

Ma's Two Lost Years

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Halfway to President Ma Ying-jeou's two-year governance, it is now time to reflect on what he has done to Taiwan's relations with China—what achievements he has accomplished, what leadership he has demonstrated, and what political tools and risks he has used or got involved in for the sake of implementing cross-strait policies.

To promote the signing of an Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) with China, Ma has characterized the period under the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government as “eight missing years” in his recent debate with DPP Chairwoman Tsai Ing-wen. But such an allegation, as well as the charge of the DPP's “closed-door” policy toward China, was invalid and politically misleading.

While the DPP government had greatly cemented the awareness of “Taiwan identity” on the domestic front, it was still capable of achieving substantial and continuous economic and functional exchanges with China. Under the DPP, Taiwan's reliance on trade with China even reached 40 percent, which had exceeded the nation's trade ties with Japan and South Korea. Most negotiations on direct cross-strait charter flights and tourism began under the DPP administration. The country's average economic growth rate reached 4.4 percent during the DPP years, but has slumped to minus 0.91 percent during Ma's first two years in power. The average unemployment rate, which stood at 4.28

percent under the DPP government, has gone up to 5.35 percent after two years of the Ma administration.

Immediately after taking office, Ma has placed cross-strait relations on top of Taiwan's diplomatic and international trade policies. He resorted to a rapid China-centric course that played down Taiwan sovereignty or selectively broached “the sovereignty of the Republic of China,” lacked a hedging policy toward China, and was characterized by untransparent decision-making behind closed doors. He revived the “1992 consensus,” advocated that Taiwan and China observe a policy of mutual non-denial, call a diplomatic truce, and define cross-strait relations as “region to region” relations under the one-China Constitution of the Republic of China.

On the premise of maintaining the status quo, Ma pledged a “Three Nos” policy of “no independence, no unification, no use of force.” It cannot be denied that cross-strait tensions have eased; besides, bilateral dialogue has also resumed. So far twelve agreements have been signed following negotiations by Taiwan's Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF) and China's Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait (ARATS). Negotiations for the ECFA are also under way with Ma declaring that the pact will be signed in June. However, although these developments have met the international community's expectations for continued peaceful dialogue across the Taiwan Strait, they have also widened domestic

dispute on Ma's China policy.

Ma could and should have used the 58 percent of the popular vote he garnered from the last presidential election, the KMT's control of the administration and its parliamentary majority to forge consensus in Taiwan on cross-strait policy. Unfortunately, he has neither the intention nor the ability to do so. He instead deliberately fast-tracked his China-centric policy. Were it not for the continued pressure from the opposition parties and civic groups over the past year, the KMT's setbacks in several local elections over the past six months, and Ma's plummeting approval ratings, we would still be waiting for Ma to explain his policy on the ECFA to the public and to accept a debate with the opposition party. Even though the Ma government has recently pro forma opened dialogue with the public, it relies more on a top-down approach, packaging public support for the ECFA with a full-blown propaganda campaign.

Beijing is fully aware that Ma is eager to build a track record of cross-strait achievements as the basis for his reelection. Based on the six points that Chinese President Hu Jintao proposed on December 31, 2008, Beijing has used the terms "one-China principle" and "reunification" to set the tone for cooperation with the Ma administration to promote the following objectives: ending political confrontation between the two sides, signing a comprehensive economic cooperation agreement, establishing military confidence-building mechanisms (CBMs), and even allowing Taiwan to participate in events held by international organizations—as long as such activities do not create "two Chinas or

one China, one Taiwan." As a result, Taiwan gained observer status in the World Health Assembly pending Beijing's conditional approval which virtually amounts to an annual review system.

Under his "China first" policy, Ma constantly played down Taiwan sovereignty, a phrase he used to repeat like a mantra during his election campaigns. And by remaining mum on China's military expansion, violation of human rights in Tibet, suppression of press freedom, and international propaganda campaign which claims "Taiwan is a part of China and that the Taiwan issue concerns China's sovereignty and territorial integrity," Ma has reinforced the impression in international public opinion that the two sides of the Taiwan Strait are marching down the road to unification.

Ma fails to keep his "633" election pledge, putting the blame entirely on the worsening international economic environment and even stating once that his promise will not be attained until 2016. The image of the Ma administration had suffered further damage when officials responded clumsily to the disaster wreaked by Typhoon Morakot in August 2009 and when the government relaxed a ban on U.S. beef imports a few months later despite public protests.

Ma's "two lost years" illustrates a dilemma: with such low approval ratings (less than 30 percent) and low levels of trust, how can Ma, in his persistent pursuit of the ECFA policy that is politically highly sensitive and glaringly lacks social consensus, afford to overlook the public will or just take some

gestures of listening to the people?

So, before you offer the Taiwanese people another illusional “golden ten years,” please honestly tell us, Mr. President, what have you messed up in the last “two lost years”? **BT**