

## AIT has nothing but praise for Tsai

Written by John Tkacik

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Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) presidential candidate Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) is a remarkably talented person. However, don't take my word for it. It is a view secretly shared by US diplomats in Taipei whose job it is to gather intelligence on Taiwanese politics.

As a long-retired diplomat who once wrote (and read) US diplomatic cables from Taipei, I confess a guilty pleasure in reading the classified assessments from the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) via that dastardly source, WikiLeaks. We old-school foreign service officers took great pride in our writing skills and I am gratified that the tradition still thrives in the AIT.

So, while the WikiLeaks release of secret US Department of State (and AIT) reports is indeed horrifying, illegal and unwarranted, it supplies powerful good reading. And, while WikiLeaks telegrams from the AIT have embarrassed many politicians in Taiwan, Tsai is not one of them.

The earliest WikiLeaks cables to assess Tsai's career date from January 2006 when she was named vice premier. They are all very positive.

Although a lawyer by education, the AIT said Tsai "subsequently acquired impressive economic experience" as a trade policy official.

"Tsai is viewed as extremely capable and very persuasive" and, as all US officials who have dealt with her can attest, "she is a tenacious negotiator." Tsai, who for five years had been the top China policy minister in the Cabinet, would have "more influence on cross-Strait issues than any previous vice premier," the AIT said.

Describing the vice premier for the benefit of Washington's officialdom, an AIT's cable said: "[Tsai] is a savvy insider on formulating and implementing policy," and "we expect her to be consistently well informed on issues and very clear about the policy positions."

In a separate analysis, the AIT outlined her stance toward China thus: "With a background in international trade law, she has always been a strong proponent of Taiwan's insistence that

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China must show respect for Taiwan before there is any substantial relaxation of cross-Strait ties, either political or economic. Nonetheless, she has supported some limited opening, including the mini-three links that allow direct transportation between Taiwan's offshore islands and the PRC [People's Republic of China]."

When Tsai departed the vice premiership in 2007, the AIT lamented that her successor lacked Tsai's "extensive economic background." When she was chosen to chair the DPP, then-AIT deputy director Robert Wang, predicted that "a clean and efficient professional, Tsai Ing-wen will definitely burnish the DPP's image and most probably improve its performance."

As she finished her first year as the DPP chairperson, then-AIT director Stephen Young marveled that she had easily overcome the challenges that were radicalizing the DPP with her "moderate and cautious approach," and that she moved swiftly to revamp the party's divisive primary system and to centralize the nomination of candidates. She "tends to be low-key and businesslike," but "she is firm in her decisions and quite demanding of her staff," Young said. This was all the more remarkable because, Young said, she was "not really excited about politics."

In another message, Young described her as a "thoughtful and a strong manager," and praised her "moderate and soft spoken personality, as well as her academic and professional qualifications." Young added that "her low-key personality may also disarm her competitors, who would do well not to underestimate" her.

After the DPP's wins in the December 2009 elections, the AIT reviewed Tsai's successes in retiring party debts and "managing the fallout" of former president Chen Shui-bian's (陳水扁) corruption scandal. Speculating that Tsai could be the DPP's next presidential nominee, the AIT reassured Washington that she was a "moderate leader eyeing a flexible China approach."

This is how the AIT connected the analytical dots: "Her professionalism and international experience — she speaks fluent English — remain apparent as DPP Chair. She appears comfortable meeting foreign dignitaries and views relationships with Japan and the United States as particularly important to Taiwan. [Note: Tsai traveled to the United States once this year and to Japan twice. End note.] As MAC [Mainland Affairs Council] Chair, Tsai helped to promote a pragmatic cross-Strait policy and participated in talks with China to improve economic ties. At her recent policy briefing, Tsai said she intended to build a strong DPP support base in order to put forward a more flexible approach toward China."

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By February last year, the AIT telegrams said Tsai had “further consolidated her position as party kingmaker” and that “Tsai has won plaudits for her tireless campaigning.” For a woman who the AIT had said two years earlier was “not really excited about politics,” the AIT observed with admiration, “Tsai’s ability to push through her proposal on nominating candidates for the special municipality elections in Taiwan’s largest urban areas reflects her now unchallenged party leadership.” She had understood systemic weaknesses of her party and her “success has quieted [the] naysayers and has gained her the respect of party elders.”

Going through all these telegrams, I was struck by the absence of anything unflattering in the AIT’s descriptions of her. She obviously connects well with people. Several AIT cables made a point of noting “she has a wry sense of humor.” In one interview with an AIT officer, she said her first year as DPP chair was “like mandatory military service.”

By contrast, the AIT cables describing President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九), now running for re-election, are far more ambivalent. Ma is portrayed as “coming from a KMT [Chinese Nationalist Party] mainlander elite family” possessing an “urbane sophistication and moderation,” a “corruption fighter” and a man “with a reputation as a telegenic, pragmatic, and clean politician.” However, the AIT’s analyses also are filled with disclaimers that some “both in and outside the KMT, have questioned his resolve and vision, and his ability to lead.”

On his election to the presidency in 2008, the AIT uncharitably observed that “his ability to win elections by wide margins is especially notable given his lack of grassroots political experience, standoffish attitude toward local political dealmakers, and soft leadership style.” It also shared the view of former KMT chairman Lien Chan (連戰) that “because Ma was raised and educated in a wholly KMT environment, he is a ‘nationalist’ who identifies with the Republic of China [ROC], not Taiwan.” The AIT concluded one analysis by saying he is a “workaholic” and “he is well-known for his generally detached temperament and bland personality.”

In 2009, the AIT said Ma was “becoming known as the ‘stay at home’ president [who] looked particularly ineffective when several of his key picks for high office were rejected by the Legislative Yuan, despite the fact that his own party controlled a 3/4 majority,” and “even though he is President, Ma lacks firm control over the KMT apparatus.”

In another backhanded compliment, the AIT said “with uncharacteristic boldness, [President

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Ma] is pushing forward vigorously on cross-Strait initiatives, counting on Beijing to cooperate and raise no political difficulties.” Even when the AIT portrayed Ma as “grateful for US expressions of support,” the AIT still said: “However, Ma still seems indecisive and risk averse when it comes to dealing with issues beyond his expertise.”

In the wake of the August 2009 Typhoon Morakot tragedy, the AIT sourly observed that “now, many people will be inclined to credit his previous [and future] blunders less to inexperience than to incompetence.” The AIT added that “political analysts agree that no one wants to see Ma recover [from the typhoon scandal] more than China’s leaders, who have found in the president an eager partner in improving cross-Strait ties.” By February last year, the AIT said Ma needed to “improve the image of his administration as woefully lacking communication skills.”

Of course, an incumbent president attracts far more criticism than a challenger, even in foreign diplomatic reports, but US officials in Taipei have dealt with both Ma and Tsai for decades and still the contrast between them in these official reports is startling.

US officials at different levels have watched Tsai for 20 years, first as a trade negotiator, then as a member of former president Lee Teng-hui’s (李登輝) braintrust. And as chair of the MAC during the first Chen administration, Tsai (like Ma, she has a doctorate in law) visited Washington frequently, having direct talks with very senior US officials, including top Department of State and White House officials. Former US deputy secretary of state Richard Armitage, according to newspaper reports, was a particularly frequent interlocutor.

It is not my place to speak for them, but in those years, I never heard from them anything but the most effusive praise of Tsai’s communication skills, her warm interpersonal traits, her intellect, her “tenacious” negotiating style and her genuine likeability. And the AIT’s high assessment of her leadership abilities and her political vision is apparent from the reports available through WikiLeaks.

For the past decade I, too, have followed closely Tsai’s career. I hosted an Asia-hands lunch for her exactly 10 years ago in Washington on Dec. 13, 2001, and have met her on official calls and privately innumerable times since. I even had a chance to chat briefly with her during her visit to Washington in September and can attest that she impressed everyone who met her on Capitol Hill and at the State Department.

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Everyone, that is, with the possible exception of an anonymous White House official who immediately phoned the Financial Times to say 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.”

Clearly, that one official had not been reading the past 10 years of AIT cables. And, judging from how rapidly he scrambled to leak his “distinct doubts” to the press, he had planned his leaks well ahead of meeting her. Which leads one to suspect his “doubts” had little to do with Tsai and much to do with Beijing.

All that said, over the past decade, my view still has not changed: Tsai is a remarkably talented person and I doubt very strongly that the AIT’s view has changed either.

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