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The 'truce' is not all that it is said to be

By Emerson Chang 張子揚

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The administration of President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) recently told the media that it had come to an understanding over a diplomatic truce with China and that after building mutual trust, discussions on a peace accord could begin.

Regardless of whether this “understanding” is the result of a unilateral evaluation or the product of cross-strait communication, it shows that the government believes the diplomatic truce is showing some results.

The truce shows that Ma’s government has come to realize that Taiwan is no longer a big economic power and that it needs to adopt methods that are more pragmatic and suitable for a small nation.

Domestically, this may direct resources from diplomacy to urgent domestic issues. Internationally, however, it means Taiwan will not satisfy the needs of diplomatic allies, who will develop closer economic relations with China as a result.

During his first overseas visit, Ma said he welcomed these developments. Diplomats will thus be forced to sit idly by as Chinese businesspeople develop deeper economic and political relations with Taiwan’s allies.

Although a truce is simply meant to ensure peaceful survival and not to bring about “victory,” it can be an effective strategy for a weaker power if it helps consolidate support and maintain the “status quo.”

The stronger nation’s response will depend on whether it is a declining or a rising power. If it is declining, the two sides will live in peace and the “status quo” may be maintained for a relatively long period.

If, however, the stronger nation is a rising power, the time may come when it will stage a counterattack. Even so, this will allow the weaker nation to gain a few allies. The pace at which the stronger country unfolds its plans decides the length of the truce.

The government views China as a rising power, so in order to establish and then extend the diplomatic truce, it has unilaterally announced several forms of cooperation as a show of goodwill. It is also using peace talks as bait to lead China into believing that the truce is in line with its overall goals.

The key to success here is the ability to predict the opponent’s actions. However, judging from government comments lately such as “If the diplomatic truce does not work, we will just come up with something else,” it is quite clear that Ma has no idea what China has in store.

Because Ma has only just initiated his “goodwill” strategy, China is holding back and waiting for its opportunity. The “understanding” is thus an over-interpretation of the situation. China is likely to wait for Taiwan to show its goodwill on various issues to gain leverage.

Once the government is fully committed to this course of action, China will likely initiate conditional talks to eradicate the Taiwanese idea of maintaining the “status quo” indefinitely. Any effort by the Ma administration to avoid or postpone talks, or if talks break down, will see China resuscitating a diplomatic war.

The government would have a hard time dealing with a new diplomatic war. Because the diplomatic truce leaves our allies with less bargaining power, they may wait for an opportunity to retaliate. The truce also decreases the motivation among Taiwan’s diplomats to encourage Taiwanese businesspeople to invest overseas and drum up diplomatic support for Taiwan.

A truce would strengthen the pan-green camp’s ability to speak out against Ma’s pro-China policies, but it would limit Washington’s ability to help Taiwan consolidate diplomatic support. Once a diplomatic war starts, the truce would make it harder for Taiwan to consolidate relations with allies and find new ones, thus maintaining the “status quo.”

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