



President Tsai: respect the will of the people and accept the '1992 consensus' by Dennis Hickey

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Roughly one year has passed since Tsai Ing-wen, presidential candidate of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), a party supporting Taiwan's de jure independence from China, was elected president of the Republic of China (ROC or Taiwan). Throughout Taiwan's 2015-16 election cycle, Tsai refused to endorse the "1992 Consensus," an understanding whereby both sides agree that there is one China, but hold different interpretations as to what this means. The arrangement enabled Taipei and Beijing to move relations forward and reduce cross-strait tensions to an unprecedented level from 2008 to 2016. Rather than employ this approach, Tsai sidestepped the issue by claiming she supported the "status quo" and would handle relations with Beijing in accordance with "the will of the Taiwan people" and Taiwan's constitution.

Following Tsai's election, Beijing has slowly applied different measures to convince her administration to return to the "1992 Consensus." In June, Beijing suspended all official contact with Taiwan. The Chinese government then cut the number of mainland tourists allowed to visit Taiwan, a move igniting protests by those dependent on the tourism industry. The island was also locked out of the 39th assembly of the International Civil Aviation Organization. And Beijing began to accede to requests by Taipei's few remaining diplomatic allies to switch recognition to Beijing (São Tomé and Príncipe dropped Taiwan in December). Perhaps most worrisome, however, are recent threats by China's state-run media outlets and the military exercises in the waters surrounding Taiwan. How should Taiwan respond to these developments?

Taiwan's leaders claim that the island's policies are guided by "the will of the people." When pressed to explain how they gauge public opinion, however, officials are evasive. It seems that they "listen to many polls." The problem with this approach is that most of Taiwan's public opinion polls—particularly those administered by the island's political parties and partisan think-tanks—are best described as "nonsense polls." They are methodologically flawed, often intentionally. For example, the polls will often employ "trigger words" in an effort to yield desired findings. As a result, their findings are "nonsense."

The Taiwan National Security Survey (TNSS), which is conducted by the prestigious Election Study Center of Taiwan's National Chengchi University, under the auspices of the Program in Asian Security Studies (PASS) at Duke

University, is different. Since 2002, this scientific survey has been conducted nine times, most recently in November 2016. The results are illuminating, and they do not always fit the narrative of Taiwan's politicians and political pundits.

For starters, when asked whether they support the idea of Taiwan and China conducting relations under the "one China with own interpretation" formula, the survey found that 62.67 percent of respondents either "agree" or "strongly agree" with the proposition. In other words, polling results show that a solid majority of Taiwanese do support the "1992 consensus."

Like other polls, the TNSS found that most people in Taiwan identify themselves as "Taiwanese." But Taiwan's people are pragmatic. They do not support "Taiwan independence" if it means conflict with the mainland, and 59.96 percent agree that China will carry through on its threats and attack Taiwan if it declares independence. Rather than beef up defenses to cope with China's growing military threat, 73.94 percent believe Taiwan should adopt more moderate policies to avoid confrontation.

Almost no one in Taiwan (only 5.8 percent) believes that they are better off economically than they were a year ago. And if tensions between the two sides rise in 2017, 77.56 percent believe Taiwan's economy will suffer. Even more interesting is the finding that, when asked whether promoting independence or maintaining trade with China should receive higher priority, 82.65 percent prefer that Taiwan's government promote trade with the PRC, even though almost 60 percent fear that economic dependence might lead Beijing to try to use its economic leverage to coerce Taiwan into making political concessions.

Not surprisingly, almost 70 percent of Taiwanese agree that Taiwan is already an independent nation and its name is "the ROC." They also believe that there is no need to seek further independence. At the same time, 82.86 percent support a peace agreement with the mainland whereby Taipei will pledge not to seek independence and Beijing promises not to attack Taiwan. Moreover, if the mainland removes its missiles opposite Taiwan, roughly 60 percent agree that the ROC should reduce arms purchases from the US. Significantly, a solid majority (58.8 percent) oppose the idea of working with the US and Japan to "balance" against China.

The findings of the TNSS poll have many important implications for Taiwan's policymakers. Two immediate takeaways stand out.

First, the Tsai administration should stop playing "word games" and endorse the "1992 Consensus." This move might anger extremist elements within her political camp, but it will be supported by most Taiwanese and help restore cross-strait relations to an even keel.

Second, President Tsai should push ahead with her calls for a peace agreement between Taipei and Beijing. Such a pact must be based on reality, namely that Beijing's leaders must recognize that, while there is only one China, there are two Chinese governments—the ROC and the PRC. This is mainstream opinion within Taiwan. What's more, it is an accurate reflection of reality. After all, the ROC has existed as a sovereign and independent state since 1912. A peace pact will yield numerous dividends for both sides and promote peace and stability in the Western Pacific, which is why politicians in Beijing and Taipei ought to listen to the people.

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