

Cross- currents
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As Ma Ying-jeou approaches the end of his first term as president of Taiwan, he is credited with not rocking the boat in the Taiwan Strait. Ironically, while Ma deserves praise for easing cross-strait tensions, it is pertinent to reflect on whether the policies of his first term will endure. Do they, in the long term, create circumstances in which the explosive issues of sovereignty and Taiwan's security can be peacefully resolved?

Ma has gone out of his way to avoid creating tension, unlike his predecessor Chen Shuibian, who was branded a troublemaker in Beijing and regarded as unpredictable in Washington and several Asian capitals. President Hu Jintao, in turn, is credited for his Taiwan "policy of greater patience", as Washington based analyst Alan Romberg puts it, aimed at deterring Taiwan's independence rather than insisting on hasty reunification. Beijing has responded to Ma's overtures by emphasising the positive trends in cross-strait relations. In Washington and across Asia, heads of state have commended Ma's approach.

As a result, Taiwan has to a large extent fallen below the international radar. On the one hand, this is indicative of improved cross-strait relations. On the other, a decline in international attention creates new challenges for resolving the fundamental contradiction between Beijing's insistence on reunification as the penultimate (though not short-term) solution and the majority view in Taiwan for the status quo to continue indefinitely.

A debate on the relevance of Taiwan is already under way in Washington. Among European policymakers, the Taiwan question has all but receded into oblivion.

Over the past three years, economic and people-to-people ties across the strait have strengthened. A free-trade agreement, direct commercial flights between Taiwan and the mainland, increased tourism, and Taiwan's role as observer at the World Health Assembly, are all results of Ma's "tread softly" policies.

Ma's rationale from the outset has been that economic integration will have positive, transformative effects on the cross-strait relationship; in particular, more exchanges can help to build trust and understanding. But support for unification now or in the future has only risen marginally since Ma took office (9.8 per cent in August 2008; 12 per cent in September 2011). Opinion polls commissioned regularly by Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council show that about one quarter of respondents support independence now or in the future. One quarter support the status quo indefinitely.

Another underlying assumption of those who foresee positive consequences in cross-strait rapprochement is that Taiwanese voters will view some form of unification with the mainland more favourably as the mainland pursues political reform and as the pluralisation of mainland society progresses. However, Beijing has not shown signs of changing in this direction. On the contrary, over the past 18 months Taiwanese have witnessed Beijing's outrage at the Nobel committee for awarding the Nobel Peace Prize to Liu Xiaobo and its detention of, among others, lawyers, bloggers and artists who expressed nonconformist views. Little, if any, progress has been made over the past decade to decrease arbitrary justice and corruption – two facets of mainland society that make reunification less than appealing to Taiwanese.

The Communist Party's leaders suffer from existential anxiety. They see themselves facing unrelenting political and ideological pressure from the West. According to Peking University professor Wang Jisi, "a unique feature of the Chinese leaders' understanding of their country's history is their

persistent sensitivity to domestic disorder caused by foreign threats". Beijing's white paper on peaceful development says that one of the mainland's core interests is safeguarding the political system.

The party leadership's sense of insecurity is likely to continue, even more so as mainland society becomes more multifaceted and the demands on the leadership from interest groups within the country come from more directions. Thus, mainland authorities will continue to detain free thinkers. It is also unlikely that the leadership will allow a genuine separation of the party and the juridical system, which is necessary to address both corruption and arbitrary justice. Repression coupled with the lack of a rule of law can hardly be expected to win the hearts and minds of Taiwanese.

Ma's rapprochement policy has undoubtedly led to what Baptist University professor Jean-Pierre Cabestan has characterised as "silent and creeping normalisation" of relations between Beijing and Taipei. The positive momentum in cross-strait relations indicates that the first thin layers of political trust have been laid. Ma's prophecy of increased people-to-people interaction leading to an end of hostilities could be accurate, but the transformation of the mainland into a more transparent, just and appealing society is equally vital. For now, that seems a long way off.

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