

Beijing and Taipei Drop the Torch

Friday 29 June 2007, by [O'NEILL Mark](#) (Date first published: 7 May 2007).

Politics may make it impossible for Taiwan's athletes to compete in the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

The next victim of the delicate politics of nationalist sentiment in Taiwan may be the island's participation in the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

With Beijing in a constant lather over the resurgent nationalism of President Chen Shui-bian's government and elections on the horizon in Taiwan, the Olympics have become very touchy indeed.

On April 27 Taiwan rejected China's plan to send the Olympic torch to the island on April 30 next year. The head of its Olympic committee said that the plan "intends to compromise our sovereignty and is unacceptable to us."

That is because the torch would enter Taiwan from Ho Chi Minh City and leave it for Hong Kong, implying that Taiwan is part of China. The government insists that it both enter and leave via a third country.

The Beijing Olympic committee said that Taiwan's Olympic committee had initially agreed to the route, but had been overruled by the government. The two sides are also in dispute over the name under which Taiwan's athletes would take part in the games - Beijing wants 'Chinese Taipei', Taiwan wants 'Taiwan'.

The issue has split the island's two main political parties. The Kuomintang say they know how to deal with Beijing and they are telling the government not to mix sport and politics. Taipei Mayor Hau Lung-pin, a member of the Kuominang, said he would welcome the Olympic torch. "We will take the Olympic torch to the top of the world's tallest building, Taipei 101, and let the world know Taipei," he said.

By contrast, the ruling Democratic Progressive Party presents itself as the defender of the island against a hostile, aggressive mainland. They believe they must hold firm on the issue of sovereignty in the face of Beijing's constant desire to whittle away at the island's breakaway status.

With legislative elections coming at the end of the year and presidential polls in 2008, the political climate is sure to heat up - and Taiwan's athletes may pay the price. If Taipei cannot settle the issues of the torch and the terms of its participation at the Olympics, then its athletes may not take part at all.

As has happened for decades, each side will blame the other.

In April, during his fourth visit to the mainland in two years, Lien Chan, the Kuomintang honorary chairman, was treated like a head of state, as Beijing used the party's desire for closer ties to chip away at Chen's government. Lien did everything to emphasise his Chineseness, attending a ceremony in Xinzheng, Henan province, to honor the Yellow Emperor, supposedly the ancestor of all

Han Chinese.

Then he went to Shenyang to sweep the tomb his mother's ancestors. Mom, who is 100 and lives with Lien in Taipei, has not been to Shenyang since fleeing the city after its capture by the Japanese in September 1938.

Finally, as if he was a head of state, he attended the third cross-straits economic, trade and cultural forum in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, attended by 500 delegates from both sides of the divide, and met with President Hu Jintao. At the end of the forum, Beijing announced a series of concessions to Taiwanese companies and individuals – but it is uncertain if any of them will be implemented because Lien and his party do not represent the government.

In Taipei, the Mainland Affairs Committee said that Beijing had imposed the pre-condition of 'one China' on the concessions and that was unacceptable.

On May 2, Ma Ying-jeou, a Kuomintang candidate for president in 2008, said that, if elected, he would abolish restrictions that keep Taiwan companies from investing more than 40 per cent of their net worth in the mainland and impose export controls only on cutting-edge technologies. He would also allow large number of Chinese tourists to visit Taiwan, to stimulate the economy.

The government says it needs to keep the controls in place to preserve the economy from excess dependence on the mainland, with the attendant strategic and military risks. But with 15 percent of Taiwan's 23 million people living, investing or working in China, and more than 90 percent of its major companies invested there, the reality is a dependence – and relationship – that cannot be denied.

But it is a political game on both sides of the strait and it is hard to imagine relations improving if the two governments cannot even figure out how to carry the torch.

P.S.

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