

Diplomatic tensions between Germany and Hungary arose recently after German Chancellor Angela Merkel used the word “cavalry” in remarks about concerns over constitutional changes in Hungary.

“We will do anything to get Hungary onto the right path — but not by sending in the cavalry right away,” Merkel said.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban responded by referring to the German tanks that had invaded Hungary during World War II in 1944, even though the Germans explained that Merkel was only being ironic with her mention of cavalry.

Similar misunderstandings can be found in the dispute between Taiwan and the Philippines over the death of fisherman Hung Shih-cheng (洪士成), who was killed by Philippine Coast Guard personnel on May 9 in waters in the overlapping exclusive economic zones of the countries.

One could recount the sequence of events and argue that Taipei and Manila have both made the same kind of error as Merkel, and today’s situation might be drastically different if they had chosen their words more carefully and diplomatically.

Taiwan’s strong response to the Philippines was unusual. President Ma Ying-jeou’s (馬英九) administration described Manila’s apology over Hung’s death, conveyed in a message brought to Taipei by Philippine President Benigno Aquino III’s special envoy, Manila Economic and Cultural Office Chairman Armadeo Perez, as “insincere.” Ma then went a step further when both sides were still debating jurisdiction and a proposed joint investigation, saying at an official diplomatic event that Hung’s death was “cold-blooded murder.”

Those comments, along with reports of Taiwanese discriminating against or assaulting Filipinos — some of which were later proven to be false — simply added fuel to the fire.

Manila might be having a hard time figuring out how an apology conveyed by a presidential

Careless wording harms diplomacy

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envoy could be interpreted as insincere, and how its coast guard personnel could be labeled “cold-blooded murderers” when investigations were still under way. However, Malacanang Palace’s own comments have not been helpful and have even been considered provocative by some. From the very beginning, Manila has described the shooting as an unfortunate and unintended incident, something Taiwan finds difficult to accept given the 50-plus bullet holes in the fishing boat — most of which were found in the crew’s cabin.

The Philippines citing its “one China” policy as a reason it does not consider Taiwan’s exclusive economic zone claims legitimate and why the incident could not be dealt with on a government-to-government level have been seen as an attack on Taiwanese identity and Taiwan’s proclamation of its sovereignty and de facto independence.

Both Taipei and Manila have committed the cardinal diplomatic sin of using strong and unequivocal wording. Both are suffering the consequences because they have left no room to maneuver. While being vague is resented most of the time, vagueness is often useful for diplomats, politicians and countries; it is a necessity in diplomacy.

Washington is able to engage with Taiwan and China at the same time because of vagueness. For example, it uses “the people of Taiwan” rather than the “Taiwanese people” in its official Taiwan-related documents and comments. The same vagueness can be seen in its China policy, the Taiwan Relations Act and many other areas.

While Taiwanese and Filipinos have thrown tantrums and attacked each other verbally and in cyberspace, government officials of both nations cannot afford to speak carelessly. Thoughtless remarks used for short-term political gains can have lasting repercussions on bilateral relations when, with a more considered approach, things could have easily gone the other way.

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