

President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) was never going to make Beijing happy with her inaugural address, no matter what she said — even if she had caved in to China's harping over her need to affirm the so-called "1992 consensus" and "one China" principle. However, her carefully measured words reassured many at home and abroad, as she pledged to strive to maintain cross-strait peace and stability, and safeguard Taiwan's democratic system.

Tsai said she respected the "joint acknowledgments and understandings" reached in a 1992 meeting — referring to the Oct. 28 and Oct. 29 meetings in Hong Kong between officials from the Straits Exchange Foundation and China's Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits — and would continue to seek common ground with China, but added that it was time to "set aside the baggage of history and engage in positive dialogue, for the benefit of people on both sides."

She also acknowledged that peaceful cross-strait relations are crucial, not just to Taiwanese, but to the nation's allies — diplomatic or otherwise — for regional peace and collective security, and she pledged to guard that peace.

However, most of her speech focused on what she wants to do for the Taiwanese — revive the nation's economy, end the reliance on a single market, increase opportunities for young people, build a better social safety net, curb pollution and protect the environment, push judicial reform, establish a peace and reconciliation commission and pursue joint development in the East and South China seas — and rightly so.

For as much as the world media view Taiwan solely through the prism of its relationship with Beijing — as international coverage of the Jan. 16 elections attested — for Taiwanese voters, the overriding issues are domestic and economic. Tsai said voters elected her to solve problems and she is right.

The majority of voters cast their ballots not just in a repudiation of former president Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) eight years in office and tilt, diplomatically and economically, toward China, but of the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT)-dictated view of Taiwanese history and the nation's place in the world.

No magic compass, just plain truth

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In his first inaugural address 16 years ago, former president Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) spoke about the beginning of a new era and Taiwan “standing up.”

In Tsai’s address, she spoke of a new era, a new direction. There was an echo of former US president John F. Kennedy’s “ask not” 1960 inaugural call to action as Tsai said that it was up to the citizens of this nation to shoulder responsibilities together and to carry the future of the nation.

However, it is Tsai first and foremost who will face a multitude of pressures and expectations at home and abroad, and the tightrope she must walk as she tries to balance these competing demands will test the most experienced of negotiators.

Some commentators said that Tsai was too ambiguous in her speech, that people will read what they want to read into it. It is certain that Beijing’s leadership will — but then again, Tsai’s speech basically threw the ball back into Beijing’s court, reminding Taiwanese and the world that Taiwan must do what is best for it, not what Beijing commands.

Chinese President Xi Jinping (習近平) has called the “1992 consensus” the “magic compass that calms the seas.” With her address, Tsai — the nation’s first female president — showed that she does not need someone else’s compass to navigate her, or Taiwan’s way — especially one with a magnetic north that only points toward Beijing.

She also made it clear that the other direction she is not interested in is backwards. Tsai said falling backwards is not an option for Taiwan or its people. There is nothing ambiguous in that.

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