

Ma Ying-jeou's National Day Address – A Commentary

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In his 2011 National Day Address President Ma Ying-jeou elaborated on the “Republic of China” at great length, demonstrating that he is decided to impose his historical interpretation of the “Republic of China.” Ma’s standpoint, however, is problematic in many ways.

The Republic of China that Ma referred to is obviously the state founded by Sun Yat-sen in China after his Revive China Society overthrew the Qing Dynasty. It is also the state that is in possession of Taiwan. In Ma’s mind only the Republic of China holds sovereignty and Taiwan is a part of the Republic of China. The Republic of China is a state, whereas Taiwan has the rank of a homeland and non state, it is a region ruled by the Republic of China. These views might result from the historical experiences of Ma and a small minority of people, but is certainly diametrically opposed to the life experiences of the vast majority of Taiwanese. In fact, the historical experience shared by most Taiwanese is the expulsion of the “Republic of China” (from the mainland) by the People’s Republic of China after 1949. In other words the “Republic of China” has already merged with Taiwan into one. The Republic of China’s territory is not shaped like a begonia flower, nor does it look like a mother hen (Translator’s Note: In Taiwan the territory of the Republic of China including Outer Mongolia is popularly likened to the shape of a begonia flower, the hen represents the territorial shape after the recognition of Outer Mongolia as an independent state in 1946). Its territory is limited to Taiwan and Taiwan’s official country name is Republic of China. This is the status quo and a fact. Taiwan can only embrace this fact or else the Republic of China won’t have real roots, a real people and real sovereignty.

Ma’s elaborating on the “Republic of China” in his national day address reaffirms the opinion of the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) about Ma, namely that he is a Chinese nationalist. This constitutes a situation that is hard to explain. We have a national leader, who was elected by the people of Taiwan and draws a salary from taxpayers’ money, yet he is not a Taiwanese nationalist, but a Chinese nationalist instead, who hopes for China’s aggrandizement and the glorification of Chinese culture, and is unable to forget the historic hatred toward Japan. Against this backdrop, Ma’s references to history in his national day address can be interpreted as niceties toward China, a China that threatens Taiwan.

The biggest problem with Ma's "Republic of China" concept, as used in his address, is that he forces his minority view of history and his nationalism on the majority. Things like that usually happen only in authoritarian countries. Those who cannot identify with such a perception of history are seen as failing to identify with the Republic of China. They are judged as manipulating ethnic sentiment, it's just as if a large majority of people don't count as citizens. In his address Ma mentioned that the people of Taiwan "have come to identify solidly with their nation, the Republic of China, and the ROC Constitution has long served as the bedrock of a society-wide consensus." This is not much different from Syrian President Bashar Assad who forced the will of the minority Alawis on the majority Sunnis. Identity comes from an inner sense of belonging. Consensus is built through a dialogue process. Only an authoritarian ruler will force identity and consensus on his people.

For a long time the territory of the Republic of China has been limited to Taiwan. After Taiwan was called Republic of China the people of Taiwan were still able to tolerate and pick as their president a person who claims Hong Kong as his birthplace and who calls himself a Chinese. Why is it impossible for this president, who has been popularly elected by a people of 23 million, to understand that his voters are limited to the people of Taiwan and that any positions that alienate the majority of the Taiwanese electorate are unsubstantiated and perfidious. That a president, elected by the Taiwan people, still believes that his "country" is the Republic of China, a republic that only exists in history, is what the majority in Taiwan cannot understand and forgive.

In the more than three years since Ma took power confrontation inside Taiwan has grown more severe. The crux of the problem is that Ma's national identity differs from the identity of the Taiwan people and therefore triggers peoples' misgivings. On top of that the president keeps citing different and quite controversial historical events to strengthen the notion that Taiwan is a part of China. For instance, he treated the press communique known as the Cairo Declaration like a historic document and distorted the historic truth that Japan gave up Taiwan without handing the island to any other country. The president has never tried to comprehend why the Taiwanese don't harbor any hatred against the Japanese, although they were under Japanese colonial rule for 50 years. With that regard they fundamentally differ from Ma who often mentions the Anti-Japanese War and harbors a deep hatred for Japan. The president also ignores the right of the Taiwan people to be the masters of their own house as he fails to voice any objection when

China claims that Taiwan is a part of China. As a result the confrontation mentioned earlier cannot be resolved.

Without doubt people in Taiwan have different national identities and different historical experiences. A national leader must not shirk his duty to heal rifts within the nation and to relieve historical suffering. It is because Ma denies, disregards, and fails to address Taiwan's internal divisions over identity that many have become fundamentally suspicious about his cross-strait policy. Even more deplorable is that Ma has no clue at all as to what the people of Taiwan are worrying about! For Ma the "1992 Consensus" might mean "one China, different interpretations." Yet he cannot stop China from continuing to isolate Taiwan in the international community, from claiming to represent Taiwan and wiping out the Republic of China. Consequently the international community has come to believe that Taiwan has already accepted the "one China principle."

Ma believes that his China policy is his greatest achievement since taking power. Yet he does not even dare to protest against China's blockade of Taiwan in the international community, does not dare to take a stance against China's continued military threats against Taiwan, or refute Beijing's claims that Taiwan is a part of China! As a result the sense of distrust toward our national leader is only increasing further. Under the Constitution the duties of Taiwan's president don't lie in internal government affairs, but in protecting national sovereignty and independence and preventing threats against national security. Obviously the people of Taiwan are not able to affirm Ma as a president who is capable to live up to these duties.