



Taiwan's democracy is flourishing

By Winston Dang

In his largely pro-unification essay, "Taiwan's Fading Independence Movement" (Foreign Affairs, March/April 2006) Robert Ross managed to misread Taiwan's political developments, misinterpret Taiwan's democratization process and grossly misrepresent the independence movement.

Far from "fading," or "waning," as Ross claimed, Taiwan's independence movement continues to thrive. Most recently, it even succeeded in forcing the pro-unification Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) Chairman Ma Ying-jeou to join President Chen Shui-bian and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in respecting independence as a free and democratic option for Taiwan's voters. Ma's independence pronouncement in March eloquently refuted Ross' myth of the alleged "demise" of the movement.

Ross' cardinal mistake seems to lie in his uncritical acceptance of the KMT's political rhetoric and China's propaganda. He managed to pepper an 18-paragraph paper with

14 factual errors, 16 partisan interpretations and at least two contradictions. There is no need for a catalog of such anomalies, but readers of Foreign Affairs are entitled to know some of the most glaring examples.

To begin with, Ross' understanding of and definition of the Taiwan independence movement is archaic. He fails to see that the majority of people in Taiwan already see Taiwan as an independent, sovereign state through years of peaceful, democratic evolution. With or without the change of their country's official name, the Taiwanese people consider Taiwan and China to be two separate states.

Although Ross concedes that "the independence movement enjoyed a high profile internationally," he nevertheless asserts that "it never won widespread domestic support," and "has become increasingly irrelevant." Yet, the most recent poll released by the DPP on March 13 showed that 50 percent of respondents supported independence.

Contrary to Ross' claim that the US "banned visits by Taiwan's leaders in deference to Beijing's insistence that Taiwan is a Chinese province," US laws specifically treat Taiwan as any other "countries, nations, states, governments or similar entities," despite the "absence of diplomatic relations or recognition" as codified in the Taiwan Relations Act Sec. 4(b)(1).

Former president Lee Teng-hui's 1995 Cornell University visit was overwhelmingly supported by the US Congress in recognition of his great contribution to peace, democracy and freedom, in a rousing tribute to Taiwan's "Mr. Democracy."

Ross' inability to distinguish fact from fiction in China's propaganda is also reflected in his charge that Chen continues to risk war by, among other things, "renouncing Taipei's formal territorial claims to the mainland." He claims that China has long considered such a move an act of war.

Incredible as it seems, Ross is obviously ignorant of the fact that Lee officially renounced such a territorial claim in 1991. Instead of resulting in war, as Ross predicted, Lee's renunciation was rewarded with a positive response from China and led to subsequent, more peaceful negotiations between the two sides in the following years.

Ross seems to endorse the KMT's claim of the existence of the so-called "1992

consensus," allegedly agreed to by negotiators of both Taiwan and China. Ironically, the KMT's negotiator Su Chi publicly admitted in February that he had fabricated the "1992 consensus" and apologized for that. Unfortunately, Ross seems to applaud both former KMT chairman Lien Chan and Ma for their support of the fabricated non-consensus.

Ross' misreading of China's military modernization also leads to him blaming Lee's 1995 visit to Cornell for China's accelerated "purchase of Russian submarines and advanced aircraft." Unfortunately, Ross overlooks the fact that the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) modernization programs had started in earnest following the 1991 US Gulf War, which shocked and awed the PLA.

Instead of examining the PLA's unwelcome threats to Taiwan's democracy and freedom and to the peace and stability of the Western Pacific -- which are joint security concerns of the US, Japan and other allies, Ross focuses on China's "capability to destroy Taiwan's prosperity before the United States would have time to intervene."

Taiwan's democracy is a universally acknowledged accomplishment. US President George W. Bush in his Kyoto speech on Nov. 16 last year hailed Taiwan's commitment to democracy and said that "modern Taiwan is free and democratic and prosperous. By embracing freedom at all levels, Taiwan has delivered prosperity to its people and created a free and democratic Chinese society."

Taiwanese treasure their de facto independence and take pride in their democracy, freedom and ability to choose. The majority of Taiwanese would oppose a forced annexation of Taiwan by China. A poll in late March by the Mainland Affairs Council showed that 84.3 percent of respondents agreed that the nation's future should be decided by the Taiwanese people themselves.

Ross also confuses the issue of the cause of instability in the Taiwan Strait. Contrary to his blaming the Taiwan independence movement, it is China's authoritarian regime which refuses to respect Taiwan's democracy and democratic processes, that is the problem. China's threats to use force against Taiwan should the Taiwanese make a "wrong choice" are the real cause of instability in the East Asian region.

Additionally, that same regime has repeatedly sent its submarines into Japanese territorial waters and claimed the entire South China Sea as its territory. The national

and security interests of the US, Japan and their allies would be better served if the real threats to them are correctly identified and dealt with.

As far as Taiwan's elections are concerned, all politics are local. Taiwan's election politics are a complex issue. The DPP's temporary election setbacks did constitute a message from voters, warning against the wishful thinking of trying to cooperate with the pro-unification opposition. Adherence to a "Taiwan First" policy will once again be the winning strategy.

Winston Dang is a Democratic Progressive Party legislator and the director of the party's Department of International Affairs.