



## The real significance of Tsai Ing-wen's visit to Central America by Dennis V. Hickey

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Tsai Ing-wen, Taiwan's new president, has wrapped up her first overseas visit to Latin America since taking office on May 20. Contrary to a popular misconception, the visits of Taiwan's leaders to the island's diplomatic allies are not a waste of the taxpayers' hard-earned money. Rather, these journeys are important on several levels.

First, they help bolster Taipei's position that the Republic of China (ROC) still exists as a sovereign and independent state in the global community. To be sure, Taiwan's president meets only with the leaders of countries located in what is now described politely in the academic community as "the global south." Most are impoverished nations. With the exception of the Vatican, these are the only entities that recognize the government in Taiwan. They are better than nothing.

Second, these face-to-face meetings enable Taiwan's leaders to pressure counterparts in foreign governments to speak up for Taipei in international forums. Taiwan is locked out of most of the world's important intergovernmental organizations (IGOs). But its "little friends" can be advocates for Taiwan's interests in the United Nations and other global bodies. And some – not all – do speak up for Taiwan.

Third, the diplomatic junkets provide Taipei's top leadership with a convenient rationale (excuse) for making "transit stops" in the US while journeying to a final destination located somewhere in the backwater of world politics. These "rests" in major US cities are likely to be approved by Washington so long as they remain low key (toward the end of his second term as Taiwan's president, Chen Shui-bian was allowed to stop only in Alaska) and enable Taiwan's president to conduct business in the United States. For example, during a 24-hour layover in Los Angeles in January 2014, President Ma Ying-jeou received pledges of support for Taiwan's participation in important economic forums during telephone conversations with 10 members of Congress. He also spoke over the phone with Bill Clinton, Hillary Clinton, Condoleezza Rice, and Donald Rumsfeld. And during President Tsai's visit to Miami, she had a face-to-face meeting with Sen. Marco Rubio (R.-Florida), the charismatic former candidate for the Republican Party's nomination as president. This marked the first visit on US soil of a sitting US senator with a ROC president since 2003.

Finally, the global journeys undertaken by Taiwan's leaders serve an important domestic political purpose. Public opinion polls show most people in Taiwan support raising the island's international profile and such travels give an appearance that a president is actively working toward this objective. Normally, an administration will go to some length to put a positive "spin" on a presidential trip. For example, while it might appear humorous (even ludicrous) to most foreigners, *Taiwan Today*, a government-sponsored news service, carried a story about Tsai receiving a "Medal of Honor" from Paraguay as its lead news story.

In other words, the international travels of Taiwan's leaders really are meaningful. Tsai's visit was important in another respect, however: it is significant that China permitted the trip to happen.

During Tsai's travels to Latin America, questions were raised about her plane's flight path from Florida to Panama. It seems that the aircraft flew over Cuban airspace and Beijing could have easily asked Havana to block such a route. When questioned about the flight path and China's role in the route being approved by Cuba, Tsai said, "It is not clear to me if China was involved in the case ... if China did play a role, that could be seen as a kind of goodwill." But there is more involved here than a flight path.

Following Ma Ying-jeou's election as ROC president in 2008 and Taiwan's return to the "1992 Consensus" (an arrangement whereby Taipei and Beijing appear to accept the principle of "one China," but differ over the meaning of "one China"), Taipei and Beijing agreed to a diplomatic truce. The two sides agreed to stop poaching each other's diplomatic allies. As China has continued to grow in economic, political, and strategic importance, however, more and more of Taiwan's diplomatic allies approached Beijing and asked to establish relations with it (and to dump Taipei). According to cables released by *Wikileaks* on Aug. 30, 2011, China has refused the requests by countries – including Paraguay and Panama – to switch diplomatic recognition to Beijing.

Despite the smiles and friendly faces that Tsai encountered in Central America, it would be delusional to think that the leaders of Panama and Paraguay will not drop Taiwan in a heartbeat if provided an opportunity. If President Xi Jinping had wanted to humiliate President Tsai and derail her first overseas visit he needed only to pick up the telephone and call Asuncion and Panama City two days before her scheduled departure from Taipei and that would be the end of her visits. And without a tour in Central America, Taipei's request for a "transit stop" in Miami and Los Angeles would make no sense and likely be denied. Tsai would be all dressed up with nowhere to go.

Much has been made of Beijing's declaration on June 25 that it has suspended cross-strait talks with Taipei. This is a

worrisome development. Taiwan's recent accidental launch of a supersonic "anti-aircraft carrier" missile toward China underscored the need for communication channels to remain open. But most of the mainstream media missed the significance of Beijing's low-key response to Tsai's overseas junket. It is unclear exactly what this means. Perhaps it's a signal to Tsai that stating plainly that she will adhere to the "1992 Consensus" will yield dividends. In other words, Taiwan will retain its diplomatic allies and she will be able to travel to Latin America (and the US). One might be tempted to describe this as a "carrot" in China's cache of "carrots and sticks." Or there could be more going on here. At a minimum, however, Tsai's recent journey is significant primarily because it actually happened. In that respect, Beijing has shown a lot of goodwill.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.*