

New Taiwanese president treads cautiously on policy to China

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As Chen Shui-bian was inaugurated on May 20 as the new president of the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan, attention focused on the potential for the incoming administration to become embroiled in an open conflict with China. Chen is the first president from the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), a party founded in the 1980s with the aim of declaring Taiwan an independent nation-state, as opposed to the current ROC constitution in which Taiwan is a Chinese province. China has consistently warned that it will invade Taiwan if any independence declaration is made.

In the weeks leading up to the inauguration, the Chinese regime had insisted that Chen, because of his political background, publicly state his adherence to the "One China" policy—the stance that the island of Taiwan is an inseparable part of the Chinese nation that must ultimately be reunified to the mainland. The US Clinton administration, Japan and other Asian governments urged Chen to comply.

In his inauguration speech, Chen answered with a carefully constructed, one-sentence overture: "We believe that the leaders on both sides possess enough wisdom and creativity to jointly deal with the question of a future 'One China'." The statement avoided saying that Taiwan is part of China while at the same time did not rule out negotiations with Beijing over a future unification of the island with the mainland.

During the election Chen had distanced himself from any declaration of independence, in order to reassure voters a DPP victory would not lead to war. During his speech he restated his "Five No's". Providing China did not use military force against Taiwan, Chen pledged that his administration would (1) not declare Taiwan an independent nation; (2) would not change the country's name from the Republic of China; (3) would not seek to alter the constitution to specify that the Republic of China and the mainland People's Republic are separate states; (4) would not hold a referendum on whether to reunify with the mainland; and (5) would not abolish Taiwan's National Reunification Council, created by the former Kuomintang (KMT) regime.

On this basis he appealed for peace and goodwill between Taiwan and China in the interests of mutual economic prosperity and stability. He hailed Deng Xiaoping and current Chinese President Jiang Zemin for creating a "miracle of economic openness". Chen has proposed accelerating moves to end the restrictions on investment and travel with the mainland—a step long demanded by Taiwanese-based companies and desired by China.

The DPP is scheduled to convene its National Conference this month to discuss removing all references to Taiwan independence from the party constitution.

Chen's overtures have been highly praised as easing the tensions with China following the declaration last July by then president Lee Teng-hui that China and the Republic of China on Taiwan had "state-to state" relations or were two distinct nations. Within Taiwan, the speech has been hailed by pro-Chen media for placating domestic fears of a conflict with China and ensuring that any clash can be presented as the fault of Beijing. It has been interpreted as an attempt to return to the status quo of the 1980s, in which the government on Taiwan accepted its exclusion from the United Nations on the grounds it is part of China, and China accepted that there would be no reunification in the foreseeable future.

Within the Chinese media, however, it has been noted that while Chen referred to "One China" once, he said Taiwan 40 times. The theme of the speech was "Taiwan stands up" and it was marked by intense Taiwanese nationalism. In unprecedented language, Taiwan—not the Republic of China—was called "our beloved land" and "our Eternal Mother". The electoral victory of the DPP was presented as the triumph of the Taiwanese people over fear, threats and oppression imposed from outside by China. At one point Chen referred to Taiwan's torment over the past century by "colonialist regimes"—implicitly placing together Japan's rule from 1895-1945 and the dictatorship of the mainland China-derived Kuomintang after 1945.

Chen's speech also made clear his administration will step up the efforts to win international diplomatic recognition for the Republic of China. Chen defined his foreign policy agenda as using human rights issues to "expand Taiwan's room for survival in the international arena". He declared: "We firmly believe that in any time or corner of the world, the meaning and values of freedom, democracy and human rights cannot be ignored or changed." Using the contrast between Taiwan's democratic elections and China's one-party state to actively seek international support against China's sovereignty claims on the island was first canvassed after NATO's war against Yugoslavia, conducted under the banner of protecting the human rights of the Kosovar Albanians. Chen has now elevated it to official policy.

The official response of the Chinese government described Chen's speech as "insincere" and "evasive and ambiguous" on "One China". Beijing's fuller assessment was spelt out in a May

25 comment by the official Xinhua news agency. It wrote: "The Taiwan leader called One China a 'question'. This is the same in nature as the 'two state' remark and the 'two Chinese nations'." But with the US Congress voting on permanent normal trading relations with the mainland, and China's entry into the World Trade Organisation still to be finalised, Beijing's response has been subdued, with no overt threats of war. A tentative offer to resume talks and exchanges has been made and Chinese negotiators may visit Taiwan.

What they will, or can, discuss is still shrouded by uncertainty. For the Beijing regime, the prospect of the Taiwanese government agreeing to a Hong Kong-style unification with China can never have appeared more remote. Constrained by international considerations, it has expressed its frustration in other ways. One was the treatment dealt out to Taiwanese pop star A-Mei, who sang the national anthem at Chen's inauguration. A mainland Coca-Cola commercial featuring A-Mei has been pulled from Chinese television stations and removed from billboards, on "orders from above". Another was the recent carrying out of low-level military exercises by the Peoples Liberation Army near the Taiwanese-held island of Kinmen.

But the danger of a cross-strait war remains. The Chinese language Hong Kong newspaper *Ming Pao* quoted unnamed mainland sources saying that elements within the Beijing regime are now convinced that "only the use of force can eventually resolve China's reunification" and that a timetable of five years is being discussed for the annexation of Taiwan. Taiwan government sources have stated they believe the Chinese regime is waiting until its high-level leadership talks in August before finalising a response to Chen's inauguration and will take no action until next year—after both China's admittance into the WTO and the inauguration of the new US president in January.

Chen's cautious handling of China policy, at this point, also reflects the domestic concerns of the new administration. His election was the product of a major realignment in Taiwanese politics, the consequences of which are still unfolding. After a decade of friction within the ruling Kuomintang or Nationalist party, it openly split during the 2000 election. At the centre of the differences has been the push by the previous president, Lee Teng-hui, backed by powerful sections of Taiwan's corporate elite and factions within the KMT, to assert the island's sovereignty and seek international diplomatic recognition.

James Soong, a KMT power-broker, openly broke with Lee when he defined China-Taiwan relations as "state-to-state". Standing as an independent, he rallied large parts of the KMT membership and its voter base to his side, as well as business figures, who opposed the heightened tensions with China that Lee had provoked.

The main contenders for the presidency on March 18 proved to be Soong, and Chen of the DPP, supported not only by his party, but by the sections of big business associated with Lee and even layers of the KMT itself. The official KMT candidate received only 23 percent of the vote.

The realignment is reflected in the new government. Chen's premier, and head of the executive branch of government, is Lee Teng-hui's defence minister, Tang Fei. The cabinet includes 14

other KMT figures, many chosen after private meetings between Lee and Chen. The main opposition is the newly formed Peoples First Party, established by Soong and his supporters after his campaign won 36 percent of the vote, compared to Chen's 39 percent.

The rift within the business elite and political establishment of Taiwan is by no means resolved by the election result. Chen felt obliged in his inauguration speech to appeal for "reconciliation" and "rationality" by the opponents of his presidency.

Chen also felt compelled to devote a considerable portion of his speech to addressing the widespread alienation in Taiwan toward the political establishment. The expectations of social reform that accompanied the introduction of elections in the late 1980s have not been met. The KMT apparatus and big business retained a stranglehold over society, while the constant economic restructuring throughout the 1990s aggravated social inequality and insecurity. Chen's speech was replete with rhetorical assurances that under parliamentary democracy the people are the true masters of the state and that his administration will rule for all Taiwanese.

In his speech Chen stressed eliminating what is known as "black gold" politics, or the nepotism and corruption that exists in the state apparatus erected by the Kuomintang and within the numerous companies owned by the former ruling party or by the state itself. He referred to the population being "deeply repelled" by the prevailing political system.

Chen made clear that his major motive in cleaning up the "black gold" is to "ensure Taiwan's competitiveness in the face of increasingly fierce global competition". Like the campaigns against "crony capitalism" in other parts of Asia, the breakup of KMT businesses and the privatisation or closure of state-owned enterprises are measures aimed at further opening Taiwan to transnational investors and bringing about lower taxation and costs for business. The widespread sentiment against corruption is to be exploited to further the interests of big business.

There is no doubt that the end of 55 years of KMT rule has generated expectations that Chen will simply not be able to meet as they are irreconcilable with the interests of the new government's corporate backers. Even before Chen's inauguration a new union federation, independent of the KMT unions, had been formed and calls raised for a rapid reduction in the current 48-hour working week and measures to address Taiwan's staggering rate of industrial accidents. As well, calls are being made for improvements in the pension system, health, education, earthquake relief and the end of the death penalty.

Chen not only faces the prospect of conflict with China, but the growing disaffection among workers, young people and others looking to the new government to provide better living standards and basic democratic rights.



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