

Taiwan's Second Power Transition in 2008

Tranquility in Surface, Conspiracy Behind

| Jauschieh Joseph Wu

On March 22, 2008, Ma Ying-jeou, presidential candidate for the then opposition Kuomintang (KMT), defeated the candidate from the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) Frank Hsieh in a landslide with a 58 percent share of the vote, thanks to a campaign that promised “an immediately better economy.” With Ma’s victory the KMT returned to power and also realized the second power transition in Taiwan’s political history. Eight years of DPP rule could not make the Taiwanese truly feel that there had been sweeping reforms. On top of that a string of corruption scandals involving the family of President Chen Shui-bian erupted in the final period of his presidency, which disappointed voters who had previously voted for him and the DPP so that they used their ballots to end the DPP’s dismal rule.

During the election campaign Ma had proposed a number of policies and approaches on national security, foreign affairs and cross-strait relations different from those of the Chen government. His main political platform included:

1. Replacing the DPP’s “scorched earth diplomacy” with “flexible diplomacy.”
2. Promoting a cross-strait “diplomatic truce” and “mutual non-denial.”
3. Upgrading relations with non-diplomatic allies, at the same time establishing formal diplomatic relations.
4. Participating in international organizations based on flexible, pragmatic principles, maintaining flexibility with regard to Taiwan’s name, do not rule out participation under the name Republic of China and

Taiwan.

5. Pushing for reentry into the United Nations. Participating in three major international organizations which are the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Health Organization (WHO).
6. Rebuilding mutual trust between Taiwan and the United States, supporting the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, and improving Taiwan-Japan relation.
7. Relaunching cross-strait negotiations on the political basis of the “1992 Consensus.”
8. Advocating a “Hard ROC (Republic of China)” national defense policy, using a defense-oriented strategy to build a defense force that cannot be intimidated, hemmed in, devoured, or crushed.
9. Promoting a volunteer military system.
10. Compiling a defense budget of not less than 3 percent of gross domestic product (GDP).
11. Demanding that China withdraw its missiles targeted at Taiwan, negotiating a cross-strait “mechanism for mutual confidence on military affair” and a “peace agreement.”

On the surface it looks as if Taiwan’s second power transition took place in the absence of any serious national security and diplomatic crises. The Ma government also often prides itself on its ability to stabilize cross-strait relations and to defuse cross-strait tension, and is even more pleased with itself over the international applause that it won for its efforts to revive cross-strait talks. However, in fact, the experience of the new Ma government with the power transition shows that

there were still serious hidden internal risks with regard to national security and foreign affairs as well as personnel management.

Compared to the transfer of power to Chen in 2000, Ma faced even greater challenges, including:

- Having just taken office, Ma was not able to clearly assess the implications of the financial crisis so that his economic election pledges were severely compromised.
- The first National Security Council composed of mainly inexperienced scholars, was not able to effectively deal with the diplomatic crisis with Japan that erupted one month within his presidency,
- Creation of an overly secretive and dogmatic decision-making model that involved Ma and a small group of National Security Council core staff.
- Ma was so eager to promote the opening of the cross-strait direct flights and other negotiations that on the diplomatic front Taiwan adopted a policy of a blanket truce with China, even watering down the informal security alliance with the United States and Japan and sending confusing signals to Washington regarding weapons procurement from the United States.
- Immediately after taking office, Ma launched an investigation of high-ranking military officers, who had been promoted during the Chen presidency, for allegedly having bribed their way to their ranks. The investigation found no evidence, but damaged the armed forces' trust in the

commander-in-chief.

If we closely scrutinize Ma's performance in national security, foreign affairs and cross-strait ties during the past three years and how far he has put into practice his election promises, then we will find large discrepancies with regard to forging new diplomatic relations, participating in official international organizations, safeguarding Taiwan's international participation and name, improving bilateral relations with Japan, promoting defense reforms and maintaining the defense budget. These discrepancies also highlight the gap between Ma's election platform and actual governing capacity and the national security team's weakness in responding to sudden crises. Destruction wreaked by Typhoon Morakot in August 2009 exposed the administration's chaotic, uncoordinated way of dealing with natural disasters, leading to the resignation of Premier Liu Chao-shiuan and his cabinet and a sharp drop in Ma's domestic popularity ranking.

Since Ma and then National Security Council Secretary General Su Chi personally controlled decision-making on national security affairs, the civil service system was neither respected nor trusted. The president and key National Security Council members were not only novices, but also liked to look after peripheral issues. The president himself particularly enjoyed handing down instructions on minor issues whenever he felt like it. Some officials within the national security apparatus dubbed the National Security Council's decision-making model under the new Ma government the kind of "micro management" that

makes people shake their head in exasperation. The council kept rehashing insignificant minor details, which shows that it was far removed from reality and unwilling to take responsibility for real policymaking. Such a decision-making model means that decisions are made in an oligarchic and closed door manner and inefficiently implemented with the following consequences:

1. Those who do nothing, make no mistakes: Bureaucrats are not willing to express their thinking and don't dare to proactively do their jobs. As a result, decision-making is being put off and remains inefficient.
2. Responsibility is shifted onto superiors: Matters are put on hold until instructions and decisions are handed down from the top. As a result, minor and major issues alike are pushed onto the Presidential Office so that the Presidential Office and the Executive Yuan have been swamped with a mountain of policies that await decision.
3. Trying to please the higher-ups: Officials do things that can satisfy the president such as the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of National Defense spending big chunks of their budgets on the construction of swimming pools, while abandoning policies that require long-term and future-oriented planning.
4. Looking for scapegoats: If a problem occurs, the higher-ups look for a lower ranking official to take the blame.
5. Playing it safe out of individual self-interest: Aware of the potential risks involved lower

rank civil servants themselves take all sorts of precautions when writing official documents. As a result, administrative procedures are fraught with uncertainties. **B**