

V. Assessment of China's Soft Power Strategy Against Taiwan

Public Opinion Polls in Taiwan

“Gradually, China has realized the significance of public opinion for Taiwan’s China policy. From Taiwan’s 1996 and 2000, (2004) presidential elections, Beijing learned a serious lesson: that China’s coercive policies are counterproductive to Taiwan. In addition, Beijing is aware that public opinion in Taiwan acts as the most effective restraint on Chen Shui-bian’s (then President) policy of Taiwan independence.”¹⁶⁴

Already quoted previously in this paper, but worth mentioning again is Dr. Su Chi, secretary-general of the ROC National Security Council and a leading authority on cross-strait relations. “Actually, beginning in 2005, it has been a clear trend that they (China) wanted to try the soft line: to win the hearts and minds of the people. I think they began to appreciate the reality and depth of democracy.”¹⁶⁵

Beijing realized that their coercive tactics were not well received by the Taiwanese general public; if China were to accomplish its ultimate goal of reunification it must change its Taiwan strategy. This strategy would target the hearts and minds of the general Taiwanese public. Here, this paper will distinguish between the Taiwanese citizenry and the ROC government. As one Taiwanese lawmaker complained, the new strategy is designed to “undermine the power of the Taiwan government...it’s a poison coated with sugar.”¹⁶⁶ This thesis argues the Chinese government, knowing the depth of Taiwanese democracy and how the mechanics of democracy could be used against the ROC government, intentionally targeting the general public. This section will look to answer two main questions: Assessing the first variable of hostility vs. friendliness, what effects did China’s goodwill gestures have on the Taiwanese public? In that, did the Taiwanese respond positively to Beijing’s goodwill gestures? Assessing the second

¹⁶⁴ Chen-yuan Tung, “An Assessment of China’s Taiwan Policy under the Third Generation Leadership,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 45, No. 3, May-June, 2005, p. 355.

¹⁶⁵ Interview with Dr. Su Chi, Taipei, July 25, 2007. Quoted in Dennis V. Hickey, “Beijing’s Evolving Policy toward Taipei: Engagement or Entrapment,” *Issues & Studies* 45 no. 1 (March 2009): 39.

¹⁶⁶ Agence France Presse, “Taiwan Says Beijing Offer ‘Poison,’ Snubs ‘One-China Principle,’” April 17, 2006.

variable of independence vs. reunification, will China's soft power strategy help lead to eventual unification?

Hostility Towards Taiwan

For this part of the paper please refer to Appendix 2. For the hostility variable, the survey conducted by the Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) asked, "Do you believe that the mainland Chinese government's attitude toward the ROC government is friendly or unfriendly?" The most recent survey shows that 44.3% (including 16% responding "extremely unfriendly" and 28.3% responding "unfriendly") of the Taiwanese public believe that the mainland Chinese government is unfriendly towards ROC government¹⁶⁷. The second question the MAC asked was, "Do you believe that the mainland Chinese government's attitude toward the Taiwan people is friendly or unfriendly?" The most recent survey shows that 41.3% (including 12.9% responding "extremely unfriendly" and 28.4% responding "unfriendly") of the Taiwanese public believe that the mainland Chinese government is unfriendly towards the Taiwanese people.¹⁶⁸ As depicted in the surveys, a higher percentage of the Taiwanese public believe the mainland government is more unfriendly toward the ROC government than toward the Taiwanese people.

Albeit, in the public's perception, presently there is only a slight difference between the mainland's hostility towards the ROC government and the Taiwanese people, however if we look at long term trends then the data truly tells a different story. This brings us full circle to my central thesis: the hard power approach of Jiang Zemin resulted in a negative response from the Taiwanese public, whereas the soft power approach of Hu Jintao has resulted in a positive response from the Taiwanese public. Again referencing Appendix 2, if we look at the Jiang Zemin era (July 2001 to December 2004) we can see the continuous trend of a high perception of hostility towards the ROC government, as well as the Taiwanese public. Actually, if we closely examine the last data set from Jiang's era we see that the hostility towards the ROC government reached a

¹⁶⁷ Surveys can be found at Mainland Affairs Council, Public Opinion Surveys, available at <http://www/mac.gov.tw/english/index1-e.htm>. Please note 20.4% had no response.

¹⁶⁸ Surveys can be found at Mainland Affairs Council, Public Opinion Surveys, available at <http://www/mac.gov.tw/english/index1-e.htm>. Please note 19.0% had no response.

staggering 79.4%, while the hostility towards the Taiwanese public reached 54.8%.

These numbers measure in stark contrast to the beginning of the Hu Jintao era in May of 2005. Where the perception of hostility towards the ROC government is 45.4% and the hostility towards the Taiwanese public is 37.3%. Interestingly, this point in time coincides with the beginning of China's soft offensive against Taiwan; specifically, Lien Chan's and James Soong's visits to the mainland, whereby they received numerous concessions from the mainland government. Hu Jintao's soft power strategy maintained this trend of a lower perception of hostility all the way to the present day. So, if Hu's public relations strategy set out to win the hearts and minds of the Taiwanese public, I would assess he accomplished his goal. The Taiwanese public, generally, has a better image of China today than they did during Jiang Zemin's era. But this still leaves the independence vs. unification question open. Has Hu Jintao's strategy increased the likelihood of unification?

Independence vs. Unification

For this part of the paper, please reference Appendix 3. For the independence variable the survey conducted by the Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) distinguished between six different views: 1. Unification as soon as possible; 2. Independence as soon as possible; 3. Maintaining the status quo and unification later; 4. Maintaining the status quo and independence later; 5. Maintaining the status quo and deciding on independence or unification later; and 6. Maintaining the status quo indefinitely. Then they asked, "Which of these positions do you lean toward?" The vast majority of the public (84.7 percent) still advocate maintaining the status quo as defined in the broader sense. (including 7.6% "maintaining the status quo and unification later," 35% "maintaining the status quo and deciding on independence or unification later," 27% "maintaining the status quo indefinitely," 15.1% "maintaining the status quo and independence later,")¹⁶⁹ As the data shows, the majority of the Taiwanese public wish to maintain the status quo. If we look more deeply at the independence vs. unification question, we see a leaning

¹⁶⁹ Surveys can be found at Mainland Affairs Council, Public Opinion Surveys, available at <http://www/mac.gov.tw/english/index1-e.htm>. Please note 7.4% had no response.

towards independence with 15.1% looking to “maintaining the status quo and independence later” and 6.7% wishing to declare “independence as soon as possible,” as opposed to 7.6% looking to “maintaining the status quo and unification later” and 1.2% wishing for “unification as soon as possible.” So, my initial hypothesis has been disproved. Hu Jintao’s soft power strategy did not lead to an increase in the likelihood of unification. The Taiwanese public still wishes to maintain the status quo.

Although the vast majority of the Taiwanese public is in favor of the status quo, is it fair to assess China’s Taiwan strategy as a complete failure? As established previously in the paper, Hu Jintao has employed a new strategy towards Taiwan. President Hu Jintao declared “it is time for us to abandon outdated attitudes and beliefs. We should renounce biases that run counter to the interests of Taiwanese citizens, and start thinking in realistic ways to solve our problems so as to bring about better cross-Strait relations and development in the two communities.”¹⁷⁰ To prove Hu’s pragmatism, he has already denounced the timetable of reunification. As Chu Shulong and Guo Yuli claim, “China’s policy under Hu Jintao emphasizes pragmatism over idealism.”¹⁷¹ They go on to explain, the reality of cross-Strait relations is that neither side has the ability to change the status quo in the present, nor for a long time in the future. It is not realistic for the mainland to pursue the ideal of unification because the people of Taiwan simply will not support unification. Similarly, the Taiwanese cannot pursue independence because the majority of Taiwan’s people are not in favor of independence.¹⁷²

In conclusion, Beijing has been unsuccessful in obtaining their ultimate goal of unification. But, according to Hu’s new Taiwan strategy, which acknowledges the reality of cross-Strait relations, the current status of cross-Strait relations is acceptable to China. China can accept the status quo, just as long as Taiwan does not declare independence. Thus, Beijing cannot claim complete victory, because their ultimate goal of unification has not been realized, but they can claim a half-victory, because Taiwan has yet to declare independence, and as recent trends show will not for the foreseeable future.

¹⁷⁰ “Cautious Optimism in New Era of Cross-Strait Relations,” *China Review*, (*Zhongguo pinglun*) December 5, 2005.

¹⁷¹ Chu Shulong & Guo Yuli, “Change: Mainland’s Taiwan Policy,” 132.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 132.