

After years of tension between China and Taiwan, the election of Ma Ying-jeou as Taiwan's new president in March was a turning point in cross-Strait relations, writes Hong Kong political scientist Baohui Zhang.

Its effect could prove a boon to the trilateral relationship among Taiwan, China and the United States.

Taiwan's Political Balancing Act

By Baohui Zhang

TAIWAN'S MARCH 22ND PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION looks to be a turning point with far reaching implications for both its domestic politics and its relations with the mainland. Indeed, the impact of this election will extend far beyond Taiwan and Mainland China. It will profoundly affect the strategic relationship between China and the United States, as well as the security of the Asia Pacific region. With the election of Ma Ying-jeou as Taiwan's new president, the worst should be over in the long crisis between Taipei and Beijing and all signs indicate that a new kind of cross-Strait relationship is emerging.

For the first time in two decades, there is a true convergence of interests between Beijing and Taipei that will provide a firm basis for more stable and cooperative relations. In turn, this will significantly relax the security dilemma between China and the US. With the prospect of direct military conflict over Taiwan always looming in the background, Beijing and Washington have been hoping for the best while preparing for the worst. Each has been obsessed with the military

capabilities and intentions of the other. The stabilization of cross-Strait relations will do a lot to reduce this most important source of mistrust between the two countries. Thus, Ma's victory may trigger a virtuous cycle in the trilateral relations among Beijing, Taipei, and Washington.

THE KMT'S IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION

The election represented a landslide victory for Ma and his Kuomintang party. Ma received 58.45 percent of the votes, while his opponent Frank Hsieh of the Democratic Progressive Party managed only 41.5 percent. Ma's 7,658,724 votes is the highest total for any candidate since 1996, when Taiwan held its first direct presidential election.

Multiple factors explain the historic victory. Analysts commonly cite the widespread dissatisfaction among voters with the eight-year rule of the DPP. In particular, voters focused their anger against personal corruption by President Chen Shui-bian and his immediate family members. Indeed, both his wife and son-in-law are implicated in scandals. Another source of popular discontent was the perception by the public that Chen's administration did nothing during its eight years to boost Taiwan's economy, which has seen rising unemployment.

Although the perceived mismanagement by the DPP was a cause of its debacle at the polls, additional factors also played a role. Many voters make decisions not according to party lines. Instead, candidates' personal qualities were a crucial factor. In this case, Ma actually had a formidable opponent. Hsieh is widely respected for his abilities and his moderate stands on reunification and China-related issues. In terms of leadership qualities, many Taiwanese actually believe that Hsieh is superior and more experienced. Nonetheless, Ma won handily. This can be laid in part to the successful transformation of the KMT's identity.

Until the 2008 election, the KMT's legitimacy in Taiwan was always an issue. Due to its origins in the mainland and its antagonistic relations with native Taiwanese during the authoritarian era that followed the retreat of the KMT to Taiwan in 1949, the party never achieved po-

litical legitimacy in the eyes of many. Although the KMT successfully initiated democratization during the 1990s, it was still seen by native Taiwanese as a party that largely represented the interests of the so-called mainlanders. Indeed, even Lee Teng-hui, who was the last KMT president before the party lost power in 2000, repeatedly criticized the party's lack of roots in Taiwan. He often described the KMT as a conqueror from China whose first loyalty was not to the people of Taiwan.

The KMT's standing was not helped by its mainland policy. Before Ma became the leader of the KMT in 2006, his predecessor, Lian Chan, still embraced the goal of eventual unification between the mainland and Taiwan. Indeed, after his defeat in the infamous 2004 presidential election, he even traveled to the mainland and reached important non-binding "understandings" with mainland leaders. These included the "One China" principle and the goal of eventual unification. The KMT's mainland policy became an easy target for President Chen and the DPP. They skillfully depicted the KMT as a potential betrayer of the Taiwanese people.

After Ma assumed the leadership of the KMT, he began to initiate profound changes. For example, to reduce distrust of his mainland origins by native Taiwanese, Ma claimed that he is a "New Taiwanese," whose entire loyalty is to Taiwan, not China. Also, to discard any perceived connection between the party and the mainland, Ma eliminated the word "China" from the name of the party. Hence, the party's full name was changed from "The Chinese Nationalist Party" to merely "The Nationalist Party."

Ma also began to modify the KMT's mainland policy. In 2007, several of his top aides secretly plotted to remove the goal of eventual reunification altogether from the party charter. This attempt, which was uncovered by the media, triggered harsh criticisms from party stalwarts, such as Lien Chan. Although Ma adheres to the One China principle, he in fact pursues a new "Three No's" policy—no unification, no independence, and no war. This policy, though very different from Chen's policy of seeking greater formal in-

dependence, nonetheless is a big step back from the KMT's traditional goal of eventual reunification with the mainland.

As a second-generation mainlander, Ma also deliberately used many occasions to prove his loyalty to Taiwan. For example, before the election Ma pledged that he would not seek political negotiations with the mainland until the latter removes its missiles deployed across the Taiwan Strait. In contrast, Hsieh never set any preconditions for political negotiations with the mainland. Indeed, Hsieh repeatedly claimed that he was willing to meet with Beijing to reduce tensions across the Strait.

Just before the election, Ma used the recent unrest in Tibet to reaffirm his mainland policy. He not only condemned what he called Chinese human rights violations in Tibet but also threatened to boycott the Beijing Olympic Games—the first political leader in the world to do so. Indeed, Ma's stance was even criticized by his DPP opponent as being too emotional and impractical.

Ma's effort to de-link the party from China has been an obvious success. His unprecedented victory margin indicates that Taiwanese voters no longer consider him and the KMT as outsiders with questionable legitimacy. This is best illustrated by Ma's ability to win a large share of the vote in southern Taiwan, the traditional stronghold of the DPP.

Ma beat Hsieh in the three largest cities in the south, Kaohsiung, Chiayi and Tainan. What was particularly telling was his victory in Kaohsiung. Not only had the city always been a bastion of DPP support in the past, Hsieh had recently been its mayor and enjoyed widespread popularity. Although Ma did not win in the five southern counties of Kaohsiung, Yunlin, Chiayi, Tainan and Pingtung, the margin of his loss was extremely narrow, falling short by a total of only 140,000 votes in these five counties.

The KMT's electoral breakthrough in southern Taiwan indicates that the party has successfully transformed its image and that it can now compete effectively with the DPP among native Taiwanese. Thus, even the strongly pro-DPP *Liberty Times* had to acknowledge after the

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election that “as an alien political power, the KMT has finally achieved legitimacy through democratic means.”

A VIRTUOUS CYCLE IN BEIJING-TAIPEI-WASHINGTON RELATIONS?

Ma’s most important challenge is to reduce tensions across the Strait. First, he needs to repair his relations with Beijing. It is rumored that before the election Beijing was only marginally in favor of him over Hsieh, believing that the two candidates’ mainland policies would not be that different since both favored greater economic integration while opposing efforts towards formal independence of Taiwan. In fact, Beijing was worried that Ma might be less conciliatory than Hsieh due to his constant need to prove his loyalty to Taiwan and its people. Hsieh, being a native Taiwanese, did not have this constraint and therefore may have pursued even greater cooperation with Beijing if he had won. Hsieh even criticized Ma for his threat to boycott the Olympic Games.

Nevertheless, with the election of Ma the relationship between the mainland and Taiwan is likely to become significantly more stable and peaceful. First, Ma supports greater economic integration with the mainland. He favors immediate implementation of the so-called Three Links with the mainland. These include establishment of direct shipping, air flights, and postal services. Chen’s government, on the other hand, had consistently rejected these commercial ties. Further, Ma supports the idea of a One China Common Market and argues that greater economic integration will only help boost Taiwan’s economy.

Second, although he rejects unification in favor of maintaining the status quo, it is a marked improvement over Chen’s policy of seeking formal independence. In the eyes of Beijing, maintaining the status quo, meaning the two sides recognize both the One China principle and the reality of divided rule, is far more acceptable than Chen’s independence agenda. Indeed, at a news conference the day after the election, Ma repeated his commitment to the One China principle and suggested that the 1992 cross-Strait consensus on

the One China principle would serve as the foundation of his administration's mainland policy.

What is particularly important is that, for the first time since the Lee Teng-hui era, there will be a true convergence of preferences between the mainland and Taiwan. During the 1990s, Beijing still aimed at reunification, with total disregard for the fact that the people of Taiwan were acquiring a new Taiwanese identity after the end of the KMT's authoritarian rule. Thus, Beijing was periodically at odds with Lee's administration since, although he refrained from pursuing formal independence, he systematically tried to assert Taiwanese identity and refused to cooperate with the mainland's reunification push. This disconnect between the desires of Beijing and Taipei's needs led to periodic crises in their relations, the best known of which was the 1996 military standoff in the Taiwan Strait.

During the Chen era, Beijing may finally have come to accept the fact of Taiwanese identity on the island and the impracticality of seeking reunification. Thus, Beijing became more willing to accept the reality of divided rule, believing that it is still a better outcome than Taiwan's formal independence. For example, President Hu Jintao indicated in 2007 that he was willing to sign a peace agreement with Taiwan as long as the latter recognizes the One China principle. Unfortunately, Taiwan's goals also changed during the Chen era, when it was Taiwan's turn to disrupt the status quo. Chen relentlessly pursued greater formal independence through referendums and other provocative measures that invited harsh criticism even from the US government. Once again, the disconnect between Beijing and Taipei resulted in instability and tension.

Now, Ma's mainland policy and Beijing's Taiwan policy are finally in sync, with both sides accepting the status quo. Although Ma has reiterated many times his position of no reunification without the consent of the Taiwanese people, he nonetheless accepts the One China principle and opposes efforts to seek formal independence. This provides a common ground to launch a new era in relations between Taiwan and the mainland. It is not unreasonable to assume that

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cross-Strait relations in the future will be very different from those of the past ten years.

However, Beijing must reciprocate by allowing sufficient international space for Taiwan. This could help Ma domestically to sustain a status quo policy. On the other hand, if Beijing continues its traditional strategy of prying the remaining countries with diplomatic ties away from Taiwan and prohibiting it from joining international bodies such as the World Health Organization, the KMT government could face a backlash from the DPP, which may again use the China issue to mobilize its electoral base.

A GOOD OUTCOME FOR THE REGION

Overall, it seems that the worst may be over in cross-Strait relations. This will have profound implications for peace and security not only for the Taiwan Strait but also for the entire Asia-Pacific region. Because it is the single issue most likely to draw China and the United States into a war, easing tensions in the Taiwan Strait will serve to improve significantly the prospects for peace in the Pacific. Since both sides have been keenly aware of the prospect of a war over

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Taiwan, they have been obsessed with each other's military intentions. Under this mentality, China and the United States prepared relentlessly for military conflict in the Taiwan Strait. Therefore, Ma's presidential victory could turn out to be a landmark event in the relationship among Beijing, Taipei, and Washington.

Ma will likely also be able to normalize relations with Washington in the years to come. Taiwan's ties with the US were seriously damaged by Chen's repeated provocations of the mainland. Indeed, Ma already indicated after the election that he planned to visit Washington to repair the soured relationship. It will not be a surprise for him to receive a warm welcome given the US's interest in seeing reduced tensions across the Taiwan Strait.

It is important to note that a virtuous cycle in Beijing-Taipei-Washington relations started to kick in almost immediately after Ma's election. President George W. Bush and President Hu spoke by telephone on March 26 to exchange their views on the new situation in Taiwan. According to Chinese media, Bush encouraged Hu to seize the "new opportunity of peace" of-

fered by Ma's election. Hu responded by stating that Beijing is willing to pursue peace in the Taiwan Strait on the bilateral One China consensus of 1992 and that he expected the two sides to resume negotiations toward a peace agreement. To reciprocate the gestures from Washington and Beijing, Ma said he would immediately seek to institutionalize dialogue with the mainland.

DOMESTIC DYNAMICS IN CROSS-STRAIT RELATIONS

The expected improvement in cross-Strait relations will be greatly facilitated by the domestic impact in Taiwan of the 2008 election. Indeed, many analysts argue that the election will lead to a profound transformation of Taiwan's domestic politics, putting a break on its recent flirtations with formal independence. In particular, the election could lead to a normalization of Taiwan's democratic politics whereby independence will no longer be the main political agenda for society.

Ma's victory should transform both the processes and issues of Taiwanese politics. First, the victory may indicate the end of using sub-ethnic politics for political mobilization, which has long been a successful strategy for the DPP. Indeed, Chen was a master at manipulating conflicts between native Taiwanese and the so-called mainlanders, who are portrayed as Chinese with ques-

tionable loyalty to Taiwan. Chen was particularly successful in using this divide for electoral purposes by depicting the KMT as a Chinese party that may sell out the interests of the Taiwanese people to Beijing.

However, it appears that the divisive politics of Chen have finally run their course. The people of Taiwan became increasingly tired and wary of his manipulation of the issue. As a result, Hsieh deliberately chose to refrain from sub-ethnic mobilization. In fact, he openly expressed his break with the DPP's past tactics by claiming that the "Chen Shui-bian era is over" and that he would pursue a policy of domestic "reconciliation and co-existence" (he jie gong sheng). This gesture was very significant since Hsieh was the first DPP presidential candidate who did not rely on exploiting this issue. It shows not only Hsieh's more moderate position but also his recognition that the people of Taiwan have become sick of the DPP's divisive strategies. The best proof of this is Ma's large victory margin. In fact, a political realignment seems to have occurred in 2008 because a significant number of moderate native Taiwanese voters turned to the KMT for its perceived ability to better handle both the economy and relations with Beijing. No doubt, Ma's successful transformation of the identity of the KMT facilitated this realignment.

More importantly, Ma's victory will also mean profound changes to the main agenda of Taiwanese politics. Ever since Taiwan's democratization in the 1990s, the reunification vs. independence issue has always been the most important political theme. The prominence of the issue not only reflected its profound national security impact for Taiwan but also the political strategies of the DPP, which relentlessly used the China factor to influence electoral preferences. The DPP used independence both to turn voters against the KMT for its alleged disloyalty to Taiwan and to mobilize its own electoral base. In contrast, the KMT typically responded by trying to focus voters' attention on the DPP's mismanagement of the economy and rampant corruption.

Significantly, this year, for the first time, a DPP presidential candidate refrained from us-

ing the independence card to gain advantage in the election. There now seems to be a bipartisan consensus that Taiwan should focus on economic issues while cooling the heat of debate between reunification and independence. Indeed, both candidates in the 2008 election should be commended for their restraint in manipulating a highly explosive and divisive issue.

There is ample evidence that the people of Taiwan are weary of using independence to define the island's political agenda, the best example being the sound rejection of a referendum proposed by Chen to return Taiwan to the United Nations. The symbolic referendum was intended to advance greater formal independence for Taiwan, but it received only 35.82% of the vote. Even important figures within the DPP appear to recognize this trend toward the normalization of domestic politics. Lin Cho-shui, an influential DPP theoretician, acknowledged that the 2008 presidential election and Ma's massive victory mean that Taiwan has entered an era of normalization and will no longer be obsessed with the statehood issue. Instead, he claims that Taiwan's political parties will, like their counterparts in advanced Western democracies, compete for popular support through alternative economic and social platforms.

This normalization of Taiwan's democratic politics will greatly benefit its relations with the mainland. The decline of independence as the main political issue for Taiwan will give Ma more room to engage Beijing. In addition, the decline of the statehood issue and sub-ethnic mobilization will reverse Taiwan's recent fixation with formal independence and thus help to rebuild the necessary trust with Beijing.

A WATERSHED EVENT

Taiwan's 2008 presidential election represents a historic moment for peace and security in the Asia Pacific. Ma's victory will likely trigger a virtuous cycle in the trilateral relationship among China, Taiwan and the United States. Beijing and Taipei should be able to achieve greater mutual trust based on the One China principle. More importantly, an increasingly cooperative

relationship across the Strait will be facilitated by a profound transformation in Taiwan's domestic politics. The coming end of the statehood issue as the central agenda for Taiwanese politics will significantly reduce pressure on Taiwan's relations with the mainland. As long as Beijing does not seek to change its current policy of maintaining the status quo in the Strait and refrains from further diplomatic isolation of Taipei, the two sides will be able to foster greater economic integration while simultaneously pursuing political engagement for confidence building and even, potentially, a peace agreement. Sino-US relations could also take on a very different dynamic in the years to come.

Although the overall rise of China as a world power will still put pressure on its relations with the US, the anticipated dissipation of tension in the Taiwan Strait will surely eliminate the most important source of conflict between the two sides. For this reason alone, the 2008 Taiwan presidential election could turn out to be a watershed event.

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