

## To Beijing, with calm

V R Raghavan is an Advisor at the Delhi Policy Group

**With the election of Ma Ying-jeou in Taiwan, cross-strait relations could become more peaceable** The election of Ma Ying-jeou — who belongs to the Kuomintang Party (KMT) — as the future president of Taiwan marks a watershed in north east Asia's geo-political scenario. Eight years of Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) rule in this tiny nation state were marked by heightened anxieties on cross-strait stability. The rhetorical flourishes of the outgoing Taiwanese President, Frank Hsieh, on the future status of his country, his foreign tours and his courting of political popularity — through the language of confrontation with China — did little to build stability in an already turbulent region. It had succeeded in antagonising both the US and Chinese leadership, which is testimony to a flawed policy.

Ma Ying-jeou fought the election on a platform of building stable relations with China, increasing people-to-people contact, and reinforcing two-way investment. The KMT, which had been in long hibernation as the opposition, was energised by Ma through a dramatic plan of Three No's vis-a-vis Beijing. In short, this amounted to No Unification, No Independence, and No Use of Force.

The strategy was built on retaining the status quo on Taiwan's international position, limited as it is. It was also designed to allay Beijing's sense of vulnerability on the possibility of a Taiwanese de jure break out from China's ambit. The No Force strategy was a savvy approach to place the onus of using force on Beijing, since Taiwan was hardly in a position to do so.

On a recent visit to Taipei, this writer was reminded by local experts of the impact of negative and confrontational policies on the economy. Comparisons were often drawn with GDP growth rates of Malaysia and India, and regrets expressed on the time lost and opportunities wasted by the faulty focus on geo-politics. Ma Ying-jeou and his policy think tank had, on the other hand, already begun to look at possible CBMs on which to build a new relationship with Beijing.

The Indian CBM experience in J&K, based on people-to-people contact through increased trans-LoC movement of affected citizens, found much support. Ma Ying-jeou places emphasis on greater movement between population segments of the two states.

A visit to Kinmin was indicative of the potential of this strategy. Kinmin, a small island within sight of mainland China, is an hour's flight from Taipei. Chiang Kai-shek made his last stand against the People's Republic of China on this island. In his successful defence, replete with a failed armada assault by the Chinese and other battles, he was massively supported by the US Navy and Air Force. Kinmin is dotted with impressive museums commemorating these battles.

There are also amazing under-sea tunnels where the KMT had sheltered its naval craft. Kinmin is also the single entry point for trade and tourism movement between the two states. There are dozens of ships transiting daily between the island and mainland. There are new hotels built in Taipei — awaiting mainland tourists. There is increased curiosity in the mainland vis-a-vis Taiwan's culture. There is a widespread desire in Taiwan for closer integration into China's economy.

War with China is the last thing on Taiwanese minds — even as the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Air Force flies more than a thousand combat sorties every day close to Taiwan's air space. In the main memorial on Kinmin island, there is a photograph of the young Ma Ying-jeou with Chiang Kai-shek visiting the place.

That the president-elect no longer represents an anti-China perspective but wants to build a stable future between the two states is a historic change. China's sense of vulnerability as also its commitment to its unity and territorial integrity is not to be underestimated. Its demand of the Dalai Lama — to publicly acknowledge Tibet and Taiwan as parts of China — is part of a concerted plan to combine the two flanks of its territorial uncertainties. The US has played the most significant role in Taiwan's existence as a state. From the battles on the Kinmin island, to its defence of the Taiwanese waters against Chinese muscular military moves, to arming the Taiwan armed forces, US support has been total and liberal. In this

scheme of things, US plans of engaging China to obtain a stable northeast Asian region is an important new element.

President-elect Ma Ying-jeou is seeking to build upon this emerging geo-political momentum to retain Taiwan's status quo and also increase its international space. He has the presidency and control of the legislature. There is every hope for a new and historic beginning of peace and stability in the region. There is an immediate sense of relief in major capitals that cross-strait relations will soon get on an even keel.