CNN Interview with President Ma

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Christiane Amanpour: To discuss what he has called a historic juncture in relations with China, we’re joined from Taipei by the President of Taiwan, Ma Ying-jeou. Thank you so much indeed for joining us, Mr. President.

President Ma Ying-jeou: Thank you, Ms. Amanpour.

Amanpour: Let me get straight down to brass tacks. There are many in Taiwan who worry that you are not “pro-independent”—that you have not said once since getting elected that Taiwan is about having an independent nation. And they’re concerned about that.

President Ma: The Republic of China on Taiwan has been an independent sovereign state for 99 years. There’s no reason to declare independence twice. We will celebrate our…[interjection by Amanpour]

Amanpour: Would you ever do it again? I mean, would you reassure, since … [President Ma cuts in]

President Ma: No. As I said, we have been an independent sovereign state ever since 1912. Next year we will celebrate our centennial. So there’s no reason for this country to declare independence again.

Amanpour: Well, clearly, Mr. President, a lot of Taiwanese expect to hear it from you, or at least to hear a stronger explanation of why you don’t say that. And there are many Taiwanese who said they’re concerned that you are perhaps compromising Taiwan’s sovereignty in order to be in the good graces of China. How do you answer that to your people?

President Ma: All these accusations are ungrounded. In the last two years, we have concluded 12 agreements with mainland China on cross-strait flights, food safety, opening Taiwan to mainland tourists and mutual judicial assistance. In all these agreements, we not only built friendship, but solved many problems that were brought to Taiwan as a result of fast-growing trade and investment relations with the Chinese mainland. All these agreements contribute to prosperity and stability in Taiwan, and nothing in this agreement compromises Taiwan’s sovereignty or
autonomy. And all these agreements are open documents. Everybody…

[Amanpour cuts in]

Amanpour: Well, how do you explain…[pauses]

President Ma: Please, go ahead.

Amanpour: Well, I just wanted to say, if that’s the case, how do you explain your rather low approval ratings. I mean, even after your latest debate, they’re not up to even 40 percent. About 38 percent, according to polls, support you. Some 43 percent say they’re dissatisfied. How do you explain that?

President Ma: Well, our economy is recovering, but it has not recovered to the state before the financial tsunami resulted from the U.S. economy. So we’re trying to do more. And this year, the International Monetary Fund has forecast that we will have 6.5-percent growth in our GDP. So I’m sure, when our economy becomes better, the situation will improve as a result.

Amanpour: Mr. President, one of those issues that you hope will show results—tangible results—is a new agreement that you hope to sign with China, ECFA. And yet your people are saying that they don’t understand it and they think that that will make you too reliant on mainland China. How are you explaining it to them?

President Ma: Actually, after the Sunday debate with the opposition leader, the people who understand and support ECFA has increased much more than there was before. So I’m very confident that when we continue to explain what it is, in the future, people will support our policy. And this policy will be very beneficial to Taiwan, not only to increase exports, but to attract more foreign direct investment from abroad. So this is the only way Taiwan can be merged with the regional economic integration in East Asia. I have explained it many, many times. I will do more to let people understand and support it.

Amanpour: Could you then, just now, take the opportunity to, in a nutshell, explain what it is?

President Ma: Yes, it has three parts. One is tariff reduction, the second part is investment guarantee, and the third part is protection of intellectual property rights. If we could tap that, then in the future, we not only will have better trade relations with the mainland, but we could also use that
as a step to negotiate with other major trading partners for a free trade agreement, so that will give Taiwan the opportunity to be even more globalized as a result. So this is a very important step for Taiwan to join the globalization process.

**Amanpour:** Could I just—I want to put up a graphic, a quote, of what the President of China, Hu Jintao, has said after your election. He basically said, and he called on China and Taiwan to “build mutual trust, lay aside disputes, seek consensus, and shelve differences and create a win-win situation.” Do you agree with that, and how will you do that, beyond ECFA?

**President Ma:** In addition to economic relations, we also want to promote cultural exchange with the mainland. For instance, we have already allowed hundreds of thousands of mainland tourists to Taiwan. And they will appreciate—actually, they do appreciate—the way of life in Taiwan—freedom, democracy and prosperity. On the other hand, we also hope to exchange in the educational area. So we are hoping we could have mainland students, college students, come into Taiwan to study. So this is a very important part of our interaction, not just trade and investment.

**Amanpour:** And so, under what conditions would you agree to meet with the president of China?

**President Ma:** I have no plans at the moment to meet with leaders from mainland China. I think the most important thing for Taiwan and for mainland China to do is to start with economic agreements, cultural exchange, educational exchange, to lay the groundwork for further relations. I think it is too premature for the top leaders of the two sides to meet at this moment.

**Amanpour:** Many have sort of posited, floated the idea that perhaps you would accept an invitation to the APEC Summit that’s hosted by the United States next year. Apparently it’s going to be in Hawaii. Would you accept such an invitation? Obviously at that place, so would the president of China be there.

**President Ma:** This is a hypothetical situation proposed by an American scholar. We haven’t gotten any information from the authorities of APEC on this issue. So as I said, as far as the current situation is concerned, it is too premature for the top leaders to meet. We do have other more
important, more fundamental things to discuss before the meeting of leaders from the two sides.

**Amanpour:** But do you think that between now and then, if you were offered a formal invitation—and as you say, you would need more details about such an invitation—is it something that you would consider? Would you accept such an invitation to APEC?

**President Ma:** As I said, this is really very hypothetical because, in the past, we have been unable to send high-level representatives to this APEC meeting. I don’t see any possibility in the near future that the situation would change. So that’s what I said, this is very hypothetical.

**Amanpour:** All right. Let me ask you about a future political situation, if you like. What is your view and your position on the possibility of “one nation, two systems”? For instance, as China and Hong Kong have. Would that work for China and Taiwan?

**President Ma:** No. I don’t think that is a good formula for Taiwan, because Taiwan is very different from Hong Kong. Taiwan is a democracy. We elect our own president, our own national parliament, and we run our own business. We want to have closer trade and investment relations with the mainland, but, certainly, we want to have our own way of life.

So, when I was inaugurated nearly two years ago, I have said very clearly that we will maintain the status quo—namely, “no unification, no independence, no use of force” under the framework of our 1946 Constitution. So, this is very important, that the mainstream public opinion in Taiwan supports maintenance of the status quo. We don’t believe that the “one country, two systems” formula should apply to Taiwan, and it has very little market in Taiwan. But the current, current state of relations of maintaining the status quo and increased trade and investment and cultural exchange are actually beneficial to both sides of the Taiwan Strait. So I believe, continuing the current mode of interaction is in the best interests of the two sides.

**Amanpour:** And, as you know, many people around the world look at China, including here in the United States, and see a growing powerhouse—an economic powerhouse, a political powerhouse. Some are concerned about its growing military capabilities. Do you consider China to be a growing military threat, especially with its continued spending?
President Ma: Mainland China has been a military threat to Taiwan for 60 years. The reason we decided to improve relations with mainland China is to try to reduce the tension across the Taiwan Strait by means other than military. And, as far as we are concerned, in the last two years, we have been able to ease that tension and make the region much more peaceful than it was before. So I think it’s very important to ease the tension, to reduce the atmosphere of hostility. But the way of doing that is not necessarily to engage in an arms race. I think we have other ways to reduce the tension and we have done it, actually.

Amanpour: Mr. President, stand by. We’re going to take a break and when we come back, we will talk more with President Ma about relations with the United States and other issues of mutual interest. We’ll be right back.

[President Obama’s voice mixed over music]
“My administration fully supports a one-China policy as reflected in the three joint communiqués that date back several decades in terms of our relations with Taiwan as well as our relations with the People’s Republic of China. We don’t want to change that policy and that approach. I am very pleased with the reduction of tensions and improvement in cross-straits relations.”

Amanpour: And joining us again from Taipei is the President of Taiwan, Ma Ying-jeou. Thanks again for joining us. I wanted to carry on this conversation with the U.S.-Taiwan relationship—but of course, the U.S.-China relationship. Many have thought over the past years and decades that this is the issue that would cause a conflict, or could cause a conflict, between China and the United States. Do you think that is still a realistic concern?

President Ma: Yes, it is a real concern, but it was a concern. In the last two years, what we did in improving relations with the Chinese mainland has already defused that tension. In other words, we have been able to reach many agreements with the mainland to, in fact, [have] more extensive trade, investment and cultural exchange. So the tension across the Taiwan Strait, which used to be a flashpoint in East Asia, now is a place of peace and prosperity. So, the relationship among mainland China, the United States and Taiwan has been the best in 60 years.

Amanpour: On that note, you were talking before we went into a break for the need to de-escalate any notion of an arms race. And of course,
recently, there was announced more than 6 billion dollars of arms from the United States to Taiwan, and that obviously caused a fairly stiff response in Beijing. And I want to play you what the Chinese foreign ministry spokesman said about that:

[English translation superimposed over original Chinese recording]

“The US conduct severely harms China’s core interests and China-U.S. ties. The cooperation between China and the United States on international and regional issues will be unavoidably affected. The United States bears the entire responsibility for this.”

Amanpour: So, President Ma, that is the view from Beijing. And I raise that because it’s also an increasing question in the United States. I want to read for you what a former U.S. official has said about the relationship: This is David Rothkopf talking in Foreign Policy magazine earlier this year, saying that “Taiwan is small. It offers us very little in the way of true strategic advantages. In the final analysis, it really is China’s for the taking, and it is certainly not worth going to war for, regardless of what U.S. rhetoric has been for decades.” What is your response to that?

President Ma: We didn’t ask the U.S. to get involved in a [war] with mainland China. We are only seeking the procurement of arms of a defensive character. Actually, what the U.S. did was in accordance with the Taiwan Relations Act, which is a federal law of the United States. And we need those weapons of a defensive nature to defend Taiwan’s democracy. And this is actually not only in the interest of Taiwan, but also in the interest of the United States. The view of American scholar does not reflect the view of the administration.

Amanpour: And yet many Americans are saying, you know, is it really worth—even how extended America is in Iraq, in Afghanistan, fighting terrorism—is it worth the risk of going to war on behalf of Taiwan? So again, the question that I want to ask you is: What do you think will happen if the U.S. started to reduce arms sales to Taiwan in order to improve relations with China? And that’s your goal, too—to improve relations with China.

President Ma: Well, if the U.S. reduces arms sales to Taiwan below the current level, it will reduce confidence in this part of the world. Taiwan needs the arms to defend its country and its democracy. But in the last two years, as a result of our efforts to improve relations with the Chinese mainland, we have already defused the tension to a great extent. And this is more important than the reduction of arms. Actually, the supply of
arms by the United States to Taiwan increases Taiwan’s confidence and sense of security, particularly when Taiwan engages the Chinese mainland in talks on trade and other matters. Taiwan wants to negotiate from a position of strength, not weakness. That is why Washington understands very well that arms sales will help keep regional peace rather than the other way around.

Amanpour: Obviously, you’ve spoken about the Chinese missiles pointed towards Taiwan and you have talked about that situation. But let me ask you—just a quick response, if you can to the question that’s sometimes is posed here: Why should Americans risk so much on behalf of Taiwan?

President Ma: As I said, at the moment the risk for the United States is the lowest in 60 years. In the past, actually, the risk was much higher. But as a result of our efforts to have rapprochement with the Chinese mainland, the tension has been greatly reduced. That is why the current administration, like the previous administration, is very pleased with what has happened in the last two years. And we will continue to reduce the risk so that we will purchase arms from the United States, but we will never ask America to fight for Taiwan. This is something that is very, very clear.

Amanpour: All right. Well, let’s move on to the issue of human rights, which is a big global issue and one that means a lot to the United States. [President Ma: Right.] Do you believe that the world, that the United States, pays too much attention or too little attention to human rights violations in China?

President Ma: It is American policy to include the element of human rights in its dealings with its friends. I think this is a policy that has been decided and determined by the American government and American people. We appreciate that value. We also share that value. But it is a policy for the United States to decide. And in my government, we also attach to human rights a lot of importance because we also support the same value.

Amanpour: Let’s talk about another issue of contention between China—between China and the world, really—and that is Tibet. Do you think the issue of Tibet, autonomy there, and the issue of the Dalai Lama, receive, or should receive, more or less attention from the United States?
President Ma: It is also the policy of my administration to support autonomy for Tibet, and we also support the talks between [the] Dalai Lama and the mainland Chinese authorities. I think that is the only way to find a solution to their problems.

Amanpour: And regarding, you know, Internet freedoms and other such issues in civil societies, is that something that worries you about the policies of Beijing. You’ve seen the latest crisis between, let’s say, Google and the authorities in China.

President Ma: Yes, I think in some of these issues, we do express our opinions on these issues—not only on human rights, but also on other freedoms—because we are located very close to mainland China. Obviously, we are also concerned about issues in this regard. And on many occasions, we have expressed our concerns on human rights issues on the mainland.

Amanpour: And in terms of the sort of dominant powerhouse in Asia, right now, of course, the United States has a huge amount of diplomatic, economic and military power. When you look ahead, do you think the U.S. will maintain that role in Asia, its lead there? Or will China take over?

President Ma: I think the United States will continue to maintain its presence in East Asia. Its security pact with Japan is vital to regional peace and stability. Also, its sales of arms to Taiwan is also very important for the maintenance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. So countries in this region continue to welcome the American presence. And I think, on the other hand, countries like the Republic of China also wants to do our part in maintaining peace and stability by reducing the risk and tension.

Amanpour: But, my question was, who do you think will be the lead player in your region in the near-to-mid future? The U.S. or China?

President Ma: As I said. I think at the moment, the U.S. plays, certainly, a bigger role. But I think in the future the situation might change as a result of military imbalance. That is why I think the countries in the region should work together to reduce tension, and to increase stability and peace.

Amanpour: And can I ask you about your international support? In the past, obviously, you’ve been able to count on a lot of support from
countries in many parts of the world, including in Latin America, including in Africa. But that seems to be diminishing as China has so much more interaction, investment activity in places such as Africa and Latin America. Are you concerned about the diminishing amount of support for you and the rising amount of support for China around the world?

President Ma: Well, that is always our concern. That is why we try very hard to maintain close ties with the 23 diplomatic allies of my country. I’ve traveled five times the last two years to maintain these ties. And as far as our international participation is concerned, in the last two years, Taiwan has been able to expand international participation. For instance, we joined the Government Procurement Agreement last year. We attended the World Health Assembly last year. And we are trying to make contact with the UNFCCC and International Civil Aviation Organization. So, given the new world situation, it is getting difficult to do that, but we still manage to make a better performance than we did in the past.

Amanpour: All right. Mr. President, and may I read you one final question from a Chinese viewer on CNN.com? They want to know will President Ma consider creating a Twitter or Facebook account so that the Chinese people across the strait can have an opportunity to interact with you?

President Ma: This question has been asked by people in Taiwan, but I really [don’t] have that much time to do that. But I do have a Web site at the Presidential Office. And I have a program, a weekly program, to talk about my views on things everyday. So if they go to my Web site, they will understand my views. They could also leave a message at my Web site. I will try my best to answer.

Amanpour: On that note, President Ma Ying-jeou, thank you so much for joining us on this program!

President Ma: Thank you, Ms. Amanpour.