Looking Back, Moving Forward

Foreign Policy Challenges for Taiwan’s New Leader

By James Baron

Taiwan’s newly inaugurated president, Tsai Ing-wen, faces a conundrum when it comes to foreign policy. If she continues on the path forged by her predecessor Ma Ying-jeou in building closer relations with Beijing, she risks the ire of hardliners within her own party. But if she departs from that path, Beijing could resort to tougher measures to thwart Taiwan’s ambition to play a greater role on the international stage, writes James Baron.

AN “EXTRAJUDICIAL abduction,” one legislator branded it. The description was justified. The deportation of 45 Taiwanese citizens from Kenya to China in early April was of nebulously legality.

The individuals were accused of telecommunication fraud, with Beijing asserting jurisdiction because the victims were Chinese citizens. When Malaysia delivered a further 32 Taiwanese suspects to Beijing at the end of April, the clamor over infringed sovereignty redoubled. Media and legislators declared the 2009 Cross-Strait Joint Crime-Fighting and Judicial Mutual Assistance Agreement worthless. While some detected a warning shot to Taiwan’s then President-elect Tsai Ing-wen (who assumed office in May), others observed that, in the Kenyan case, China had been demanding the deportation of the suspects since their arrest in December 2014. For its part, Beijing insisted that Taipei’s leniency on fraud was the prime driver.

Motives aside, Tsai faces a dilemma. If she continues outgoing Kuomintang (KMT) President Ma Ying-jeou’s rapprochement with Beijing, she risks enraging independence-minded members of her Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). The alternative is grimmer — provoking China after years of cordiality.

Nowhere is the situation more precarious than in foreign policy, ever a concomitant of cross-strait relations. Tsai has been straitjacketed by perceptions of hardliners within her own party. But if she departs from that path, Beijing could resort to tougher measures to thwart Taiwan’s ambition to play a greater role on the international stage, writes James Baron.

While her challenge is unique, however, she is following the well-worn footsteps of Taiwan’s past leaders.

Even the infamously rigid KMT leader Chiang Kai-shek demonstrated considerable flexibility in foreign policy. A rabid anti-communist who flirted with fascism and employed German, Italian and Japanese advisers, Chiang maintained the KMT’s Leninist structure, administered the Soviet-funded Whampoa Military Academy and packed his scion, Chiang Ching-kuo, off to Moscow. His adopted son Chiang Wei-kuo served in the Wehrmacht.

Chiang’s latitude surfaced in cases such as Mauritania’s admission to the United Nations in 1962. Counting on support at the UN from newly independent African countries, Taipei approved the motion. When the Soviet Union blocked it to counter Taiwan’s veto of Mongolia’s inclusion, Chiang backed down, and both countries were admitted simultaneously. This was no small concession, because Mongolia’s independence undermined Taipei’s claims of legitimacy.

The operations center for the KMT’s probe into Africa was the consulate at Johannesburg, where an official Chinese presence had been maintained intermittently since 1905. Although Taipei eventually resorted to bribery, the early forays were based on trust and close personal relationships under the stewardship of the diplomat H.K. Yang, nicknamed “Mr. Africa.”

Liu Ying, a career diplomat, recalls being sent from Johannesburg to Basutoland (now Lesotho) to woo Prime Minister Leabua Jonathan in 1966. “The colonies would soon be independent,” he says. He balks at the suggestion that money changed hands. “There was no need. The communists threatened the traditional tribal hierarchy.”

PAST FOREIGN POLICY SKIRMISHES

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Because his tenure (1978-1988) coincided with Taiwan’s international isolation, Chiang Ching-kuo has also been depicted as intransigent. Yet, this one-time Trotskyite was a survivalist who prevented Taiwan’s recession into the international wilderness.

Announcing a policy of “total diplomacy,” Chiang pursued what Columbia University scholar Samuel S. Kim has termed “performance-based legitimation,” making Taipei economically difficult to ignore. As diplomatic recognition evaporated, Chiang encouraged foreign investment and trade, committing the international community to Taiwan’s future.

By the time of Chiang’s death in 1988, 11 European countries maintained offices in Taiwan, and trade restrictions with former Soviet bloc nations were lifted. In fact, Chiang had met with Soviet agents in Taipei as early as 1968, dropping hints that ties with Soviet bloc countries might be reestablished.

While Taiwan was blocked from most intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), between 1977 and 1989 it almost doubled its presence in international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) from 239 to 464, thanks in part to the “Olympic formula,” which facilitated Taiwan’s entry into the International Olympic Committee under the name Chinese Taipei. It also retained its position in the Asian Development Bank (ADB), albeit after a two-year boycott of ADB meetings over the nomenclature “Taipei, China,” and primarily because of its creditor status.

During his presidency (1988-2000), Lee Teng-hui expanded Chiang’s approach, advocating “pragmatic diplomacy.” Taipei’s abandonment of its policy of exclusivity did not boost its ally count. But through participation in IGOs, and particularly INGOs, and the forging of semi-official relations, it made headway.

Admission to the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation forum in 1997 was a high point, though Lee was barred from summits, a practice that continues. He did make unofficial visits to countries with whom Taiwan did not enjoy diplomatic relations, most notably and controversially to the US in 1995 to visit his alma mater Cornell University, a trip which contributed to the 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis.

Canniness in circumventing the sovereignty issue epitomized Lee’s presidency. One example was the UN Fish Stocks Agreement of 1995, which included a reference to “fishing entities,” a euphemism designed to involve Taiwan in decision-making processes. The proviso facilitated Taiwan’s participation in related regional agreements. Another tactic was the use of “parliamentary diplomacy” through a liaison group that fostered support in foreign legislatures.

Lee’s announcement in 1993 that the Republic of China (ROC) would apply for re-entry to the UN marked an obvious change of tack. Here, Taipei was embracing a dual recognition formula, anathema to Beijing. In 1997, Taipei began arguing for WHO entry on “humanitarian and scientific grounds,” pointing out the inequity and risks of its exclusion.

The WHO was accused of blocking assistance to Taiwan under Chinese duress during an enterovirus 71 outbreak in 1998. The following year, when an earthquake killed over 2,000 people, Taipei’s initial expression of appreciation for Beijing’s offer of assistance gave way to claims that the Chinese Red Cross was demanding that foreign relief teams seek Beijing’s approval.

In his inaugural press conference as president, Lee beseeched Beijing “not to hamper our international activities.” Taipei underlined its case after Beijing branded its Security Council veto to nix peacekeeping missions in Haiti in 1996 and Macedonia in 1999, and the dispatch of observers to the Guatemala Peace Accords in 1997. All of these actions were aimed at punishing support for Taipei.

While these affronts gained Taipei sympathy, they also underscored the will of the US to reconcile competing policy challenges.

DIPLOMATIC MINEFIELDS

West African allies flit back and forth between Taipei and Beijing, but the most egregious incident involved an alleged loan of US$2.35 billion to Papua New Guinea in 1999 to secure diplomatic ties. PNG Prime Minister Bill Skate reportedly visited Taiwan to collect. Two days later, Skate resigned ahead of a no confidence vote, and, under pressure from Australia, the new PNG government rescinded recognition. Taipei’s recently upgraded embassy was forced to revert to the status of a representative office, leaving the administration red-faced.

The missteps of the Chen Shui-bian era are perhaps most instructive for Tsai. At odds with Beijing before he took office in 2000, Chen let Taipei’s foreign policy lapse into anarchy. Admittedly, he was encumbered by shackles that Tsai won’t have: a KMT-dominated legislature, which passed bills giving it greater control of foreign aid. Still, having vowed to put away the checkbook, Chen was vulnerable when the scandals accumulated.

The South Pacific proved treacherous. PNG returned to the headlines in 2008 over a US$30 million bribe that had disappeared two years earlier. Depending on the version of events, the funds were pocketed by intermediaries or by PNG officials. Either way, the money was never recouped and Taiwan’s Foreign Minister James Huang took the blame.

Graver still were the 2006 post-election riots in the Solomon Islands. Violence in Honiara was directed at Chinese who were accused of vote rigging. Chinatown was demolished, and the Pacific Casino, reputedly a front for Taiwanese money laundering, was torched.

Australian media accused Taipei of undermining vulnerable democracies by transposing its diplomatic wrangle with Beijing onto the Pacific playing field. Taipei protested it was being scapegoated for Australia’s botched handling of security during the elections. Despite scant evidence of direct interference, the lack of oversight in Taipei’s aid programs certainly had a destabilizing influence.

Most galling was Costa Rica’s severance of its diplomatic relations with Beijing during its 1997-1999 administration, a state of affairs that revived the specter of the Taiwan Province of China.”

GLOBAL ASIA Feature Essay The Foreign Policy Challenges of Taiwan’s New Leader

Taiwan’s new President Tsai Ing-wen may love Taiwan, but how will she reconcile competing policy challenges?

Photo courtesy of the Office of the President
60-year relationship weeks after it had voted against Taiwan's WHO application. Pressed for an explanation, San Jose had dissembled. Revelations that Taipei was oblivious to a secret deal with Beijing elicited scorn from opposition legislators; even Vice President Annette Lu chimed in, lamenting the inability of Taipei's last two ambassadors to Costa Rica to speak Spanish. Just 10 days before his inauguration in May 2008, President-elect Ma Ying-jeou publicly called for a “diplomatic truce” with Beijing, linking this explicitly to “dollar diplomacy.” Coming 10 days after the PNG scandal had exploded, Ma's point was clear: “Taiwan will have a very different international presence if diplomacy can be associated with cross-strait policies.”

In December, Ma expanded the idea in an op-ed piece for the Washington Times:

“Concerning our international space, we will persist in upholding our principles of ‘flexible diplomacy’ and observing a ‘diplomatic truce’ with regard to antagonistic rivalry that undercuts opportunities for constructive participation in the global community. Ma urged Beijing “to realize the wisdom of dispensing with zero-sum diplomatic tactics to squeeze Taiwan's international space, and take to heart the aspiration of our people to play their rightful role in the international community.”

The emergence of corruption cases involving bribes to Panama, Guatemala and El Salvador under Chen reinforced Ma’s image of probity. Meanwhile, the 2009 White Paper on Foreign Aid Policy and the International Co-operation and Development Act of the following year pointed toward increased responsibility in official development assistance (ODA). Yet, while Ma is credited with scaling back foreign aid, as Czeslaw Tubilewicz and Alain Guilloux have observed, expenditures began to fall under Chen.

First touted under Chiang Ching-kuo, “flexible diplomacy” does not describe Ma’s approach. What Ma espoused translates as “way-out” or “survival” diplomacy, which demonstrates the truism that Taipei's diplomatic space is contingent on Beijing’s goodwill.

TAI'S OPPORTUNITIES
On ditching Taipei in 2006, Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade declared, “Our nation has no friends and only interests.” Such cynicism may accurately describe state-to-state relations — a glaring example is the KMT’s past recognition of the Sandinista government in Nicaragua while funding the Contras — but what of civic ties? Trends toward people-to-people diplomacy offer clues to how Tsai might proceed.

Officials from Taiwan’s partner countries agree. “Government-to-government relationships change,” says Honduras Ambassador to Taiwan, Rafael Sierra. “But if we create a people-to-people relationship, no one can change that. If we have all these relationships — business, sports, universities, sister cities — and we have a president trying to oppose that, people won’t accept it.”

Taiwan’s injection of a personal touch into its ODA through micro-financing to smallholders might be expanded. Taiwan watch Joel Atkinson has suggested Taipei consider the innovative practice of “cash transfers,” where individual citizens in recipient countries receive direct payments from donor nations. This would eliminate the uglier aspects of Taiwan’s aid, win plaudits internationally and give “ordinary citizens a stake in their country’s relationship with Taiwan.” A similar point is made by Colin Alexander, a former Ministry of Foreign Affairs research fellow, who notes that “traditional systems of political patronage cannot be relied upon as the basis for international relations” and that “the publics play a central role in the political process.”

One avenue might be to shore up support with overseas Chinese communities, which have become increasingly ambivalent in their attitudes toward Beijing during Ma's tenure. Part of the problem is that many of these communities historically identified with the Republic of China and the KMT after 1949, rather than Taiwan. The rapprochement with Beijing has blurred the lines. “The community is identifying a bit more with mainland China,” said Ivan Qant, head of the Chinese-Nicaraguan Association. This is echoed throughout Latin America.

Whatever course is taken, it is clear that a new way forward is required. Given Taipei’s historical failure to meaningfully boost its ally count, the harm and humiliation that such attempts have brought and the likelihood that Beijing will revert to type, Tsai might be best advised to step back from Taiwan’s focus on state-level maneuvers.

If Taiwan can continue to connect with individuals through NGOs, interest groups and personalized ODA initiatives, the perennial thorns of sovereignty and recognition may eventually shrivel into irrelevance.

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