

Taiwan's president outlines pro-independence election strategy

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At a mass pro-Taiwanese independence rally of over 200,000 people on October 25, the president of the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan, Chen Shui-bian, pledged to establish the legislative framework for a referendum on declaring the island a separate nation-state.

The declaration was aimed at ensuring that Taiwan's March 2004 presidential election will centre on the highly contentious issue of the island's political relations with China. Moreover, it heightens the risk of a military confrontation with Beijing, which insists on the right to use force to reunify the island with the mainland.

Chen told the rally in Kaohsiung that he would push through a referendum law before the election and then, if re-elected, hold a plebiscite by 2006 on altering the 1947 ROC constitution. "It will be stated in the new constitution that Taiwan is an independent sovereign state which is not a province or special administrative district under another country. Taiwan and China are two countries on each side of the Taiwan Strait," Chen bluntly declared.

Vice President Annette Lu told the rally: "Taiwan does not belong to China. We must now affirm Taiwan's name and Taiwan's new identity through a referendum." She declared that the recent death of Soong Mayling, the widow of former Kuomintang dictator Chiang Kai-shek, signified a "new start" in Taiwan—a break with its past political relations with China.

Taiwan has been ruled separately from mainland China since the 1949 Chinese civil war, when the Kuomintang dictatorship was overthrown by the Stalinist Communist Party, which established the Peoples Republic of China (PRC). The KMT was only able to hold one province—Taiwan—as well as several small islands in the Taiwan Strait.

By the 1980s, the KMT had abandoned its long-held ambition of invading the mainland and re-establishing its control. The Beijing regime, on the other hand, has never relinquished its goal of incorporating Taiwan into the PRC. It has demanded that Taiwan's governments accept the "One China" policy, i.e. that Taiwan remains a province of China—as the basis for all relations. Moreover, while China is offering Taiwan a negotiated reunification similar to those carried out with Hong Kong and Macao, it continues to threaten military force if the island is declared a separate state.

Chen Shui-bian has refused to formally embrace the "One China" policy. Nevertheless, in May 2000 he made a pledge not to declare independence, not to change Taiwan's official name

(Republic of China) and not to seek to hold a referendum on independence.

Chen's shift to open talk of referenda and constitutional change is the outcome of both desperation and recklessness. His Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) faces electoral defeat, and he calculates that any declaration of independence will be supported by the US, forcing China to back off.

During the 1990s, the island's KMT president Lee Teng-hui increasingly turned toward independence as a means of resisting China and preserving the island's economic and military alignment with the US and Japan. But his orientation provoked bitter tensions with sections of the Taiwanese elite, who were investing vast sums on the mainland and wanted to maintain the status quo. They were even prepared to consider some type of reunification in order to expand their political influence over Beijing.

The KMT's internal disarray led ultimately to the victory of Chen Shui-bian and the DPP in the 2000 election. Pro-unification KMT powerbroker James Soong split the vote by standing as an independent against the candidate endorsed by Lee Teng-hui. Chen attracted support as a reformer capable of ending decades of corrupt and authoritarian KMT rule. But he won just 39 percent of the vote, with Soong receiving 36 percent and the KMT's Lien Chan 23 percent.

Since then, the DPP's reformist credentials have evaporated and it faces an increasingly restive working class. The island has a record rate of unemployment, with more than 700,000 people out of work. The government has sparked mass demonstrations by workers and farmers against its policies of privatising state-owned industries and eliminating the credit cooperatives that provided generous loans to small farmers. The government was also discredited by the inability of the island's medical system to cope with the SARS epidemic early this year.

Shih Ming-the, a former chairman of the DPP who left the party over the government's economic agenda, told the *Taipei Times* this week: "The government's privatisation policies only widen the gap between the rich and poor, and play into the hands of financial groups."

The KMT's election strategy is to make an appeal to this general discontent and reclaim power. More significantly, it has formed a joint electoral ticket with James Soong and his People's First Party (PFP). Moderates who favour the status quo with China and pro-unification layers are back in control of the former ruling party

and have been able to agree on a common platform with the PFP. If the KMT and Soong receive even close to the same number of votes they won in 2000, the DPP will be swept from office.

Over the past several years, Lee Teng-hui and many of his supporters have left the KMT to form an openly pro-independence party, the Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU), which is backing the DPP. Both parties are seeking to divert the election from social questions and into a contest over China policy.

Lee Teng-hui successfully pursued a similar election strategy in 1996. China responded to a series of provocative pro-independence statements by the ROC president by firing missiles into the Taiwan Strait. The election took place under the shadow of the mobilisation of the Taiwanese armed forces and the deployment of a US aircraft carrier battle group to the area. In the resultant atmosphere of nationalist and anti-China hysteria, Lee won a convincing victory.

Taiwanese political analyst Tim Ting told the *Washington Post* on October 7: “The only way he [Chen Shui-bian] can win is if he stimulates China to react. There will be a line somewhere and Chen will cross it.” Another senior Taiwanese government official commented: “We have a bunch of political campaigners charting the course for Taiwan. The only way they think Chen will be reelected is if they succeed in polarising Taiwan.”

Chen and the DPP are already seeking to tarnish the KMT and PFP as a fifth column for Beijing. They have made a huge issue, for example, out of the participation of a PFP politician in an official Chinese delegation to a World Health Organisation (WHO) conference on SARS in June. Since Taiwan is not recognised by the United Nations as a separate nation-state, it is not a member of the WHO. The pro-DPP *Taipei Times* denounced the act at the time as evidence that the PFP considered there “would not be any problems if only we would capitulate to China”

During his October 10 “National Day” address, Chen implicitly denounced the opposition, declaring that only those “who do not believe in Taiwan will succumb to hegemony, make concessions for peace, or try to convince us that China’s military intimidation and impervious coercion compels us to accept the so-called ‘one China’ principle.”

To date, Beijing’s response to Chen’s statements and the DPP election strategy has been relatively low-key. Under Chinese pressure, Liberia, an impoverished African country devastated by civil war, broke diplomatic relations with Taiwan in order to gain Beijing’s backing for limited UN aid.

Senior officials of the Bush administration have publicly cautioned Chen. On the eve of Bush’s recent trip to Asia, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice reaffirmed that the US adhered to the “One China policy”. The US government has also sought to discourage Chen from trying to push through a referendum law.

Over the past two years, the Bush administration has tactically dropped its designation of China as a “strategic competitor”. It sought out and gained Beijing’s collaboration in carrying out the invasions of both Afghanistan and Iraq. The pay off to China has included declaring a separatist group in China’s Muslim Xinjiang province as a “terrorist” organisation and muzzling the most vocal anti-China elements in the Republican Party.

The August issue of *Foreign Affairs* asserted that a “dramatic

shift” had taken place in the US perception of China: “Beijing has gone from Washington’s strategic competitor to being its security collaborator and a major trade and investment partner... Preoccupied by the war on terror and events in Iraq, the United States has also pushed China to play a bigger role in maintaining Asian security—a role of which Washington would no doubt have been wary prior to September 11.”

Nevertheless, such “collaboration” is understood by both sides to have definite limits. Alongside its ostensibly friendly relations with China, Washington has continued to encourage the Taiwanese nationalists in the belief that the American military will back them if China attacks. Moreover, the White House has never retracted Bush’s statement in April 2001 that the US would use “whatever it took” to defend Taiwan from a Chinese invasion.

The October 30 *Washington Post* reported that unprecedented relations are being developed between the Taiwanese and US armed forces in order to expand Taiwan’s “war-fighting abilities”. In the past three years, US officers have attended Taiwan’s military exercises as observers, and hundreds of Taiwanese officers have received training in the US.

One independence advocate has even suggested that the US might tolerate Taiwan equipping itself with nuclear weapons. DPP legislator Lee Wen-chung told the *Washington Post* last month: “We need something to threaten China with, to make them think twice about attacking us. If the United States doesn’t give us the red light, I think we should go forward.”

Lee Teng-hui summed up the impact of Washington’s implicit support last month. In an interview with the *Washington Post*, published on October 12, Lee declared: “We really need to see whether the Beijing government has the power to launch this kind of attack [on Taiwan]. It seems to me China is not in a position to act. It is afraid of the United States. The Beijing government does not dare to challenge US military strength. Now is the time.”

China, however, has been making serious efforts to improve its military capabilities. According to an August 2003 report by the Pentagon, Beijing has greatly expanded its arsenal of “increasingly accurate and lethal ballistic missiles and long-range strike aircraft”. The number of Chinese intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of striking the US will increase from 20 to 30 in the next two years, and may reach 60 by 2010. It is estimated that 450 Chinese short-ranged ballistic missiles capable of striking Taiwan have been deployed this year in the Taiwan Strait.

As the Taiwanese election campaign unfolds, the brinkmanship of the pro-independence parties can only fuel an already tense and volatile political situation.



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