

INSIGHT

Damage limitation

Jonathan Sullivan says Xi Jinping's symbolic meeting with Ma Ying-jeou is Beijing's way of trying to pre-emptively constrain the DPP ahead of its likely victory in presidential and legislative elections

When Xi Jinping (習近平) and Ma Ying-jeou shake hands on Saturday in Singapore, it will be the first time in history that sitting presidents from the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China will have met each other face to face, even if they will not address each other as such. The symbolism is rich, particularly on the PRC side, where the image of a Taiwan returning to the fold is more powerful than scenes of Xi rubbing shoulders with US President Barack Obama or being received in state by the queen in Britain. The meeting is obviously a coup for Ma, a man driven by a keen sense of the Chinese nation and his personal role in its preservation. It is also great news for Beijing to serve up at home, with the *Global Times* pronouncing that "the Taiwan problem is no longer a problem".

Beyond the warm and fuzzy state media coverage, the timing of the meeting reveals a lot about the intentions behind it. We are just two months away from elections in Taiwan that will almost certainly see the Democratic Progressive Party win the presidency and a legislative majority for the first time. For Beijing, which suspects DPP president Tsai Ing-wen's "true intentions" and her capacity to keep the "secessionist tendencies" of her party's factions in check, it is

an unnerving prospect. The last time the DPP controlled the presidency, despite facing an obstructive Kuomintang/People First Party majority in parliament, Chen Shui-bian was able to widely cement the idea of Taiwan's distinctness and separation from the rest of China. Now, after eight years under a president who is unusually well disposed to the mainland and, in his first term at least, powerful enough to push through significant moves towards economic integration, the trends in Taiwanese public opinion are unpropitious for advocates of closer ties. Decades-long opinion polls show the Taiwanese have never been surer about their identity, and identification with Taiwan is unequivocal among the young. At this point, Beijing has decided to intervene.

In the short term, the prospect of Beijing's intervention rescuing the KMT, which has for months been sleepwalking towards catastrophic electoral defeat, is slim. Although the KMT recently acted to remove its duly elected presidential nominee, the unificationist Hung Hsiu-chu, the machinations needed to replace her with chairman Eric Chu appear to have been a wasted effort. Tarnished by his ties to Ma and the protracted drama over his decision to run, Chu's poll numbers are little better than Hung's. Building on historic gains in last November's local elections,

the national campaigns have thus far been plain sailing for the DPP. Tsai has staked out popular positions on China and the economy, and gave an accomplished performance on her trip to the US. She currently enjoys a double-digit lead. Given that Ma's unpopularity is mainly a product of a rush to embrace China, combined with his opaque decision-making – the sunflower movement was first and foremost about transparency in politics – it is difficult to see how a clandestinely arranged surprise meeting with the Chinese president will help the KMT at the polls.

However, taking a broader geographical and longer-term view, the meeting serves multiple ends for both parties. Ma gets his long-cherished milestone and may be able to convert it into continuing relevance after he steps down. Much more significantly, for the Communist Party, the meeting will serve to circumscribe what the DPP can do by enhancing and solidifying "international society's" perception of what the status quo in cross-strait relations is. Given that it is difficult to read a newspaper report about Taiwan without seeing the words "renegade province" or "province of China", one could say that the framing war has already been won. But the mainland will frame the Xi-Ma meeting as the embodiment of the "status quo": friendly relations, dialogue

and partnership, progress moving towards unification. The reality is nothing of the sort, but that matters less than the image and the narrative that will be constructed around it. The presentation of an "enhanced status quo" complicates Tsai's position, during the campaign but more importantly after her likely victory. Constraining the DPP, pre-emptively circumscribing its room for manoeuvre

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and limiting the "damage" that a DPP administration could do to the unification project is the aim of this meeting.

The losers in all this, surprise surprise, are the Taiwanese people. Yet, contrary to the reaction of their hyperactive politicised media, Taiwanese society appears fairly relaxed about it. Indeed, Taiwanese have reacted with remarkable equanimity considering what is, to many, the galling spectacle of a reviled leader pursuing his person-

al goals against the wishes of the majority, and witnessing an outside power conspire to influence the outcome of hard-won democratic processes. The "maturity" of this response is a resounding rebuff to Chinese, and some of the KMT elite, who complain that Taiwan's democracy is undermined by the emotional and immature nature of the people. Despite the exigencies of political competition and the heightened sense of drama that accompanies Taiwan's hard-fought elections, there is actually a high degree of consensus on Taiwan's status – functional autonomy within the framework of the ROC with future endpoints still to be decided.

The majority of Taiwanese identify themselves as Taiwanese, identify with the Taiwanese form of democracy, enjoy the freedoms of Taiwanese society and distinguish very clearly between Taiwan and the PRC. Taiwanese are angry but they also have sufficient confidence in the robustness of their democracy to let their votes do the talking. They know that, come January 16, their opportunity will come to pronounce on Ma and the KMT's eight-year tenure. The worry is that the right to sanction the KMT will be a pyrrhic victory if Taiwan's future has already been influenced by something as decidedly undemocratic as an ad hoc meeting between Mr Xi and Mr Ma.

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A sporting life for our healthy harbour

Ian Brownlee says with nature, and people, returning to the waters made cleaner by the government's sewage treatment scheme, it's time to make best use of HK's major natural asset

A quiet revolution is taking place in Victoria Harbour as nature starts to reclaim the waters. And few are aware of the significance. In September, the government started turning off the last of the sewers which had for years spewed thousands of tonnes of almost raw sewage into the harbour. This is a major step in completing the Harbour Area Treatment Scheme, which has progressively seen the construction of major infrastructure to collect sewage from Hong Kong Island and Kowloon, and send it to the massive Stonecutters Island sewage treatment works. Before 2001, the poor water quality in the harbour was an embarrassment to this wealthy city which placed so little priority on caring for the natural environment. Raw sewage flowed directly into the harbour. The poor water quality did not need technical assessment; it could be seen and smelled. Arrivals at Kai Tak airport were met with the pungent smell of pollution from the Kai Tak nullah.

In 1995, construction of stage one of the treatment scheme started with a network of very deep tunnels collecting sewage from the eastern and northern parts of the harbour, taking it to the new sewage treatment works. Operation started in 2001 and 1.4 million cubic metres of sewage were collected every day. The removal of this sewage increased dissolved oxygen in the eastern harbour by about 10 per cent and reduced levels of key pollutants – ammonia by 31 per cent; nutrients by 36 per cent; and the overall E.coli level by some 50 per cent.

This change was significant and made the harbour usable. In 2010, disinfection of discharge reduced the bacteria concentration in the western waters so that seven closed beaches in Tsuen Wan were opened to swimming between 2011 and 2014.

By 2011, the water quality in the eastern harbour had improved so much that the cross-harbour swimming race, suspended for 33 years because of pollution, was reinstated.

Since 2012, an international triathlon has been held annually off Tsim Sha Tsui East with competitors swimming in waters where few would have envisaged people would ever venture.

The harbour provides a dramatic venue for water sports and many events would love to come here

Marine life has returned to the harbour waters and is starting to thrive, increasing in both size and variety. Many fish are now seen in the Kai Tak nullah and larger fish are being caught in the eastern harbour by recreational fishermen. Corals have been found again and scientific studies have shown that a wide range of marine species have returned.

This is despite 25 per cent of the sewage from Hong Kong Island's north and western parts still flowing into prime central waters. Stage two of the scheme will address this and by the end of November the system will be fully operational and sewage will no longer be pouring into the waters off Wan Chai.

This massive change creates a great opportunity to reassess the use of the harbour as a recreational asset. The chief executive, in his 2015 policy address, instructed the relevant bureau to explore the feasibility of organising water sports activities in Victoria Harbour. Also, the remaining areas of coastal waters in the harbour presently subject to discharge of residual pollutants will be studied to remove these final problems, arising mainly from illegal discharges, to provide venues for water activities along the harbourfront.

The harbour provides a dramatic venue for all sorts of water-based sports, and there are many international events which would love to come to Hong Kong. One problem is that the design of the waterfront does not facilitate use of the water, as in the past people have been discouraged from contact with it. Future designs need to encourage people to be in and on the water.

The completion of stage two of the Harbour Area Treatment Scheme provides a statement that Hong Kong cares about the quality of its major natural asset. This could be celebrated in no better way than by having a diverse range of local and international water sports events on the harbour every weekend.

Ian Brownlee is managing director of Masterplan Limited and a triathlete who will be swimming in the harbour off Tsim Sha Tsui on November 8



Swimmers compete again in the cross-harbour race, which was suspended for 33 years. Photo: Sam Tsang



Discount drinks are nothing to cheer about for women

Julian Groves says ladies' nights don't discriminate against men, whose interests are well catered for in a society floundering with basic issues facing many women, such as childcare and poorer pay

Should Hong Kong's bars and nightclubs be allowed to charge women less than men for drinks? Are men being discriminated against because they have to pay more for their drinks? The question is not "ridiculous", as Allan Zeman suggests.

A visiting Martian might get the impression, as I often hear from men, that it is men who are increasingly the subordinate sex in society. They have shorter life spans, and are more likely to be victims of suicide. Boys perform worse than girls at school to the extent that they are now in a minority among undergraduates. There are more men than women in prison. Men are often passed over for women for jobs in the unskilled sector (cashiers, waiters and shop assistants). And there is no men's commission.

But looking at these facts in isolation obscures a larger picture. In whose interests is it that bars have large numbers of women whose alcoholic consumption is unfettered by budgetary constraint? Men's or women's? Bars are run as businesses and their owners know they have to attract a large number of female clients, who might not ordinarily frequent them, especially if they are packed with men. Without the

women, the men may not come. We know from sociological studies that men's higher propensity to commit suicide is related to their isolation from family, friends and the community – something women, because of their traditional roles as homemakers, know how to mitigate. Men encourage each other to be independent; the silent and strong sex. To share your feelings is to risk being called a "wimp". Women rarely use such language. They are more likely to say that they prefer a sensitive man who shares his feelings. Our culture of masculinity encourages competition and even aggression among men, which often gets them in trouble with the law.

Employers in the service sector know men would not be happy with the low pay and poor conditions that women endure. They figure women, particularly those bearing the costs of childcare alone, will compromise, settle for lower wages and accept part-time work. Regardless of their achievements in even the toughest of sports, we still think women need to have physical obstacles, such as doors, removed from their paths. Harmless, I agree. But this thinking has often been to men's advantage. Concerns about the physical limitations of women

have been used to keep them out of many jobs we now know they are perfectly capable of doing equally as well as men. The assumption that men are material providers, while women have to rely on men's generosity (or in this case, discounted drinks) has similarly limited opportunities for women. Such beliefs are an important part of masculine identity. They work to the advantage of men, not women.

Should we have a men's commission? I suggest we already do: it's called the Hong Kong government. Over 80 per cent of our legislators and Executive Council members are men. And although there's something called an "Equal Opportunities Commission", it still hasn't figured out how to provide adequate childcare for working parents without still relying on women – poor women from overseas. From this angle, it looks like men as a whole are doing pretty well. If it were men who bore children, the problem of childcare for working parents would have been resolved years ago. Companies would boast hi-tech day-care facilities for employees, as they do with gymnasiums and sports clubs.

I agree it's time to abolish ladies' nights. They are discriminatory and unjust. But not against men. And almost certainly not at the behest or to the benefit of women.

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Cities are a global issue

Joan Clos says the challenge for China is to urbanise in a way that reaps the most benefits for its citizens but does the least harm to the planet

China's urban transformation over the past three decades has been impressive. The impact on the economic and social prosperity of its citizens has been remarkable; 500 million people have been lifted out of poverty and over 260 million people moved from agriculture to more productive activities.

This shift towards industrial manufacturing and services has increased employment and led to a higher quality of life. Indeed, high rates of growth in both China's GDP and urban population have been the trends that marked the process. Urbanisation and industrialisation have been the engines of growth, innovation and job creation in China.

Today, China continues to push forward the largest urbanisation process in history. The majority of the Chinese population will live in urban areas by 2050. China has an enormous opportunity to continue driving economic growth while improving social inclusion and protecting local, national and global ecosystems. The main issue for China now is to urbanise in such a way that it obtains the maximum benefits possible for its citizens and the planet.

The Chinese model covers new policies on land, mobility, improving the housing system and starting the building of "green" cities. Despite progress in environmental policies, the cost of pollution to the nation's health is rising as China's population is

increasingly concentrated in cities. China is not alone. Cities contribute up to 70 per cent of the world's total greenhouse gas emissions.

More than ever, the power of well-planned urbanisation for development is well recognised. The recent adoption of Agenda 2030, a universal document that consists of 17 sustainable development goals and 169 targets to end poverty and improve the lives of the world's population by 2030, is a step forward in this sense. The new agenda recognises the vital role of urbanisation in achieving sustainable development. This role is reflected strongly in goal 11, to "make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable". If we want to achieve it, we hope for the support of China.

Urbanisation is at a crucial crossroads, for both China and the globe. Next October in Quito, the UN is organising the Habitat III conference on housing and sustainable urban development. This is an exceptional opportunity to decide on a new urban agenda promoting equity, welfare and shared prosperity. I encourage the Chinese government and local authorities to take an active part in the preparations for the conference. Investing in sustainable urbanisation in China is investing in the wealth of future generations.

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