

There has been no hint that China is capable of taking steps that might improve its public standing in Taiwan, by allowing the island greater representation in the United Nations or other international organizations, for example, or signaling a willingness to treat it as an equal in a future political union.

In many ways, the Communist Party's approach to Taiwan has mirrored its policies in volatile Chinese territories like Hong Kong, Tibet and Xinjiang, where it opens its checkbook to distribute economic benefits but refuses to compromise on political matters.

But Taiwan is different — beyond Beijing's rule — and the problem that China faces there is an example of the limits of its heavy reliance on trade and investment to project influence overseas. Even as it has assumed the role of a global power, its one-note focus on economic relations has sometimes backfired, with resentment against Chinese investment simmering from Southeast Asia to Africa.

Since his election in 2008, Mr. Ma has made more than 20 deals to expand commerce and interaction with mainland China. But student-led demonstrators occupied Taiwan's legislature for nearly a month last year to block passage of a new trade bill that he championed, a protest that became known as the Sunflower Movement and that unnerved Beijing.

The lesson for the Chinese leadership was that “the usual influence of the mainland — more money, more investment — has less impact,” said a senior Asian diplomat following cross-strait relations, who requested anonymity to speak freely about a subject the Chinese consider sensitive.

Joseph Wu, secretary general of the D.P.P., said the meeting scheduled for Saturday represented a shift by Beijing but was also a “double-edged sword.”

“China is trying to woo Taiwan,” he said. “However, I think the resentment among regular people for China is quite deep. People's dislike of President Ma is also deep. For those two to get together in Singapore may not change people's minds.”

Part of the problem in Taiwan has been slow growth; gross domestic product contracted in the last quarter, despite all the Chinese tourism and trade. Many are worried that investment in China has undermined Taiwan's own industries. And even when the island's economy performed better, wage growth stagnated, with the benefits of cross-strait trade going disproportionately to Taiwan's business elite.

The larger concern, though, has been China's intentions. Beijing considers Taiwan to be Chinese territory that must be reunited with the mainland, by force if necessary, and the demonstrations against Mr. Ma's policies have been driven by fear that China is using trade to achieve what decades of military bluster could not.

Both sides have said Saturday's meeting is meant to consolidate peaceful relations and ensure future prosperity. "This meeting is positive, for Taiwan, for the mainland, for the world," Mr. Ma said in a news conference on Thursday,

But many in Taiwan view the meeting as an attempt to influence the vote in January. Beijing has tried before to dampen popular support for independence-leaning politicians in Taiwan. It lobbed missiles into waters near the island ahead of the 1996 election. And it lavished attention on the Kuomintang to undercut the former president, Chen Shui-bian, whose moves to formalize Taiwan's separate status from China angered Beijing and, at times, Washington.

"China has always tried to use different methods to influence Taiwan," said Lin Fei-fan, one of the leaders of the Sunflower Movement. "Most people in Taiwan understand why they want to meet now," he added.

Given that the Kuomintang's candidate, Eric Chu, is trailing Ms. Tsai in the polls, the Chinese government sees a meeting with Mr. Ma as a chance to shake up the race, said Li Jiaquan, a retired Taiwan researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing. "We chose the timing because the situation for K.M.T. is critical right now," he said.

"The meeting is to inspire the routed K.M.T.," he added, "and on the other hand, suppress the charge of the D.P.P."

But Mr. Li acknowledged the gambit had little chance of success with an electorate in Taiwan that has soured on closer ties with the mainland. "I can't say it would really work, but we need to do something to humble the D.P.P.," he said.

Many analysts in Taiwan predict the meeting will only hurt the K.M.T. further. Ms. Tsai has already gone after Mr. Ma on the issue, denouncing his surprise announcement of the meeting and warning him against making concessions that could undermine Taiwan's status.

"The way to win an election in Taiwan is to be the less dangerous of the two options," said Nathan F. Batto, a political scientist at Academia Sinica in Taipei. The D.P.P. was voted out of power after Mr. Chen's efforts to assert Taiwan's sovereignty and rile China, he noted. "But over the past four years, I think Ma Ying-jeou defined himself as the more dangerous option. He engaged China too eagerly."

Others said the criticism of Mr. Ma overlooked how his policies had drastically reduced tensions and the potential for armed conflict between China and Taiwan. "He deserves more credit than he gets," said Kai-Fu Lee, a prominent investor from Taiwan and former head of Google in China.

The D.P.P. says it would be open to meetings with Mr. Xi, too, if it wins in January, but it has rejected Beijing's insistence that both sides first agree that Taiwan is part of "one

China.” It has also called for broad transparency and legislative oversight of meetings with mainland officials.

Beijing has tried to hedge for the possibility that the D.P.P. will return to power in Taiwan, inviting several party figures to China for meetings with local officials in recent years. But if Ms. Tsai is elected as expected, there is little doubt that she will slow its efforts to bind Taiwan more closely to the mainland economically.

That leaves Mr. Xi with limited options. “This line of united-front thinking has failed,” wrote Li Ping, a journalist for Apple Daily, a newspaper in Hong Kong, referring to China’s strategy of using economics to pursue its political goals. “But the Communist Party has never engaged in introspection.”