

Diplomatic work costs money — the government knows it and so does the public. Nevertheless, it is important for the government to draw a clear line between necessary spending and what falls under the dangerous category of “checkbook diplomacy.”

It is no secret that Taiwan’s sensitive international status and limited resources has made it hard for the nation to make new friends and keep its old ones. Beijing’s repeated efforts to flaunt its deep pockets has only made it more difficult.

This was dramatically highlighted yesterday with Burkina Faso’s announcement that it was cutting ties with Taiwan, and a similar statement in Taipei. It was the second loss of a diplomatic ally in a month, and the fourth in two years.

Just a day earlier, Minister of Foreign Affairs Joseph Wu (吳德昇) was asked in the Legislative Yuan if the government had returned to using “checkbook diplomacy,” amid reports of pledges of financial aid to two allies.

President Tsai Ing-wen’s (蔡英文) administration has agreed to Solomon Islands Prime Minister Rick Houenipwela’s request for help so that his nation can host the 2023 Pacific Games. The amount to be given reportedly totals NT\$900 million (US\$30.07 million).

On Thursday last week, the Miami Herald reported that the government had also agreed to give Haiti a US\$150 million low-interest loan to build rural power grids.

However, Wu failed to give a satisfying answer when pressed by Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) legislators about what sets the government’s aid programs — which it has said are based on the principle of “mutual assistance for mutual benefits” — apart from Beijing’s “checkbook diplomacy.”

He said that he defines “checkbook diplomacy” as promises of “large amounts” of financial aid, in which one party’s sole intention is to outbid the other by offering “10, 20 or even 100 times

## Diplomatic policy needs explaining

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what we are offering in assistance.”

The problem is that the term “large amount” is subjective. It cannot be properly measured, unless it is compared relative to a nation’s GDP, because what appears to be a “large amount” to some might account for only a fraction of a nation such as China’s GDP and vice versa.

Taiwan’s diplomatic policy has been given several names in recent decades, from former president Chen Shui-bian’s (陳水扁) “people’s diplomacy” and former Ma Ying-jeou’s (馬英九) “viable diplomacy” to Tsai’s “steadfast diplomacy.”

The differing names are confusing and give people the false impression that they are fundamentally dissimilar, but the cornerstone of relations with our formal diplomatic allies has always been the provision of foreign assistance, notably in the areas of medical care, agricultural technology and education.

In essence, the goal is to make Taiwan’s allies see its value and irreplaceability by offering aid and assistance that could provide long-term benefits and really improve the quality of life of their people — at least, that is what the public has been told.

Despite the government’s best effort to convince the public that relations with allies are built on its provision of well-meant aid programs rather than on cold cash, some of its pledges of financial assistance could be seen as walking a tightrope between money diplomacy and needed assistance.

For example, the promise of financial aid to the Solomons for the 2023 Pacific Games and the gifting of 50 Humvees to the Dominican Republic in February inevitably raised some questions.

After its repeated criticism of Beijing’s “checkbook diplomacy,” the government should provide a better argument to convince the public why its diplomatic strategies are different from China’s, otherwise it risks being seen as hypocritical.

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