

Why Taiwan is needed in ICAO by David Brown

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It's time for Taiwan's exclusion from the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) to end. ICAO's mission is to promote the safe and orderly development of civil aviation by setting the standards and regulations necessary for aviation safety and security. Finding a way for Taiwan to participate is essential to achieving these objectives.

Taiwan is the world's 17th largest economy and a major participant in international aviation. Some 50 domestic and foreign airlines operate flights from Taiwan to over 100 international destinations. Taipei is responsible for the Taipei Flight Identification Region (FIR) that sits astride international airways linking northeast and Southeast Asia. Each year some 1 million flights pass through the Taipei FIR making Taiwan a key link in world air travel. Taiwan's exclusion from ICAO creates risks to the safety and security of these flights that the international community can ill afford.

There are real risks involved in Taiwan's exclusion from routine networks and systems that ICAO has established to ensure timely dissemination of safety standards. Exclusion also means Taiwan does not have timely access to rapidly changing technology and procedures covering flights through the Taipei FIR. Taiwan's airlines and civil aviation officials have to rely on slow and non-authoritative means for keeping track of ICAO changes affecting safety and security. It gets some information from friendly governments, such as the US. Its airlines can purchase new ICAO regulations from commercial providers, but with months-long lag times. If Taiwan could participate, it would automatically and instantaneously receive information through online ICAO networks.

One particular problem is that exclusion prevents Taiwan from participating in the ICAO Director General's Conference for Aviation in Asia (DGCA). This body includes all other aviation authorities in Asia and is the regional body for coordinating air safety and security in Asia. Taiwan's authorities don't have any easy way of contributing to or learning about DGCA air safety actions. A decade ago their absence created risks when China planned to start new routes in the Taiwan Strait. More recently, some experts believe that Taiwan's exclusion has been a contributing factor in some minor safety incidents that have occurred.

Exclusion from ICAO also makes it difficult for Taipei to keep others informed of changes it is making within the Taipei FIR. Furthermore, because Taiwan and its airlines are not part of regular ICAO reporting systems, it is possible, perhaps even likely, that there is under-reporting of problems and potential risks by Taiwan airlines.

In 2003, Taiwan's exclusion from the World Health Organization (WHO) hampered the international communities' ability to contain the SARS outbreak. The episode also poisoned Taiwan's relations with China. Several years later, the way was cleared for Taiwan to become an observer and participate in some WHO work. Consequently, Taiwan is now participating in efforts to contain the H7N9 virus. Do we have to wait for an aviation disaster before finding a way to remove the risks associated with Taiwan's exclusion from ICAO?

Why is Taipei excluded? Because Beijing is opposed to Taiwan's membership in international organizations, particularly those in the UN system. Beijing's stated position is that "fair and reasonable arrangements" can be made for Taiwan's "participation" provided they do not create a situation of "one China, one Taiwan" or "two Chinas." That is the framework by which Taiwan participates as an observer at the World Health Assembly and in some WHO activities.

Taipei understands Beijing's position and has modeled its approach to ICAO accordingly. Taipei is asking to be an observer, not a member, in ICAO. It has said it will participate as a health entity represented by its health officials. And, it has said that it is willing reluctantly to use the name "Chinese Taipei," as it does in the WHO and elsewhere, rather than insisting on its formal name, the Republic of China. As this posture avoids creating the risks of "one China, One Taiwan" or "Two Chinas," Beijing's conditions would be met.

In 2011 and again in 2012, then Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Hu Jintao twice told Taipei's emissary Lien Chan that Beijing would consider Taiwan's interest in participating in ICAO. But Beijing has not yet acted. Why not? Because Beijing is insisting that Taipei consult with it about its international participation. Beijing wants to exploit Taiwan's desire for international participation to pressure Taipei on other issues. This is short sighted from Beijing's perspective because it means that the goodwill that might help change the Taiwan people's attitudes toward China would be squandered.

The ICAO's Assembly is scheduled to hold its triennial meeting in September. The time has come for Beijing to remove the barriers to Taiwan's participation. Doing so would contribute to improved cross-strait relations. As the international community has a strong interest in the issue, governments, including the United States, should speak up for Taiwan's participation and work behind the scenes to find a way to achieve that this year.

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