

Response to PacNet #48 “Why Panama matters”

Bill Sharp (we.sharp@gmail.com), is the host of Asia in Review, a 2016 Taiwan fellow, a 2017 Fudan University fellow, and a lecturer at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa.

Bill Sharp replies:

I had the pleasure of meeting Professor Hickey at a conference in Macao in January 2016 and have a high regard for his work. However, I have to take exception with “Why Panama Matters,” (*PacNet #48*, June 27, 2017).

No doubt Panama was one of the leading countries that recognized the Republic of China (Taiwan). However, even if Taiwan should lose other allies — which seems probable — it will make little difference. Other than the Vatican, nations allied with Taiwan are small, poor countries that play minor roles in international relations. Indeed, as Hickey points out, 11 Taiwan allies were unable to secure participation for Taiwan in the May 2017 World Health Assembly.

It is more beneficial for Taiwan to worry about unofficial relations with the US, Japan, the European Union, and the Go-South countries of South and Southeast Asia. The US sells arms to Taiwan; Japan has a bilateral investment treaty and wants Taiwan to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership that Tokyo now seeks to lead; the EU shares common democratic values with Taiwan; and the Go-South countries form the bedrock of Taiwan’s strategy to reduce economic reliance on China.

Tsai Ing-wen is a social reformer and economic planner. She is not a charismatic, ideologue advocating for independence like Chen Sui-bian. During her presidential campaign, there was no call for independence. She knows full well that if she were to seek independence that the US would not support her, that her relationship with China would suffer, and that she would upset neighboring countries. No country in the world will recognize a Republic of Taiwan. In effect, she has frozen the pro-independence plank of the Democratic Progressive Party’s platform.

But accepting the ‘92 Consensus, she would lose the support of the pro-independence faction of her party. While Hickey cites various polls to support his view that Tsai should accept the ‘92 Consensus, from Tsai’s perspective the most important support is that from within her party and among the swing voters that supported her in her 2016 election victory.

Instead of getting behind the ‘92 Consensus, Tsai supports creation of a “Taiwan Consensus.” That is an open, nationwide debate on what Taiwan’s relationship with China should be, which should then be ratified by the electorate in a referendum and made into law.

The harder China pushes for Tsai and Taiwan to accept the ‘92 Consensus, the deeper Taiwan’s growing sense of

Taiwan identity will become. As a result, China will find it even more challenging to promote unification.

Note: Professor Hickey has an open invitation to appear on my TV show *Asia in Review* to further discuss his point of view.

Dennis V. Hickey replies:

I’d like to make a few brief observations in response to Bill Sharp’s comments about my essay, “Why Panama Matters” (*PacNet #48*).

First, I’ve never suggested that Taiwan’s diplomatic partners can engineer the island’s return to the WHO or other IGOS. Even the countries Sharp cites as important (the US, Japan, etc.) cannot do that. Taipei’s road to participation in UN-affiliated agencies and most of the global community runs through Beijing—not Washington or Tokyo. Some of Taiwan’s “small friends” loudly promote Taipei’s case in international bodies. Taipei claims this is helpful, and I tend to agree.

Second, Sharp ignores all other reasons cited in my essay explaining why Panama is important. He does not explain what will become of Taiwan if it is no longer recognized by any of the world’s governments. Moreover, Sharp does not mention how Taiwan’s leaders will manage to “transit” and “rest” in the United States (and meet important US officials) after it loses all of its diplomatic allies in Central America. Similarly, he ignores the fact that Panama is symptomatic of a much larger problem. Namely, Taiwan is quickly losing its “footprint” in the global community. All progress achieved from 2008 to 2016 is being undone. “Unofficial” relations with other countries are being downgraded and Taiwan is being locked out of international organizations. Some of us do view this as a worrisome development.

Third, my essay does not discuss Tsai’s stance toward independence, social policies, or China’s reunification. So, I cannot understand why so much of Sharp’s “response” focuses on these irrelevant topics.

Fourth, Sharp claims that my article “cites various polls.” My essay doesn’t cite any polls.

Finally, Sharp claims that Tsai wants to promote a “Taiwan consensus.” But no one knows what that means. And Sharp doesn’t explain how this will help Taiwan return to the international community. In closing, I am pleased that my article prompted Mr. Sharp to take the time to express some of his thoughts about the Taiwan issue. Given the stakes involved, I hope that more academics and practitioners will pay attention to recent developments in Taiwan.

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