

A “Crisis” Made in Beijing

Taiwan’s democracy is not the problem.

BY GARY SCHMITT

ON JANUARY 16, Taiwan’s president, Chen Shui-bian, announced the wording of the referendums he intends to put on the ballot in March, when the people of Taiwan go to the polls to elect a president. The referendums will ask whether, in the face of the missile threat from the mainland, Taiwan should purchase more advanced anti-missile weapons, and whether its government should negotiate with the mainland to create a new framework for peaceful and stable relations.

When President Chen first proposed coupling the presidential election with policy referendums, commentators in the United States and abroad accused him of playing politics. In a tight reelection contest with his Kuomintang (KMT) opponent, Lien Chan, Chen was scrambling to change the dynamics of the race. And his strategy worked. Behind in the polls last summer, Chen used the idea of holding various referendums, along with an improving Taiwanese economy, to pull even with Lien and, according to some polls, grab the lead.

But the critics also made a more serious charge: that Chen was playing the demagogue, displaying a reckless willingness to create a crisis in cross-strait relations and needlessly complicate America’s own global statecraft. In fact, Chen’s use of the referendum is well within the normal politics of a self-governing people, and the crisis he supposedly engendered is of China’s creation.

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Taiwan’s critics maintain Beijing had softened its rhetoric over Taiwan. But it never softened its actions. China has spent the past year squeezing Taipei internationally—preventing its entry into the World Health Organization, trying to downgrade its status in the World Trade Organization, and routinely frustrating its efforts to play a normal role in regional forums. Nor did Beijing slow its military build-up aimed at Taiwan. On January 13, China even resurrected its threat “to adopt all possible drastic measures, including the use of force,” unless concrete progress is made on “reunification.” The Bush administration—distracted as it is by other pressing issues, and influenced by a few senior advisers who see Taiwan more as a problem than an asset—has offered a half-hearted response to this bullying.

Not President Chen. Predictably, he responded by reasserting Taiwan’s sense of self through the referendums, and reminding the voters that his party, the DDP, strongly favors maintaining Taiwan’s self-governing status, in contrast with the KMT, whose history on this point has been less clear. Far from creating a new issue, Chen was appealing to most Taiwanese’s sense of themselves as “Taiwanese.” Only a dwindling minority see themselves as “Chinese.” This accounts for the fact that, as soon as Chen tabled his ideas, the KMT chimed in “Me, too,” insisting in speeches that their party would be just as scrupulous as he in protecting Taiwan’s sovereignty. It was at this point that Beijing started screaming about the danger

of “splittism” in Taiwan and pushing the White House to weigh in on its behalf.

Chen’s referendums thus are a useful reminder that the most serious challenge to the status quo in the Strait is China’s military build-up. Knowledgeable American military and intelligence analysts no longer assume an easy or certain U.S. victory in the event of a conflict. On the contrary, unless both the United States and Taiwan begin to take this challenge more seriously, at some point in the not so distant future, the only viable policy for avoiding war will be appeasement.

Indeed, a key reason for holding the referendum on the missile threat is to solidify a mandate in Taiwan for enhancing the island’s defenses. The fact is, Taiwan’s legislature—where the DDP has less than a majority—has been slow to act on needed acquisitions, and Taiwan’s military establishment has been somewhat sluggish in responding to the threat, as well.

None of this is particularly surprising given the newness of Taiwan’s democracy and the habits of a Taiwanese military used to running its own affairs. Washington should welcome the prospect that the people of Taiwan will send a clear message to their elected representatives and defense establishment on this critical issue.

So far, the White House’s reaction to the language of the referendums has been largely positive. If not exactly jumping up and down with enthusiasm, the administration appears to have accepted the referendums as crossing no “red-lines” that would trigger a crisis. For now, then, tensions should ease. But the administration shouldn’t kid itself. Getting past the current flap is not the same as coming to terms with its causes. China’s ambitions and nationalism are growing, not flagging. And liberal democratic Taiwan increasingly wants—and deserves—a normal role in the world community. Squaring this circle is only going to get harder. ♦