

Perspectives on Cross-Strait Security: France

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It has been 40 years since France recognised the PRC, and derecognised Taiwan. At that time, De Gaulle's surprising and ahead of his time decision – soon to be followed by most Western countries - was criticised in Washington, now Peking's major trade partner. And, this year 2004 is, for Paris and Peking, a year of celebration, the Year of France in China and the Year of China in France. This year started, in France, by the State visit of the Chinese president, Hu Jintao, a Chinese New Year of the Monkey parade on the Champs Elysees, and many controversies...

On that occasion, president Jacques Chirac has veered the course of French diplomacy unexpectedly boldly away from Taiwan and even more towards the PRC. Receiving Hu Jintao, he went further than any Western leader in publicly condemning the referendum planned by the Taiwanese leader Chen Shui-bian – also criticised, but on more moderate terms, by president Bush – as " an irresponsible initiative ", " aggressive " and " dangerous for everybody ". He also innovated in considering as obsolete the European embargo on the sale of weapons to Peking – enforced after the Tiananmen massacre – and asked the EU to scrap it. He probably went even further than his host expected, in offering him a excessively lavish reception – which shocked many French people and clogged traffic in the streets of Paris for days – and in having him invited to speak in front of the National Assembly – an honour usually granted to democratic leaders. A behaviour many saw as unusual, exaggerated, and even humiliating, and which resulted in half of MPs', left, right and centre, boycotting the event.

An example of what could be considered as " kow-tow diplomacy " was the non invitation – under Peking's pressure – of Gao Xingjian, the 2000 Nobel Prize for literature, to the Salon du Livre, this year specially dedicated to Chinese literature, announced by Le Monde. Gao, a former dissident, is not recognised by the PRC as a Chinese writer as he asked for, and got, French citizenship.

There are several rationales to Chirac's position. First of all, his personal, and sincere, attraction for Asia – mostly Japan and China. It's an old love for Asian arts, culture ; for an Asia as seen by his former mentor and minister in De Gaulle's governments, Alain Peyrefitte, who wrote many books on China and whose line was that the Chinese, and Asians in general, were traditionally alien to democratic values.

Secondly, there is the widespread attraction for the Chinese market. And the thought – shared by many, in politics and business, in France and in all other Western countries – that, in order to grab juicy contracts and market shares, one has to avoid any controversy and do whatever the Forbidden city wishes, or whatever THEY think the Forbidden City wants. And that the Chinese will be grateful for all this support. Whereas it is often

considered by them as a sign of weakness, if not as a due mark of respect to the Middle kingdom.

This is not terribly original, and could very well describe the behaviour of most, if not all Western governments in their dealings with China and with Taiwan and in their acceptance of the " One China policy ". Thus criticising France for behaving like the others would be preposterous ; she is mainly doing openly, clumsily sometimes, what others do more quietly.

The differences are two-fold : first, Chirac's strive for a less unipolar and more multipolar world has convinced him that he needed closer links with Moscow and Peking. Which might explain his warm welcome of president Hu and his lack of public criticism of the human rights situation in China or Tibet. But he doesn't seem to have realised that, whatever sympathy China or Russia could have to his views, their primary partner remains the US. Whatever they can think of president Bush's policies.

Secondly, it could also be that there is, in Chirac's case, an irrational element. The unpredictability of a politician who sometimes gets carried away by his gut feelings, for the better but also for the worse, as we have seen in other situations, who is prone to escaping from his written notes, sometimes to his own disadvantages. The examples are many.

However, the results of this China policy has been limited. Despite these old ties and the ritual use, by Peking, of the word " friendship ", French trade with the mainland, about 1,6 billion euros in 2003, is still one third of Germany's, although Berlin has shown more restraint since former Chancellor Kohl visit to Tibet in the 80's. France is a close competitor with the UK for the position of second European exporter to the PRC. The contracts signed by Chirac and Hu had been negotiated months before. And this behaviour has coasted France a diplomatic crisis with Taiwan, another good and financially reliable client. And an image problem, even with the Chinese: one can be respected only if one behaves in a respectable way!

China is, and has been for centuries, a very special case in international relations. She is often considered by the West as we would like it to be, as a mirror of our illusions, or as she is trying – through her skillful propaganda and her political pressure – to look like. There is often a lack of objective criticism, of " seeking truth from facts " - as the Chinese saying goes – when it comes to view the situation there. Governments, politicians, businessmen want to see things in a rosy way that suits them better, because China is a great country, and a promising trade and diplomatic partner. Western businessmen and politicians seems to be as uncritically pro-Chinese as Maoists militants were in the 60's and 70's ! As if trade depended on a good behaviour towards China, specially regarding Taiwan.

But experience has proved the reverse :

- France sold six frigates (in 1991) and Mirage fighters to Taiwan without a major diplomatic crisis with Peking. The Chinese were certainly not happy, and got trade compensations, and business was not impaired.

- France's condemnation of the Tiananmen massacre, her support to students and intellectuals for escaping from the mainland and obtaining political asylum, the inclusion of Chinese dissident students in the 1989 Bastille Day bicentennial parade did not stop business. Nor was she penalised for joining the international condemnation of the repression that followed and for the international arms embargo. For two reasons: one that it was a widespread international policy. Two, because, when China needs trade, she'll buy and sell with any country, whatever it takes.

- And president Bush's policy, when he entered the White House and shifted from Bill Clinton's "strategic partnership" to a new type of "strategic competition" certainly made the Chinese leadership furious. They showed their displeasure by grounding and dismantling an US Airforce plane. But, with their traditional pragmatism, they adjusted to this new and unexpected situation, ... until 9/11 came and – due to the "war on terrorism" - US-Chinese relations went back to the status quo ante.

To conclude, lured by the scope of the Chinese market, president Chirac has abandoned France long time balanced policy to side with Peking. Whether abandoning Taipei will pay remains to be seen as China's strategy is and has always been geared by her own strategic and economic self-interest.