

DPP Consensus-Building on Cross-strait Policy

| Shih-chung Liu

In late January Taiwan's biggest opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) decided at its National Congress to nominate its candidate for the 2012 presidential election through an islandwide opinion poll. Now that the rules of the game have been set, any contender willing to join the race must develop his strategy based on these nomination regulations, no matter whether he or she likes it or not.

Since the national polls are open opinion polls and not polls that exclude supporters of the blue (Chinese Nationalist Party, KMT) or green (DPP) camps, they will have a different impact on contenders with currently higher public support than on those who are less popular. Therefore those in the DPP who want to run for president have recently begun to throw around ideas on cross-strait relations in an attempt to attract media attention.

In an exclusive interview with the Washington Post on Feb. 17, the chairman of the ruling KMT incumbent President Ma Ying-jeou expressed his intention to run for a second term. Ma anticipated the DPP to unleash a debate within the party on the course of its cross-strait policy. Therefore he brought up the topic of the "1992 Consensus" right after mayoral elections in Taiwan's five largest cities in December, hoping to cause an internal rift in the DPP.

Ma first tried to nail down DPP Chairwoman Tsai Ing-wen on her previous statement which stated that "should we regain government power we will continue the previous government's cross-strait policy". He demanded that Tsai

clarify whether her statement meant to "also continue" the "political basis" of the KMT's cross-strait policy, namely the "1992 Consensus." Ma then went on to confusingly quote Li Yafei, vice chairman of China's Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits (ARATS), who had said in August last year "the '1992 Consensus' is a consensus expressed in spoken form by ARATS and the Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF) in 1992 that the two sides of the Taiwan Strait both adhere to the 'one China principle'."

Ma also pointed to a telephone conversation between Chinese President Hu Jintao and then U.S. President George W. Bush in March 2008 during which Hu noted "It is China's consistent stand that the Chinese mainland and Taiwan should restore consultations and talks on the basis of "one China with different interpretations," and the "1992 Consensus." In a bid to isolate the DPP, Ma used these two facts to deliberately create the wrong impression that Washington, the KMT and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) all accept the "1992 Consensus," whereas the DPP remains the only party that doesn't.

Ma's other political ploy is to use cross-strait issues to broaden the differences of opinion regarding China policy among the contenders for the DPP presidential ticket, thus sabotaging DPP party unity. Ma's strategy has been proven successful, given that recently several heavyweight DPP leaders have one after the other voiced their individual takes on the 1992 Consensus.

As the very first former Vice President Annette Lu brought up her "1996 Consensus" as an alternative. She said the 1996 Consensus means that with the first democratic presidential election in 1996 Taiwan's sovereign status quo was confirmed. Former Premier Frank Hsieh, who ran for president for the DPP in 2008 and has long advocated a "theory of Constitutionally one China," made minor adjustments to his stance to suggest an "overlapping consensus" based on "different interpretations of the Constitution" by the various political camps in Taiwan. As expected at the present stage Lu and Hsieh both trail far behind in public opinion polls, so it is only natural for them to feel compelled to propose some more sensational ideas to attract media attention.

Another former premier, Su Tseng-chang, who does much better in the opinion polls, also recently proposed a "Taiwan Consensus" based on the "Resolution Regarding Taiwan's Future" that the DPP adopted in 1999. Su pointed to the so-called "seven items" that Mainland Affairs Council Chairwoman Lai Shin-yuan listed as Taiwan's core interests last December as well as Ma's New Year's address, in which he reiterated that "Taiwan's future must be decided by the Taiwanese people," as evidence that the KMT has moved closer to the DPP's position and argued that therefore only his "Taiwan Consensus" constitutes a mainstream consensus.

Another leading contender, Tsai, cannot go as far as to make overly bold proposals aside from her above mentioned statement regarding the previous government's policy, given her position as party leader and good chances of winning the nomination race.

In January ARATS Chairman Chen Yunlin noted "the mainland's economic policy toward Taiwan is based on a political premise, namely

as Hu Jintao has said 'opposition to Taiwan independence' and the '1992 Consensus.' If one day these two preconditions are no longer fulfilled, we might have to reconsider everything." Chen's remark shows that Beijing is trying to confine the DPP's internal debate within the "one China" framework.

As a party that is used to healthy competition between different opinions, the DPP has incorporated diverse voices on cross-strait policy in the first place. Now that the race for the presidential nomination is on, the contenders even more tend to make their individual moves. But this is only the intra-party nomination primary after all. The contenders should not make rash policy proposals for the sake of short term gain or thoughtlessly fall into the "1992 Consensus" trap set up by the KMT and the CCP. Judging from the current situation, the two leading contenders Su and Tsai are playing it safe, whereas trailing rivals Lu and Hsieh are busy striving for more media exposure to boost their opinion poll standings.

For the 2012 presidential election the DPP certainly needs to come up with a feasible China policy. But the process is more important than slogans, and party unity is more valuable than infighting. What the DPP elite ought to consider even more is whether it is necessary at this time "to declare the party's stance just for the sake of declaring it," or to make excessive pledges in response to the new rules of the game, thus sacrificing the DPP's fundamental stance. As a result they would be confined by a framework of premature pledges even if winning nomination. The presidential hopefuls in the DPP should therefore forge greater domestic consensus for building "a new political basis for dialogue" with China to be launched once the DPP has regained government power. 