



The Importance of Tact

Ma Ying-jeou

PRESIDENT OF TAIWAN

The recent global downturn has darkened economic forecasts around the world, but in Taiwan, it nearly blotted out the sun. Last February, *The Economist* called the country's financial forecast "the ugliest of them all." Producing about 70 percent of the world's laptops and PDAs and 12 percent of its cell phones, Taiwan relies on the West to buy its high-tech gadgets. Unfortunately, Americans haven't been spending a lot of time at Best Buy lately. In the past few months, however, Taiwan's prospects have started to look rosier, thanks in large part to the country's new president, Ma Ying-jeou. How is he saving the country? By being the world's best marriage counselor.

TAIWAN AND CHINA— THE AWKWARD COUPLE

Technically speaking, Taiwan is a part of China, but in reality, they are two separate countries with two separate identities. And, until recently, they rarely talked to each other. Although he was successful in driving out the Japanese during World War II, General Chiang Kai-shek lost the Chinese Civil War to the internal communist forces in 1949. He then fled to Taiwan, a Chinese island 100 miles off the coast. Vowing to reclaim the mainland, Chiang Kai-shek and his band of nationalists set up a military dictatorship in Taiwan, and the island remained in a state of perpetual (if stable) martial law until 1987. For nearly half a century, capitalist Taiwan (the Republic of China) and communist China (the People's Republic of China) had virtually no diplomatic relations, and travel between the two countries was strictly forbidden. The nations had separated but refused to reconcile or get divorced. After all, reconciliation would mean one nation giving in to the other, and divorce would lead to all-out war. Even now, China has hundreds of missiles pointed at Taiwan, which they threaten to launch should Taiwan declare independence. In case you were wondering how this affects the United States, the American government has sworn to protect Taiwan in the event of an invasion. If they go to war, we would probably go along with them.

Months before his death in 1988, Taiwan's last dictator, Chiang Kai-shek's son Chiang Ching-kuo, allowed the nation to become a democracy. It was at this time that Ma Ying-jeou, the future president, first made his mark on the international scene.

Ma came from one of the families that had followed General Chiang Kai-shek to Taiwan, and Ma's father had decided that his only son's life would have national purpose. The expectations were great. Ma was forced to study Chinese classics after school every day, and he was pressured to perfect his calligraphy. Ma's father also made him run daily to rid him of any laziness.

While Ma hated every minute of it, the experience did instill a certain discipline. He obtained a law degree from NYU and a doctorate from Harvard before returning to Taiwan to teach. There, at age 37, Ma became the former dictator's protégé. The two shared a deeply held desire to reunite China and Taiwan under the banner of democracy.

Ma knew that the first step was getting the two nations on speaking terms again. Using his legal expertise, he drafted what would become known as the "1992 Consensus," a masterpiece of diplomatic ambiguity. It declared there to be only "one China," but let both countries interpret the phrase however they pleased. The flexible agreement opened up a dialogue with China that led to increased commerce between the two nations. It also helped Ma gain a reputation as a savvy politician, which, along with his general handsomeness, got him elected mayor of Taipei in 1998. (In a poll of Taipei women, asking which public figure they would most like to father their children, Ma was the resounding winner.)

Yet, mending fences with China would not prove simple. Ever since Taiwan became a democracy in 1987, there has been a sizable political

movement to break away entirely. After all, Taiwan is an open society that believes in free speech and civil liberties. China, in spite of all its economic gains, is still rife with human rights violations, from Hong Kong to Tibet.

In 2000, Taiwan elected a pro-independence president, Chen Shui-bian, and diplomacy with China took a nosedive. Both countries began saber-rattling and imposing financial restrictions on one another. Their relationship took a turn for the ridiculous in 2005, when China offered Taiwan a goodwill gift of two pandas named Tuantuan and Yuanyuan—a play on the Chinese word for reunion. Taiwan officially rejected them. As trade between the two countries waned, Taiwan's economy grew sluggish. Taiwan's ties with the United States also became strained because the American government didn't want to be dragged into a conflict with China.

REUNITED, AND IT FEELS SO GOOD

On March 22, 2008, Ma Ying-jeou was elected president of Taiwan by a wide margin, after campaigning on the idea of a "Great China market." Modeled after the European Union, it would allow the free movement of goods and capital and encourage tourism between nations. In his inauguration speech, Ma reaffirmed his belief in the fantastically vague concept of "one China," and Taiwan's relationship with China improved almost immediately. Ma was able to sign a series of agreements that increased trade and investment across the Taiwan Strait, opening up vital parts of Taiwan's service and manufacturing sectors to Chinese investors. Even more dramatically, Ma passed legislation to make

air travel between the nations possible. On July 4, 2008, a commercial airplane brought passengers directly from China to Taiwan for the first time in nearly 60 years. Now, about 3,000 Chinese tourists arrive to invade Taipei's shopping malls each day. Also, when China offered Taiwan the pandas Tuantuan and Yuanyuan again, President Ma gladly accepted them.

Improved relations with China have also translated into improved relations with the United States. Now that China and Taiwan aren't belligerent towards each other, Westerners are again seeing Taiwan as a safe place to invest their money. Unfortunately, Ma assumed office just as his country began to feel the effects of the global economic downturn. (In the first quarter of

2009, Taiwan's economy shrank by a record 10.2 percent from a year earlier.) But many economists believe that, with money pouring in from both China and the United States, Taiwan may be on the road to recovery. Will Ma's dream come true? Will China and Taiwan ever reunite under the banner of democracy? Many foreign affairs experts would tell Ma to keep dreaming. But 25 years ago, these two countries weren't talking at all; and today, they're giving each other pandas. Anything is possible. 🐼

For years, Taiwan and China weren't talking; today, they're giving each other pandas.



5. Nouri al-Maliki

THE LEAST OFFENSIVE LEADER OF IRAQ

Time magazine recently described Nouri al-Maliki as "a chameleon" with a "permanent five o'clock shadow and slack posture." The fact is, this suspicious character only became prime minister of Iraq as a result of a 2006 compromise between Shiite, Sunni, and Kurdish factions. They picked him because he was largely unknown to most people in Iraq, having spent more than 20 years in political exile, and because he held moderate stances on divisive issues. He was simply the least-offensive candidate.

Al-Maliki got into politics as a university student, joining the Dawa resistance movement, which opposed the Baathist government of Sunni Muslims and Saddam Hussein. In October 1979, al-Maliki was marked for arrest and execution, so he fled the country and moved to Iran, then Syria. After the U.S. invasion toppled Saddam Hussein in 2003, he returned and was instrumental in purging the government of former Baathist Party members. He also helped draft the new Iraqi constitution.

Since becoming prime minister, however, his style of governing has proven to be more a matter of convenience than principles. He has both criticized and praised the continuing U.S. military presence, sought conciliation with Sunni Iraqis while ordering the arrest of prominent Sunni leaders, and been both friendly and hostile to militant Shiite clerics and their militias. His political rivals are beginning to whisper that there is a new Iraqi dictator in the making.