



Executive Memorandum

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THE MASTER STROKE OF TAIWAN'S NEW PRESIDENT

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On May 20, 2000, Taiwan inaugurated a new president, Chen Shui-bian, the Democratic Progressive Party candidate, ending 50 years of rule by the Chinese Nationalist Party, the Kuomintang (KMT).

In the weeks between his election and inauguration, Chen was an impressively canny politician. With wise words and prudent actions, he displayed the leadership necessary to control the domestic political forces that threaten Taiwan's nascent democracy as well as the international pressures intrinsic to Taiwan. His political appointments, in particular, have calmed the political storm that ensued after Chen's surprising election. Meanwhile, Chen's overtures to the People's Republic of China (PRC) have displayed his mastery of Taiwan's uniquely delicate diplomatic situation. On June 19, Chen invited his Chinese counterpart to a summit.

Keeping House. Having won the election with a plurality of just under 40 percent, Chen immediately set about creating the island republic's first coalition government and placating domestic political forces frustrated by the election results.

Chen's Premier, Tang Fei, is a retired Air Force general, serves as a member of the KMT Central Committee, and acted as Defense Minister in the previous government. His selection eases the concerns of many senior military officers, most of whom are staunchly pro-KMT. At the same time, authorities on the mainland can take comfort from

the fact that Tang opposes formal independence for Taiwan.

New Foreign Minister Tien Hung-mao, former head of the prestigious Institute for National Policy Research and a professor emeritus at the University of Wisconsin, was an informal adviser to the former president. A veteran of international conferences and track two diplomacy, Tien is well-known in Beijing's policy-making circles—which is reassuring to the PRC—and equally well-respected in the United States.

Chen also made an inspired choice when he named the unofficial ambassador in Washington, the second most important post in Taiwan's foreign policy hierarchy. Outgoing Foreign Minister Chen Chien-jen, who served repeated tours in Washington dating back to the early 1970s, is well-known in both the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives. The job is a perfect fit for Chen, who is also a member of the KMT Central Committee. Chen's appointment, however, indicates that Taiwan's foreign policy and relations with the United States will not change abruptly.

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Dealing with the Dragon. The People's Republic of China is undoubtedly apprehensive about the new Taiwanese president. In the weeks leading up to the March election, Beijing aimed a steady stream of vitriol at Chen. In February, the PRC issued a "white paper" threatening to attack Taiwan if, in China's judgement, Taiwan delayed too long in entering reunification negotiations. Under the paper's terms, Beijing alone would decide just what was "too long," and Beijing alone would decide whether Taiwan was taking steps toward independence. Then, in the days before the election, the PRC openly called for Chen's defeat and declared him "unacceptable." Later, after Chen's victory, the PRC press said that anything seen as a move toward independence would turn the island into "a sea of fire." The PRC promised dire consequences if the new president did not accept China's version of the "one China principle": there is only one China, and Taiwan is a part of China. Meanwhile, the PRC press boasted of its latest arms purchases from Russia: advanced fighter planes, stealthy submarines, and destroyers equipped with late-model anti-ship missiles.

Chen's inauguration speech, however, demonstrated both his grasp of the issues and his hope of creating a Taiwan-China relationship based on mutual respect and understanding. Holding out an olive branch to Beijing, Chen said that the 20th century had been a tragedy for both China and Taiwan: "imperialist aggression" for the one, colonial oppression for the other. Chen praised both Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin for their efforts to create "a miracle of economic openness" on the mainland that, Chen said, should not lead to war or conquest. Instead, it should create "good will, reconciliation, active cooperation, and permanent peace, while at the same time respecting the free choice of the people." Quoting from classical Chinese philosophy, Chen reminded the Beijing leadership that "a government which employs benevolence will please those near and appeal to those from afar; and when those afar will not submit, then one must practice kindness and virtue to attract them."

Carefully choosing his words, Chen pledged that "as long as the Chinese Communist Party regime has no intention to use military force against Taiwan," he would not declare formal independence, change the country's name from Republic of China to Republic of Taiwan, or amend the constitution to enshrine his predecessor's contention that Taiwan had a "state-to-state relationship" with China. Chen's speech was doubly shrewd. First, he reassured the PRC leadership about their most worrying concerns. At the same time, he linked his pledge not to overt aggression by the Chinese, but instead to his reading of China's intentions.

Doing by Example. The island republic's efforts to play a part in international humanitarian affairs have been blocked repeatedly by the PRC. When an outbreak of serious viral disease struck Taiwan's children, the World Health Organization, under PRC pressure, provided no assistance. When Taiwan attempted to accede to United Nations conventions banning the production of chemical weapons or to human rights protocols, Beijing vetoed Taiwan's actions, and no nation objected. In his inaugural address, therefore, Chen Shui-bian pledged that not only would his government abide by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Convention for Civil and Political Rights, but it would take action to transform these international instruments into domestic law in Taiwan and, thus, formally establish a Taiwan Bill of Rights. The contrast with the PRC, which signs and then ignores these conventions, could not be clearer.

Conclusion. It is still the early days of the Chen administration, but the new administration has had an excellent beginning. The United States should celebrate not only the growth of a young democracy, but also the fortuitous ascension of someone whose master strokes may lead a region defined by misunderstanding into a new era of cooperation and peace.

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