

Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je (柯文哲) is fond of making impromptu remarks in front of reporters. Sometimes, his remarks show a lack of understanding and are nonsensical, but at times they reveal a common sense in a plain and frank manner that only an amateur politician can do, which explains why he is so popular.

His statement in an interview earlier this month that the referendum on an import ban on food products from five Japanese prefectures was “feeble-minded” was a typical Ko statement.

Of all the referendums held on Nov. 24 last year, Ko said the one he disapproved of most was the import ban, because there was insufficient campaigning and information. He said that adopting different standards from the US and EU on radiation levels in food requires a convincing reason and, without that, it would be difficult for Taiwan to become integrated into the global community.

Politicians would not normally refer to a referendum as “feeble-minded” after the nation had voted, but Ko’s comments are just common sense: Taiwan and China are the only two nations that still maintain such a ban, and since even China is removing the ban, Taiwan is upholding stricter safety standards than the US and the EU.

The common sense approach also explains the negative effects of maintaining the ban. Taiwan is adopting the world’s strictest standard to deal with the issue unreasonably, while also expecting Japan to help it join the Tokyo-led Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership.

Economic and trade negotiations require equal and mutual benefits, as well as give and take. It is plain common sense that hoping for Japan to lend a hand while unilaterally imposing super-strict regulations on Japanese products is unrealistic.

The way the government is sticking to the ban is bewildering. Friendly private-sector exchanges between Taiwan and Japan remain strong and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is the most Taiwan-friendly Japanese leader in recent years, but bilateral relations have failed to advance because of the food import issue, which is not beneficial to helping Taiwan

break through the economic and trade marginalization. Whose fault is this?

Despite the good relations between Taiwan and the US, there also concerns. The US Trade Representative's annual National Trade Estimate Report, released on March 29, said that Taiwan has not complied with international standards, scientific regulations or a bilateral protocol in dealing with the import of US pork and beef.

Unsolved for years, the long-standing issue of US pork and beef imports has hindered economic and trade progress. The US' suspension of Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) talks for two consecutive years provides clear evidence.

It is common knowledge that US President Donald Trump rejects multilateral trade agreements in favor of bilateral free-trade agreements (FTAs).

Speaking at a Heritage Foundation seminar by video during her stopover in Hawaii on March 27, President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) said that a breakthrough in Taiwan-US free trade would greatly benefit Taiwan in negotiating with other nations and reduce its reliance on the Chinese market.

The question is how will Taiwan advance FTA talks when it is not even able to take practical action to persuade the US to resume lower-tier TIFA talks.

Common sense can also be applied to overall Taiwan-US relations, which might be the best since official diplomatic ties were severed in 1979. Prominent politicians such as former New Taipei City mayor Eric Chu (朱立倫), Taoyuan Mayor Cheng Wen-tsan (鄭文森), Keelung Mayor Lin Yu-chang (林錫山) and Kaohsiung Mayor Han Kuo-yu (韓國瑜), as well as Ko and Tsai, have all visited the US recently, either on formal visits or on stopovers.

Whether intended to show off, study and learn from the US, work to promote diplomatic affairs or seek Washington's support, these visits underscore the importance of US relations.

At the same time, the US has conveyed a great deal of goodwill toward Taiwan by including it in its Indo-Pacific strategy partnership, moving arms sales forward in accordance with the National Defense Authorization Act, implementing the Taiwan Travel Act and the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act, and introducing the draft Taiwan Assurance Act.

The US' friendship is not only apparent in the US Congress and other political areas, it also extends to the public, media and academia. Last month, renowned law professor Jerome Cohen suggested that Taiwan's representative office in the US should use the name "Taiwan" in its title.

Most of the time, the friendship between Taiwan and the US is the result of Washington's initiative — from Trump's telephone conversation with Tsai before assuming office, his many Taiwan-friendly confidants and Congress' many decisions favorable to the nation. Despite US goodwill, Taiwan remains timid because of the assumption that Trump, with his business background, would be unpredictable and use Taiwan as a bargaining chip in talks with China.

Taiwan is failing to take advantage of the unprecedentedly good relations with the US to deal resolutely with the meat imports issue and missing an opportunity to make a breakthrough that could greatly benefit the nation.

Common sense also shows the absurdity of relations with Beijing. China is an enemy state that is doing all it can to take over Taiwan — from urging Lions Clubs International to change the name of its Taiwan chapter, launching a dispute over the color and name of Taiwan on a globe sculpture at the London School of Economics and Political Science, and forcing entertainers to identify themselves as Chinese to blocking Taiwan's participation in the WHO and the World Organization for Animal Health's meeting on African swine fever, sending aircraft and ships to encircle Taiwan and crossing the median line of the Taiwan Strait, deploying fake news to harass the nation and buying off Web sites and recruiting a cyberarmy. A Chinese media invasion is ongoing.

Apart from its coercion, China also has its errand boys in Taiwan, who confuse the difference between friend and foe, saying that Chinese aircraft crossing the median line is exercising "free navigation."

Last month, Han held secret visits with China's liaison offices in Hong Kong and Macau, and signed memorandums of understanding in a bid to boost Kaohsiung's economy with Beijing's help, essentially bringing Taiwan into China's "one country, two systems" framework.

Economic reliance on China is an old cliché that proved unfeasible during former president Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) time in office. More specifically, common sense how reliance on China is the main cause of low wages and slow growth in Taiwan.

A demonstration against China's "one country, two systems" framework and promoting a new Taiwanese nation in Kaohsiung on Sunday last week made the point clear: Being incorporated into China would be an unmitigated disaster.

On April 5, the *New York Times* published an analysis saying that "Trump has already scored a big victory" in the US' trade dispute with China, as global companies "are rethinking their reliance on China" and "beginning to shift their supply chains away from [it]."

After fully experiencing the bitter results of the industrial relocation to China, Taiwan must grasp the current opportunity and reduce its reliance on this enemy nation if it is to have a brighter political, economic and social future.

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