

Time for a Taiwan embassy

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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Until this week, Taiwan's *de facto* embassy in the US had a rather ungainly, euphemistic and antiquated title: Coordination Council for North American Affairs Headquarters for Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in the US, or CCNAA.

On Saturday last week, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that the title would be changed to the Taiwan Council for US Affairs.

The government touted this as a major development and President Tsai Ing-wen's (蔡英文) Facebook page carried a photograph of a beaming Tsai with the phrase "the first time the words 'Taiwan' and 'America' have appeared together in the name of the representative office."

The CCNAA was set up as Taiwan's counterpart to the US' American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) after the US' Taiwan Relations Act was passed in 1979. Its original function was to serve as the *de facto* embassy in the US, but it could not be called an embassy in deference to Beijing's objections to the existence of two "Chinese" embassies after Washington shifted diplomatic recognition from the Republic of China (ROC) to the People's Republic of China.

The CCNAA was subsequently superseded in the US by the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office (TECRO) — and individual Taipei Economic and Cultural Offices (TECO) in 12 cities — in terms of consular activity, following a 1994 policy review by then-US president Bill Clinton's administration. In 2012, it was transferred from the Executive Yuan's jurisdiction to the ministry's.

So Tsai and the government appear to be celebrating the name change of a demoted, functionally emasculated "white glove" institution with a title that has always been a deliberate obfuscation of its openly acknowledged purpose.

Nonetheless, the change is significant. Not only does it rectify a historical anomaly, it comes at the conclusion of a series of attempts, on the part of both the US and Taiwan, to make the name more adequately reflect reality. Its significance lies not in the name itself, but in a shift in relations with Washington that, if allowed to continue on this trajectory, can only mean good news for Taiwanese sovereignty.

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The reason the original title did not include the word Taiwan was the refusal in 1979 by the then-Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) government to use anything other than the ROC.

Decades later, supporters of Taiwan in the US Congress attempted to change the name CCNAA to the Taiwan Representative Office, but nothing came of it.

Former president Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) also tried to change the title during his tenure, but it was rebuffed by then-US president George W. Bush's administration, as it would apparently have given the appearance of unilaterally changing Taiwan's status.

The likelihood that the administration of former US president Barack Obama, which attempted to be more accommodating toward China, would have allowed such a change was low.

This change has finally been allowed by the current US administration, which has consistently shown itself to be far more supportive of Taiwan than previous ones.

It comes at a time when Japan, under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, is also willing to show its support for Taiwan, by changing the name of its representative office in Taipei in 2017 from the Association of East Asian Relations, Taiwan to the Taiwan-Japan Relations Association.

While the latest development is significant, it needs to be seen as a small step in a longer process that will hopefully conclude with a full reflection of the reality: We need an embassy.

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