

CHINA'S APPROACHES
TO THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN TAIWAN

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I. INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the different approaches the Government of the People's Republic of China (hereinafter referred to as "Beijing") has taken to the Presidential Elections in Taiwan since 1996.

Over the last few decades, there had been an incremental development towards democracy in Taiwan and, as a consequence, the direct election of the President was started in 1996. Since then, four Presidential Elections, once in every four years, have taken place. In order to pursue its political objectives in cross-Strait relations, Beijing considers it very significant who will be elected as Taiwan's President. It has tried to exercise influence over the election process and has adopted a specific approach to the elections.

In the spring of 1996, Beijing conducted military exercises including missile launches in the vicinity of Taiwan. In the spring of 2000, Beijing used verbal intimidation, warning the voters in Taiwan not to vote for a specific candidate. In contrast to these two cases, Beijing kept silence in the spring of 2004 as well as in the spring of 2008.

In this paper the approach Beijing took at each of these instances is examined. Attention is paid particularly to the political circumstances surrounding each case and to the political factors behind which Beijing decided its approach. Examining these four cases highlighted two distinctive characteristics, which are discussed in the conclusion.

II. THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN TAIWAN IN 1996

Beijing acted harshly at the time of the Presidential Election in Taiwan in 1996, with large scale military exercises including missile launches off the coast of Taiwan. Such kind of behavior is seldom seen in an approach of a government to elections in other political entities. Beijing could not have acted more intensely without employing the direct use of force against Taiwan.

Why did this happen? Did Beijing make good calculations before deciding this approach? The answers to these questions are found in the sequence of events on the cross-Strait relations since the year before.

It was in March, 1995 that Beijing first ordered its forces to fire live ammunitions in the Taiwan Strait. At that time the issues concerned were not the Presidential Election in Taiwan the following year but cross-Strait relations. One of the specific issues was the response of the Government of Taiwan with regard to Beijing's reunification proposal, the Eight-point Policy, which was delivered by President Jiang Zemin in January of that year. Although it was based on the "one China" principle

and in the framework of “one country, two systems”, it was regarded particularly in Beijing as a conciliatory proposal for future cross-Strait relations. Instead of receiving an accommodating response to its proposal, Beijing found in March that President Lee Teng-hui was planning to visit the United States, which Beijing regarded as seeking recognition of Taiwan’s independent status by the Government of the United States (hereinafter referred to as “Washington”). Military exercises with the firing of live ammunitions was started just after the both Houses of the United States Congress passed resolutions that required the Administration to grant a visa for the visit of President Lee to the United States. The situation was exacerbated by more military exercises and missile tests in the summer and the fall of that year, after such events as President Lee’s lukewarm answer to Beijing’s Eight-point Policy in April, his visit to the United States, and his making of a speech entitled “the people’s aspirations are always in my heart” at Cornell University, his alma mater, in June.

Against the backdrop of such sequence of events in 1995, Beijing came to consider Lee Teng-hui as a political leader inclined to depart from the “one China” principle towards Taiwanese independence. In other words,

Beijing did not want to see him reelected as President in 1996. Facing the first direct Presidential Election in Taiwan in March of that year, Beijing, therefore, intended to express its negative views on President Lee and to try to influence the election process against him.

The only remaining matter for Beijing to decide was what kind of approach it would take to this election. Due to the sequence of events in 1995, Beijing must have felt that it was not free to choose alternative approaches. Through that year military exercises and missile launches were almost a recurring event in the Taiwan Strait. It is easy to assume that Beijing felt its room for decision was limited because of these events in 1995. Beijing felt it could not risk being regarded as weak, taking an approach of lower intensity than that of military exercises and missile launches it had already engaged in. It was probably afraid to be seen as weak or irresolute by the leaders and the public in Taiwan, Washington, and, perhaps equally or even more importantly, by the political elite and the public in China. In this way, Beijing eventually took the approach of military exercises and missile launches off the coast of Taiwan in the spring of 1996, with a larger scale than those in 1995.

How much influence did Beijing's approach actually have over the process and the result of the election? Although it is impossible to estimate the influence quantitatively, it is safe to say that the influence was strong and significant, but it went against Beijing's objectives. In the course of Beijing's large scale military exercises and missile launches in the spring of 1996, the incumbent candidate, Lee Teng-hui, behaved as defending Taiwan's newly developing democracy against Beijing's bullying. It is easy to assume that President Lee's popularity increased, rather than decreased, among the public in Taiwan during the election process, particularly when he showed himself as standing up against Beijing's heavy pressure. In March he gained a clear victory with 54.0 % of the total vote, in comparison with only 21.1 % of the vote for the opposition party candidate. The result of the election provided him with a stronger mandate and confidence for the next term in office. Such consequences were quite opposite to what Beijing wanted.

The above analysis leads to the question: was it really necessary for Beijing to take this approach? As far as Beijing's intention was merely to express negative views on Lee Teng-hui, it is possible to say that this

objective was realized. At the same time, however, it is also possible to say that the means was too much to realize the end. Beijing could have taken other means of lower intensity to express its views on President Lee. As a matter of fact, Beijing used acrimonious criticism and invectives against him in its controlled media in the spring of 1996. But, unlike in 2000, it also employed such means as military exercises and missile launches. Was this because Beijing wanted to defeat President Lee in the election? Considering the political circumstances in Taiwan around that time, however, it is almost impossible to assume any other outcome of the election irrespective of Beijing's approach to it. Lee Teng-hui was a candidate of the Nationalist Party (hereinafter referred to as "the KMT") which had monopolized political power in Taiwan since 1945. He had been incumbent already for 8 years in 1996 and was still popular as the first "Taiwanese" President among the public there. In addition, there seems to have been no preferable candidate for Beijing in this election. It is true that there was an opposition party candidate, Peng Min-ming, endorsed by the Democratic Progressive Party (hereinafter referred to as "the DPP"). Yet, because the DPP was apparently more inclined to advocate Taiwanese

independence than the KMT, there is no reason for Beijing to support him in the competition with the KMT candidate. There were independent candidates as well but, unlike the case of James Soong in 2000, they had no substantial possibility to win the race due to the lack of organized support all over Taiwan. When these political factors surrounding the election in 1996 are taken into account, it is possible to argue that Beijing could not have changed the result of the election, whatever method it had adopted. This argument suggests that it was not necessary for Beijing to take the approach with military exercises and missile launches to the Presidential Election in Taiwan in 1996.

III. THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN TAIWAN IN 2000

Beijing also acted aggressively at the time of the Presidential Election in Taiwan in 2000. This time, however, its approach was different from that in 1996. In the spring of 2000, Beijing used verbal intimidation by its senior officials including Premier Zhu Ronji to the public in Taiwan, conveying a bellicose message that they should not vote for the pro-Taiwanese independence candidate, Chen Sui-bian, in the election. Nevertheless, it took neither military exercises nor missile launches. Although this is still of high intensity compared to how a government responds to elections in other political entities, this approach is considered to be restrained in comparison with Beijing's approach in 1996.

Why did this happen? Perhaps Beijing reflected on what it did in 1996 and the aftermath. It is clear on reflection that the previous approach was not only unsuccessful in bringing about the preferable outcome for Beijing but also turned out to be counterproductive. It was counterproductive particularly because Beijing's actions caused Washington to dispatch two aircraft carrier battle groups to the vicinity of

Taiwan and increased international tensions over the Taiwan Strait. As a result, a sense of American protection took root among the public in Taiwan, which only encouraged pro-independence forces there. Taking into account these ramifications, perhaps Beijing calculated that it could not take the same approach as in 1996. It is safe to say, therefore, that Beijing did not really have a choice to employ military exercises and missile launches to the Presidential Election in Taiwan in 2000.

Did Beijing have any other options in 2000 that would be of similarly high intensity? One choice may have been to invoke domestic demonstrations to show Beijing's views and to put pressures on its hypothetical opponent. Unlike democratic regimes, this was rather familiar political means for Beijing and, as a matter of fact, there were some cases in the past where Beijing had utilized this to pursue its political objectives. Beijing, however, did not mobilize the domestic population to this end in 2000. And, moreover, the election in 2000 was not an exceptional case. It is probably true that Beijing has not invoked demonstrations at home against Taiwan or with regard to any issues concerning Taiwan in the past few decades. This is considered to be very different compared with Beijing's

behavior to other countries, for example the United States and Japan. A possible argument on this difference is that Beijing has a comparatively higher threshold with Taiwan when it resorts to mobilizing the population at home. Beijing must realize that it inevitably stimulates the public sentiment when it invokes domestic demonstrations and mobilizes the public. As a consequence, it necessarily faces the serious political risks that the once mobilized public may not behave as expected and they may possibly overact beyond its control. The level of such political risks is considered to be dependent on the target of demonstrations invoked by Beijing. In its calculations, Beijing must regard Taiwan as a very risky target to mobilize the public at home. It is possible to argue, therefore, that Beijing, taking into account the political risks, did not really have the option of invoking demonstrations at home on the Presidential Election in Taiwan in 2000.

It is easy to understand that Beijing regarded this election as critical for the future of cross-Strait relations. Due to a split among the ruling political forces, with Lien Chan as the KMT candidate and popular James Soong as an independent candidate, this was an unprecedented

opportunity for the DPP, with Chen Sui-bian as its candidate, to win the Presidency of Taiwan for the first time. Beijing obviously wanted Chen, a well known proponent of Taiwanese independence, to be defeated in the election and considered its choices for realizing its preferable outcome. As argued above, Beijing did not really have an option of employing military exercises or invoking demonstrations at home. It is conceivable, therefore, that in 2000 the option of verbal intimidation was in reality the most intense option Beijing could choose among feasible alternatives.

It is very difficult to make an objective evaluation of how much influence Beijing exercised on the Presidential Election in Taiwan in 2000. A salient characteristic of the election in 2000 was a triangular structure of competition among three major candidates. If it had substantially been a two-way competition for the Presidency, a competition between a KMT candidate and a DPP candidate with some innocuous independent candidates almost outside of the race, the cross-Strait relations would have been the most significant issue in the election and, therefore, Beijing's influence could have been directly reflected in the election. In 2000, however, there were competition not only between the DPP candidate,

Chen Sui-bian, and the other two candidates but also between an officially endorsed candidate by the KMT, Lien Chan, and an independent candidate with strong backing from the KMT supporters, James Soong. With regard to the latter one issue was the possibility of whether Soong embezzled the party money when he had been in the ranking post of the KMT. Taking advantage of this battle between the two KMT related candidates, Chen made corruption, instead of Taiwanese independence, as his number one campaign issue and received increasing support from the public. Under such political circumstances in the spring of 2000, Beijing conveyed its verbal intimidation to the public in Taiwan by telling the people not to vote for Chen Sui-bian in the election, including the belligerent statement by Premier Zhu just days before the election.

Receiving 39.3 % of the total vote, Chen eventually won the election with a narrow margin of 2.5 % of the vote. The result of the election was again against Beijing's objectives, and its approach ended in failure. It is possible to say that Beijing's approach, contrary to its intention, helped Chen to garner the public support in the election process. However, it is not possible to argue that Beijing played a critical role to decide the

outcome of this election. Nor is it possible to state that Chen could not have won the Presidency in this election without Beijing's approach with verbal intimidation to the public in Taiwan. These are because the main cause of Chen's victory was a split among the political forces associated with the KMT. Since James Soong gained 36.8 % and Lien Chan took 23.1 % of the vote, a unified candidate, who had presumably existed, could have defeated Chen Sui-bian irrespective of Beijing's approach to the election. In other words, Beijing could not have altered the election result whatever approach it had taken. A critical moment had probably come before Beijing had chosen any alternative when a triangular structure of competition among three major candidates came into reality. This argument suggests that it was not necessary for Beijing to take the approach with verbal intimidation to the Presidential Election in Taiwan in 2000.

IV. THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN TAIWAN IN 2004

Unlike the previous two cases, Beijing employed neither military exercises nor verbal intimidation at the time of the Presidential Election in Taiwan in 2004. Although Beijing's intention was very clear this time, preventing President Chen Sui-bian from being reelected, it kept quiet during the election process in the spring of 2004. Its approach to the election can be described as with cautious silence.

Why did this happen? The main underlying reason can be attributed to the characteristic of this election. Before the start of the campaign, an alliance was established between the KMT and the People First Party (hereinafter referred to as "the PFP"), a political party formed by James Soong and some of his supporters just after the election in 2000, and a slate was formed with Lien Chan as a Presidential candidate and James Soong as a Vice Presidential candidate. In contrast to the election in 2000, it was a two-way election comprised of two different political forces in Taiwan. One was a green coalition led by President Chen and supported by the Taiwan Solidarity Union (hereinafter referred to as "the TSU"), a

political party associated with former President Lee Teng-hui. The other was a blue coalition led by Lien and Soong. In addition, the blue coalition, which focused Taiwan's economic slowdown as a major campaign issue, had been leading the green coalition in public opinion polls almost constantly in the course of the campaign process. It is possible to assume, therefore, that Beijing expected the result of the election to be in its favor.

It is also possible to assume that Beijing had reflected on its approach to the election in 2000 before it decided which approach to take in 2004. On reflection Beijing may have considered that by employing verbal intimidation it had helped Chen Sui-bian to certain extent in the Presidential Election in 2000. If Beijing's bellicose approach would provoke emotional reactions among the public in Taiwan and would shift the public opinion there somewhat in favor of Chen, Beijing found an advantage in keeping silence in the election process. On the other hand, President Chen must have realized that the harsh approach by Beijing would certainly help him to garner more support from the public in the election process. He wanted to make a national referendum, rather than the economic downturn in Taiwan, a major campaign issue for his reelection.

He tried to elicit a fierce reaction from Beijing as it had revealed in the fall of the previous year when he had announced to call for a referendum at the same time as the Presidential Election. Although Chen Sui-bian utilized a “China card” and deliberately tried to provoke a reaction from it, Beijing decided to opt for careful silence in 2004. This was probably because it had calculated that this would benefit it more.

It would be possible to argue that Beijing’s approach with careful silence to the Presidential Election in Taiwan in 2004 had been not only well calculated but also successful if the result of the election might have been in line with Beijing’s expectation. Yet, the election turned out to be Chen Sui-bian’s victory with a razor-thin margin of 0.2 % of the total vote. He received 50.1 % of the vote, whereas the Lien and Soong team took 49.9 % of the vote. It was reported on the very eve of the voting date that President Chen and his running mate, Vice President Annette Lu, were targeted by an assassin. The blue coalition alleged that this happening was staged by Chen and his associates. Although it was unclear what was really happened on the eve of the election, the report of the assassination attempt obviously increased the number of votes for President Chen out of

sympathy among the public and eventually contributed to his victory. It is true that Beijing's approach to the election in 2004 was not successful. But that was not Beijing's failure. The final outcome of the election was certainly beyond its control.

V. THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN TAIWAN IN 2008

Following the precedent in 2004, Beijing did not employ military exercises or verbal intimidation at the time of the Presidential Election in Taiwan in 2008. Although Beijing obviously desired Ma Ying-jeou of the KMT to defeat Frank Hsieh of the DPP in the election, it kept quiet in the spring of 2008. In this sense, Beijing's approach in 2008 looked similar to that in 2004. There are, however, some differences in nuance between the two and Beijing's approach in 2008 can be described as with secure silence.

Why did this happen? The election in 2008 was a distinctive two-way competition between the DPP candidate supported by the TSU and the KMT candidate supported by the PFP. Frank Hsieh, known as a moderate in the DPP, followed pro-Taiwanese independence policy of the party and, together with President Chen, promoted a referendum at the time of the Presidential Election to ask the public's opinion on entering the United Nations in the name of Taiwan. On the other hand, Ma Ying-jeou, enjoying personal popularity among the public, endorsed the status quo

across the Taiwan Strait and focused on revitalizing Taiwan's economy through better cross-Strait links. The public in Taiwan constantly showed preference for Ma with a large margin in a number of opinion polls conducted in the course of campaign. A primary reason in this background was the declining public trust in Chen Sui-bian and the DPP. In his second term in office, President Chen strengthened his pro-independence profile and pursued first Constitutional changes and later a referendum for his objectives. Beijing acted aggressively against Chen's endeavor particularly in late 2004 and early 2005. Its reactions culminated with the promulgation of the Anti-Secession Law in March, 2005, which authorized it to employ "the non-peaceful means" to protect China's sovereignty in case of Taiwanese independence. Since then, however, Beijing had acted differently towards Taiwan by using not only sticks but also carrots as well. It invited leaders of the opposition parties of Taiwan and made direct discussions with them. The KMT leader Lien Chan went to Beijing in April, 2005, while the PFP leader James Soong visited there in the following month. Both of them met with President Hu Jintao and issued a joint statement respectively, in which Beijing offered a variety of inducements

for Taiwan. Through these unprecedented direct contacts between the political leaders across the Strait, Beijing showed the public in Taiwan that it could work with the opposition leaders for the better cross-Strait relations. Beijing also reacted differently to President Chen's referendum endeavor. It tried to collaborate with Washington and tried to utilize the U.S. influence on Chen Sui-bian for preventing him from resorting to a referendum for Taiwanese independence. This new approach worked. Washington, concerned about President Chen's stronger pro-independence trend in his second term in office, kept its pressure on him even explicitly in some occasions. A certain distance from Washington, together with the visits of the opposition leaders to Beijing, undermined the public's support for President Chen and the DPP. To make the situation worse, Chen faced corruption scandals involving his family members and close associates. Since he had been known as an acrimonious critic of the corrupt practices under past KMT administrations, he was discredited badly by the corruption scandals. After his wife, the First Lady, and his aides in the Presidential Office were indicted, he used most of his political resources for his own survival. Before the Presidential Election, an election for the

Legislative Yuan, Taiwan's legislature, took place in January, 2008. It turned out to be a landslide for the KMT, which has now occupied more than two thirds of the legislative members. Taking into account all these political circumstances in the spring of 2008, Beijing expected its desired result and chose to opt with silence at the time of the election.

In March, 2008, the Taiwan Presidential Election resulted in a decisive victory for Ma Ying-jeou. He received as much as 58.45 % of the total vote, which was the highest vote ratio in the past four cases of the Presidential Election in Taiwan. As a consequence, he received a clear and strong mandate to seek revitalization of Taiwan's economy through better cross-Strait links as he had repeated in the campaign. The KMT had now returned back to the power after eight years, also occupying the legislature with a large majority. On the other hand, Frank Hsieh suffered from a serious defeat with 41.55 % of the total vote. In addition, the referendum on entering the United Nations in the name of Taiwan, which was promoted by the DPP, was not validated with only 35.8 %, much less than half, of the turnout. Together with the result of the legislative election in January, the DPP now faced declining public support and declining momentum for its

pro-independence policy. In contrast to the past three cases, Beijing eventually achieved its desired objectives in the 2008 election. It is possible to argue, therefore, that Beijing's approach to the Presidential Election in Taiwan in 2008 was not only well calculated but also successful.

VI. CONCLUSION

Through the examination of the four instances of Beijing's approach to the Presidential Elections in Taiwan since 1996, it is possible to argue that two distinctive characteristics are found.

The first characteristic is the fact that Beijing appears to have learned from its previous experiences and to have developed its calculations when it decided its approach. In 1996, Beijing's ability to choose the best options was limited to the sequence of the past events across the Taiwan Strait and its own decision making at home. In 2000, Beijing reflected on the 1996 precedent, finding shortcomings of its past behavior before deciding its approach. Since 2004, it has paid more attention to the situation inside of Taiwan and has been able to make better calculations of the overall political circumstances surrounding the elections when it decided its approach.

The second characteristic is the continuing sophistication of Beijing's choices. This characteristic can be noted in two different ways.

First, Beijing has chosen a decreased level of intensity in each case. In 1996, Beijing's approach with military exercises and missile launches in the vicinity of Taiwan was the most intense form of approach except the direct use of force against Taiwan. In 2000, Beijing employed verbal intimidation instead of military exercises. This approach, which is of lower intensity than that in 1996, was still considered to be of relatively high intensity. In 2004, on the other hand, Beijing chose an approach with careful silence. And it chose an approach with secure silence in 2008. In contrast to the previous two cases, these were of much lower intensity.

Secondly, in these four cases Beijing's approaches have come to be more acceptable among the public in Taiwan as well as in the international society. In 1996, Beijing's harsh approach provoked strong reactions from the public in Taiwan. It also created the international concerns about Beijing's belligerent behavior to its outside. In 2000, Beijing's verbal intimidation stimulated the public in Taiwan and provided another example of Beijing's aggressiveness to its outside. On the other hand, Beijing's silent approach in 2004 and 2008 did not create any repercussions in Taiwan and could be viewed as an approach of maturity by

the outside world.

It was a result of the learning and the development of calculations as well as the sophistication of the approaches that Beijing's approach to the Presidential Election in Taiwan in 2008 turned out to be not only well calculated but also successful, bringing about Beijing's desired outcome of the election first time in the past four instances.

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