

## The unspoken '1998 consensus'

Written by Wayne Pajunen  
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Colonized by successive invaders for more than three centuries, the stars have finally aligned for native Taiwanese to overcome foreign rule and win their emancipation.

Modern Taiwanese have figuratively and literally elected to move forward. They are rejecting the calls for the newly elected administration to bury its head in the quicksand of the "one China" principle and so-called "1992 consensus."

This saga of successive generations struggling for liberty, starring brave Taiwanese, has played out over centuries with Uncle Sam joining in to play a supporting role in recent decades.

The outgoing government's admittedly self-invented "1992 consensus" would eventually lead a nation of people who fled China to eventually be ruled by the land and people they had hoped to leave behind.

In 1998 though, a substantive consensus was agreed upon between the US and Taiwan to advance the nation's prospects — as opposed to the hollow "1992 consensus" trumpeted by the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT), whereby both sides supposedly agree to disagree on Taiwan's liberty, concurrently handcuffing Taiwan's international diplomatic relations and trade opportunities.

Since the day Japan signed Taiwan over to US General Douglas McArthur at the conclusion of World War II, the US has had a vested interest in Taiwan.

To this day, the US government states that the official status of Taiwan is "undetermined," while its involvement in Taiwan's affairs over the years since has fluctuated between ambivalence and intervention, depending on its perceived self-interests.

A case in point: Most observers accused the US of meddling in Taiwan's 2012 presidential election and favoring the KMT while it was cozying up to the People's Republic of China. Had the US remained neutral, then-Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) presidential candidate

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Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) might have won, but it was unlikely that her party could have gained control of the legislature. This would have mirrored the two terms of DPP president Chen Shui-bian's (陳水扁) administration from 2000 to 2008. Eight years of ineffectual political gridlock resulting in the nation's affairs condemned to a state of limbo.

In 2012, the US appears to have believed that four more years of political imbalance for Taiwan would be counterproductive to regional stability, justifying its intervention in the election at the time.

Unlike Tsai's 2012 Washington visit, her visit last summer was not met with challenges to her competence to lead Taiwan, these via leaks to US media and demeaning quotes from former US apparatchiks. More on this later.

Several recent remarks by US intellectuals and officially "retired" diplomats, the usual channel for "unofficial" diplomatic trial balloons by government administrations, are signifying a new phase in Taiwan-US relations might be in the offing.

As reported by the Taipei Times in October last year, a panel of US academics said that it might be time for a review of Taiwan-US relations.

Project 2049 executive director Mark Stokes told a Hudson Institute forum that "it would be worth considering a national conference on the future of US-Taiwan relations."

"Is this the time to think about improving US-Taiwan relations and strengthening deterrence in case there is something possible involving the use of force?" Hudson Institute director of Chinese strategy Michael Pillsbury said.

He said that there were hints that "something of importance" had occurred at the meeting between US President Barack Obama and Chinese President Xi Jinping (習近平), but that "outsiders would have to wait 30 years for the details to be declassified."

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Furthermore, US House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia Chairman Matt Salmon said: "I am concerned we are not living up to our expectations as expressed in the Taiwan Relations Act."

The current foundation for maintaining Taiwan's oft-mentioned "status quo" in its relations with China and the cornerstone of its vital relationship with the US is a consensus reached in January 1998. This agreement was constructed between former president Lee Teng-hui's (李登輝) administration and a previous generation of "unofficial" US spokespeople.

In 1996, during the run up to Lee's election as the Republic of China's (ROC) first directly elected president, China fired a series of missiles into the sea just off the shore of Taiwan.

In response, then-US president Bill Clinton felt obligated to dispatch two 7th fleet aircraft carriers and supporting vessels. To address this and future undesirable occurrences, the US proposed a *modus vivendi*.

Martin Lasater and Peter Kien-hong Yu (許建雄) described in their 2000 book *Taiwan's Security in the Post-Deng Xiaoping Era* how the US had communicated via "unofficial channels," which they labelled Track II diplomacy, a tacit agreement outlining the *quid pro quo* required for providing Taiwan stability and protection.

This Track II diplomacy was carried out early on in Lee's term of office, in January 1998.

Two weeks after these "unofficial" meetings, during a luncheon in Taipei, "unofficial" ROC representatives proudly shared the heart of their newly minted consensus with a visiting delegation from the Canadian House of Commons, of which this author was a member. During the luncheon, it was recounted that the ROC was offered a *casus foederis*, whereby the US would protect Taiwan from a Chinese military invasion under certain strict conditions.

Following 1998, successive presidents Chen and Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) made clear their intentions regarding China.

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Chen promised the “one if” and the “five noes,” which included these four promises: no declaration of independence; no change in the national title; no state-to-state description in the Constitution and no referendum to change the “status quo.”

Subsequently, Ma pledged a “three noes” policy: no unification, no independence and no use of force.

These public proclamations by both presidents following the “1998 consensus” complied with the US’ conditions. These presidential proclamations satisfied the terms of the 1998 consensus to gain the resultant cover of the US military umbrella throughout their terms. Although originating from divergent perspectives and with possibly differing motives, the DPP and KMT have diligently vindicated the 1998 consensus and its relationship with the US.

Although Tsai has not duplicated her predecessors’ public pronouncements substantiating the unspoken 1998 consensus, her closed-door meetings with policymakers in the US in June last year might have made this act superfluous. Another consideration might be that, as noted earlier, perceptions in Washington are mirroring Taiwan’s social evolution and the US could be leaving the door open on the issues of constitutional reform and or de jure independence for Taiwan.

Tellingly, leading up to the election, there were no public admonishments of Tsai such as that by former American Institute in Taiwan director Douglas Paal, who told a Taiwanese television station in the run-up to the 2012 vote: “Both Washington and Beijing would breathe a huge sigh of relief if Mr Ma were re-elected.”

For all five previous presidential elections, the KMT has led Taiwanese to believe that it was its political savvy and the “1992 consensus” that kept the People’s Liberation Army at bay, when all along Taiwan’s freedom has been propped by the 1998 consensus.

Furthermore, Gary Schmitt, an academic with the American Enterprise Institute and former staff director of the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, commented in the Wall Street Journal that: “Bringing democratic Taiwan in from the cold is as important as Washington’s

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opening to Cuba — arguably far more so.”

Schmitt said that Taiwan has been denied recognition as a sovereign state by the US based on the “diplomatic hocus pocus charade” of its “one China” policy.

Taiwanese are maturing under the nourishing light of democracy, freedom, self-expression and determination and primed to break away from China’s tether. Once a populace has experienced these liberties, you cannot lock them back up in the jail of autocratic oppression without devastating turmoil and repercussions for all actors.

Unknowingly nurtured by the reassuring 1998 consensus, the stars have aligned and an enlightened Taiwanese social consensus has emerged from the illusory propaganda of the diplomatically stifling “1992 consensus.”

Taiwanese are no doubt pondering how to navigate this celestial alignment to land on the planet of de jure independence and international respect.

*Wayne Pajunen is a political analyst and commentator.*

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