

NEWS AND ANALYSIS

What Taiwan Wants Us to Know

The Taipei government is keen to show the island is more than a political football between the U.S. and China.

BY BOB DAVIS — JUNE 11, 2023

POLITICS



Taiwan's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jaushieh Joseph Wu, at the US-Taiwan Economic Prosperity Partnership Dialogue, November 21, 2020. Credit: 外交部 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ROC (Taiwan) via [Facebook](#)

Lots of governments pay for foreign journalists to tour their countries in the hopes of increased and more favorable coverage. But probably none depends more on these junkets than Taiwan.

Dwarfed by its immense neighbor and recognized by just 13 countries, Taiwan struggles to deliver its message that it's more than just a political football in a titanic geopolitical game played by the U.S. and China.

In May, Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs invited me and 29 other reporters from two dozen countries for a week-long, expenses paid, political tour of Taipei and environs. The ministry plans a few other tours this year and figures it will wine and dine more than 100 foreign reporters. Adding trips for lawmakers and their staff, academics and others who might sway public opinion, MOFA estimates it will pay for 2,400 foreigners to visit Taiwan during 2023 alone.

The Taiwanese play on the sympathy many foreigners tend to feel for a small democracy competing with huge, authoritarian China, presenting a David and Goliath story — although in Taiwan's case, David is wielding a silicon shield. With the world economy so dependent on advanced semiconductors made by Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co., Taiwan's implicit message is: if we get invaded or blockaded, you're all screwed. Don't expect shipments of new iPhones anytime soon.

[Ryan Hass](#), a Taiwan expert at the Brookings Institution, said in an email that the junkets have helped Taiwan “put a human face and human connection on Taiwan” so that the island “is not viewed as an object of competition between great powers but rather as a thriving society of 23 million people who want a say in their own future.”

The program's biggest success, he said, was courting former U.S. president Bill Clinton when he was a young Arkansas governor. “They spotted him early and built a relationship with him through these visits,” Hass said.



That paid off. When China sought to intimidate Taiwan in the run-up to the island's 1996 election by [firing missiles](#) nearby, Clinton dispatched two aircraft carrier groups to steam near Taiwan and deliver a pointed message about U.S. power and commitment. China's military power has greatly increased since then.

“ From these invitations, we have seen fruitful outcomes as visitors gain more knowledge about Taiwan, increase awareness of our unique situation and develop invaluable friendship with us. ”

— [Catherine Y.M. Hsu](#), director-general of Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs's international information services branch

For reporters, the invitations present an ethical conundrum, made more intense by journalism's collapsing finances. Accept Taiwan's offer and your work may be viewed as suspect; reject it and your publication may not be able to cover Taiwan in person. Of the 30 reporters on the tour, only one, Lili Pike, from a new U.S. publication called *The Messenger*, said her bosses were paying. A European reporter said this was his third MOFA-financed trip to Taiwan.



A CGTN video covering a portion of Honduran reporters' 17 day trip to China, May 7, 2023. Credit: [CGTN](#)

Invitations like these from other countries can prove irresistible. China offers free and cut-rate tours to places reporters would have tough times reaching themselves, including Tibet and the rocket launch site at Jiuquan. The European Union takes reporters to see its program in Africa and invites Chinese journalists to see Brussels. The U.S. sponsored 22 journalists to cover the 2022 midterm elections in North Carolina and Arizona “to explain how our democracy and political system works,” the State Department says, among other invites.

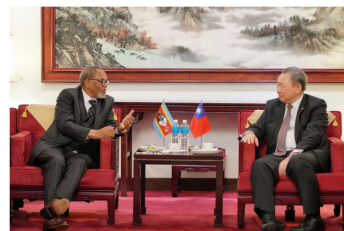
For myself, I couldn't have accepted the Taiwanese offer when I worked at *The Wall Street Journal*. It was against the company's rules and the *Journal* could afford to station reporters in Taiwan. But as a freelancer, I decided to take the junket to see what it was like. The Taiwanese paid about \$5,000 each for me and others to participate, I calculate. MOFA estimates that it spends \$500,000 annually on journalist visits.

Our MOFA hosts called us “delegates,” as opposed to “journalists,” and the label fit. We traveled in a cushy tour bus, ate sumptuous meals, and had interviews with senior officials arranged for us. At one government conference room after another, reporters took turns asking questions. To the officials' credit, they answered all the questions without asking for the usual dodge of going off the record. And remarkably they could understand the accented English of some of my colleagues that I had trouble deciphering.

We were a mixed group, with participants from the U.S., Canada, Japan, Europe, Africa, and Latin America. The Taiwanese made sure to include journalists from a handful of their diplomatic allies, Paraguay, St. Kitts, and Nevis, and Eswatini (the former Swaziland).

Among the group was a stylish Omani who wore a different head covering every day and a big friendly Fijian, who brought two big bottles of Fijian rum to share. Drink it with a splash of water, he suggested. We did.

Indeed, there were so many feasts that the tour could have been billed as a food tour with some interviews tossed in. At the [National Palace Museum](#), we saw a small delicate jasper carving called “[Meat-shaped stone](#),” an art treasure that resembles a piece of pork belly cooked in soy sauce. Afterwards the group ate at a restaurant that served a dish that resembled the statue carved to resemble the dish.



Taiwanese Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Alexander Tah-ray Yui meeting with Eswatini's Deputy Prime Minister Themba Masuku, June 5, 2023. Credit: [@MOFA_Taiwan](#)

Unlike in mainland China, though, the meals weren't accompanied by endless toasts and countless shots of high-octane baijiu alcohol. Occasionally wine was served.



A tweet about a video interview held between Lithuanian journalists and Minister Jau Shieh Joseph Wu, April 29, 2022. Credit: @MOFA_Taiwan

In the 10 separate interview sessions, the officials didn't break any news about Taiwanese politics or the economy. That wasn't the point. The officials presented their view of the world so the journalists (delegates) could better understand how Taiwanese—or at least officials from the ruling, independence-leaning Democratic Progressive Party—look at their precarious situation.

After the tour, the journalists quickly filed stories citing some of the interviews. Surely, the trip made it likely they will continue to write about Taiwan and reflect the officials' talking points in future stories.

"From these invitations, we have seen fruitful outcomes as visitors gain more knowledge about Taiwan, increase awareness of our unique situation and develop invaluable friendship with us," said [Catherine Y.M. Hsu](#), director-general of MOFA's international information services branch.

Here is what the Taiwanese officials wanted the world to know:

- Taiwan wants to preserve "the status quo." In other words, there is no interest in unification with China, but also no push to declare independence. "From our position, Taiwan is not going to be a provocateur," said Foreign Minister [Joseph Wu](#). "We will follow the status quo."

According to the polling data that Taiwanese officials distributed, that is also the politically popular position. Only a tiny percentage of Taiwanese want independence or unification "as soon as possible," said a March 2023 poll commissioned by the Mainland Affairs Council, which oversees cross-Strait relations.

- "We do not provoke. We do not escalate," said several officials, including Hsueh Jui-yuan, the health and welfare minister. Again, status quo is the goal. The message is that China is the one pushing for change—and threatening violence—not us.
- No matter what China says, Taiwan really is sovereign and should be accepted into international organizations. "Taiwan is a sovereign, independent state and has been for quite a long time," said Hua Shijie, secretary general of the [Mainland Affairs Council](#). "But because of China's consistent effort in persuading many countries to accept their one-China principle, that Taiwan is a part of China and is not a sovereign, independent state" Taiwan often can't gain entry.

Currently Taiwan is lobbying to [join the World Health Assembly](#) and an [Asia-Pacific trade pact](#) called the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership.

- In the event of armed conflict with China, Taiwan isn't asking anyone to fight for it (although of course it is, especially the U.S.). "I need to stress the determination of the Taiwan side to defend itself," said Wu. "We are not in a position to ask other countries to fight for Taiwan if Taiwan is not willing to fight for itself."
- But if the worst does come to worst, the rest of the world will pay a steep price from a Chinese offensive, so it should back Taiwan now. "If other countries feel the impact or the cost is too high, they need to work to prevent war from happening," said Wu. Rhodium Group, a market research firm, estimates a Chinese blockade of China would [deliver a \\$2 trillion hit](#) to the global economy, mainly from a halt in semiconductor trade.
- Still, Taiwan doesn't want war talk to get out of hand. From its point of view, former Trump administration National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien's musing in a recent [article](#) that the U.S. would never let TSMC fall into Chinese hands in the event of a war—presumably by destroying its facilities—was a step too far. TSMC wants its clients to be confident that it can continue to rely on shipments from Taiwan. ([O'Brien](#) later walked back his remarks and said TSMC facilities would fall into disrepair in the

event of a China attack.)

When asked about the O'Brien comments, the usually loquacious Deputy Foreign Minister [Tien Chung-kwang](#) deferred to another speaker on the dais, Lai I-chung, president of the [Prospect Foundation](#), a think tank close to the government, so that Tien didn't need to deliver an official response.

"We do not want to weaponize TSMC," Lai said. "We'd be killed by friendly fire? In my view that's a strange comment."

“**We are a sovereign nation with our own people, currency, and constitution. If we can keep that for as long as possible, it will eventually affect the other side.**”

— *Tien Chung-kwang, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Taiwan*

Still, hewing to the status quo isn't much of a long-term response to the Chinese challenge, especially when Beijing repeats again and again that returning Taiwan to the motherland is a core interest. After a lunch hosted by Tien, the deputy foreign minister, I asked him how he saw the conflict eventually resolving itself short of war.

At some point, he said, China would become more like Taiwan. When Chinese tourists visit, he claims, they are mesmerized by Taiwanese television shows where people criticize the government. "They probably one day want their government to be like that," Tien said.

So, count Tien as one of the remaining believers in engagement. If enough mainlanders are exposed to Taiwanese-style democracy, he argues, they will want change of that sort. "We are a sovereign nation with our own people, currency, and constitution," he said of Taiwan. "If we can keep that for as long as possible, it will eventually affect the other side."

Beijing once also believed in engagement and figured that the lure of the Chinese market, and the tug of family relations would eventually convince Taiwanese to agree to reunification with an authoritarian China. The idea of "one country, two systems," the slogan China has long used about Hong Kong, was meant to entice Taiwan.

But China's crackdown on that city over recent years has destroyed whatever interest there was in Beijing's offer, said Tien "Nobody would believe that one-country, two systems is going to work," he said. "No way."



Deputy Foreign Minister Tien Chung-kwang.
Credit: [@MOFA_Taiwan](#)



Bob Davis, a former correspondent at *The Wall Street Journal*, covered U.S.-China relations beginning in the 1990s. He co-authored "[Superpower Showdown](#)," with Lingling Wei, which chronicles the two nations' economic and trade rivalry. He can be reached via bobdavisreports.com.

● COVER STORY



Cable Cutters

BY GREGOR STUART HUNTER

On February 2, a Chinese fishing vessel cut one of the two subsea internet cables connecting the Matsu islands to Taiwan. Six days later, an unidentified ship severed the second cable, leaving Matsu's 14,000 residents cut off from the outside world. Was it an unfortunate coincidence? Or a deliberate act of vandalism — one that was designed even to be a test run of a similar assault on all of Taiwan?

● THE BIG PICTURE



Dicey Debt Collection

BY AARON MC NICHOLAS

A look at the murky world of debt collection in China, where strong-arm tactics and often violent threats have created a stigma that will not easily fade.

● Q & A



Chun Han Wong on How Xi Jinping Has Changed China

BY KATRINA NORTHROP

The journalist talks about Xi Jinping's rise to the top; how he keeps his rivals at bay; and what could happen after he finally steps down.



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