

Endorse the 1992 Consensus, Ms. Tsai by Dennis Hickey

*Dennis V. Hickey (DennisHickey@missouristate.edu) is distinguished professor and director of the Graduate Program in Global Studies at Missouri State University. A version of this article originally appeared in the *China Daily* [here](#).*

Following Ma Ying-jeou's election as president of the Republic of China (Taiwan) in 2008, Taiwan endorsed the "1992 Consensus." Under this arrangement, both Taiwan and the Chinese mainland accept the principle of "one China," but each side holds its own interpretation of what that means.

Taipei's return to the 1992 Consensus enabled cross-strait relations to move forward. Negotiations between Taiwan's Straits Exchange Foundation and the mainland's Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait re-opened for the first time in over a decade. By 2016, the top cross-strait officials from the two sides had met seven times and a total of 23 cross-strait agreements had been signed. The number of direct cross-strait flights soared from zero to 120 per day. Millions of mainland tourists visited Taiwan and the mainland now serves as the island's largest trading partner.

International observers praised the progress in cross-strait relations. Support for the rapprochement was even enshrined in the 2010 National Security Strategy of the United States. And President Barack Obama declared that, "I am very pleased with the reduction of tensions and the improvement in cross-straits relations."

On April 15, 2015, Tsai Ing-wen was nominated as the Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) presidential candidate. President Ma's solid achievements in cross-strait relations represented a conundrum for Tsai's campaign because the DPP's platform still supports Taiwan's independence from China. An endorsement of the 1992 Consensus might alienate key DPP constituencies. But an open abandonment would frighten voters, provoke Beijing, and alarm the global community.

To cope with the challenge, Tsai opted to sidestep the issue by claiming she supports the status quo and will handle relations with Beijing in accordance with "the will of the Taiwan people" and Taiwan's Constitution. Throughout her campaign, she refused to elaborate on her vague approach to cross-strait relations.

The campaign is now over and Tsai Ing-wen will be inaugurated on May 20. She could use the opportunity to explicitly endorse the 1992 Consensus and has five reasons to do so.

First, Tsai was careful not to reject the 1992 Consensus during her campaign. Rather, she described it as an "option." On May 20, Tsai will possess the power to choose or reject an option. Hopefully, she will choose wisely.

Second, Tsai claims that she supports the "status quo." For eight years, the 1992 Consensus has served as the foundational basis for cross-strait relations. This means that Taiwan's present policy toward relations with the mainland is the status quo. Rejecting the 1992 Consensus upends the status quo.

Third, Tsai promises to handle relations with Beijing in accordance with "the will of the Taiwan people." This means she can easily endorse the 1992 Consensus. Serious public opinion polls – not the "nonsense polls" so often cited by Taiwan's politicians and partisan think-tanks – reveal that most of Taiwan's people support the present approach to relations with the mainland. The 2015 Taiwan National Security Survey (TNSS), a scientific poll conducted by the Election Study Center of National Chengchi University, under the auspices of the Program in Asian Security Studies at Duke University, reveals that a solid majority of Taiwan's people either "support" or "strongly support" this approach to cross-strait relations.

Fourth, top DPP officials concede that their party's victories in 2015 and 2016 may be traced to Taiwan's economic problems – not Taipei's approach to cross-strait relations. In fact, the TNSS poll shows that a plurality of Taiwan people support increased economic exchanges with the mainland. And less than 1 percent (0.4 percent) believes that economic conditions will improve if cross-strait relations worsen. A failure to endorse the 1992 Consensus will likely undermine cross-strait relations, harm Taiwan's economy, and reduce the DPP's prospects in future elections.

Fifth, the global community will welcome an endorsement of the 1992 consensus. No one wants to see a return of "Taiwan the Troublemaker." In keeping with longstanding US policy, Washington will not "officially" endorse the 1992 Consensus. But the US has *never* voiced opposition to it.

On May 21, 2015, Susan Thornton, assistant secretary of State, appeared to establish a linkage between US policy and Taipei's approach to Beijing. She said Washington hopes to continue to cooperate with Taiwan "and it must be said that an important ingredient of that close cooperation in recent years has been the stable management of cross-strait ties. We have an abiding interest in the preservation of cross-strait stability, and this interest informs our overall approach to cross-strait issues." And if that statement wasn't clear enough, media outlets report that Washington sent a former high-ranking official to Taipei in March to "unofficially" tell Tsai that the US wants her to accept the 1992 Consensus.

In sum, the time for election year politics has passed. Tsai Ing-wen's speech on May 20 provides her with a historic opportunity to honor election year promises. Endorsing the 1992 Consensus will show that she intends to maintain the

status quo, respect majority opinion, reassure the international community, and get Taiwan's economy moving again.

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