

Ma Ying-jeou in a Green Coat

| Shih-chung Liu

It goes without saying that cross-strait relations have always played an important role in Taiwan's presidential elections. As Taiwan's largest opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) holds a hotly contested primary for the presidential ticket, the aspiring candidates are closely watched for the direction of their respective China policies. Now that it can be virtually taken for granted that no one in the ruling Kuomintang (KMT) will challenge incumbent President Ma Ying-jeou's reelection bid, Ma has already begun to adjust his cross-strait policy, even shifting toward the political spectrum that supports the Taiwan sovereignty stance long advocated by the DPP.

After mayoral elections in Taiwan's five largest cities last year, Ma exploited a series of exclusive interviews with domestic and foreign media to put a spin on his cross-strait policy for his reelection campaign. Ma adopted a two-pronged strategy. First, he dished up the topic of the 1992 Consensus of "one China with different interpretations," demanding that DPP leaders declare whether they accept it, in a bid to influence the DPP presidential primary. On the other hand, Ma let Mainland Affairs Council Chairwoman Lai Shin-yuan play "bad cop," allowing her to subsequently state the core interests of the people of Taiwan, termed the "Lai seven items," which underline the democratic principle that "Taiwan's future must be decided by the people of Taiwan." The Ma government has taken various steps to move closer to the green camp's policy positions. Political columnist Nan Fang-shuo has also ridiculed Ma for "dousing

himself with green paint each time when an election nears."

In early March, Ma accepted an exclusive interview with Britain's Financial Times, in which he stressed that there is no timeframe for political dialogue with China, that he will not open talks on unification while in office and that he has not yet considered or planned to define cross-strait ties. With regard to the political crackdown by Beijing on an Internet call for a "Jasmine Revolution" Ma said people in Taiwan are worried when seeing actions in mainland China that harm human rights and the rule of law. This issue was an index of whether the sides can narrow the gap, Ma told the newspaper. At an event hosted by the Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF), Ma said that "while the two sides do not recognize each other's sovereignty, nor do they deny each other's authority to govern."

Since taking power Ma has drawn fire from the green camp for leaning excessively toward China in his policies. Assuming that the DPP would launch its main attack during the election campaign by claiming that cross-strait relations had lost balance due to his overly "China-centric" stance, Ma has begun to take preventive action with recent statements that emphasize that his approach aims to "balance" cross-strait relations.

A yardstick for distinguishing politicians and great statesmen is whether their deeds match their words. As KMT chairman in the past (before assuming the presidency), Ma once supported "ultimate unification" between the two sides, but later he changed his tune for the election saying

that “Taiwan’s independence is also one of the options.” Later on he said again that “Taiwan’s future must be decided by the people of Taiwan.” Toward a domestic audience Ma emphasizes “the sovereignty of the Republic of China” and also claims that Beijing accepts the 1992 Consensus of “one China with different interpretations” and does not deny the Republic of China’s “authority to govern.” But too many examples prove that this is just wishful election rhetoric. Each time when Taiwan’s participation in international affairs continues to be obstructed by China or Taiwan’s sovereignty is misunderstood by the international community as “being a part of China,” the Ma government always fails to resolutely stand up for Taiwan. The most important conditions for a national leader are that he walks his talk and protects national dignity and statehood. But the Taiwanese people have not seen Ma fulfill these two conditions.

When China violently cracked down on Tibet before Taiwan’s presidential election in 2008, Ma said he does not rule out boycotting the Beijing Olympics. In the past, Ma also used to criticize China on anniversaries marking Beijing’s suppression of the June 4, 1989, Tiananmen movement. But after assuming the presidency, he has toned down his criticism of China’s human rights record. When Liu Xiaobo won the Nobel Peace Prize, Ma only chimed in after leaders from around the globe urged Beijing to release Liu. In contrast Ma last year even praised China for an improved human rights situation, whereas in another about face he now voices criticism about

(Beijing’s handling of) the “Jasmine Revolution.” This shows again and again that what Ma said and did in the past is not consistent with what he says and does now, and that all is related to the elections.

After Taiwan and China signed the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) in June 2009, China began to pressure the Ma government to open political negotiations. Since public opinion in Taiwan forces Ma to avoid this issue, he deliberately retains the ball of cross-strait political negotiations in his court until after he has won reelection. Beijing originally hoped that its “economic concessions” toward the Ma government would be reciprocated with “political paybacks.” It was caught by surprise when Ma, as soon as he had gotten ECFA to boost his reelection bid, returned to his old stance of “economics first, politics later, first the easy steps, then the difficult ones.” Beijing was very displeased. Still Ma’s way of phrasing things will give Beijing a wrong impression, leading it to believe that all it takes is helping Ma to get reelected and that the two sides can then discuss political issues and even unification. On the other hand, how Beijing reacts should Ma fail to win reelection will constitute a major crisis for Taiwan. Considering that Ma has been saying one thing and doing another in the past, he is even more likely to immediately conduct political negotiations with China if his reelection bid succeeds, because his hands won’t be tied by public opinion.

Ma says that at the present stage he has not yet considered the problem of defining cross-

strait relations. But in fact the wrong impression in international community that “Taiwan is a part of China” is gaining ground. A growing number of countries are implementing Beijing’s “one China principle,” and not the Ma government’s “one China, different interpretations.” The Ma government lacks the strength to correct this impression. A typical example happened recently when the Philippine government deported Taiwanese criminal suspects to China based on the one China principle.

Ironically, a number of Taiwanese opinion polls show that although the Ma government is “pro-China,” citizens’ “identification with Taiwan,” which intensified during the DPP era, is further on the rise. In response to international pressure and for reelection considerations, the Ma government now finally says it wants to “balance” cross-strait ties. This also shows that Ma is gradually putting on his “green cloak.” Another important indicator deserving observation in the upcoming election campaign is how China reacts to Ma’s playing the “green card,” unless, of course, Ma and Beijing have already reached a tacit understanding. **BT**