

A by-product of Taiwan's nearly 400 years of settler occupation, followed by the self-exile of the Republic of China from the UN for nearly a half-century, has been that Taiwanese more often ask how geopolitical events will affect them, rather than how Taiwan could and should influence the world.

Since the disastrous pride-induced walkout from the international stage in 1971, Taiwanese involvement on the world stage has been unofficially deep while officially minimal and, until 2000, generally self-pitying.

After Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) became president, Taiwanese saw the return of some national pride and self-respect in international relations and diplomacy, even if much of it was superficial and mostly designed for domestic consumption.

Between 2008 and last year, former president Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) administration voluntarily shrunk Taiwan's visibility in an effort to appease China, a strategy that yielded some visa waivers and almost nothing else, including no symbolic expansion of its presence on the international stage.

Taiwanese were told to go through China to the world, discard dangerous illusions of any potential US or Japanese aid in the event of a conflict and make peace with a historically predetermined fait accompli.

Meanwhile, the US continued to wield its now-greatly dulled strategy of ambiguity, only succeeding in ineffectually rebuffing egregious disrespect heaped upon Taiwan by China in international organizations and events in the misguided hope that a pro-Beijing government in Taipei would reduce tensions in the Taiwan Strait, thereby allowing Washington to wash its hands of an ongoing irritation, which only the US Congress seemed to care about.

All the while, Taiwanese and friends of Taiwan watched everything the US and its allies did with great care, parsing over every word uttered in relation to Taiwan and its status and rights, in the search for any overt or subtextual statements of validation or abandonment.

In this context, then-US president-elect Donald Trump's telephone call with President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) on Dec. 2 last year understandably resulted in paroxysms of "insta-analysis": Who called who first? What did this mean for the US relationship to Taiwan? Had official US policy changed? Would Trump beckon a new era bringing Taiwan in from the cold of its anachronistic ostracization? Was Tsai playing with fire? And finally, the perennial favorite: "How would this affect cross-strait relations?"

A year on and it seems, with the benefit of hindsight, that nothing much changed as a result. In that time, Washington has agreed to sell some more arms to Taiwan, Trump has not said or done anything further of any major substance with regard to Taiwan and the usual procession of foreign visitors from legislatures have come and gone — no doubt impressed with Taiwan's "robust democracy" and Tsai's diplomatic acuity and her commitment to "stability."

In the now infamous words of British Prime Minister Theresa May, arguably the UK's most inept post-World War II leader: "Nothing has changed."

During the past year, people also saw dramatic events unfold in the Catalonia region of Spain. Again, perhaps pressed by an occupational requirement to comment, a flurry of opinion immediately took flight like a flamboyance of startled flamingos, much of it in the process by-passing major contextual differences in an effort to wring as much relevance as possible out of the issue to Taiwan.

I myself penned my own piece, such is the affirmative allure of seeing one's name in print.

Such was the density of the output on this one issue alone that the headlines merged in the consciousness becoming the kind of bland word salad one expects from click bait: "Twenty reasons why Catalonia is relevant to Taiwan and the last one will shock you."

To adapt the immortal words of the character Ian Malcom from the 1993 film Jurassic Park, many commentators "were so preoccupied with whether or not they could draw [an analogy] that they didn't stop to think if they should."

If the geopolitical tremors of the past two years are anything to judge by, the world is warming up, figuratively if not literally. It might be more a matter of when, not if, something occurs that might or might not have serious immediate or long-term implications for Taiwan's security.

It is understandable then that analysts evaluate the most immediately visible signs of disruption or conflict as potential harbingers of negative outcomes in the region.

With Trump's constant childish need for attention, it is hard not to be constantly mildly concerned about what destructive impulsiveness will emanate from the White House next.

It is also easy to blame the symptom rather than the cause. A good example would be Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

This is not Trump's idea. It is a requirement upon the US president passed by the US Congress in 1995 via the Jerusalem Embassy Act, which passed the US House of Representatives by a margin of 374-37 and US Senate by 93-5.

It is in essence the opposite of the Taiwan Relations Act — rash, provocative, unnecessary and, in the eyes of the rest of the world barring Tel Aviv, ignores international law designating the city's status as unsettled as the result of war.

While former US presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama used a national security waiver to delay implementation of this law for more than 20 years, it appears that Trump will only continue to sign the waiver to avoid budget penalties stipulated in the act, and allegedly plans to establish a US embassy in Jerusalem in three years' time.

Putting aside the justifiably condemnatory headlines and dire warnings, the real architects of domestic and international chaos hide in the shade of the attention Trump draws himself: An elected millionaire ruling class utterly beholden to lobby interests and big donors, a military-industrial complex increasingly dominating foreign policy, a tiller-less US Department of

State led by corporate careerist rather than a diplomat and numerous overlapping security organs, which have grown used to regarding every place on Earth as a core US interest and everyone else as either an asset or a threat.

In an effort to get ahead of the “analogists,” Trump’s move on Jerusalem is not necessarily proof he will engage in dangerous adventurism elsewhere, such as in cross-strait politics.

Again, context matters, as does how important an issue is to Trump and his party. There will be no embassy in Jerusalem because Trump most likely will not be US president in three years’ time and because it has taken the US five years just to build a new mountain compound for the American Institute in Taiwan in Taipei’s Neihu District (新湖), absent any major international objections or security threats.

Furthermore, Trump’s recent visit to China demonstrated his utter lack of diplomatic acumen and experience, and was more or less a complete washout for the US, causing serious damage to its reputation in the West Pacific.

While the danger of Trump inadvertently handing China a similar symbolic victory still remains a possibility, it looks to be in the realm of the build up to a futile war with North Korea rather than in relation to Taiwan.

For her part, Tsai is right to maintain her New Southbound Policy and build a “smart defense” for Taiwan, and it would be advisable to maintain a wary cordiality between Taiwan and the US State Department until if or when more capable hands take over.

For the time being, the US Congress has a much better impression of Taiwan than China, so there is little chance of any bill being passed that would adversely affect Taiwan.

Congress is a fickle beast, though, and the US military is rarely less than hawkish.

Taiwan and the rest of the world

Written by Ben Goren

Thursday, 07 December 2017 08:07

For Taiwan analysts, it is less glamorous, but far more fruitful to watch those institutions for evidence of policy drift than overreact to the incoherent spasms of a racist oligarch who never expected and does not know how to be president.

Taiwanese are lucky to have such a capable professional as their head of state.

Ben Goren is an essayist, businessman and long-term resident of Taiwan.

Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2017/12/07](#)