

Taiwan's U.N. Entry and Flexible Diplomacy

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Since the government of President Ma Ying-jeou took power on May 20, 2008, it has refrained from filing an application for entry into the United Nations (UN) ahead of the opening of the General Assembly's annual session for three years in a row now. Instead the Ma government has pushed for Taiwan's participation in specialized agencies of the United Nations. In 2009 and 2010 Taiwan participated in the World Health Assembly (WHA) as an observer, but it enjoys the "special honor" of participating in that meeting as a "non-member state" only after receiving a written invitation before the meeting each year. Present diplomatic efforts focus on gaining observer status in the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) and the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The Ma government wants to demonstrate that its flexible diplomacy, adopted after calling a diplomatic truce with China, has born fruit. But when it comes to participation in multilateral mechanisms, the Ma government only continues the much greater efforts that the previous Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government made to get into ICAO and join the carbon reduction mechanisms under the UNFCCC, which

China does not dare to face. The platform that Ma and his running mate Vincent Siew proposed in the 2008 presidential election – returning to the U.N., the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) - is not likely to be delivered before the next presidential election in 2012. Indirectly this proves that Ma's flexible diplomacy has failed, because it would only be logic that if flexible diplomacy worked, Taiwan's entry into any international organization would be a breeze.

Entry into International Organizations at China's Mercy?

It is, of course, important for Taiwan to join the ICAO and UNFCCC. But it is becoming a U.N. member state that is the fundamental purpose of diplomatic work. If the diplomacy of the Republic of China shall be conducted in the spirit of independence and initiative as stipulated in Article 141 of the Constitution, then this independence and initiative may not by any means be based on the goodwill of the enemy. What about "Returning to the U.N."? Originally this demand was part of Ma and Siew's election pledges in the 2008 presidential election, as they believed it to be

identical with the policy promoted by the then ruling KMT from 1993. In 2008 they even pushed for a referendum on Taiwan's return to the U.N. as the Republic of China, essentially taking the same stance. But after Ma and Siew won a majority of the presidential ballot, their calls for a “return to the U.N.” have died down, because the Ma government knows that it will hit China’s raw nerve if it commissions its diplomatic allies to submit a motion to the U.N. to put Taiwan's representation and participation in the U.N. on the agenda of the U.N. general assembly. Such diplomacy that builds on the goodwill of the enemy cannot last.

During the election Ma and Siew not only push for a return to the U.N., but also called for Taiwan’s return to the World Bank. That’s a policy that the Foreign Ministry should actively promote. If flexible diplomacy works, then Ma and Siew would on the one hand be able to deliver on their election pledges, instead of breaking them. On the other hand the interests of Taiwanese investors in the international arena, in particular in China, could be protected. That would not run counter to the Foreign Ministry’s goal of promoting Taiwan’s participation in U.N. specialized agencies, yet why does the Ma government hesitate to push this policy? The reason is that Taiwan is not a U.N. member

state. Provided Taiwan joins the World Bank and organizations under the World Bank Group such as the International Development Association (IDA), the International Finance Corporation (IFC), the International Center for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID), and the Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency (MIGA), it can logically also become a member state of these organizations. MIGA, of which China is a signatory, in particular is an investment guarantee mechanism that Taiwanese investors are ardently hoping for. Should the interests of Taiwanese investors be damaged in China, MIGA could be used to lodge a complaint against China. Still, if Taiwan now seems to have an opportunity to join ICAO, this is no guarantee that Taiwan will be able to become a member of functional international organizations.

Only U.N. Entry Means Breaking Diplomatic Blockade

The Ma government would currently rather drop its election pledges and abandon participation in multilateral mechanisms. Following the signing of an Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) with China, it is all too willing to negotiate an “investment protection agreement” with China through a bilateral mechanism. In

the event that China unilaterally terminates the agreement, the interests of Taiwanese investors would not be protected at all. But Taiwan would already be locked inside China so that there would probably no opportunity for a turnaround.

People must know that most international diplomatic venues and settings revolve around the U.N. system. Making isolated efforts to become the member of individual specialized agencies has a certain positive significance. Yet many specialized agencies are very important. Domestic labor organizations hope that Taiwan joins the International Labor Organization (ILO), while the finance industry hopes to join the World Bank and the IMF, the fishing industry hopes to enter the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and the environmental groups hope that Taiwan becomes a member of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). This being the case, shouldn't the Ma government consider an approach that settles the problem once and for all? It is United Nations membership that is the fundamental purpose of flexible diplomacy, since only as a U.N. member can Taiwan break its diplomatic isolation. **B**