

Response to PacNet #6 “President Tsai: respect the will of the people and accept the ‘1992 consensus’” by Michael J. Fonte and Dennis V. Hickey

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Michael J. Fonte replies:

Consistency and caution are virtues that President Tsai Ing-wen has embraced regarding cross-strait relations, from her presidential campaign through her major speeches to date. “Maintaining the status quo is the pledge I made to voters,” the president declared in her National Day speech Oct 10, 2016. She then reaffirmed that pledge: “On cross-strait relations, I once again reiterate the immovable position of the new government, and that is to establish a consistent, predictable and sustainable cross-strait relationship, and to maintain both Taiwan’s democracy and the status quo of peace across the Taiwan Strait.” This position of “maintaining peaceful and stable relations across the Taiwan Strait,” the president declared at a new year’s press conference, was held “in accordance with the people’s will and consensus in Taiwan.”

In *PacNet* #6, Professor Dennis Hickey calls on President Tsai to “stop playing ‘word games’ and endorse the ‘1992 consensus.’” Hickey claims this endorsement “will be supported by most Taiwanese and help restore cross-strait relations to an even keel.”

Hickey bases his demand on response to a question posed in a November 2016 Taiwan National Security Survey (TNSS) [B23] 有些人主張臺灣和大陸應該在「一個中國、各自表述」的原則下進行交流，請問您支不支持這種主張？

“Some people advocate interaction between Taiwan and the mainland should be under the [one China, respective interpretations] principle. Do you agree or not with this?” Fifty-eight percent of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with this formulation.

When it was pointed out to Hickey at a recent Wilson Center presentation that the “92 consensus” is not explicitly mentioned in the question, he demurred, saying that “92 consensus” was a trigger word that would, presumably, skew the answers to the question.

Those who have followed the framing of the “92 consensus” discussion know that the Chinese side has never used “respective interpretations.” For the PRC, the “92 consensus” is simply “one China” and that China is the PRC. Where does that leave a Taiwanese respondent then to the

question as posed? One looks elsewhere in Professor Emerson Niu’s long TNSS questionnaire for clues.

表B30. 有些人認為臺灣已經是一個主權獨立的國家，現在的名稱叫中華民國，不需要再宣布獨立，請問您同不同意這種看法？

“Some people think that Taiwan is already a sovereign independent country whose current name is the Republic of China. Thus it is not necessary to declare independence. Do you agree?” A full 65.8 percent of respondents either agree or strongly agree with this statement.

Is this the “one China” the Taiwanese respondents refer to in their answer to the previous question? If so, the CCP has never, and presumably will never, accept such an “interpretation.”

A further look at Niu’s fine and detailed questionnaire shows overwhelming support for the “status quo,” whether what follows the status quo is to be unification (9.8 percent), or wanting to see what transpires and then deciding on independence or unification (33.7 percent), or a status quo that stretches forever (26.3 percent) or a status quo that eventuates in independence (19.5 percent).

While Hickey dismisses out of hand “most of Taiwan’s public opinion polls” as, “nonsense polls,” most analysts would not consider the Taiwan Indicators Survey Research polls to be such. In the TISR poll of 5/30/16, two questions relevant to the issue of the “92 consensus” were asked.

A firm 57.1 percent of respondents agreed with President Tsai’s wording in her inaugural address, where she stated that she respects the historical fact of the 1992 discussions and said her government would conduct cross-strait relations based on the ROC Constitutional framework, Taiwanese democracy, and public opinion. The question ended by noting that President Tsai did not mention the 1992 consensus.

A second question noted that the Chinese government wants President Tsai to accept the 1992 consensus and asks whether respondents believe she must do so. Over half (51.4 percent) of respondents did not agree. (TISR Chinese original here: <http://www.tisr.com.tw/?p=6812#more-6812>)

The bottom line, in my mind, is that Tsai’s “maintenance of the status quo” is, in fact, a clear articulation of the “will of the Taiwanese people.” Taiwanese like what they have: democracy and its freedoms, the rule of law, and respect for human rights. At the same time, Tsai and the Taiwanese body politic are well aware of the need for caution in describing relations with China. Tsai has left the door open for dialogue that preserves peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait with all options open for the future, as befits Taiwan’s democratic reality.

Mr. Hickey's Response:

Mr. Fonte, an employee of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), is disappointed with the results of a scientific survey conducted by the Election Study Center of National Chengchi University. Let's get one point clear now. This is the most prestigious and professional polling organization in Taiwan. No other polling firm is even in its league. Fonte suggests that another poll might be used. Ironically, it is my understanding that the poll Fonte prefers (TISR) conducted its last and final survey in 2016 – they've folded up shop – and could not compare with the TNSS. And like Tsai and others, Fonte will not reveal which polls the Tsai administration actually consults. Why is that?

My essay calls on Tsai to stop “playing word games.” Everyone knows that the “one China with own interpretation” formula used in the TNSS poll (and long supported by a majority of Taiwanese) is the “1992 Consensus.” The formula means that the Republic of China (ROC) claims that it is “one China.” And the People's Republic of China (PRC) claims that it is “one China.” Both agree there is one China, but disagree on what that means. Fonte demands that the PRC must abandon this stance and admit that there is a ROC now. That was not the understanding reached in 1992 and is a change to the status quo.

Let me repeat for emphasis here. One side claims there is one China (ROC), while the other side claims there is one China (PRC). During his eight years as president of the ROC, Ma Ying-jeou never acknowledged the existence of the PRC. But he loudly proclaimed the existence of the ROC.

Yes, the formula strikes some foreigners as odd, but it's hard to argue with success. During the eight years that both sides adhered to the “1992 Consensus,” tensions reached their lowest level since 1949. Roughly two dozen landmark cross-strait agreements were signed (am I the only one who remembers the 9 hour “indirect travel” journey from Beijing to Taipei via Hong Kong before 2008?). And after eight years adherence to the “1992 consensus” this became the “status quo.” Now, the Tsai administration will not endorse the “1992 consensus.” The status quo has changed. And Taiwan's people are feeling the fallout.

To be sure, Mr. Fonte approached me as I was leaving a meeting in Washington and asked me why the survey did not specifically use the phrase, “1992 consensus.” For starters, the same question has been used consistently in all TNSS polls since 2005. And the results are consistent. It would be an unsound move to rephrase the question now. But don't trust me – trot over to the library and look it up. I also tried to explain that unethical pollsters employ “trigger words” to spark desired findings (also mentioned in the [PacNet](#) essay).

For example, in 2013, CNN found that more people opposed “Obamacare” than “the Affordable Care Act” – although they are the exact same thing! In the final analysis, the TNSS poll is trying to find out what the Taiwanese people really believe – it is an honest and scientific poll.

Clearly, the TNSS poll makes some uncomfortable. But I am just reporting the news. It is my hope that the findings can help shed some light on what is going on in Taiwan. At a minimum, the poll can help us understand why a majority of

Taiwanese (55.7 percent) are now dissatisfied with Tsai's performance as president. If Tsai honestly wants to follow the will of the Taiwanese people, she should adjust her policies accordingly. If she is not willing to follow the will of the Taiwan people, she should stop claiming that she does.

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