

President Ma's imperfect storm

A planned visit by the Dalai Lama to Taiwan upsets China.



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If there has been one dominant theme of Ma Ying-jeou's 15-month tenure as president of Taiwan, it is the effort to improve relations with China. And it has borne fruit. Commercial, financial and travel ties are perhaps better than they have ever been since the end of the Chinese civil war in 1949 left Taiwan as, de facto, an independent country.

After eight years of worsening relations under President Chen Shui-bian of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), now the main opposition, even a Taiwan-China summit has become conceivable. Now that Mr Ma is also chairman of the ruling Nationalist party, the Kuomintang, or KMT, such a meeting could be held with Hu Jintao not as China's president, but as the head of its Communist Party.

So it seems astonishing that Mr Ma has jeopardised all this by doing the one thing most calculated to upset China: accepting a visit to Taiwan from the Dalai Lama, the exiled spiritual leader of Tibet, whom China reviles as a "splittist" when it is polite and "a jackal in monk's clothing" when it feels cross.

Yet Mr Ma has done just that. Unlike last year, when he stopped the Dalai Lama coming, on the pretext that the time was inopportune, he has agreed to a request for a visit next week, to comfort those who have suffered loss or been bereaved by Typhoon Morakot. The worst storm to hit Taiwan in 50 years, the typhoon devastated parts of the south of the island between August 6th and 9th. The final death toll is unknown, but could be as high as 650.

It was the link with Morakot that made the Dalai Lama's visit so hard to turn down, for three reasons. First, the scale of the disaster and the Dalai Lama's popularity in Taiwan are both so great that to reject the visit would seem heartless.

Second, Mr Ma personally—and his government as a whole—have been roundly criticised for their slow and inadequate response to the disaster, and in particular for initially rejecting foreign aid. Mr Ma's own popularity ratings have plummeted. When the DPP raised the question of the Dalai Lama's visit they knew this put him in a difficult position.

That was in part for a third reason: that the DPP had accused the government of being afraid to accept foreign help after the typhoon for fear of angering China, which bridles whenever Taiwan improves its official ties with any other government. The accusation was probably baseless. More likely the government had simply fallen prey to bureaucratic inertia, and to a drastic underestimate of how serious the damage had been. But it left it vulnerable to any further hints of pandering to China's whims at the expense of its own people.

China has of course responded angrily to Mr Ma's decision to accept the Dalai Lama, as it does when any foreign government gives house room to the Tibetan leader—or these days to Rebiya Kadeer, an exiled activist from China's ethnic-Uighur minority.

It is noticeable, however, that China has directed its fiercest criticism not at Mr Ma, but at the DPP, which favours Taiwan's eventual formal independence from China. It accused the party of trying "to sabotage the hard-earned positive situation of cross-straits relations".

This indicates both the greater sensitivity China has shown in recent years to Taiwan's internal politics, and the dilemma its policy always faces there. If it punishes Mr Ma by introducing sanctions or slowing down the pace of rapprochement, it would undo his government's main achievement. And the biggest beneficiary of this would be the DPP, China's enemy.

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