



SWP



**13th Annual Conference on  
“The Taiwan Issue in China-Europe Relations”**

Shanghai, China

October 9 – 11, 2016

*A workshop jointly organised by the German Institute for International and Security Affairs / Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Berlin and the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS), Shanghai. With friendly support of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (Shanghai Office).*

Discussion Paper

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**Rejuvenating Taiwan's Foreign Policy**

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## Rejuvenating Taiwan's Foreign Policy

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During less than four months in office, the Tsai government had to cope with a number of challenges, both expected ones as well as unexpected ones. While internally, President Tsai has been striving to develop a collective voice to fulfil her promise to bring significant changes, she has been very careful to refrain from changes and safeguard the continuity in Taiwan's foreign policy, as several of her administration's decisions have already shown. Hopefully, her overarching goal to maintain the status quo in the Taiwan Strait and her so far "practiced actions"<sup>1</sup> will gain Beijing's trust and foster a warmer environment in the future.

### Returning to winter

The change in cross-strait policy from the Ma Ying-jeou government to the Tsai Ing-wen government has undoubtedly been the most significant immediate impact on Taiwan's internal and external relations. The Ma administration hoped that improved relations with China will open doors for Taiwan in the international arena. However, Beijing's goodwill was very limited and in spite of some positive developments, it did not meet Taiwanese expectations. Consequently, many Taiwanese started to accuse the Ma administration of only serving Beijing's agenda and deepening the international community's perception of Taiwan being a part of China and thereby jeopardizing Taiwan's autonomy. As a result, the support rate for the KMT drastically fell. Accordingly, President Tsai's victory had been expected for several months prior the Election Day, both in Taiwan and China.

In order to consolidate public support, amass political power and maintain stability, the DPP has moved toward the centre of the political spectrum and adopted a more moderate and diverse policy stance over the issue of self-determination and independence. As cross-strait political analysts anticipated, President Tsai stopped short of accepting the controversial term "1992 Consensus", whereas Beijing fulfilled its threats to suspend all official communications such as SEF-ARATS and MAC-TAO links, as well as halted exchanges between the DPP-governed municipal and county officials. Cross-strait relations have, as predicted, entered a period of the "Cold Peace".<sup>2</sup> While the

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<sup>1</sup> Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) spokesperson said that "Taiwan must clarify this issue with practical action," *Xinhua*, (25.5.2016), [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-05/25/c\\_135387722.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-05/25/c_135387722.htm)

<sup>2</sup> "In dealing with China, DPP cannot evade '1992' consensus: scholars," *CNA*, (21.8.2015), <http://focustaiwan.tw/news/aip/201508210026.aspx>

DPP's dominance will make policy implementation easier on the domestic front, the new government might have less room to manoeuvre on the international front.<sup>3</sup> Should Beijing perceive Tsai administration's moves as challenging its "one China" policy, the external pressure will grow even stronger. Whether it will attempt to "freeze" Taiwan's engagements in international organizations and corner Taiwan more forcefully in the international arena is to be observed very soon.

### Energizing foreign policy directives to keep warm

Taiwan's primary long term foreign policy goal is to gain international recognition of its sovereignty and prevent China from using force to take Taiwan. Therefore, it strives to strengthen both formal and informal relations with nations and increase Taiwan's global visibility in various international organizations and venues. As China continues to block Taiwan's engagement in the international arena, Taipei needs to insert tremendous energies to finding alternative channels to advance national interests and prevent further diplomatic isolation. Even more so during the "Cold Peace": As long as Beijing insists on its "one China" precondition, Taiwan will have to dress warm and keep more active to survive. It is yet to be observed whether Beijing will re-launch a diplomatic battle, as already signalled by embracing Gambia in the aftermath of Taiwan's general elections. To be prepared for such a scenario, the Tsai government has already invested much energy into strengthening ties with the United States, Japan, the leading member states of the European Union and other like-minded democracies from around the world.

Another government priority relates to diversifying economic and trade ties and pushing for free trade negotiations to ensure that Taiwan will persist to be a viable economic entity. Only an economically strong and thriving Taiwan will lure international support and entice nations to develop stronger substantial relations with it. Priority focus has been set on expending trade exchanges with emerging economies in South and Southeast Asia, as well as Australia and New Zealand. To set up new mechanisms and incentives to help Taiwan's firms to develop markets in the region as well as to boost bilateral interaction and cooperation of human resources, education, culture, tourism and agriculture, the government has assigned a newly formed national-level think tank for ASEAN and South Asian studies, a New Southbound Policy Office (新南向政策辦公室), as well as set

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<sup>3</sup> Kwei-Bo Huang, "Tsai's diplomatic dilemmas", *East Asia Forum*, (20.1.2016).

plans for a number of service counters within and outside Taiwan to provide relevant information to interested businessmen among other measures.<sup>4</sup>

In order to appease Beijing and maintain stability in the Taiwan Strait, President Tsai has followed the Ma approach towards the claims in the South China Sea. After the final decision on 12 July 2016 on the South China Sea arbitration case initiated by Manila, which was in favour of the Philippines, the Tsai government announced it does not accept the verdict and reiterated that the South China Sea Islands are part of the territory of the ROC.<sup>5</sup> While some were very disappointed by President Tsai's hard-line stance of bolstering the ROC (and thereby the PRC's) claims over the South China Sea, the majority in her administration have assessed that maintaining a stable cross-strait relationship was a top priority for Taiwan's national security.

A very moderate approach was also well apparent in the Tsai administration's decisions concerning participation in important international organizations. It remains highly unlikely that there will be any substantive changes in the re-energized policy vis-à-vis international space. The new government continues to seek merely "meaningful participation" and has opted not to re-enter the United Nations (UN) nor to seek full membership in the UN affiliated organizations despite strong criticism by many of the green camp. Furthermore, in spite of the delay of this year's invitation letter to Taiwan to attend the World Health Assembly (WHA) and a newly inserted paragraph that conditioned Taiwan's participation on Beijing's "one China principle", the incoming government chose to accept it and, what is more, its delegation even upheld the "Chinese-centred" rhetoric ("Chinese Taipei") during the entire WHA speech, completely avoiding any mentioning of "Taiwan". This was certainly a very vivid determination on behalf of the new government to do its utmost to preserve the status quo.

Such a highly pragmatic approach was also reflected in the Tsai government's campaign to attend the 39<sup>th</sup> session of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) Assembly in September 2016. In 2013, Taiwan for the first time received an invitation to participate in the assembly as a guest under the designation "Chinese Taipei". The Tsai government has followed the approach of its predecessor, aiming to achieve at least similarly meaningful participation for Taiwan. However, less than two weeks prior the ICAO Assembly, the invitation to Taipei had not arrived. As concerns Taiwan's inclusion in the International

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<sup>4</sup> See, "New Southbound Policy' promotion plan launched," Office of Information Services, Executive Yuan, ROC, (5.9.2016), [http://www.ey.gov.tw/en/News\\_Content2.aspx?n=1C6028CA080A27B3&s=366421D81E3C10FB](http://www.ey.gov.tw/en/News_Content2.aspx?n=1C6028CA080A27B3&s=366421D81E3C10FB)

<sup>5</sup> Office of the President, "ROC government position on the South China Sea arbitration," <http://english.president.gov.tw/Default.aspx?tabid=491&itemid=37703&rmid=2355>. The Itu Aba Island (Taiping Island, 太平島), the largest land feature of the disputed Spratly island chain, which Taiwan claims, was downgraded to a rock and thus scrapped of rights to an EEZ around it and continental shelf under it. Moreover, Taiwan was identified in the ruling as the "Taiwan authority of China".

Criminal Police Organization (Interpol), another highly important international organization, it remains to be seen whether the United States' strong support of the House of Representatives, Senate and the White House, will prove sufficient.<sup>6</sup> Undoubtedly, the level of international support will continue to be one of the key elements for Taiwan's inclusion into any IGO.

### Long winters may be costly

Since China is unquestionably the most daunting external factor that Taiwanese leadership has to contemplate in its foreign policy implementation, the Tsai government will need to tread very carefully to expand Taiwan's international space, which remains to be its top priority. The Chinese government, on the other hand, should likewise be in touch with reality. Endorsing the "1992 Consensus" or any other form of "one China" would be an action against the Taiwanese public's will what the new democratic leadership cannot and shall not opt to do. President Tsai has recurrently assured the Taiwanese citizens that in order to constitute an accountable government her administrative team will transcend political party lines, follow the public's will and abide by democratic principles.<sup>7</sup> It is a fact, that a large majority of Taiwanese citizens, especially the younger generations, have started to consider themselves exclusively as Taiwanese, portraying their homeland and people as a nation distinct from China and wanting Taiwan to function as a sovereign state in the international community.<sup>8</sup> A firm Taiwanese national identity and a profound generational change will continue to form a significant source of pressure and undoubtedly affect Taipei's future foreign policy decision making.

In other words, Taiwan-centric identity and democracy are the realities that China should learn to respect, if it truly desires to maintain a stable and peaceful relationship. Punishing Taiwanese people by means of imposing limitations on the number of Chinese tourist groups' allowed to travel to Taiwan and intentionally hurting the island's economy is not a good message to be sending to the world.<sup>9</sup> In

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<sup>6</sup> "Obama inks bill supporting Interpol bid", *Taipei Times*, (20.3.2016), <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2016/03/20/2003641989>; "Taiwan Interpol observer bid bill passed by US Senate", *Taiwan Today*, (11.3.2016), <http://taiwantoday.tw/ct.asp?xItem=242861&ctNode=2175>

<sup>7</sup> "Future administrative team to transcend party lines: DPP", *CNA*, (22.2.2016), <http://focustaiwan.tw/news/aip/201602220024.aspx>

<sup>8</sup> "Important political attitude trend distribution", *Election Study Center*, N.C.C.U., (24.8.2016), <http://esc.nccu.edu.tw/course/news.php?class=203>

<sup>9</sup> Jermyn Chow, "Protest in Taipei over fewer tourists," *The Straits Times*, (13.9.2016), <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/protest-in-taipei-over-fewer-tourists>; "China reportedly to reduce number of tourists heading for Taiwan in 3 stages," *The Straits Times*, (11.6.2016), <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/china-reportedly-to-reduce-number-of-tourists-heading-for-taiwan-in-3-stages>

a time when China is pouring billions into the new Silk Road initiative, which will require extremely high levels of political trust with all nations it cooperates, such an autocratic message – say something we do not like and you will pay for it – might turn out to be very costly for all parties in the long run.

To sum up, the new government in Taipei has proven it is committed to upholding the status quo and is pursuing a highly pragmatic “steadfast diplomacy”. Nonetheless, to endure the cold temperatures, it had but to switch to a much more energetic mode in order to reach its targets. The more pressure Beijing attempts to assert on Taiwan, the more robust Taiwan’s foreign policy directives will be and the more resistance it will encounter.