

**New Positive Developments Across the Taiwan Straits
--On the Visits of the Taiwan Opposition Leaders to the Mainland**

By MG. Pan Zhenqiang, Shanghai Institute for Strategic Studies

Beijing May 22, 2005

Amidst much fear and concern over implications of the enactment of the anti-secession law on the peace and stability by Beijing's legislature in March, developments of the situation across the Taiwan Straits have taken a sudden and dramatic U turn in the last thirty days. At the invitation of General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Hu Jintao, Mr. Lien Chan, Chairman of China's Nationalist Party (KMT), and Mr. James Soong, Chairman of the People's First Party (PFP), paid their visits to the mainland respectively from April 26 to May 12.

Lien dubbed his trip to the mainland as a trip of icebreaking, and of making peace. This is the first official mainland trip by a KMT chairman in 56 years and Lien is also the island's highest-ranking politician to visit the mainland since 1949. "Our aim at this time is to bring peace to both sides of the Taiwan Straits, create stability on both sides, and lay some positive groundwork for the future," he stressed. During his trip from April 26 to May 3, he stopped over Nanjing, Beijing, Xi'an and Shanghai, and never failed in making efforts to that end.

On April 29, Lien held talks with Hu, which resulted in a joint communiqué that hailed Lien's visit as of great "historical significance". According to the communiqué, both parties agreed to work together to promote early restoration of cross-Straits talks, an end to the state of hostility, further economic and trade links, and discussions on Taiwan's participation in international activities. "It is the common stance of the two parties to adhere to the '1992 Consensus,' to oppose 'Taiwan independence' and to seek peace and stability across the Taiwan Straits," said the communiqué.

On the heel of the successful conclusion of Lien's visit, James Soong led his party delegation to visit the mainland from May 5 to May 12. Soong described his trip as a trip of bridging, and of furthering communication across the Straits. After his short stay at Xi'an, Nanjing, Changsha and Shanghai, the trip ended up also with talks with the mainland's top leaders including Hu Jintao at Beijing. Like in Lien's case, the two parties also issued a joint communiqué, aimed at the promotion and improvement of cross-Straits relations as well as development of party-to-party relations. The two parties agreed that they should join hands in bringing reconciliation, stability and peace so as to guarantee the general interests of the Chinese nation.

Clearly in substance, there is not much difference in the two communiqués reached

between Beijing and the two leaders respectively. If there were any difference to be defined, Lien's visit has evidently broken the long political stalemate in the relations across the Straits, while James Soong seems to have built on the dynamics created by Lien and succeeded in defining a framework of improving the cross-Straits relations in relatively more specific terms in the future.

What is more impressive, however, is the almost same consensus that both Lien and Soong have achieved with Beijing on the political conditions for any meaningful cooperative measures between the two sides of the Straits. These political conditions include opposition to the independence, insistence on the '1992 Consensus' (one China but two sides), and both the mainland and Taiwan belongs to the one and same China. With these agreements as a political pillar in the future cross-Straits relations, many important suggestions are advanced as what to be done in the future to put these relations on a right track and insure a sustaining peace and stability between the two sides. They include inter alia:

- resuming talks on an equal basis as soon as possible, and solving crucial issues of mutual concern on the basis of mutual respect and seeking common ground while reserving differences;
- opposing the "rectification of Taiwan's name" and "constitutional changes through referendum." So long as there is no possibility that Taiwan is moving toward "independence", military conflicts across the Straits can be effectively avoided;
- attaining a formal ending of the state of hostility through consultation and negotiation in a bid to reach a peace accord and build a military mutual trust mechanism;
- promoting overall economic and trade exchanges across the Straits on the basis of mutual benefit;
- promoting discussion of Taiwan's participation in international activities after the resumption of cross-Straits dialogue. Priority will be given to the discussion about Taiwan's participation in the activities of the World Health Organization; and
- promoting the establishment of a cross-Straits non-governmental forum of elites, to study various policy ideas, suggestions and proposals conducive to the development of relations.

Security landscape across the Taiwan Straits and even the whole region of Northeast Asia will no doubt look much inherently better if all these measures to be fully implemented. Both Lien and Soong promised to do their utmost to mobilize the public opinion to bring peace and stability across the Straits by building on the progress of the visits when they returned to Taiwan.

The value of the two visits can never be overestimated. First of all, the political reconciliation again between the CPC and KMT has opened up a new window of opportunity to break the long-time stalemate across the Straits. Further, the consensus reached as reflected in the two communiqués with Lien and Soong has even

delineated effectively a path for the two sides of the Straits to solve their problem based on the '1992 Consensus' and one China principle. Particularly, in the CPC-PFP communiqué, the mainland has formally offered that if Taiwan does not seek independence, there will be no military conflicts across the Taiwan Straits, and that both shall work for the promotion of cross-Straits economic exchanges and trade. The new gesture, among other consensus reached by the two parties, has been an further show of goodwill by the mainland side toward the Taiwan people and reflects common aspirations by people in both the mainland and Taiwan for peace, stability and development of cross-Straits relations. The clear message delivered to the island is that "we can wait for the peaceful unification till you think you are ready for that. Pending the unification, let's live together side by side for peace, stability and common prosperity". That will go a long way towards building trust and confidence in each other in future and insuring peace and stability in the region.

Secondly, the two visits have evidently dealt a heavy blow to those "Taiwan independence" secessionist elements by showing that independence is indeed a dead alley while living in shared interests and brotherhood in the one China framework provides ample win-win benefits to both sides. Chen Suibian and his Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) for the so-called independence movement seem to be suddenly losing its bearings and being sidelined in the exploration of stabilizing the situation across the Straits.

Last but not the least, the warm support by people of both sides to the visits have also demonstrated how deeply the mainland and the island have been tied to each other by over five thousand years' common tradition and culture, kindred-ship and practical common economic interests. Such deep-rooted ties have virtually made the two sides of the Straits inseparable towards each other, a phenomenon that used to be overlooked by outsiders. Both Lien and Soong attached importance to seeking roots and origins during their trips. To pay homage to the mausoleum of Huangdi, who is regarded as the ancestor of all the Chinese, to pay respect to the mausoleum of Dr Sun Yat-sen, the KMT founder and a pioneer of the Chinese Democratic Revolution, and to visit their hometowns including the tombs of their old family members, have all aroused a sense of a son who has left his hometown for so long but now has finally returned home. Often, many people on the spot were moved to tears, witnessing such moving scenes. They cannot but have the feeling that "we are of the same family". This perception is educational not only to the people on the Taiwan island, but also to people all over the world, many of whom were led to believe by the distorted propaganda of the Taiwan's independence elements as if Taiwan is never part of China.

Indeed, statistics of both sides show nearly 98 percent of the 23 million Taiwan residents are descendants of Chinese mainlanders that moved to the island province in various periods, mainly at the end of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) and during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). In addition to having the same ancestry, people along the

Taiwan Strait speak the same language and share the same cultural and historical background. Economic exchanges between the two sides have boomed in recent years. As with regard to the current linkage of the two sides, Taiwan business people have made investments in more than 60,000 projects on the mainland, with contractual investment hitting almost 80 billion US dollars and 40 billion dollars being actually used. Indirect trade volume between the Chinese mainland and Taiwan amounted to more than 400 billion US dollars, of which Taiwan has obtained an accumulated trade surplus of 270 billion dollars. In 2004 alone, the trade volume across the Straits reached more than 78 billion dollars. All these have provided strong basis for the future closer linkage between the two sides of the Straits.

But on the other hand, it is also true that a couple of visits cannot fundamentally change the nature of the confrontation across the Straits and particularly halt the independence activities on the island overnight. Whether sustained peace and stability can be achieved across the Straits by building on the dynamics for better understanding and closer cooperation in the one China framework produced through the two visits is far from certain, and looks depending on the following three main factors involved:

The first factor is related to the ability of the two opposition parties to expand the initial achievements of the visits and sell successfully to the Taiwan people what has been agreed on with the mainland leaders on the future actions. Good news is that the visits have upgraded their status in the eyes of the average people in the island with the support rates to both parties increased. The message that they brought back to Taiwan that the mainland will exert greater kindness and flexibilities to bring many more concrete benefits to Taiwan are also warmly welcomed to them. The bad news, however, is that both parties do not seem in good shape to be powerful as major opposition. The KMT has a serious successor problem. Lien Chan has already announced to retire. The party has yet to reach consensus to choose a new chairman with enough charisma to rally all its members. The PFP seems to lose its policy orientation by changing its position often too hastily and overwhelmingly that has led to the bewildering of its own party members and the loss of much of the popular support. Divergent partisan interests have also prevented them from closing ranks to form a more powerful opposition to constraint the ruling DPP. All these suggest that much of the momentum for all the positive developments through the visits could be dissipated.

The second factor relates to the future attitude of Chen Shuibian. Despite the historical significance of the two visits, they are after all the visits by the oppositions. Thus anything reached with the mainland carries no administrative power. In other words, much will still depend on the attitudes of Chen and his ruling party, that is, if they will accept what has been reached as the future guidelines for the across Straits policy. So far, the prospect does not look optimistic. True, the agreement reached through the visits by the oppositions has posed great challenges to Chen. If he does

not endorse the consensus reached, he is running the risk of being marginalized in the future across-Straits relations. However, if he follows the path as designated by the consensus, it will virtually mean a renouncement of his owed belief of seeking independence and running the risk of losing support of his own party. Thus he is in a real dilemma. But from all signs it appears that Chen may still have time to assess the situation and not in a hurry to make a choice. This is partly because of the weak performance of the opposition parties, partly because of the ambiguous position of the United States.

Thus the future uncertain situation will depend much on the third factor in the future situation, namely, the attitude of Washington to a great extent. The Bush administration has evidently ambivalent feelings towards the relaxation of the tension across the Straits. It expressed its support to the visits of the opposition, but seemed reluctant to give credits to the success of these visits. Instead, it strongly urged Beijing to hold talks unconditionally with Chen Shuibian's regime – which is almost impossible for the mainland to accept when Chen is still adamant against the one China principle. It will be interesting to see how Washington will react towards the further developments.