

It is normal for the head of a country's executive branch to be clear about their nation's status as an independent, sovereign state; to say that the government will seek to prioritize the interests of the nation, while being mindful of the need to cooperate with other nations; and to work to realize the will and interests of its citizens.

The reaction to Premier William Lai's (賴清德) comments in the Legislative Yuan on Tuesday show just how far Taiwan's situation is from normal.

Lai said Taiwan is a sovereign nation, that its official title is the Republic of China (ROC) and that it is neither part of, nor beholden to, a certain foreign government.

He expressed goodwill toward this other government, despite its manifestly stated lack thereof toward Taiwan, but said that his policies would be based on a Taiwan-centric approach.

Asked about his personal stance, he reiterated what everyone knows: That he is in favor of Taiwan independence and that his opinion on that would not change, irrespective of his office.

This is the first time a premier has ever uttered such sentiments in the legislature. This, and the fact they were so contentious, is worth reflecting on.

China's Taiwan Affairs Office Minister Zhang Zijun (張志軍) answered in the only way someone in his position could: That Taiwan is an "inalienable" part of China, that it "has never been and never will be" an independent nation, and that playing with the idea of independence is playing with fire.

The Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) legislative caucus also criticized Lai's comments, saying he was speaking in his official capacity as premier, not as an ordinary citizen, and that his words risked bringing Taiwan to the brink of war, especially with the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) 19th National Congress approaching.

KMT Deputy Chairman Hau Lung-bin (郝龍斌) said on Facebook that the majority of Taiwanese identified with the ROC and would disagree with Lai, who was simply playing to his base.

Hau was, of course, playing to his own base, and his claim that the majority of Taiwanese identify with the ROC, as opposed to Taiwan, is dubious.

Former premier — of a KMT administration — Jiang Yi-huah (江宜華) accused Lai of stirring up trouble for the sake of political point scoring.

Jiang said it appeared that the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) had already embarked on a program promoting independence, ironically opening himself up to accusations of stirring trouble for the sake of political point scoring.

Meanwhile, Kaohsiung Mayor Chen Chu (陳菊) yesterday said that the DPP was fully behind President Tsai Ing-wen's (蔡英文) position of maintaining the “status quo” and that, according to the ROC Constitution, Taiwan was indeed a sovereign, independent nation whose official title is the ROC.

While Chen was attempting to diffuse the situation, she was mostly correct.

Most of what Lai said does not depart from the official DPP stance.

While Lai was selected by Tsai, and not actually elected by Taiwanese, the electorate handed both the presidency and a legislative majority to the DPP, which has been very clear about its position regarding independence since its inception.

With the exception of the addition of his personal view, for which he was specifically asked on this occasion, Lai did not stray from the party line.

Personal opinion and party lines

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Lai was asked about his personal stance, in the context of clarifying his previous position of “friendly relations with China, while loving Taiwan.” He gave it. No doubt mindful of his responsibility as premier, he also said he would not separately declare independence.

eiing is perfectly aware of what the DPP stands for, which is why it has refused to work with it. It finds Lai’s comments unacceptable because it does not want a shift in the way that the issue is framed.

The only thing that everyone is getting so worked up about is that Lai explicitly said what everyone already knew to be the case.

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