

Tsai's Foreign Trips Rebranded the DPP

Liu Shih-chung, Research Fellow, Taiwan Brain Trust

Election is about image-building, message-delivering, and most importantly, policy elaboration. And when it comes to Taiwan's presidential elections, what strikes the international observers is the rationale behind candidates' overseas visits with the hope of adding more political points to the elections.

Former major presidential candidates, from both the governing Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) and the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) all made overseas trips after they were officially nominated. Even when the incumbent President of Taiwan is forbidden to visit major capitals of the world, he may also play the "transit" card, as manifested by former DPP President Chen Shui-bian, to hopefully generate more media coverage and publicity.

For decades, the KMT has accused DPP leaders of lacking sufficient understanding of international affairs and strategic change to discuss global and regional issues. In contrast to the party leaders that came before her, Tsai's unique personality, trade negotiation skills, international vision, academic background and fluent English have been deployed to develop a new image of the DPP leadership.

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That explains why the DPP presidential candidate Tsai Ing-wen has made five overseas trips, including Germany, Great Britain, Philippine, the U.S. and Japan, since she was nominated in early May. Given the incumbent President Ma Ying-jeou is prohibited to visit major capitals in the world, Tsai's camp specifically incorporates "public diplomacy" into her campaign as a way to re-brand the DPP and distinguish herself from Ma on issues related to cross-strait relations, regional security and US-Taiwan relations.

The image of the DPP in most countries remains firmly in the Chen era. As a result of his maneuverings in domestic politics and cross-strait relations, Chen was characterized by many international commentators as a "troublemaker."

Whether that was fair or not, Tsai's mission has been to rebrand the DPP. That is why she has used these overseas trips to repeatedly say that the DPP's China policy will be moderate and rational. By admitting to the mistakes of the former DPP

government, Tsai has also been able to rebuild the party's relations with major governments, particularly Washington and Tokyo. Policy consistency and "surprise-free" decision-making are two key messages that Tsai has delivered to the international community.

Moreover, Tsai has demonstrated to audiences in the US, Japan and Europe that she is different from Chen, who was considered too provocative to Beijing.

Tsai has also tried to distinguish herself from Ma, who has been criticized as being too "China-friendly." Her pitch to the international community has focused on the need for Taiwan to be on the same side as the community of democratic nations and to utilize Taiwan's strategic position to hedge the rise of China.

Due largely to Washington's high expectations for Tsai's cross-strait policy, as well as the fact that she is the first DPP presidential candidate who can speak fluent English, President Ma sent his campaign director, King Pu-tung to Washington to "balance" Tsai's trip. Facing electoral maneuvering by both parties, US President Barack Obama's administration, on the surface, tried to remain unbiased, while influencing Taiwan's elections in a subtle way.

In terms of "image-building," "message delivering" and "public diplomacy," Tsai achieved her goals. First, she highlighted differences between her and her DPP predecessor, former president Chen, by recognizing strategic divergences between Taiwan and Washington during the Chen era and emphasizing the need to rebuild trust and construct a partnership. She also pledged that future DPP cross-strait policy would be stable and balanced.

Second, Tsai distinguished her leadership from Ma's by stressing her ability to work closer with US allies in the region and determination to take strong action to defend Taiwan.

Finally, and most importantly, Tsai dismissed the notion of the so-called "1992 consensus" as a fabricated concept reached only by the KMT and the Chinese Communist Party(CCP) and suggested replacing it with a "Taiwan consensus." She also pledged to continue the agreements reached by the Ma administration and its Chinese counterparts, provided Taiwan remains able to re-examine their pros and cons.

So far Tsai's strategy is to use her notion of generating a "Taiwan consensus" as the first step to formulate a transparent, democratic and majority basis in Taiwan and then seek possibility for negotiating with Beijing on cultivating the alternatives. Nevertheless, pundits have challenged Tsai over how a "Taiwan consensus" could be formed and executed, if Beijing insists on DPP's unilateral acceptance of the "one China" framework or the DPP fails to win a majority in the upcoming legislative election.

Tsai encountered numerous challenges, particularly in her meetings with officials from the Obama administration and think tank experts. The major concern for the Washington establishment is the substance of Tsai's theory of building up a "Taiwan consensus" if she wins. While Tsai talked of the process of generating such a consensus, the US expected more detailed elaboration.

Another worry is a fear that Tsai might misjudge Beijing's willingness to work with a possible new DPP government. Though it is reasonable for Tsai to refrain from revealing her hand when Beijing has yet to show its cards, Washington anticipates a more concrete agenda behind Tsai's cross-strait policy that could ensure a continuation of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait.

That explains why, after Tsai left Washington, a story in the *Financial Times* sparked a political fire.

The story quoted an anonymous senior US official, who attended a meeting with Tsai, as saying that "she left us 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."

Despite the US State Department's immediate clarification that "the 'official' mentioned in the article is totally unknown to us and certainly does not speak for the Obama administration," the episode demonstrated a divergence in views from different US agencies when evaluating Tsai's cross-strait policy. And this faction tends to use the media to spin the news to influence Taiwan's elections indirectly.

Although the US administration said it does not take sides in Taiwan's elections, such ambiguous and inappropriate interference in Taiwan's domestic politics runs the risk of jeopardizing a fair, open and democratic electoral process in the upcoming elections.

There is no doubt that Washington often plays a pivotal role in influencing public opinion in Taiwan. Former US president George W. Bush's administration used a series of open statements by high-ranking officials, including former US president George H.W. Bush, to warn the DPP government about the likely dangers of holding referendums prior to the presidential elections in 2004 and 2008. Beijing was no doubt behind the US' verbal and diplomatic pressures on the Chen administration.

It is therefore not surprising to see some US officials duplicating that strategy to force Tsai to unveil more details about her cross-strait policy or to make clear "strategic reassurances" to Washington as the election approaches.

No matter whether it comes from a lack of internal coordination between different US agencies or if the Obama administration intends to help Ma get re-elected, such moves sabotage Taiwan's hard-won democracy. The US should be neutral and not intervene in Taiwan's elections, as well as ensuring a successful transition of power in January were Tsai to win.

In sum, to win the election is one thing but to explain to the international society that the DPP has transformed into a mature and responsible stakeholder constitutes the most important task for the DPP leader. In this regard, Tsai deserves more support than doubts.