

# Confrontation brewing between Beijing and Taiwan's president-elect

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Even before the installation of newly elected Taiwanese president Chen Shui-bian next month, tensions between Taiwan and China are set to sharpen. Having opposed Chen's election, the Chinese bureaucracy has insisted that the new administration recognise Beijing's "One China" policy, which regards Taiwan as part of China. Chen, who is from the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), has repeatedly said he is prepared to discuss reunification but will not accept the "One China" policy as a precondition for negotiations.

In an interview with *Newsweek*, published on April 17, Chen said: "If 'One China' is defined as Taiwan being a province or local government of the Peoples Republic, this is not acceptable to the vast majority of people in Taiwan. How can they [China] expect me, as president of this country, to accept Taiwan's demotion to a province? If the mainland insists that acceptance of 'One China' is a precondition, it will be hard to resume dialogue. We prefer to see 'One China' as an issue that can be discussed."

Chen's statement followed bitter attacks by the Chinese government and press on his vice president-elect, Annette Lu. On April 4, in an interview with Hong Kong television, she described relations between China and Taiwan as being like those of "distant relatives" and "neighbours". Lu is a veteran politician and well acquainted with the coded language of cross-strait diplomacy. Her choice of words was a direct repudiation of Beijing's frequent invocation, as part of its sovereignty claim on the island, that mainland and Taiwanese Chinese are the same "family".

The Chinese government Taiwan Affairs Office declared that Lu was an "extremist and a typical Taiwan independence element," who had "challenged the One China policy," "provoked animosity" and "become the scum of the Chinese nation". An editorial by the official Xinhua news agency on April 11 declared her a "traitor" and stated: "Lu's lunatic remarks give off a dangerous signal when the development of cross-strait relations is at a crossroads". A barrage of such language against Lu, accompanied by demands that Taiwan accept the "One China" policy, has

filled the mainland press over the last three weeks.

The main aim of the anti-Lu invective appears to be to pressure Chen. But on April 20, Chen again rejected China's insistence that Taiwan is a province of China, indicating only that "there was plenty of room for discussions" on a confederation system or a loose association with no mainland sovereignty over the island. Lu stated on the same day that "we cannot say we are Chinese, if the 'One China' refers to the Peoples Republic".

Chen's DPP was initially formed in illegality in 1986 on the platform of declaring the island an independent state. At that time, the Kuomintang (KMT) dictatorship, that had ruled the island since 1949 as the Republic of China (ROC), regarded itself as the legitimate government of the whole of China, with Taiwan as just one province. Over recent years though, the DPP has distanced itself from a declaration of independence and drawn closer to the stance of retiring KMT president Lee Teng-hui.

In the course of his 12-year presidency, during which a transition was made from military rule to a parliamentary system, Lee repudiated the Republic of China's post-1949 claims on the mainland and agitated for international recognition alongside the People's Republic.

Last July, in his most explicit declaration of Taiwanese sovereignty, Lee described cross-strait relations as "state-to-state" or between countries. This provoked a breakdown in talks with China and intensified military activity in the Taiwan Strait. Lee's willingness to push the issue to the point of war caused a split within the Kuomintang, with longtime KMT politician James Soong running as an independent for president. But the DPP enthusiastically supported Lee's position.

In the lead-up to this year's presidential election and since his victory on March 18, Chen has repeatedly pledged not to implement the DPP's independence platform unless China attacks Taiwan. He has projected a moderate image and stated his willingness to enter into negotiations with China, including on reunification. However his official statements are little more than semantics. His standpoint is that

constitutional reforms during the 1990s, establishing that the ROC government can only be elected from Taiwan, have made a declaration of independence unnecessary. Like Lee, Chen uses the ROC and Taiwan as interchangeable terms.

After meeting with Lee soon after the election, Chen sealed a de facto coalition with what remains of the Kuomintang by appointing the serving KMT Defence Minister, Tang Fei, as his Premier and head of cabinet. Tang is a former airforce commander and life-time KMT member. Chen's open embrace of the KMT, which the DPP had opposed since its formation, and which was responsible for the arbitrary arrest and imprisonment of many DPP members, has led to recriminations in the DPP's ranks.

The main opposition to the DPP administration is what was the anti-Lee faction in the KMT led by Soong. After winning 36 percent of the vote in the presidential election, compared to Chen's 39 percent, Soong and his supporters have formed the Peoples First Party. Only a small number of KMT legislators have defected to it, however, leaving the DPP and KMT with an overwhelming majority in the parliament.

Both China and Taiwan appear to be on a collision course. For his part, Chen is pushing for Beijing to drop its "One China" policy. He is relying on Taiwan's considerable US-supplied military arsenal, the lever of extensive Taiwanese investment on the mainland and the assumption that the US would intervene against China in any conflict. His position is also strengthened by the current weakness of his domestic political opposition.

For the Beijing leadership, which has staked a great deal of its domestic prestige and legitimacy on the nationalist push for China's reunification, the election of a DPP president is a humiliation. Reports indicate that president Jiang Zemin has come under pressure from the Chinese military and elements in the government for being soft on Taiwan.

Singapore's Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, who met with Jiang Zemin and Premier Zhu Rongji earlier in April, told the *South China Morning Post*: "In their view, Taiwan has slipped further and further down the road to independence. They want Chen Shui-bian to accept the 'One China' principle. With that, there is no room for flexibility, it was explained to me."

China has issued threats against Taiwanese corporations that supported the DPP during the election. Li Bingcai, a deputy director of the mainland Taiwan Affairs Office stated on April 8: "Some people in Taiwan's industrial and commercial fields openly clamour for 'Taiwan independence' and advocate the 'Lee Teng-hui line'.... Meanwhile they scabble for profits by engaging in business and economic operations on the mainland... Such a situation will not be allowed to continue".

As a result Acer, which operates computer assembly lines in China and views the mainland as its largest future market, publicly stated it supported Taiwan's ultimate reunification with China. Other companies have denounced Beijing and responded with their own threats that Taiwanese firms will reduce their investment on the mainland.

China's insistence that Chen immediately commit to reunification is also conditioned by the possibility of a Republican victory by George Bush in the US presidential election in November. A win by Bush could lead to a shift in US policy, which since 1972 has recognised Beijing as the legitimate government of China. A Republican administration may move towards closer ties and diplomatic recognition of Taiwan.

Layers within the Republican Party have long viewed Taiwan, with its strategic position vis-à-vis the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea shipping lanes, as the frontline in an effort to block China's emergence as a regional Asian political and economic power. They are now gaining a wider hearing and Bush has solidarised himself with their standpoint by declaring that China is a "strategic competitor" of the US.

In the *Washington Post* on March 31, a leading Republican right-winger, Senator Jesse Helms, wrote: "The United States must recognise the reality of two Chinese states by championing Taiwan's gradual entry, alongside Communist China, into international organisations such as the World Trade Organisation, the World Health Organisation and eventually the United Nations."

With both sides hardening on irreconcilable positions, the danger of war is ever-present in the Taiwan Strait. The Hong Kong Chinese language paper *Ming Pao* has reported statements by unnamed Chinese officials that if Chen has not agreed to reunification negotiations on the basis of "One China" by the time of his inauguration on May 20, then Beijing intends to unilaterally set a deadline for such talks.



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