

# Retaining Ambiguity and Protecting Taiwan's Democracy

Written by Fang-long Shih

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FANG-LONG SHIH, JUN 21 2023

Taiwan's international status is anomalous, constituted by a double ambiguity. It is in key respects a *de facto* self-governing entity but cannot proclaim itself to be an independent state since that would be regarded as an abomination by the PRC. Like the love that dare not speak its name, Taiwan is an island that enjoys self-governance and substantial democratic freedoms, which would be put in considerable jeopardy by any overt recognition of its operating separately as – let alone declaring itself to be – a nation-state. Taiwan's *de jure* status is itself ambiguous and a matter of dispute.

The US operates a strategic ambiguity with regard to its relationship with Taiwan. In the 1979 Joint Communiqués on the establishment of diplomatic relations between the US and the PRC, “the Government of the USA *acknowledges* the Chinese position that there is but one China and Taiwan is part of China”. The use of the word “*acknowledge*”, rather than “*accept*”, is often cited as an aspect of the USA's ambiguous position regarding the future of Taiwan. Additionally, in the 1982 Six Assurances to Taiwan, the US further shrouded the nature of its continued support for Taiwan in “strategic ambiguity”. For instance, Assurance Five states that: “[T]here has been no change in our longstanding position on the issue of sovereignty over Taiwan.” Followed by Assurance Six, stating: “[N]or will we attempt to exert pressure on Taiwan to enter into negotiations with the PRC.” (conveyed in congressional testimony 8/17/1982).

The American strategic ambiguity has been in place for 40 years. This strategy has enabled the US to have formal diplomatic relations with PRC/China while continuing substantial but non-diplomatic relationships with ROC/Taiwan. However in recent years, Beijing is no longer playing ambiguity but accelerating “One Country” and “One China” with less room for “Two Systems” and “Difference on its Definition of China”. While there is little doubt that Beijing seeks to fully annex ROC/Taiwan into the PRC/China one day, questions remain about the timing and methods that China might use to achieve this goal. There remains uncertainty as to whether and in what circumstances the US would be prepared to intervene militarily if China were to invade Taiwan.

In August 2022, the visit to Taiwan of Nancy Pelosi, (Democratic) Speaker of the US House of Representatives – third most powerful American politician after the President and Vice-President – was a vitriolic form of political symbolism. The PRC interpreted it as a blatant violation of the island of Taiwan's incorporation as an inexorable part of their “One China” precept. They reacted with their own stark political symbolism, claiming Taiwan and the US is deviating from the status quo of maintaining peace in the Taiwan Strait over the past 40 years. They increased the level of cyber-attacks and military manoeuvres, threats and intimidation towards and over Taiwan. They featured cancellation of dialogue and cooperation with the US. The diplomatic tensions have continued till and during 2023.

On March 26 2023, Taiwan's diplomatic relations with Honduras in Central America were terminated. Just three days later, DPP President Tsai Ing-wen of Taiwan left for a 10-day diplomatic trip (March 29 to April 7), ostensibly to consolidate Taiwan's diplomatic ties with Belize and Guatemala, the only two Central American states still to have diplomatic relations with Taiwan. However, on the outward journey, she stopped off in New York, and on her return journey she stopped over at Los Angeles. There she met with Kevin McCarthy, (Republican) Speaker of the US House. This was portrayed as “ground-breaking” in Taiwan's media as it was the first time ever that a democratically

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elected Taiwan President had met with such a high-ranking politician on American soil.

Given Taiwan's anomalous situation, it has limited options. In many ways it falls beyond the remit of much IR theorization. Its policy is not to focus on the competitive and conflictual side of international politics, but on soft power, informal channels, cultural and symbolic forms of diplomacy. As such, I feel the constructivist school of IR thought to have heuristic efficacy for examining Taiwan's efforts to retain its strategically ambiguous position on an increasingly fraught global chessboard. Emerging in the 1990s, the IR constructivists see the international system as determined not by material capabilities, but by social relationships based on "shared knowledge, shared understandings, shared opinions, expectations, relations, activities and interactions" (Erbas 2022: 5095). Thus they emphasize the international relationships are constructed by actors through the making of norms and alliances, in which ideational factors play the crucial role (Wendt 1999). Soft power involves the mobilization of ideational factors, relying on constructing political and cultural symbols, a sort of branding or re-branding exercise.

The Tsai-McCarthy meeting as an event of political theatre, was deliberately staged at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. In this article, I explore the political symbolism involved in choosing this site for Tsai's "ground-breaking" meeting. I also weigh up the extent to which the intended message of this key example of Tsai's venture into a diplomacy reliant on political symbolism has been received, accepted, ignored or rejected by different audiences.

## Recent occurrences in Taiwan's diplomatic relations

From 1971 when the United Nations restored PRC/China to the Chinese seat and expelled the ROC/Taiwan till 1979 when the US broke off diplomatic relations with ROC/Taiwan, ROC/Taiwan's formal diplomatic ties had reduced from 56 to 22 countries. Since then, China has taken every opportunity to sabotage further Taiwan's diplomatic relations with other countries. It was not coincidental that just three days ahead of Tsai's departure, Honduras broke off 80 years of diplomatic ties with Taiwan, claiming that "Taiwan is an inseparable part of China's territory". Within half a day, China had boasted documents establishing the PRC's diplomatic relations with Honduras. This made it the ninth country with which Taiwan has lost diplomatic ties since Tsai became President in 2016. Currently, only 13 countries maintain diplomatic relations with Taiwan. If measured in terms of official ties, Taiwan's diplomatic outreach seems to have come to a *cul de sac*.

On the day of Honduras' severing diplomatic relations, President Tsai Ing-wen asserted that "Taiwan will not engage in meaningless dollar diplomacy competition with China". Eleven days later, while stopping off at Los Angeles, Tsai met with McCarthy at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. In addition, Tsai had a 90 minute closed-door meeting with 20 cross-party Congressmen (14 Republicans and 6 Democrats), showing this to be not a single Party matter, but a shared approach. After the meeting, McCarthy and Tsai each gave a public address with an Air Force One Boeing 707 plane as backdrop – while not the official plane for the current President, it had served seven US Presidents from 1973 to 2001. Against this quasi-official staging, McCarthy addressed Tsai as "the President of Taiwan".

McCarthy emphasized: "The friendship between the people of Taiwan and America is a matter of profound importance to the free world, and it is critical to maintain economic freedom, peace and regional stability." Tsai Ing-wen answered: "The peace that we have maintained and the democracy that we have worked hard to build are facing unprecedented challenges," and "This meeting together and unwavering support reassure the people of Taiwan that we are not isolated and we are not alone." This stop-over meeting was supposedly low-key and did not openly refer to the ROC, nor did it broach the idea of state-to-state or even *quasi-state*-to-state relationships. Instead, it is portrayed by both lead protagonists as a matter of friendship and mutual support between the peoples of Taiwan and the US on the basis of their shared understandings and democratic values, and thereby premised on people-to-people relationships.

Supposedly low-key, the Tsai-McCarthy meeting was always going to generate substantial media attention. More than 180 journalists from around the world attended to "capture this historical moment" (VoA 2023/04/05). It was seen by both sides as a publicity opportunity. In some Taiwan media, the meeting's success is best measured in

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terms of the quantity of media attention. For instance, RW News enthuses on there being “more journalists in attendance than any White House press conference”. The Cable Era TV goes so far as to suggest that “not only for Tsai, but also for McCarthy, their meeting brought them to the pinnacle of their political careers to date, putting both in the spotlight as never before”. Such commentators view the meeting in terms of its political symbolism and media volume, assuming its effect on international public opinion about Taiwan's situation.

## **Diplomacy's limited shelf-life: From Honduras to Reagan's Library**

What changes to Taiwan's diplomatic approach occurred over the 12 days from Honduras' termination to the spotlighting of the Tsai-McCarthy meeting? Till March 26 2023, Taiwan and Honduras had maintained traditional formal diplomatic relations for 80 years. The two countries dispatched diplomatic envoys to each other on the basis of mutual recognition, and maintained official ties and connections on the basis of each other's situational needs. Since 1979 Taiwan's strategy involved keeping official diplomatic relations with an albeit small number of countries, and their votes in the United Nations. That was the theoretical gain for Taiwan. For Honduras the diplomatic deal pivoted on much-needed financial aid from Taiwan.

According to the International Monetary Fund, Honduras is a “highly indebted poor country”. Throughout its history, Honduras has been politically unstable and subject to frequent regime changes. Its volatility has been exacerbated by – whilst contributing to – long-term fiscal deficits, and a foreign debt which currently exceeds US\$20 billion. Honduras Deputy Foreign Minister Antonio Garcia said that he had held talks with Taiwanese officials at least four times since September 2022, and requested loans of US\$2 billion. Immediately after Honduras's termination of diplomatic relations, Taiwan Foreign Minister Wu Chao-Hsieh disclosed that Honduras had asked Taiwan for further funding, including US\$45 million to help build a hospital, and US\$300 million to help build a dam, amounts later raised to US\$90 million and US\$350 million respectively. This is a scenario which Tsai will have had in mind when she talked about “meaningless dollar diplomacy”, and her reluctance to engage in a ‘bidding war’ with China.

For Taiwan, formal diplomatic ties with Honduras was solely a matter of adding one more to the paltry number of states with which Taiwan had continuing formal relations. It was something of a charade, reliant on “dollar diplomacy” which operates like a sealed bid auction. But Taiwan is always liable to being outbid by China, who can offer a bigger carrot as inducement, but also can wield the stick of exerting the pressure of economic sanctioning or retaliation on countries that do not toe the CCP line. In dollar diplomacy, Taiwan has an impotent hand, with, it seems, no more cards to play, since China can trump its financial inducements, its carrots, whilst also holding the aces of the sticks it can wield. It is a bum deal as far as Taiwan is concerned, a losing hand.

In contrast to the strategy of maintaining formal diplomatic ties with a dwindling number of states, President Tsai's “transit through the US” is indicative of her playing a different game, one which seeks to extend non-formal ties between the peoples of Taiwan and the US by means of key ideation and symbols. This game relies on investing meaning into political symbols and adherence to shared democratic ideals. Tsai's strategy is to promote democratic symbols and ideation as a lever for persuading an international media audience of the ongoing and enhanced alliance between Taiwan and other democracies – people to people ties, rather than state-to-state ties. Hence giving up on dollar diplomacy in favour of a constructivist approach that includes the dimensions of political symbolism, democratic rhetoric, and digital diplomacy (or eDiplomacy or “digiplomacy”).

## **The Reagan Presidential Library as symbolic location**

Taiwan under Tsai Ing-wen's presidency prioritizes strategic ambiguity. We can see an alteration in the primary focus of this policy. Part of the PRC's pressure on Tsai since 2016 has been engineering the reduction of Taiwan's official partners from 22 to 13. Tsai has shifted emphasis from Taiwan's flagging formal ties – portrayed as dollar diplomacy – to a focus on soft power and symbolic construction of informal international relationships as the best way for protecting Taiwan's democracy.

I suggest that we can explore the potential symbols and ideations of the Tsai-McCarthy meeting being held in the Reagan Presidential Library – a deliberate choice and piece of theatre. The Library is not an official building as such,

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but it is associated with previous American Presidency. But why not the Library of other recent Presidents? Why invoke Reagan specifically? President Reagan is portrayed as playing a decisive role in ending the Cold War (1947–1991). In doing so, he is represented as a proponent of the power of democracy and freedom not just to transgress the Iron Curtain, but to bring it down. His Memorial Library has long provided political symbolism and ideation for democratic Taiwan. Reagan is identified with his signing off on the 'Six Assurances to Taiwan', which have since laid the foundation for a strong and unique partnership that has lasted for over 40 years.

In an earlier iteration of symbolic diplomacy, President Tsai had also stopped over and given a speech at the Reagan Library in 2018. Specifically, she had chosen for her dais to be located in front of a commemoration comprised of a brick taken back by Reagan from the dismantled Berlin Wall. Tsai proclaimed: "Reagan's uncompromising pursuit of freedom and democracy is also where Taiwan's values lie" and cited Reagan's remark: "Everything was negotiable except two things: our freedom and our future" (made in 1986, when arms reduction talks with then Soviet Leader Gorbachev had stalled).

Both visits, in 2018 and again in 2023, are efforts to figure an association with Reagan selectively remembered as a bastion of freedom and democracy. The day before the meeting, American researcher Rebecca Heinrichs Tweeted: "Excellent location. Reagan knew the US needed – *needed* – allies to win the Cold War. And well, here we are again." Next day, McCarthy said: "Today is a bipartisan meeting, where the Republican and Democratic parties gather in a place [the Reagan Library] that symbolizes freedom and commitment." Tsai once again cited Reagan: "Freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction. It must be fought for and defended constantly by each generation." She reiterated Taiwan's commitment to defending the peaceful status quo, where the people of Taiwan may continue to thrive in a free and open society." In other words, to protect democracy, Taiwan needs to retain its double ambiguity.

Some Taiwan journalists have spotlighted the political symbolism of speaking in front of the former Air Force One plane as associating it with previous US Presidents. I venture the interpretation that the staging affords a deft representation (by being in front of a former Presidential aircraft) of a liminal space and the productive ambiguity located between the realms of what's official and non-official. It is a constructed theatre which stages and projects the strategic ambiguity of Taiwan's existential challenge, situating the encounter as neither official nor entirely unofficial.

A section of Taiwan's media reads the event as recognition of Tsai as "President". This partial reading focuses on how Tsai is addressed by House Speaker McCarthy as "the President of Taiwan", and not as President of the Republic of China. There is, they claim, thereby no breach of the US 'One-China' policy, based on the proposition that the PRC is the only China. Not invoking the term ROC is portrayed as avoiding a violation of that formal policy. One comment, quoted on the Storm Media, goes so far as to claim that, therefore, "China's loss of face has been kept to a minimum". Wishful thinking?

In the new Cold War alignment now unfolding, Taiwan has been compared with Berlin's liminal situation in the old Cold War. The building of the Berlin Wall was a landmark event in the official outbreak of communist East Berlin vs capitalist West Berlin. Wu Jieh-min sees the Taiwan Strait as the new Berlin Wall built between Taiwan (cf. West Berlin) and Hong Kong (cf. East Berlin) and the rest of China (The Reporter, 2022). After the fall of "Two Systems", he portrays Hong Kong as now locked inside China's Iron Curtain. In my view, the construction of the Great Firewall is a landmark event tantamount to the construction of the Berlin Wall, symbolic of and materially manifesting the division which authoritarian China has erected between itself, democratic Taiwan, and the rest of the democratic world.

Referring to the Berlin Wall in 1989, President Reagan emphasized that "Information is the oxygen of the modern age. It seeps through the walls topped by barbed wire and it wafts across the electrified borders". Reagan metaphorized 'information' as 'oxygen'. It cannot be seen, but its existence has real effects in the world. Lack of information, like lack of oxygen, makes it impossible to survive. As for him the crucial component of ending the Cold War, Reagan selectively highlighted the significance of freedom of information and the transmission of democratic ideation while eschewing reference to the limitation of nuclear arms and the spread of what has become known as

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neo-liberalism. The symbolic location of Reagan's Library plays on such a partial memory which valorizes his reputation for spreading democratic values, people to people, transcending the barriers. As such, for those favouring Tsai's line, it resonates with the current impasse either side of the Great Firewall.

Furthermore, in 1987, when calling for Gorbachev to open the Berlin Wall, President Reagan broadcast his faith in the potency of democratic values: "This wall will fall. Beliefs become reality... Yes, across Europe, this wall will fall. For it cannot withstand faith; it cannot withstand the truth. The wall cannot withstand freedom." The avowed political symbolism of Tsai's visits seems premised on the fragile faith that the dismantling of the Iron Curtain was *actually* based on the inexorable spread of democratic values. We could update this quote to read: "Yes, across the world, this information firewall will fall. For it cannot withstand faith; It cannot withstand the truth. The wall cannot withstand freedom." The flow of information – fake or otherwise – across the information firewall is portrayed as necessarily unidirectional and hegemonic.

## Symbols can break anchorage from their moorings

The intentional fallacy, a term used in 20<sup>th</sup> century literary criticism, problematizes judging a literary work by presuming and prioritizing the author's intentions (Dickie and Wilson 1995; Carroll 1997). My account of the political symbolism of Tsai's meeting with McCarthy at the Reagan Library presumes it to have been a piece of political theatre deliberately intended and agreed by Tsai and McCarthy. Even if we allow for this to be the case, neither author of the meeting can control the meanings that different audiences may "read into" the symbols. Even assuming that I have discerned Tsai's intentions accurately – and that her intentions matched those of McCarthy (and his with the views of the wider US political establishment), we encounter existential difficulties in measuring the political efficacy of the meeting's symbolic construction of Taiwan's place in the fraught field of international relations. Tsai is a shrewd enough politician to recognize that she cannot have anything like complete ownership of the visit, no matter how eloquent its backcloth.

Tsai's venture into a diplomacy reliant on political symbolism has been read very differently by supporters of Tsai and by her detractors on Taiwan, and by the large number of the population whose position is unaligned to either camp. Most Tsai supporters agree that China's threatening of Taiwan can be countermanded by propagation of democratic ideation and pronouncements. This is the discourse to which Tsai and her supporters are overtly subscribing – whether or not they believe this to be true, it is a position they feel they have to adopt. This is political symbolism from Tsai, bidding to leave her legacy in her final year as President, that is for 'the converted' who see the visit as ground-breaking and a new model for Taiwan's future diplomacy.

However, Tsai's visit has been read quite differently by some commentators who are concerned about the liaison between Taiwan, with its undoubted democratic freedoms, and an America which has historically preached democratic values while invading or toppling regimes (including in Honduras) which they don't like. It is not just those on the left who are concerned that Tsai's visit with McCarthy represented for them a cosying up with an advocate of Donald Trump, whom they see as threatening the very existence of democratic institutions in the US. Even some left-leaning Europeans assumed Taiwan to be a right-wing entity because that's what they read into the meeting between Tsai and McCarthy. The intended political symbolism of the meeting will have escaped most observers, who will look for latent meanings of the meeting, attributing it to the selling of arms, alignment in the emerging new Cold War situation with the US, continued expansion of neo-liberalism and other hidden motives. There's an irony that Tsai imagines the best way of preserving Taiwan's democracy is to align with a regime whose own democratic credentials seem increasingly to be under threat from within. It might be argued that it was not House Speaker McCarthy but former President Reagan with whom Tsai's symbolism intended to be associated. Tsai would argue that this is the real politics of Taiwan's diplomatic conundrum, and that she had no choice as to whom is the US House speaker she met.

At the very next day of Honduras' termination (March 27), Former (KMT) President Ma Ying-jeou departed to visit China and returned to Taiwan at the very next day of the Tsai-McCarthy meeting (April 7). Anti-US and Pro-China media, such as China Times, described this as "an ice-breaking" visit to the PRC by Former President of the ROC, stating: "The people on both sides of the Strait really need to melt the ice". Tsai's supporters dismiss the supposed

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rationale of Ma's visit to China as a means for preserving peace across the Taiwan Strait. They argue that it involves a rapprochement with China which would cost Taiwan its democracy and freedom. They reject the counter-symbolism of Ma's visit to China as a sell-out. The KMT itself is divided on Ma's visit.

The PRC has, inevitably, interpreted the political symbolism of Tsai's visits in an entirely negative light. They have criticised the visit as exemplifying Tsai's "relying on the US and conspiring independence will push Taiwan toward a dangerous war scenario". The PRC denies the reality of Taiwan's double ambiguity. The CCP vigorously refutes any strategic ambiguity and instead aggressively advances what it regards as essential clarifications. No longer abiding by the precept "One Country Two Systems" for either Hong Kong or Taiwan/ROC. It says that Taiwan is an internal matter for China; that Taiwan is irrefutably part of the One China. The CCP reserves the right to win back Taiwan by force of arms if deemed necessary. Against the backdrop of Putin's invasion of Ukraine, and the agreement of the G7 of the threat posed by China, the PRC is pressuring the US to declare its hand in its policy of strategic ambiguity towards Taiwan.

The extent to which soft power and acts/events of political symbolism can countermand the real-world pressure on Taiwan are seriously limited, perhaps forlorn. The staging of the Tsai-McCarthy visit was a purposive piece of political theatre, intended to project a message for those in the auditorium. The message has not, though, reverberated beyond the theatre walls. It has not changed the hearts or minds of those not previously converted. Many onlookers have ignored Tsai's rhetoric and paid more attention to what they imagine to have been the latent political symbolism of the visit. How successful is "ideation", "symbolism" if they, in a circular fashion, end up as preaching only to the converted?

It has become an urgent time for Taiwan to ask whether, driven into a *cul de sac*, there is any alternative diplomatic path that Taiwan can take? Particularly, in the information age, international relations have undergone critical changes. The "real" relationships between countries and people are being reinvented and redefined with interconnected digital technology in the virtual cyberspace. Churchill is (wrongly) accredited with saying that "Democracy is the worst form of government – except for all the others". Perhaps a diplomatic approach premised on political symbolism and strategic ambiguity is the least worst form of diplomacy for Taiwan to follow. It is certainly more viable than dollar diplomacy.

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