JAPAN’S VIEWS OF MA YING JEOU’S ASCENSION TO POWER: AN END TO AN ILLUSION?

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Executive Summary

Japan had gotten used to a level of comfort with its Taiwan policy. From 1988 to 2008, Taiwan had been governed by either pro-Japanese regimes or regimes that understood Japanese interests well.

Because of the two Japan-friendly Lee Teng Hui (李登輝) and Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) administrations, Japan was able to play the Taiwan card with China effectively and skillfully. For two decades, Japan-Taiwan ties had settled into a comfort zone with closely intertwined economic and geopolitical interests vis-à-vis Beijing.

In some ways, the two decades had created an illusion (at least from the perceptions of right-leaning and pro-Taiwan factions in Japan) that it would always remain this way, unchanging and mandated by the will of the Taiwanese people. In other words, Taiwan’s tilt towards Japan for two decades had been taken for granted.

This equilibrium was suddenly disturbed by Ma’s presidential electoral victory on the night of 22 March 2008. Signs were well-posted about DPP’s demise with eruptions of domestic scandals within the Chen administration. Yet, the abrupt end to two decades of almost illusory smooth-sailing Japan-Taiwan relations still sent the Japanese scrambling to cope with inevitable changes that will come with Kuomintang’s (KMT) return to power.

Before his recent election as the President of Taiwan, Ma Ying Jeou (馬英九) had an ambiguous relationship with Japan; neither an anti-Japan-basher nor a pro-Japanese politician, Ma has to placate, at the same time, pro-Taiwan Japanese factions who have labeled him “anti-Japanese and close to China (反日親中 hannichi, shinchuu)”.

Ma’s difficulties with Japan showed up prominently during his visit to Japan (Tokyo and Yokohama) in July 2006 after being elected as chairman of Taiwan’s
KMT. Some Japanese Diet members expressed their reservations about Ma, accusing him of being "anti-Japanese". Japanese mainstream political arena and society’s real concern is to whom Ma gravitates closer, especially whether and how far or quickly he would go into Beijing's orbit.

Overall, Ma’s role as a balancer between Japanese and mainland Chinese interests without overly tilting towards Japan (as Lee Teng Hui did) or confronting the PRC (as Chen Shui-bian did) may do Japan-Taiwan, cross-strait or even Sino-Japanese relations a lot of long-term good. It will neturalize the complications of the Taiwan card in the trilateral relations through a Taiwan-centric policy of maintaining status quo.