

SPEAKING FREELY

Taiwan: When no news is good news

By Chin-Hao Huang

Following hard on the heels of Chinese President Hu Jintao's visit to New York last month to attend the United Nations summit, Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian has been on a whirlwind tour, visiting eight countries across three continents in less than two weeks.

He claimed that it was a diplomatic breakthrough, but in light of the highly anticipated Bush-Hu meeting in New York, few in Washington even took note of Chen's visit. However, rather than engaging in highly critical rhetoric against Beijing during a Miami stopover, Chen adopted a more subtle and pragmatic diplomatic approach to mend fences with Washington.

It comes without much surprise that Beijing found Chen's stopover irksome as it issued the usual statement of protest. Beijing's reaction was predictable. It avoided drumming up or shedding any unnecessary publicity on Chen's visit. Beijing has learned from past lessons that doing so would only boost Chen's political capital at home. It is also relying on Washington to help Taiwan toe the line and monitor Chen's actions.

Chen's brisk transit was thus almost a non-event. Compared to his unprecedented treatment in New York in late 2003, there were no highly public appearances or media opportunities. But keeping a low profile seems to imply that Chen has got the message to avoid "rocking the boat", following the stern signal from President George W Bush in December 2003 when he publicly rebuked Chen for making unilateral moves to upset the status quo in the Taiwan Strait.

In light of Hurricane Katrina, Chen did not take Hu's resulting cancelled state visit as a political victory. Chen avoided the usual tough talk on China, demonstrating his understanding that both the US and China are working closely on North Korea, UN reform, the ongoing "war on terrorism" and energy issues. Instead, he engaged in constructive dialogue on arms sales, and offered assistance and shared with local officials Taiwan's experiences in handling natural disasters. On the prospects for peace across the Taiwan Strait, Chen echoed the Bush administration's views that Beijing should engage in constructive dialogue with Taiwan's duly elected officials.

The fact that his stopover did not make headlines was perhaps good news. Chen has gained the reputation of being an opportunist, and it seems that the only time Taiwan captures Washington's attention is during an elevation of tensions across the Taiwan Strait - a situation in recent years that has often been attributed to Chen. This time, Chen sent a reassuring message to Washington. However, he maintained that whether reunification, independence or some form of federal system is in Taiwan's future, ultimately Taiwanese must have the deciding voice.

Only time will tell whether Chen has it right. Relations between Washington and Taipei have warmed since 2004, and it is hoped that the Taiwan approach will continue to be pragmatic,

not confrontational. One of the main hurdles Chen faces during the rest of his second term is his determination to further Taiwan's constitutional reengineering project. Amendments calling for a more streamlined and efficient government structure will contribute to more stability in Taiwan. He has vowed, however, not to pursue contentious issues, such as changing the national flag, anthem or territorial boundaries, and he will be closely watched by Washington for consistency in his words and actions.

Chen has repeatedly expressed his admiration for Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's ability to dissolve the diet and in turn win a snap election. Chen appears tempted to make a similar call as a way out of the current political deadlock in Taiwan's legislative yuan. However, doing so would further polarize domestic politics and cause more unrest in Taiwan's unconsolidated democracy. Chen ought to be mindful not to sacrifice the long-term goal of political stability for short-term political gain.

But there are encouraging signs. His Democratic Progressive Party decided to campaign under the platform of better governance rather than an anti-China theme as it has in the past. Chen's meeting with former US deputy secretary of state, Richard Armitage, during his stopover further underscored his administration's unwavering support for the long-pending arms sale package and the need for improved defensive capabilities. With Ma Ying-jeou as the new opposition leader for the Kuomintang Party, there is hope that the arms sale bill will pass during this parliamentary session.

Going into his second term, Chen is more perceptive of the implications of China's rise and the ambiguous relationship between Washington and Beijing. The likelihood of both powers drifting toward global rivalry cannot be ruled out, and the Taiwan Strait could very well be a source of conflict that sparks further tensions.

Hence, Taiwan's dwindling support in the international community and Beijing's determination to use force, if necessary, in response to Taiwan independence, allow little room for Chen to pursue a provocative agenda. From this stopover, Chen showed a clearer understanding of what it takes to reverse the negative trends, foster trust and reliability between friends, and steer relations between Taipei and Washington in a more constructive course.

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