from its recent past.

II. CHANGING HORSES IN THE MIDDLE OF THE STRAIT? TAIWAN'S EXTERNAL RELATIONS

Abroad, Ma has aims for which support and trust at home will be vital assets. Ma's agenda and Beijing's initial response point to an evolving relationship. Given the central role cross-Strait relations have played in Taiwan's politics, it will be important for Ma and his negotiators to engage their interlocutors across the Strait from a position of strength rooted in domestic

support; with room to maneuver at home and innovate abroad; and with the ability to invoke credibly a Taiwanese consensus for Taiwan's autonomous status.

Washington: Sighs of Relief . . . and Signs of Complacency

In the U.S., Ma's election mostly brought sighs of relief that the unnerving gambits and rocky exchanges that characterized Taipei-Washington relations in recent years would cease. A partial inventory of points of friction would include Lee's 1999 characterization of ROC-PRC relations as "state to state"; Chen's 2002 assertion that there was "one country on each side of the Strait"; his subsequent moves that appeared to try to "change the status quo" (as President Bush characterized them); his pursuit of a new constitution; his 2006 evisceration of Lee's Guidelines for National Unification and National Unification Council; and his decision to hold referenda on cross-Strait relations and national defense issues in 2004 and, most controversially, UN membership under the name Taiwan in 2008.

Bringing to power for the first time a candidate from the "pro-independence" DPP, Chen's election had raised significant concerns in the U.S.--ones serious enough that Chen's 2000 inaugural speech was vetted in Washington and its Four Noes and One Not, according to many accounts, were added partly to ease American apprehensions. At the end of Chen's second term, U.S. observers worried openly whether Chen might pull a "May surprise," taking one last stab at asserting more formal state-like status for Taiwan.

Washington expected nothing of the kind from Ma, given his positions on cross-Strait and status issues (which included his own "Three Noes"--no independence, no unification, and no use of force), his moderate manner, smooth style, fluent English, and his avowed goal to repair the damage caused by Chen's "diplomatic adventurism." The U.S. offered warm and high-level congratulations to Ma on his election, and reports indicated that Washington had not sought to vet Ma's inaugural address.

U.S. expectations of moving beyond the Chen era were strengthened by several post-election steps toward improving ties between Beijing and Taipei. These included mutual affirmation of the 1992 Consensus as a foundational principle for talks; an informal conversation between PRC President Hu and Taiwan's then-vice president-elect Vincent Siew at China's Baoao Forum on economic development; a meeting between Hu and former KMT leader Lien Chan that reprised their breakthrough 2005 meeting; and a post-inaugural visit to the PRC by KMT chairman Wu Poh-hsiung. Such developments were welcomed in the U.S. as portending that cross-Strait relations will be conducted in a more bilateral fashion, allowing Washington to reduce its difficult and costly role of identifying and trying to rein in whichever side was at fault in chronic cross-Strait crises.

However, the silver cloud could have a dark lining. The principal dangers stem from complacency. For those in U.S. policy circles who are most suspicious of China's rise, any welcoming of Ma's expected cross-Strait rapprochement reflects a dangerously sanguine view of dealing with Beijing. From this perspective, Ma may wittingly sell Taiwan out or inadvertently give away too much, with results that will be harmful to the U.S. and potentially ruinous for Taiwan.

Among the wider swath in U.S. policy circles that believes that more cooperative cross-Strait relations are likely to be in the U.S.'s interest, the risks stem from associating the problems in Taiwan-U.S. relations too firmly with Chen, and thus having unduly high expectations about how smoothly cross-Strait relations will go under Ma.

This type of complacency and the Bush administration's lame-duck phase make it less likely that the U.S. will take steps that may be in its own interest to shore up Ma and Taiwan as they enter an uncharted phase in relations with Beijing. Wary of China's possible reaction, Washington rebuffed Ma's expressed interest in a pre-inauguration visit, and the long-pending sales of F-16s to Taiwan are all but certain not to be consummated on Bush's watch. This will leave the issue for the next administration, which will not want to take the plane sales up as an early matter of business--Beijing's presumed negative reaction will be stronger when the new U.S. president has not yet demonstrated the *bona fides* of his commitment to good U.S.-China relations and when it might hope to extract a compensating concession.

Beijing: Getting What You Wish For . . . and Needing to Follow Through

For Beijing, Ma's election looks like a gratifying confirmation of China's evolving strategy toward Taiwan and its progress in learning how to deal with Taiwan's elections. Angered by President Lee's Cornell University reunion speech asserting Taiwan's international status, the PRC addressed Taiwan's first fully democratic presidential election in 1996 with missile tests in the Strait. In 2000, Premier Zhu Rongji cautioned ROC voters not to support Chen and Beijing issued a "White Paper" on the Taiwan question with several warnings. In 2004, largely sat on the sidelines but made clear its preference for the KMT's Lien Chan and its unwillingness to deal with Chen.

By the time of the 2008 campaign, China under Hu had consolidated a revised approach to Taiwan, often characterized as one of preventing independence (or secession) rather than seeking to advance unification (or reunification). The PRC's Anti-Secession Law in 2005 that again threatened the use of force under already-familiar conditions also embodied Beijing's revised Taiwan strategy. It reflected Beijing's long-term acquiescence in a status quo of Taiwan's *de facto* independence, if Taipei did not claim *de jure* independence. In this context, as the 2008 elections approached, PRC authorities sought to make clear that voting KMT would open up possibilities for progress in cross-Strait relations that many Taiwanese wanted. And for the first time (albeit for reasons that went far beyond Beijing's improved tactics), the PRC's preferred candidate.

Now, if China does not achieve significant, prompt progress in cross-Strait relations, Hu's strategy will be vulnerable, and Taiwanese voters may desert the KMT for the DPP, in which case the PRC's strategic interests in improved cross-Strait ties

will suffer.

The initial signs from Beijing are promising. The April 2008 Hu-Lien meeting symbolically and explicitly reaffirmed their April 2005 joint statement of principles on cross-Strait relations and confirmed that those principles will have a place in Ma's cross-Strait policy. KMT Chairman Wu's May meeting with Hu raised party-to-party links to the highest formal level of the PRC era and prompted another affirmation from Hu of the 2005 Hu-Lien joint statement, the 1992 Consensus and Beijing's willingness to discuss Taiwan's participation in international activities. There has been significant movement toward reviving dialogue between Taiwan's quasi-official Straits Exchange Foundation and its PRC counterpart, the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits (ARATS), which had been suspended after Lee's 1999 "state-to-state" remarks. Notably, Beijing named as ARATS chairman Jia Qinglin the government's main "united front" body.

Beijing appeared poised to make early progress on relatively uncontroversial issues, beginning with weekend cross-Strait charter flights (the first step toward normalized transportation links) and increased tourism from the mainland. Ma wrote a July 4 start date for these developments into his inaugural address. Although both sides expect that deadline to be met, this sets a problematic precedent should the next round of accords prove harder to achieve. Harvesting the low-hanging fruit first makes sense, especially in light of the need to build mutual confidence and momentum. Still, seeking quick advances on easy issues may create overly optimistic expectations.

If Beijing's Taiwan agenda runs into difficulties, it may also have to adjust to different responses from Washington than it came to expect during the Chen years. Assuming that Ma hews to the approach he has laid out and assuming no radical alterations to U.S. policy by the next president, the sources of cross-Strait friction post-Chen are less likely to appear to Washington as the ROC's doing. Washington will therefore be less likely to come to Beijing's assistance in checking a Taiwan leader's initiatives. While the PRC surely will welcome the end of what it saw as Chen's reckless provocations, the more mixed responses that will probably come from Washington will complicate China's relations with the U.S. and across the Strait.

Taipei is at greater risk than Washington of having high expectations disappointed. China may not be prepared to deliver enough to Taiwan, or fully appreciate the limits to what the Ma administration will or can deliver. It remains unclear to observers--and perhaps uncertain to participants--how much the PRC's Taiwan policymakers still expect economic integration to lead to political accommodation, and how prepared they are for the severity of the difficulties that may vex negotiations.

Although China's cross-Strait strategy is decided at the highest levels (the contemporary approach is widely seen as bearing Hu's imprint), China's Taiwan policymaking process is not monolithic. There are signs that proponents of relatively anti-accommodationist views (typically associated with the Foreign Ministry or the PLA) remain reluctant to give Taiwan very much, even if nothing less will suffice to sustain progress in cross-Strait relations. If more moderate, Taiwan-accommodating elements can minimize the impact of such views, they still face the problem that China's cross-Strait policymaking is ponderous and inertial. Even top leaders must grapple with disparate views and multiple institutions, and avoid "losing Taiwan" (or even committing a grave error in Taiwan policy), Beijing's cross-Strait policy does not adapt nimbly. Opportunities can be missed and necessary steps not taken.¹ China's Taiwan policymakers also may not fully comprehend how much Ma and his KMT differ in outlook and agenda from their predecessors or how different a domestic political landscape they face.

Taiwan: A Different KMT . . . and Democratic Accountability

Ma is not Lien. The constraints imposed on any ROC president by citizen preferences in Taiwan today are different from those of a decade or more ago, when Beijing last seriously engaged in cross-Strait negotiations.

To be sure, Ma has made strong, credible commitments to deeper engagement with the PRC and warmer cross-Strait relations. Ma also endorsed, much more than his predecessor, the "Chineseness" of Taiwan, and closely linked his promise to reenergize Taiwan's economy to improved cross-Strait ties. At the same time, Ma has bound himself no less firmly to positions that limit how far Taiwan will go in pursuing closer ties with Beijing. Candidate Ma had some harsh words for the PRC, of which his sharpest rebukes involved issues with implications for Taiwan's international status. He condemned the PRC's response to unrest in Tibet, even raising the possibility of an Olympic boycott. Ma's point, as he explained it, was that Taiwan was not like Tibet and therefore could not become similarly subject to the Chinese state's repressive measures. Ma denounced PRC Premier Wen's assertion that matters affecting Taiwan's future were for China to decide. To the contrary, Ma insisted, any change in the status quo required the democratic support of the people of Taiwan. For Ma, Taiwan's successful democracy limits the possible terms of cross-Strait accommodation: democracy defines Taiwan, distinguishes it from the PRC, enhances its international stature, and can influence political change on the mainland.

Ma routinely refers to "Taiwan" as well as the "ROC" as relevant entities, and regularly speaks of safeguarding his nation's sovereignty and seeking international dignity, as well as the other two of his "three yeses" (prosperity and security). In his inaugural, Ma proposed mutual "respect" between the PRC and ROC in international organizations and activities, and declared that an end to Taiwan's international isolation was a condition for cross-Strait relations to "move forward with

¹ On this front, the World Health Assembly meeting in May was a disconcerting sign. Facing unreformed opposition from Beijing, Taiwan was again denied the opportunity to participate in the WHO, even as an observer.

confidence.”

Negotiating with Beijing to address the question of Taiwan’s international space is one of the items on the Hu-Lien 2005 joint statement that seems to have most salience for the Ma administration. Ma’s call in his inaugural address for a “diplomatic truce” to end the financially costly competition with Beijing for the handful of small-state governments that do or might extend diplomatic recognition to Taipei is more a pragmatic reassessment than a change of preferences. Ma cast the shift as part of his broader agenda of using “flexible methods” to secure and expand Taiwan’s place in the international community. Although the party and its leader clearly had no love for their March 2008 referendum calling for UN representation of Taiwan under more “flexible” nomenclature, which was adopted as an electoral tactic to counter the DPP’s similarly tactical referendum on UN membership under the name “Taiwan,” UN representation for Taiwan remains an enduring goal.

In Taiwanese politics, Ma’s statements trumpeting his love for and loyalty to Taiwan resonate strongly with commitments at least to maintain the status quo of Taiwan’s de facto independence. They also inescapably evoke the “New Taiwanese” idea, which transcends ethnicity, is based in a political community, and was crafted by Lee, a hero of pro-independence Taiwanese and in whose administration Ma held senior posts. It would be too flip to discount these positions as election-year politicking. Some of the statements were politically costly or at least politically risky, at home or across the Strait. Close observers of Ma describe a man who developed stronger feelings for and connections with the Taiwanese people, and a deeper personal identification with Taiwan, over the course of a long, island-wide campaign.

In any event, Ma was elected by, and is accountable to, a Taiwanese electorate that wants to preserve the cross-Strait status quo, that strongly identifies itself as Taiwanese, and that favors robust international status for Taiwan. Ma and the KMT won the 2008 presidential and legislative elections by appealing to median Taiwanese voters who hold such views. In dealing with Beijing, Ma and his administration will remain accountable to Taiwan’s electorate. The much-battered DPP, even under relatively moderate new leader Tsai Ing-wen, is poised to exploit its perceived advantages and credibility on Taiwan sovereignty issues if Ma’s strategy seems to get too little or give away too much. As Ma tellingly put it on the eve of his inauguration, although he came to office with great optimism about prospects for engaging the PRC, he still felt as if he were “treading on thin ice and standing upon the edge of an abyss.”

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