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Picture source: Office of the President, Republic of China (Taiwan), flickr, <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/presidentialoffice/29199750527/>>.

## *Tsai's Overseas Visit and Transit a Counterbalance to Beijing's International Saber-Rattling*

Mr. Shih-chung Liu

President Tsai Ing-wen of Taiwan conducted state visits to two of Taiwan's diplomatic allies, Paraguay and Belize, in late August. She stopped over in Los Angeles and Houston en route to Central and Southern America and was treated by the Donald Trump administration with dignity, respecting her comfort, safety, and convenience.

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politically and diplomatically significant. In terms of US-Taiwan relations, the trip was a “litmus test” for the passage of the *Taiwan Travel Act* by the US Congress and the administration earlier this year. Although this Act is not binding on the Executive branch, it aims at permitting visits and exchanges of high-ranking officials from both countries.





There was a hope that Tsai might stop over in East Coast cities such as New York or even Washington, DC. No democratically-elected President, Vice President, Premier, Foreign Minister or Defense Minister from Taiwan has ever set foot on the soil of Washington. Nevertheless, the Tsai government decided not to challenge restrictions this time because it cherished the current warming of US-Taiwan relations. On the other hand, Tsai's prudence and respect for the Trump administration have won a positive response from Washington for better transit treatment.

In light of the ongoing trade war between Washington and Beijing and China's overwhelming international saber-rattling over Taiwan's survival, Tsai's team has worked closely with its American counterpart to ensure a surprise-free but more respectful and dignified transit for Taiwan's leader.

In the past few months, the Chinese have increased their efforts to block Taiwan's presence on the international stage, such as demanding that international airlines and hotel groups change Taiwan's designation on their websites. Beijing even maneuvered the cancellation of the East Asia Youth Sport Games organized by Taichung City, which is governed by a DDP-led administration. Moreover, Beijing has poached four diplomatic allies from Taiwan since Tsai took office.

To use transit and state visits to highlight the fact that the Republic of China on Taiwan is an independent and sovereign country is crucial. Moreover, that Taiwan has been seen by an ally

such as the U.S., with which it has no diplomatic relations, as a close partner is even more encouraging to counteract Beijing's squeezing of Taiwan's international space.

Unlike previous US transit visits by her predecessors that tended to be low-profile affairs with no media coverage released in advance, Tsai's itinerary was released ahead of time, and her first official stop was at the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office's (TECO) Culture Center. On the returning transit, Tsai visited the NASA Space Center. All activities were broadly reported by the media. These are unprecedented breakthroughs.

Most importantly, the timing of Tsai's transit also coincided with President Trump's signing of the *National Defense Authorization Act* for fiscal year 2019, which includes two provisions pertaining to Taiwan. Before Tsai left Taiwan, her cabinet pledged to increase its military budget next year to signify Taiwan's determination to strengthen its defense capability.

In Houston, Tsai took the opportunity of meeting U.S. congressmen and business leaders by stressing that Taiwan and the US have spared no effort to consolidate the free-market economy, protect enterprises by ensuring fair competition and safeguard businesses from political interference. Tsai also announced several investment projects from Taiwan to the U.S. to echo President Trump's call for foreign investment.

These signs of progress can be seen as indicative of a "greater chemistry" between the



two sides. The Tsai government replied to Washington's good-will gesture by emphasizing that Taiwan would "continue to act in conjunction with the US government to stabilize and deepen the security and economic partnership between Taiwan and the US in a mutually beneficial way."

Regretfully, Beijing's intention to block Tsai's diplomatic efforts has not stopped. Two major incidents occurred during and after Tsai's trip to the U.S. and Latin America.

During her stay in Los Angeles, Tsai visited a Taiwan-based bakery cafe chain named "85°C". After the media released the story, the cafe shop corporation was boycotted by Chinese netizens and was labeled a pro-Taiwan independence company.

The social media uproar forced the company to issue a statement expressing support for the so-called "1992 consensus." This move backfired, since Taiwanese netizens saw the cafe corporation as "kowtowing" to Beijing.

However, the cafe corporation was the victim of China's relentless pressure on the Tsai government to accept the so-called "1992 Consensus" as the precondition for cross-Strait dialogue. But in fact the inventor of the "1992 Consensus," then Mainland Affairs Council Chair, Su Chi, has already admitted that the concept was merely a "convenient tool" for cross-Strait interaction. Not to mention that Beijing has never accepted the Chinese Nationalist Party's (KMT) definition of the Consensus as "one China with different interpretations." Beijing's reaction to

Tsai's visit to the cafe shop was irrational and not conducive to improving cross-Strait relations.

One day after Tsai returned to Taiwan, China "ambushed" Taiwan by maneuvering El Salvador's switch of diplomatic recognition. The move aimed at downplaying Tsai's successful transit in the U.S. as well as further humiliating the Taiwan President. El Salvador is the 5th diplomatic ally to have severed ties with Taiwan in the past few years. Beijing's action is consistent with its policy of punishing Tsai for refusing to accept the so-called "1992 consensus," which it considers to be integral to the cross-Strait "status quo." But in reality, it is part of a series of moves to unilaterally change the status quo in the Taiwan Strait.

Moreover, the El Salvador incident was not only about Taiwan losing another diplomatic ally but also a manifestation of China's penetration into America's own back yard. It has regional security implications for the U.S.

This explains why the Trump administration immediately condemned Beijing's hostile response to Tsai. Both the State Department and the White House issued statements urging Beijing to refrain from changing the status quo. What is special in those press releases is Washington's warning that it may review its relationship with El Salvador. This shows that Washington has worked with Taipei to deal with the expansion of China's global influence.

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