

Taiwan should lead with kindness

Written by Fernando Herrera Ramos
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The government's reaction of withdrawing its economic and technical assistance from any country that decides to switch ties from Taiwan to the People's Republic of China (PRC) is completely understandable, but is punishing scholarship students for the decisions that their governments made the right thing to do?

Taiwanese taxpayers cannot be asked to continue to support cooperation projects in countries that chose to break their relationship with Taiwan. Those countries are sure to receive more than enough economic incentives from the PRC government.

However, taking financial assistance away from students, who are sometimes as young as 17 years old when they arrive in Taiwan, might not give them a good impression about the Taiwanese government.

Taiwan has had a long-going dispute with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in which they have accused each other of using "dollar diplomacy" to build relationships with other countries. By punishing students and taking away their financial aid due to issues that have nothing to do with academic concerns, the Taiwanese government seems to be falling right into the CCP's narrative.

These students have no voice in the decisions that their governments make, and as it has been reported in the case of Nicaragua, those who have made Taiwan their second home, and wish to continue to live and study there, have been abandoned by their embassy.

Many reports in international media have talked about how the elections in Nicaragua had one of the highest abstention rates in the history of the country. Taking that into consideration, can it really be said that this is what Nicaraguans wanted?

Even if the majority of Nicaraguans had been in favor of the decision, which does not appear to be the case, the scholarships that have been awarded to young students based on their academic performance should not be used as a bargaining chip or as a retaliatory measure against their government.

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Furthermore, the academic exchanges granted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) scholarship program are not limited to people from countries that have diplomatic relations with Taiwan. As is specifically stated in its general guidelines, "special consideration may also be given to students from other countries," referring to countries with no diplomatic relations.

The International Cooperation Development Fund (ICDF) scholarship is even more open regarding who can apply for it, as it has an eligibility list of 49 countries, including Russia and South Africa, two countries that are not even remotely discussing establishing diplomatic ties with Taiwan.

If these scholarships are not limited to countries with diplomatic relations, why should students be punished if their governments decide to make the switch?

Many students from ex-allied countries have fought their government's decision, because they wanted to create a new life in Taiwan. Many Panamanian and Salvadoran students decided to stay in Taiwan instead of taking their government's offer to start a new life in China. Many of them have become members of the Taiwanese workforce, soccer players or entrepreneurs, or enrolled in new academic programs so that they could continue living in Taiwan.

It is understandable that many people think taking away Nicaraguan scholarships is the right thing to do, but for many hardworking students and their families who are worried about what their future will hold, geopolitics is not something that they can do anything about, and something that they wish was not part of the equation.

The decision MOFA is about to make about whether to suspend this assistance should also take into consideration the dreams of all of these young students who left everything they knew behind and moved to a country on the other side of the world, a country with a completely different culture and language.

The scholarships that Taiwan provides have helped an uncountable number of people who left their countries in search of a better education and a better future, and for those who were welcomed to this beautiful island without having any political connections to their governments,

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myself included, that opportunity has been truly a life-changing experience.

These academic exchanges give students the opportunity to learn more about Taiwan, about its history, about its people, and to become ambassadors, telling others of Taiwanese kindness when they go back to their countries.

They are also given the motivation to help Taiwan when they become professionals, whether the diplomatic ties with their countries remain in place or not.

A perfect example of this is Prague Mayor Zdenek Hrib, whose positive experience while participating in an exchange program in Taiwan led him to promote the relationship between his city and Taipei.

This was of course something that the Chinese government did not view kindly and its reaction might be one of the reasons why the EU is now standing up to China's pressure and promoting interactions with Taiwan.

As a consequence of that sentiment, the German parliament has passed a resolution that asks its government to reassess its position toward Taiwan and to "deepen the exchanges" between the two countries.

Before that, Lithuania had already opened a Taiwanese representative office in its capital, a sign that Taiwan's relationship with European countries is heading in the right direction.

As for countries with diplomatic relations, many of Taiwan's allies in Latin America have publicly stated that they intend to continue to stand by the nation. This list includes countries such as Paraguay, Honduras and Guatemala.

This is without a doubt good news for Taiwan, but knowing how uncomfortable uncertainty can be, the government should be empathic regarding how Nicaraguan students are feeling.

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It is comforting to see that some of the universities that are hosting these students are willing to step up by offering them assistance through university scholarships and part-time job offers, but if Taiwan wants to show that it is different from the Chinese government, its leaders should take a step back and reconsider whether leaving these students to fend for themselves is really the image that they want to show to the world.

At a time where the government is trying to show the international community that this is a country of principles and values, this is the perfect opportunity to demonstrate that even against adversity, Taiwan will lead with kindness.

Fernando Herrera Ramos is a Honduran lawyer residing in Taiwan. He has a master's degree in business administration.

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