



## Keep the diplomatic truce! by Dennis Hickey

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Some fear that Taiwan's presidential election may usher in another period of cross-strait tension and hostility. Beijing might steal most if not all of Taipei's diplomatic allies and otherwise seek to bully the island in the international community. This is not a certainty, however; it is still possible for relations to move forward.

During the 1950s and 1960s, the Republic of China (ROC or Taiwan) enjoyed formal diplomatic relations with many of the world's governments, including the United States. By 2008, however, most countries switched recognition to Beijing and not one important government recognized Taipei. Taiwan's efforts to bribe impoverished countries in the global south to establish relations succeeded only in bolstering its reputation as a troublemaker. Following a number of unsavory incidents in Latin America, a major scandal exploded in May 2008 when it was revealed that two shady individuals entrusted by the Chen Shui-bian administration with \$30 million to bribe the leaders of Papua New Guinea had absconded with the money. The incident sparked public outrage and led to the resignation of Taiwan's foreign minister and other high-ranking officials.

After being sworn in as president in 2008, Ma Ying-jeou put an end to a practice he criticized as "our pointless competition with China for allies in the global community." The new president embraced a policy he described as "flexible diplomacy" and relations between Beijing and Taipei moved forward. Perhaps most important, Ma endorsed the "1992 Consensus," by which both Taiwan and mainland China appear to accept the principle of "one China," but each side holds its own interpretation of what that means. The understanding paved the way for numerous breakthroughs in cross-strait relations including a diplomatic truce – an unofficial ceasefire in the long war for diplomatic allies.

The diplomatic truce has saved Taipei and Beijing a lot of money and potential embarrassment. Some predicted it would fail. In 2009, the *Liberty Times*, a pro-independence newspaper in Taiwan, predicted that "Ma's 'diplomatic truce' is likely to drive away all of Taiwan's diplomatic allies." But this did not happen. In November 2013, the administration's detractors were delighted when Gambia dumped Taipei. They rushed to brand the diplomatic truce a failure and blame Beijing for poaching one of Taipei's allies. However, Gambia

soon found itself without diplomatic representation in either Beijing or Taipei. A US government study concluded that "no public evidence exists to suggest China enticed or pressured the West African country to break diplomatic relations with Taiwan." In fact, no country has switched diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing (or vice versa) since 2008 – all such efforts have been rebuffed. By any standard of measurement, the diplomatic truce was a success from 2008 to 2016.

Diplomatic allies are important to Taiwan because formal recognition as a government bolsters the argument that it is a sovereign state. These "little friends" also speak up for Taiwan's interests in global forums like the UN since it is locked out of most international government organizations. And the ability to maintain diplomatic allies reassures businesses operating in Taiwan that the country is stable. But individuals across Taiwan's political spectrum predicted that the diplomatic truce will collapse when a Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) administration returns to power on May 20, 2016.

In 2015, Lin Chong-pin, former deputy minister of defense, warned that Taiwan might face "an avalanche of ruptured diplomatic ties" after a DPP victory in the presidential election. Lin is not the only former Chen administration official to make such a prediction. Annette Lu, former vice president, cautioned that Taipei might face "a domino effect of ruptured diplomatic ties more terrifying than that of the Formosa Fun Coast Water Park Dust Explosion." Kuomintang (KMT) officials concur with this assessment. In December 2015, Alex Tsai, a KMT lawmaker, claimed that 18 of Taipei's 22 diplomatic allies may seek to switch ties to the PRC if Tsai Ing-wen wins the presidential election.

Throughout the presidential campaign, Tsai refused to endorse the "1992 Consensus." Rather, she sought to sidestep the issue by claiming she supports the "status quo" and will handle relations with Beijing in accordance with "the will of the Taiwan people" and Taiwan's Constitution. When pressed to explain her stance on the "1992 Consensus" during one of Taiwan's presidential debates, Tsai described it only as "an option."

Given Tsai's position, it came as little surprise that questions about the diplomatic truce surfaced during Taiwan's first presidential debate on Dec. 27, 2015. But observers were surprised by Tsai's responses. The candidate did not praise the hard work of Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA). Rather, she charged that "Taiwan's diplomats have lost their direction in the past eight years of diplomatic truce and have lost their efficiency and competitiveness – as a result Taiwan has become beholden to China in maintaining diplomatic ties." Tsai threatened to transform MOFA's inefficient personnel into "combat ready" diplomats. Several days after the debate,

Tsai complained that Taiwan's diplomats wasted their time waiting for "someone to throw them a bone" and charged that "this is not how a country should handle diplomacy."

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Tsai's remarks about Taiwan's foreign relations – including the diplomatic truce with Beijing – are noteworthy on several levels. First, the candidate ignored the progress in foreign policy that Taiwan has achieved during the past eight years. According to most accounts, Taiwan has enjoyed remarkable improvements in its relations with many countries in Europe and North America. During a 2014 Congressional hearing, Daniel Russel, assistant secretary of State, testified that "US-Taiwan unofficial relations have never been better." Ties with Japan have also been strengthened. After Ma took office, Taiwan inked 25 cooperative agreements with Japan, over 40 percent of all the deals cemented by the two sides in the past 60 years. Tsai failed to mention that Taiwan's "inefficient" diplomats have managed to raise the number of countries and regions offering Taiwan visa-free preferential treatment from 54 to 158 since 2008 (these countries now include the US). And rather than be branded as a troublemaker, Taiwan is now praised for seeking to play the role of peacemaker in a variety of complicated international disputes.

The fact that Tsai chose to ignore Taiwan's recent diplomatic achievements and claim that the country's diplomats have "lost their way" could be chalked up to election-year politics. After all, many of the DPP's attacks on the Ma administration were partisan. Much more worrisome is her harsh criticism of the diplomatic truce and cavalier attitude to it. Some fear that Tsai might have been preparing Taiwan's people for an end to the diplomatic truce and a return to the DPP's "scorched earth diplomacy."

The death of the diplomatic truce would not be an isolated event, however. It would probably represent only one part in a collapse of the rapprochement that has characterized cross-strait relations since 2008. This development could undermine peace and stability in the Western Pacific. This gloomy forecast is not a certainty, however.

Tsai was correct when she claimed the "1992 Consensus" is only "one option." It is possible for the two sides to work together and move beyond the "1992 Consensus." As I have suggested elsewhere, Beijing and Taipei need to recalibrate their relationship in a more pragmatic way and adopt new thinking on the concepts of sovereignty and the political status of the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan. In short, they need to figure out a way to acknowledge that both the ROC and the People's Republic of China exist within one China. With that accomplished, the two sides could cobble together some sort of durable peace agreement.

To be sure, such a breakthrough will take compromise and creative thinking in both Taipei and Beijing. But it is not beyond the realm of possibility. It's not a foregone conclusion that the DPP's victory means a return to the incessant quarrels and conflict that characterized cross-strait relations before 2008. This could represent a "win-win" scenario for the PRC, ROC, and the entire global community.