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SPECIAL COMMENTARY: AMERICA & CHINA SHRUG

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A leading global magazine recently posted a column on Taiwan in which it claimed that President Chen Shui-bian's recent statements to the Formosan Association for Public Affairs (FAPA) were "designed to provoke China's leaders".

I firmly believe that this analysis is erroneous. Instead, I would suggest that Chen made those statements – to FAPA's 25th anniversary celebration on Taiwan sovereignty - to insert himself, front and center, into the debate surrounding the Taiwan primaries and the Democratic Progressive Party's candidate for President in 2008. In so doing, he has put every DPP candidate on the spot over some of the core "Green" (read traditional DPP) issues. The time for "provoking China's leaders" is this coming autumn and winter when the legislative and presidential elections are underway and they can be used to rally the DPP base. Instead, these statements were for DPP party consumption, and serve to limit the ability of the DPP candidates to strike a more moderate tone in the primaries.

While this is less important for candidates such as Annette Lu and Yu Shyi-kun, who agree with Chen, it is far more relevant to other candidates such as Taiwan's sitting Premier, Su Tseng-cheng. In my view, Su is currently the most electable candidate in the DPP stable. He has enjoyed some success in his most recent post, has assembled a highly competent economic team led by his Vice Premier Tsai Ing-wen, and he has shown a willingness and ability to outmaneuver his boss the President and the "Dark Greens" within his party on its dogmatic China policy. Indeed, over the past months we have actually seen steady incremental liberalization of cross-Strait trade, with the chip sector being an excellent example. Su is the candidate least likely to strike a dark green line as President. If you presume (and I do) that Chen would like to see a darker green candidate, by drawing out these issues now Chen can at best damage Su's candidacy, or at least force him to make statements that he can later be held to.

On the matter of U.S. and Chinese reactions to Chen's words, it strikes me as interesting how similar the responses were – both basically shrugged. This suggests two things in my mind. Firstly, that Beijing and Washington have pretty strong lines of communication to discuss these matters prior to responding, and secondly that they have an increasing awareness of the impact of their reactions on the environment within Taiwan. The Chinese, by not reacting, kept the entire matter out of the press (for the most part), making it a non-event.

While cross-Strait economic integration will surely continue - whether under a potential Su Tseng-cheng administration or under a possible Ma Ying-jeou administration - the domestic politics of the island do not lead me to believe that we are heading toward political reconciliation with Beijing. Even if Ma is elected, his ability to reach out to Beijing will be highly constrained by factors within his own party (think Wang Ching-ping and his faction), by the need to ensure that the KMT is seen as representing Taiwan's interests and not China's, as well as by energetic DPP opposition. Extrapolate that by 20 years and all you have is further entrenchment of Taiwan democracy and Taiwan identity, albeit (I hope) with vastly greater regional integration through normalized cross-Strait trade and participation in bilateral and regional multilateral trade agreements.

Taiwan isn't Hong Kong, and from Ma and Su down they bristle at the notion of Taiwan as part of the PRC. Is China prepared to back off the "One-China Principle" in the next 20 years? I highly doubt it.

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