

# Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen: Beijing must respect our democratic will

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By Lally

Weymouth

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*Lally Weymouth is a senior associate editor at The Washington Post.*

Tsai Ing-wen is the first woman to be elected president of the small island of Taiwan, a close U.S. ally but also a potential flash point, because Beijing asserts that Taiwan belongs to the People's Republic of China and can never be independent. Quite a few Taiwanese in Tsai's party see it differently. Although China and Taiwan have been able to paper over their differences to date, tensions have been mounting since Tsai's inauguration, when she did not restate the so-called '92 consensus, in which Taipei and Beijing agreed that they are part of "one China" — but with different interpretations. This past week, The Washington Post's Lally Weymouth visited Tsai's office for the president's first foreign interview since taking office. Edited excerpts follow:

**Q:** What is your impression of Chinese President Xi Jinping?

**A:** I think that Chairman Xi's courage tackling corruption is an important matter in the development of Chinese society. I also look forward to him showing a bit more flexibility in dealing with cross-strait relations. I hope that he can appreciate that Taiwan is a democratic society in which the leader has to follow the will of the people.

**Q:** Some academics say Xi has a certain deadline by which he wants you to agree to the '92 consensus. Is that right?

**A:** It isn't likely that the government of Taiwan will accept a deadline for conditions that are against the will of the people.

**Q:** Since your inauguration in late May, the Chinese have cut off the official channel that was used to communicate between Taiwan and the mainland. How do you plan to handle day-to-day relations with Beijing?

**A:** We have always had diverse channels of communication across the strait. These include not just official communications but also people-to-people contacts. . . . There are differences between the positions of the two sides of the strait. In Taiwan, we have done our best to minimize that gap. I believe that the Chinese realize the goodwill we have put forth at the inauguration.

**Q:** It doesn't seem that way. I think it was China's Taiwan Affairs Office, part of the State Council, which said that your speech was "an incomplete exam." There is no public indication that they appreciated your position. Are you, the president, in touch with your counterparts in the Chinese government?

**A:** Different levels of the government have different ways of communicating with their counterparts in China. At this stage, I cannot go into too much detail.

**Q:** Do you feel you are closing the gap between Taiwan and the People's Republic of China?

**A:** Over this past period, we have handled relations with China very carefully. We do not take provocative measures, we make sure that there are no surprises, and we hope that through channels of communication, we can gradually build up trust.

**Q:** You represent many of the youth who think of themselves as being Taiwanese, not Chinese. They are more pro-independence than the older generation. As president, you want to maintain cross-strait relations for stability, but at the same time, you must keep your followers happy. How do you balance these factors?

**A:** Different generations and people of different ethnic origins have different views on China. But they all agree on one thing. That is democracy.

**Q:** Is it fair that Washington has considered Taiwan an entity, not a country, since 1979, when the United States changed sides and recognized the People's Republic of China (with its capital in Beijing) — in lieu of the Republic of China in Taiwan (with its capital in Taipei) — as China?

**A:** I am not clear what the U.S. means when they use the term "entity." For us here in Taiwan, we believe that we are a country, a democratic country.

**Q:** So isn't it unfair that Taiwan is not recognized in the world?

**A:** It is indeed unfair.

**Q:** American readers would find it hard to understand that you, as a Taiwanese president, are only allowed to come to the United States for 48 hours, and then only if it is a transit stop.

**A:** Indeed.

**Q:** There has reportedly been a drop-off in tourists from the mainland. Will that hurt your tourist industry?

**A:** We hope to have a more diverse source of tourists.

**Q:** China could bring more pressure on Taiwan if it chose to. They could frighten away your diplomatic allies by threatening to weaken your bonds with them. Are you worried about that?

**A:** If they do take economic measures to apply pressure to Taiwan, they will have to think about the price that they are going to pay. Because the surrounding countries will be looking very carefully at what measures China will take against Taiwan.

**Q:** So you think as far as your alliances go, they will stay as they are today?

**A:** We will do everything we can do to maintain those relations and make sure that our diplomatic allies feel that having diplomatic relations with Taiwan is worthwhile.

**Q:** Your predecessor, President Ma Ying-jeou, wanted to buy 66 F-16s from the United States. Even though 47 senators wrote in support of his request, nothing happened. Do you intend to repeat that request?

**A:** At the current stage, what we need are surface ships, submarines and air defense systems, as well as defensive capabilities in terms of cybersecurity.

**Q:** I think Ma also asked for diesel submarines and got nowhere. Will you repeat that request?

**A:** We are trying to develop our own [submarines].

**Q:** When it comes to the U.S. election, Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump — who would be better for Taiwan?

**A:** As the leader of a different country, it is not very wise for us to comment on the presidential election in the U.S.

**Q:** I understand that the focus of your program is domestic — that you want to raise wages, to give people more time off. But with a growth rate under 1 percent, how can you spur the economy while delivering increased social services?

**A:** There is no panacea for this. I think Taiwan's economy needs an overall structural readjustment. Our new model focuses on innovation and research. This is different from our growth model in the past, which was centered on the manufacturing industry.

**Q:** Isn't China your No. 1 trading partner?

**A:** China is still our largest trading partner; however, complementarity between our economies is decreasing. We had the ability to organize a manufacturing process, and then we moved our manufacturing capability to China to make use of their labor pool. But now the situation is very different. [Chinese] labor costs are increasing, and China has their own capability.

**Q:** So China has become a competitor of Taiwan?

**A:** They are more and more our competitors.

**Q:** I saw that you expressed disappointment over the ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague on the South China Sea. It held that Taiping Island, which you claim as part of Taiwan, is a rock, not an island, and thus cannot enjoy an exclusive economic zone. Will you abide by the ruling?

**A:** We will not accept their decision. There are a couple of reasons for that. Taiwan is an important interested party in this case, but we were not invited to participate in the proceedings. Secondly, we found it unacceptable that we were referred to as the Taiwan Authority of China. The third reason is that [Taiping Island really is] an island.

**Q:** You are the first woman in Asia who does not come from a political family to be elected president of a country. How did you do it?

**A:** I think that my emergence as a leader is closely related to the development of Taiwan's democracy. Taiwan's democracy was a gradual development. It was done from the bottom up. Therefore a lot of the more successful political leaders come from civil society, those that are closer to the grass-roots level of the public.

**Q:** It must have been difficult to be a woman leader in such a male-dominated society.

**A:** Yes, to a certain extent. But I think that the society and our democracy are mature enough to place emphasis on the quality and the value of the individual politician, rather than their gender. Some people will find it fashionable to have a woman leader, but I think the reason people chose me as the leader of this country is because my policies and my values suit the needs of Taiwan today. We represent people who want to have change in the society. For years, this place has been dominated politically by a single party, the Kuomintang. People now want the place to be more democratic. They want to place more emphasis on human rights and transparency in terms of government decision-making. This is different from the way the government conducted business in the days when this was pretty much an authoritarian place.

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**Q:** The KMT had a long military rule.

**A:** The expectation of the people now is very different. They want democracy.

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Lally Weymouth is a senior associate editor for The Washington Post.  Follow @LallyWeymouth