

Analyzing the Outcome of Tsai Ing-wen's U.S. Visit

| Liu Shih-chung

Amid Taiwan's heated presidential campaign the role of the United States has finally come to the fore. Tsai Ing-wen, presidential candidate for the major opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), recently visited the United States. The most important part of her itinerary was a visit to Washington, during which she explained her cross-strait policy in meetings with politicians and scholars, Obama administration officials and U.S. Congress members. The U.S. is interested in the cross-strait positions that Tsai eventually put forward following repeated prodding. Moreover, Tsai is the DPP's first-ever presidential candidate who is able to converse with her U.S. counterparts in fluent English. Faced with this challenge, Ma Ying-jeou of the ruling Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT), who is prohibited to visit the U.S. as the incumbent president, dispatched his right hand aide and election campaign manager King Pu-tsung to the U.S. ahead of Tsai to spread his message in an attempt to water down or at least balance the effects of her U.S. visit on the election campaign and the media.

Overall Tsai's performance in Washington successfully achieved the objectives that she had set for her visit such as:

1. Highlighting where she differs from ex-president Chen Shui-bian:

Tsai acknowledged that toward the end of the previous DPP administration there were diverging views on strategic priorities, and that as a result the bilateral relationship went through a rough period. But she also said the DPP has learned from these developments realizing that it is important to rebuild strategic confidence and reinforce the

strategic partnership, and will therefore strengthen communication with the U.S. More importantly, Tsai eagerly conveyed the important message that the DPP will pursue a stable and balanced policy toward China that is in line with the mainstream consensus in Taiwanese society as well as international expectations, that the DPP will refrain from extreme or radical approaches, that its doors are open "to those Chinese interested in dialogue" and that the party harbors no animosity toward the people of China.

2. Highlighting where she differs from Ma:

Pointing to the flaws for which people most reproach President Ma including his excessive "pro-China" stance, his lack of dedication to a strong national defense, as well as the lack of transparency and democratic decision-making in cross-strait policy, Tsai emphasized that the DPP, when back in power, will strengthen cooperation and coordination with the U.S. and its allies, demonstrate a stronger commitment than the KMT to a strong self-defense capability, and play an even more constructive role as a regional stakeholder.

3. Highlighting the 1992 Consensus as "wishful thinking" that must be replaced with a "Taiwan Consensus" that reflects mainstream sentiment and is formulated through democratic procedures:

Tsai emphasized that the "1992 Consensus" is a fabricated political precondition that does not make a sufficient basis for cross-strait interaction.

She said that the two sides should be “peaceful but recognizing differences, peaceful and seeking commonalities” to maintain a peaceful and stable cross-strait environment, to ensure that the right to determine Taiwan’s future rests in the hands of the people of Taiwan, and any change of the status quo must be agreed by the people of Taiwan through democratic means. When necessary such a “Taiwan consensus” could be written into law, emphasis must be placed on forging consensus through political procedures, then constitutional amendments or a referendum won’t be necessary. Only if there is a “Taiwan consensus” can talks with China take place, because such a consensus constitutes a more robust basis.

4. Highlighting the continuity and stability of cross-strait ties if the DPP returns to power:

Tsai also addressed the internationally most asked question whether the DPP would honor the cross-strait agreements under the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA). She clearly guaranteed the continuity of policy, but also said that the impact of these agreements would be examined.

From the perspective of “rebranding the DPP” Tsai delivered messages that the Americans wanted to hear and were able to understand, thus effectively reshaping the “troublemaker” image that the DPP used to have in Washington’s political circles. She also created her own unique leadership style and more importantly made the Americans understand that she clearly knows where U.S. strategic interests lie.

Nevertheless, Tsai inevitably faced a number of challenges in closed-door meetings with Obama administration officials and U.S. scholars and

experts well-versed in cross-strait affairs:

1. Tsai’s “Taiwan consensus” emphasizes procedures and the right time and will only start to be promoted after she wins the presidential election. However, what is important to the U.S. are more concrete intentions and strategic reassurances.
2. Given that Beijing has so far sneered at Tsai’s “Taiwan consensus,” Beijing’s reaction is hard to fathom should Tsai reject the “1992 Consensus” after winning the election. The U.S. is worried that Tsai might be too optimistic about China.

How was the atmosphere in talks between Tsai and Asian affairs officials of the National Security Council, the State Department and the Pentagon after all? For outsiders it is hard to catch a glimpse of the truth from the courtesies that the two sides exchanged in public. Solely the Financial Times quoted an unnamed Obama administration official as saying after Tsai’s departure from Washington that Tsai had left U.S. officials with distinct doubts “about whether she is both willing and able to continue the stability in cross-Strait relations the region has enjoyed in recent years.” In the first paragraph the article stated that “The Obama administration has warned that a victory by Tsai Ying-wen, the Taiwanese opposition leader, in the island’s January presidential election could raise tensions with China.” The unnamed official went on to say that is was “far from clear ... that she and her advisers fully appreciate the depth of [Chinese] mistrust of her motives and DPP aspirations.”

Although Tsai’s aides emphasized after the newspaper report that the U.S. comments were not consistent with what American officials told Tsai in the meetings and the U.S. State Department clarified that the so-called anonymous official did not speak for the Obama administration, the

Financial Times article clearly shows that within the Obama administration there are forces still distrustful of the DPP and Tsai that intentionally leak certain information.

During Tsai's visit, the Obama administration was rumored to have already decided against selling Taiwan advanced F16 CD fighters. Just as Tsai was touring the U.S., Washington sent Assistant Secretary of Commerce Suresh Kumar to Taiwan, the highest-ranking official to visit in nine years, which means that we must not underestimate the influence that the Obama administration exerts on Taiwan's elections in a more suitable way.

It is obvious that while the U.S. keeps professing that it will not take sides in Taiwan's elections, that it will remain neutral and support the outcome of democratic elections, it still holds a number of "trump cards" that it may play in the coming three months in response to sudden changes in the election situation or cross-strait relations. Once Tsai looks set to win, Washington will inevitably resort to applying more overt pressure. **BT**