

Checkbook diplomacy is a dead end

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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After Panama last year, China has poached another of Taiwan's diplomatic allies, with the Dominican Republic on Monday announcing it was severing ties with Taipei and switching recognition to Beijing.

The question now is: How is purchasing diplomatic recognition in a losing battle of "checkbook diplomacy" with China congruent with the government's goal to project Taiwan on the world stage as a mature and responsible democracy and a trusted international partner?

Redirecting these vast sums of money into large-scale humanitarian aid programs would not only be a more ethically sound foreign policy, but also a far more effective way to project Taiwan's voice abroad.

Last month's claim of a chemical weapons attack in Syria, replete with horrific reports of children foaming at the mouth, was a stark reminder of the horrendous human suffering that afflicts so many areas of the globe.

As the world's 15th-largest economy and Asia's seventh-largest, Taiwan should be doing more to provide emergency humanitarian aid in disaster zones.

According to the latest available data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Taiwan in 2016 spent only 0.06 percent of GDP on international aid, less than Slovakia, Romania and even Malta, and well below the UN's target of 0.7 percent.

There is of course a strong moral imperative to provide overseas aid — humanitarian assistance should be the primary goal, but the government should not be afraid to also advance the diplomatic argument.

Taiwan donated the most aid of any nation after a major earthquake and tsunami struck northeastern Japan on March 11, 2011. It was a clear demonstration of the power of well-targeted Taiwanese aid, the benefits of which are still being felt to this day.

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Since then, the Taiwan-Japan relationship has been elevated, with the renaming last year of Japan's Taipei representative office to include "Taiwan" in its name.

Japanese tourism to Taiwan has also seen a significant boost.

It would be churlish not to acknowledge that Taiwanese humanitarian aid has come a long way, and is now more transparent and better directed than ever. Taiwan's International Cooperation and Development Fund is active on several continents, including Africa, providing drought relief in Kenya, healthcare training in Nigeria and agricultural assistance in South Sudan.

However, at a time when Taiwan is struggling to make its voice heard on the international stage, why is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs not engaging more proactively with the wider world, beyond Southeast Asia, with generous, high-profile humanitarian aid programs?

With Taiwan effectively frozen out of the international community by China, it can sometimes feel as if the ministry's officials have too little to do.

Let us put the civil servants to work. After all, Taiwan does not need to be a member of any international organization to provide aid.

If Beijing were to kick up a fuss over direct state-to-state aid, Taiwan could channel its official aid informally, through non-governmental organizations. In such an event, the ministry would need to follow up with a high-profile advertising campaign to ensure the aid is clearly attributed to Taiwan.

If Taiwan is serious about becoming an accepted member of the international community, officials need to come up with a more creative — and ethical — foreign policy.

The government should call time on outdated "checkbook diplomacy," take a leaf out of

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Sweden's book and become the "humanitarian superpower" of the East.

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