

Assessing Ma's Future Cross-strait Agenda

| Shih-chung Liu

The relationship between Taiwan and China in the so-called “post-ECFA [Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement] era” has entered a phase of uncertainty and ambiguity after President Ma Ying-jeou’s administration sent mixed messages to domestic and international audiences on what steps it would take next.

Amid Beijing’s immediate pressure for negotiations on political issues, such as partial withdrawal of missiles, negotiation on establishing military confidence-building mechanisms, the end of hostilities and the signing of a peace agreement following the signing of the ECFA in late June, Ma and his Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) government have adopted a two-pronged strategy to shoulder China’s increasing pressures.

Ma first sent Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) Minister Lai Shin-yuan to Washington to sell his ECFA agenda in early August. In a speech to the American Enterprise Institute, Lai openly called for Beijing to remove two political obstacles to improving cross-strait relations, namely its continued military expansion and “policies and laws” concerning China’s military deployments targeting Taiwan.

Most observers interpreted Lai’s comments as referring to China’s notorious March 2005 “Anti-Secession” Law in which Beijing abrogates to itself the “legal right” to use “non-peaceful means” to effect “unification.”

Beijing reacted with fury to her statement and slammed Lai as a “Taiwan independence separatist.”

In his recent statement to the annual US-Taiwan Defense Industry Conference in Cambridge, Maryland, last week, Deputy Minister of National Defense Andrew Yang adopted a “hawkish” tone to Beijing because of its continued preparation for “contingency operations” to respond to any change in relations across the Taiwan Strait. Yang accused China of instigating differences between Taiwanese and their government and trying to dominate Taiwanese public opinion and manipulate it through cross-strait relations.

Ironically, Ma later denied he had authorized Lai to poke her finger in Beijing’s eye by implying the “Anti-Secession” Law was obstructive. However, Lai should have been replaced if she misinterpreted Ma’s goodwill policy toward China. Not only

does she remain in her post, her American Enterprise Institute speech is still posted on the MAC Web site and she continued to send the same message during her recent trip to Europe.

Ma has yet to respond to Yang's comments. However, the US-Taiwan Business Council originally invited Minister of National Defense Kao Hua-chu to attend the conference as a way to signify a breakthrough in US-Taiwan political relations. Kao rejected the invitation. It shows the cross-strait political nuances on such a sensitive issue.

Nevertheless, it has long been speculated that the Ministry of National Defense always plays the "bad cop" when it comes to analyzing China's military threats and US arms sales to Taiwan. Ma has been displaying an ambiguous attitude ever since he took office and launched a China-centric foreign policy. Not until very recently did Ma start to openly urge Washington to sell F-16C/D fighter aircraft to Taiwan.

Ma set the tone for his cross-strait policy in the post-ECFA era last month by introducing a principle of "it's good enough for now" to react to Beijing's pressure for political talks. It is understandable to see Ma play a "wait and see" card now. His KMT is struggling in the upcoming special municipality elections. Ma has publicly characterized the campaign as his

"mid-term election." Since the opportunity for the -Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) to outperform the KMT is increasing, potential domestic constraints have narrowed Ma's options for political negotiations with Beijing for the remainder of his term.

What strikes domestic and external audiences are some controversial statements Ma made in his recent interview with the Associated Press (AP). Although Ma clarified that he did not specifically address the issue of cross-strait political negotiation in his possible second term, AP's report indicated that Ma implied that political negotiation will come after both sides complete economic talks in his second term. Ma's ambiguous stance on when to start political talks with his Chinese counterparts has no doubt complicated future cross-strait relations. Recent suggestion by several American scholars and Ma's personal friend for pursuing a potential "Ma-Hu meeting" further revealed Ma's intention to play the "cross-strait card" in his re-election bid. Director of China's Taiwan Affairs Office Wang Yi emphasized that cross-strait economic talks come hand-in-hand with political issues.

The biggest challenge is the extent to which Chinese -President Hu Jintao can live with Ma's game of "save it for my second term." Recent information from the Chinese

reveals a great deal of anxiety on Hu's part to leave a legacy of framing cross-strait relations under the "one China" and unification rubric. The dilemma for Hu is whether to support Ma's re-election bid by accepting Ma's rules. After all, Beijing would not want to see a DPP comeback in 2012.

Another dilemma, however, is the risk that Hu might underestimate the DPP and misread Taiwanese. Chinese academics have certainly accelerated and broadened their contacts with DPP-affiliated personnel and think tanks with the main aim of ensuring the future DPP leadership totally renounces former president Chen Shui-bian's approach. China should not willfully and unilaterally focus on Chen's mistakes and blame him for the failure of the DPP-China dialogue. Nor should China believe that the impatience of DPP leaders resulted in changeable policies to rationalize its own failure to start a dialogue with the DPP. The fact that the former DPP administration has deepened Taiwanese identity and democratic principles for deciding Taiwan's future is one legacy Beijing should not overlook. The DPP-CCP dialogue should deepen bilateral understanding of each others, rather create a misperception on the Chinese side. **BT**