



Light Up Taiwan Puts the Spotlight on the Young Generation

By Rudy deLeon

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In a general election that pivoted primarily on economic and identity issues, Taiwan voters elected Tsai Ing-wen to be their next president. Taking 56 percent of the vote, Tsai's victory was fueled by a younger generation that is frustrated with stagnant wages and high rents.¹ Energized by the Democratic Progressive Party's "Light Up Taiwan" campaign—which highlighted the theme of building a robust and vibrant Taiwan—the support of Taiwanese youth with a definite 21st-century focus meant that Tsai's election was never in doubt during the final month before voters went to the polls on January 16.²

In a postelection message, the U.S. Department of State congratulated Tsai on her victory—propelled by a 66.27 percent voter turnout and more than 12 million people casting ballots—and saluted the people of Taiwan for once again demonstrating the strength of their robust democratic system, which will now undergo another peaceful transition of power.³ The U.S. statement also recognized the eight-year administration of current President Ma Ying-jeou for its efforts to develop a strong partnership with the United States and applauded the president "for concrete steps he has taken to improve cross-Strait ties in recent years" between Taipei and Beijing.⁴

In addition to the economic issues in the election, President Ma's important meeting in Singapore with Chinese President Xi Jinping was also widely discussed by all of the candidates during the campaign. The two leaders, along with other senior representatives from Taipei and Beijing, met on November 7, 2015, in the first face-to-face summit on cross-Strait relations in almost 70 years.⁵

Notably, the U.S. State Department's postelection message reflected Washington's interest in continued constructive diplomatic dialogue between Taipei and Beijing that is based on the good framework offered by President Ma. In fact, the progress in cross-Strait relations under Ma was one reason why international media covered the elections in such detail. Ma made the Taiwan presidency an important player in international diplomacy, and the election of his successor is a crucial indicator of what might come next.

Next on the Taiwanese agenda will be the transition between administrations as President-elect Tsai prepares to take office in May. Tsai has already signaled that her administration will select its words carefully when it comes to cross-Strait relations, stating on election night that the new administration “will work toward maintaining the status quo for peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait in order to bring the greatest benefit and well-being to the Taiwanese people.”⁶

In fact, as President-elect Tsai prepares to take office, there are three key elements from the current dialogue that should inform continued cross-Strait exchange.

First, the status quo arrangement now referred to as the 1992 Consensus is broadly defined and allows leaders on both sides of the Strait to engage and resolve topical issues through practical dialogue. This allows leaders to solve what they can solve today, make progress, and place other disagreements on the agenda for a future opportunity. Under this approach, real progress has already been made in travel and cultural exchange between Taiwan and the mainland. The next step—establishing liaison offices in both countries—would provide for even more direct contact by creating a formal system for direct exchange on a variety of economic, cultural, and political interests.

Second, President Ma’s strategy, using what can be described as an approach of “no surprises,” has allowed both Beijing and Washington to engage separately with Taiwan and have confidence that their interactions would not produce a cross-Strait surprise due to unexpected, last-minute policy changes or announcements. Officials in Beijing would be wise to continue their own practice of “no surprises” by maintaining a practical posture of avoiding threats and military exercises that could distract from a peaceful government transition in Taiwan.

Finally, diplomatic progress is good, but middle-class economic confidence is essential in a democracy. Much progress has been made on economic engagement between Taiwan and China, as well as in the broader region. But economic development remains the greatest challenge, especially for young people who have yet to see economic gain since the benefits of the global economy have not yet boosted opportunities for Taiwanese Millennials. Young people are an important constituency in Taiwan and exert a major influence among the 1.8 million new voters who participated in the January 2016 election.⁷ This restless younger generation—educated in the 21st century, technology-savvy and connected, and dashing around on Vespa bikes—is searching to fulfill its ambitions and continues to look to its leaders for direction.⁸



Young people are an important constituency in Taiwan and are a major influence among the 1.8 million new voters who participated in the January 2016 election. This restless younger generation that calls itself generation Taiwan—well-educated and focused on the 21st century, technology-savvy and connected, and dashing around Taipei on their Vespa bikes—is searching to fulfill its ambitions.

Photo: CAP/Rudy deLeon

The status quo as a diplomatic tool

In October 1992, Beijing's Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits, or ARATS, and Taipei's Straits Exchange Foundation, or SEF, held talks in Hong Kong and reached an informal consensus premised on the assumption that there exists one China, while agreeing to differ on its political definition. This allowed each side the opportunity to move forward on particular bilateral understandings while putting aside more complicated disagreements. Although originally described as "one China, different interpretations," the Kuomintang—or KMT—substituted the term 1992 Consensus to provide even more latitude in the cross-Straits exchange.⁹ Others may simply refer to this arrangement as the status quo.

Since 2008, however, the flexibility of this approach has proved to be a useful tool in cross-Straits diplomacy. For example, agreements are now in place that provide for direct flights between 61 cities across the Strait. As a result, tourist visits between the two countries increased from 300,000 visits to 3.9 million visits annually during Ma's presidency.¹⁰ On the economic side, Taiwan has joined critical China supplier networks that support global manufacturing and commerce. In education, students from Chinese communities can enroll in Taiwanese colleges to complete their undergraduate degrees. And as mentioned earlier, discussions are currently underway to create government liaison offices to further expand cross-Straits opportunities.

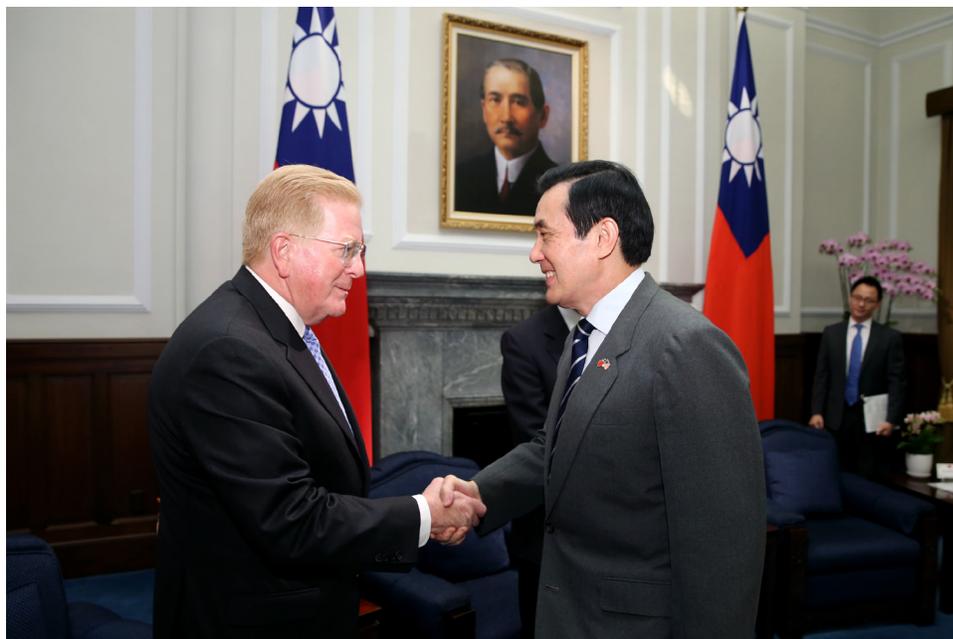
At the same time, Taiwan has resolved fishing disputes with Japan in a move to settle historic claims over fishing rights. Reaching this agreement allows for a common understanding between Taiwan and Japan on practices that include no use of force, prior notification before engagement, and the prompt release of any fishermen detained in questioned areas.

On the security front, President Ma used the Singapore Summit in 2015 to present his views on the cross-Strait security environment during a press conference. He noted that the summit:

... marked the first time our side could directly convey to the leader of mainland China our concerns about its military deployment against Taiwan, as well as Taiwan's international space, and demand that the mainland show goodwill and take concrete action. Our government will closely monitor the follow-up measures taken by mainland China, and hopes that it will take our people's concerns on security and dignity seriously.¹¹

Ma's comments at the Singapore Summit were consistent with the position outlined early in his administration through his three key principles of China-Taiwan engagement. The three principles were no use of force, no unification, and no independence. These remarks allowed for a cross-Strait baseline from which other issues could be discussed.

The status quo consensus has served as a constructive diplomatic tool for dialogue across the Strait, laying the groundwork for the important meeting between Ma and Xi at the Singapore Summit and allowing significant travel opportunities, economic development, and cultural exchange. The new Tsai administration will offer its own perspectives on the status quo, but as President Ma leaves office, he has set in place with the cross-Strait dialogue a diplomatic mechanism for constructive exchange going forward.



A delegation from the Center for American Progress visited Taiwan in November 2015, a few days after the cross-Strait meeting in Singapore. The CAP delegation was able to meet with representatives of the Kuomintang, or KMT, and the Democratic Progressive Party, or DPP. Additionally, the delegation met with senior representatives of the Taiwan Foreign Ministry, Ministry of Defense, National Security Council, and Ministry of Economic Affairs. The delegation was also able to meet with President Ma Ying-jeou for a full exchange on major policy issues. CAP Senior Fellow Rudy deLeon is pictured with President Ma in his office.

Photo: Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office

'No surprises' builds trust

It is a bit ironic that policy transparency became an issue in Taiwan's presidential election campaigns. Taiwan's unique parliamentary structures between the president and the legislative body can make domestic political exchange an issue within itself. But from the perspective of international relations—particularly among Washington, Beijing, and Tokyo—the eight years of the Ma presidency have been marked by clear communication and exchange. A diplomatic “no surprises” strategy on the part of President Ma and his team allowed complicated diplomatic transactions to be completed. Whether it was a fishing agreement with Japan, the cross-Strait summit in Singapore, or the complicated security exchange for Taiwan relations authorized by the U.S. Congress, the foreign ministry in Taipei was sure-footed, straightforward, and aboveboard; in short, there were no surprises. This was in contrast to prior Taiwanese administrations, from which policy announcements could be unpredictable and sometimes problematic.

The internal political dialogue in Taiwan is dynamic and unconstrained. It is an approach that is to be admired in the region and is expected in a democracy. The degree of transparency between domestic branches of government can be debated and open to interpretation. But a practice of “no surprises” in complicated diplomacy is a trait to be respected and acknowledged and is an important contribution.

President Ma's strategy of “no surprises” allowed both Beijing and Washington to separately work with Taiwan and to have confidence that their engagement would not produce a cross-Strait crisis because of unanticipated policy changes or announcements.

The Taiwan transition: A celebration

It was U.S. President John F. Kennedy who noted in his inaugural address that a transition of governments is more than a political victory—it is “a celebration of freedom.”¹² That is the opportunity that awaits President-elect Tsai as she forms a new government.

Across the Strait, officials in Beijing would do well to respect the peaceful transition of governments in Taiwan and adopt their own form of outgoing President Ma's policy of “no surprises.”

Each side of the Strait has a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, even as they work on issues that are regional in nature. On both sides of the Strait, the key challenge is providing jobs and opportunities for the skilled human capital represented in the rising Millennial generation that is ready to make its mark at home and with the rest of the world. That is the challenge. That is the opportunity.

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Endnotes

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- 3 *Taipei Times*, "Voter turnout was lowest since 1996," January 18, 2016, available at <http://www.taipetimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2016/01/18/2003637469>; Channel NewsAsia, "Live updates: DPP's Tsai declares victory in Taiwan election," January 16, 2016, available at <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/live-updates-kmt-s-eric/2431048.html>; Austin Ramzy, "Tsai Ing-wen Elected President of Taiwan, First Woman to Hold Office," *The New York Times*, January 16, 2016, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/17/world/asia/taiwan-elections.html>.
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- 7 A Center for American Progress delegation visited Taiwan in November 2015, a few days after the cross-strait meeting in Singapore. The CAP delegation was able to meet with representatives of the Kuomintang, or KMT, and the Democratic Progressive Party, or DPP. Additionally, the delegation met with senior representatives of the Taiwan Foreign Ministry, Ministry of Defense, National Security Council, and the Ministry of Economic Affairs. The delegation was also able to meet with President Ma Ying-jeou for a full exchange on these policy issues.
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- 9 Stacy Hsu, Shelley Shan, and Wang Yu-chung, "Ma defends significance of meeting with Xi," *Taipei Times*, November 9, 2015, available at <http://www.taipetimes.com/News/front/archives/2015/11/09/2003632021>.
- 10 CAP delegation visit to Taiwan, November 2015.
- 11 Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of China (Taiwan), "Remarks by ROC President Ma Ying-jeou at an international news conference on the outcomes of the meeting between the leaders of the two sides of the Taiwan Strait," Press release, November 14, 2015, available at http://www.mofa.gov.tw/en/News_Content.aspx?n=8157691CA2AA32F8&sm=4F8ED5441E33EA7B&s=0C4B7CAB4E1E3FD0.
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