

Taiwan's President begins her second term with a call for unity

Richard C. Bush

Nonresident Senior Fellow-Foreign Policy, Center for East Asia Policy Studies, John L. Thornton China Center

Brookings

May 21, 2020

Taiwan's president, Tsai Ing-wen, was sworn in for a second term at the office of the president on the morning of May 20. Shortly thereafter, she gave her [inaugural address](#) to a relatively small audience on the grounds of the nearby Taipei Guest House. Instead of the traditional celebration with thousands of people in the public square, COVID-19 restricted the ceremony to the basics.

Yet the dialed-down affair should not detract from the significance of the event. My colleague Ryan Hass' [review](#) of the last year of Tsai's first term highlights how she and her Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) overcame their stunning defeat in local elections in November 2018. At that time, political prognosticators were betting that someone besides Tsai Ing-wen would be giving the inaugural address in May 2020. But after the DPP's strong victory in the January 2020 presidential and legislative elections, she again stood at the podium.

Tsai Ing-wen's speech was also important. Her first inaugural speech heralded the victory she and the DPP had won in the January 2016 elections. It both presented ambitious goals and promised a commitment to competence in governance. As she said at the time: "The people elected a new president and a new government with one single expectation: solving problems."

Her 2020 address was different, both a mid-term report and statement of

mid-course corrections. She presented an accounting of the progress her administration had made on the goals she outlined four years ago, and a plan for how to build on those projects. She offered the kind of policy detail that wonks love, and at which she excels. There was no soaring rhetoric, which is not really her style. As she said: “It takes more than fervor to govern a country. Leadership means calmly taking the right course in a changing world.”

Leadership and competence have been most on display in Taiwan’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Tsai administration employed international best practices in containing and mitigating the spread of the virus. The current number of total cases on the island is 440. The total number of deaths, seven. Moreover, Taiwan has worked hard to fill the shortages in critical materials like masks that exist in other places around the world, including the United States.

President Tsai’s address had a clear domestic focus. She offered concrete proposals on how to sustain economic growth in a world devastated by the coronavirus. She emphasized several sectors: information and digital technologies, cybersecurity, biotech and medical technology, the fusion of the civilian and defense industries, and green and renewable energy. She mentioned creating strategic stockpile industries. She also highlighted the “reorganization” of global supply chains that the pandemic has accelerated, and which poses a special challenge to those Taiwan companies that have been key links in those supply chains. COVID-19 also shaped her approach to ensuring a “safe society,” among other things, caring for a growing number of older people whose immunity and resistance to disease is declining. Finally, Tsai spoke of the need to “optimize our government institutions,” and pledged that the island’s legislature would establish a constitutional amendment committee to help forge cross-party consensus.

Whether Tsai will succeed in pushing through all the domestic adjustments and initiatives that she promised will become clearer over the weeks and months ahead. Reform initiatives in Taiwan are often slowed by problems in implementation. A significant drag on maintaining

economic competitiveness is the shortage of the right kind of human talent, a gap that cannot be quickly or easily filled. Moreover, as she discovered during her first term, mobilizing public support for significant policy changes is not always easy.

Observers who were expecting a long, ground-breaking discussion of Taiwan's external policies were likely disappointed. Less than a quarter of the text covered defense, diplomacy, and relations with China combined, topics that took up almost a third of her speech four years ago.

The section on defense emphasized the need to shift to asymmetric capabilities, a stronger reserve force and mobilization system, and a military management system appropriate to the island's democracy. The United States has long urged Taiwan to emphasize its armed forces' reserve force and asymmetric capabilities (i.e. those that orient Taiwan's defense to target China's points of weakness rather than its areas of strength). Progress in these areas will depend on the changes in the military's institutional culture and on a larger and well-deployed defense budget. That will not be easy when the government's relatively low revenues limit the size of the total budget pie.

On Taiwan's participation in international forums, which China has worked hard to constrain, Tsai pledged renewed efforts in areas where Taiwan can make contributions. She cited her administration's response to COVID-19, the island's "democratic success story," and improving ties with like-minded countries as areas of success. She promised to "continue our fight for our participation in international organizations."

Concerning relations with China, Tsai signaled a continuation of first-term policies. She said that "we have made the greatest effort to maintain peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait." The approval she said that Taiwan received from the international community, including the United States, gives her reason to pursue this track. She reiterated a key passage from her first inaugural address, where she pledged to base her China policy on the Republic of China constitution and the law governing cross-Strait relations. This was [an indirect but purposeful way](#) of addressing

China's concern that she would move Taiwan towards de jure independence. She reiterated the strong opposition of successive administrations to China's formula for resolving the basic dispute with Taiwan ("one country, two systems"). She reiterated both a willingness to engage in dialogue with Beijing but also the principles of "peace, parity, democracy, and dialogue."

China quickly stated its disapproval of Tsai's speech. The spokesperson of its Taiwan Affairs Office [vowed](#): "We will definitely not leave any room for separatist activities aimed at 'Taiwan independence' in any form," which it asserts is what Tsai is doing.

Among other things, Beijing may worry that the constitutional amendment committee that Tsai announced will be a covert way of moving towards de jure independence. But she clearly indicated that it would work on changes to "government systems and people's rights," in implicit contrast to changes in Taiwan's legal identity. Sometimes, democratic systems do resort to constitutional amendments to address weaknesses in domestic governance.

Given China's negative response, Tsai's "steady as she goes" approach should not be surprising. Even before her first term began and in her 2016 inaugural address, she sought in her own way to reassure Beijing about her intentions. What she got in return was a concerted Chinese campaign of intimidation, pressure, international marginalization, interference in Taiwan's politics, and cooptation of potential allies. So, she saw little reason to make new concessions in the face of China's recalcitrance, concessions that neither she nor a majority of the public would approve.

Instead, she concluded her discussion of cross-Strait relations with a passage that conveyed her view that the ball was not solely in her court:

Cross-strait relations have reached a historical turning point. Both sides have a duty to find a way to coexist over the long term and prevent the intensification of antagonism and differences. Faced with changing circumstances, I will hold firm to my principles, adopt an open attitude to resolve issues, and shoulder my responsibilities as

President. I also hope that the leader on the other side of the Strait will take on the same responsibility, and work with us to jointly stabilize the long-term development of cross-strait relations.

The conclusion to Tsai's address was short, but it included a crucial point: the need for unity. She said:

I truly hope that all of my fellow citizens will remember how it felt to come together to overcome the challenges of the past few months. The Republic of China can be united. Taiwan can be safe. Being Taiwanese can be an honor that makes you hold your head high. My dear citizens, the path ahead of us is long, and we are about to begin a new chapter in Taiwan's story. Taiwan's story belongs to each and every one of us, and it needs each and every one of us. I ask that the 23 million people of Taiwan act as our guides and partners. Let us pool our wisdom and courage and make this country a better place together.

Unity, or the absence thereof, is a theme that Tsai Ing-wen has repeatedly emphasized over the last couple of years. Pleas for unity are an indirect way of saying that Taiwan is actually quite a divided society politically, and that this division obstructs initiatives by any political camp to solve problems. Polarization and partisanship might not be such a handicap if the society did not face daunting challenges, such as sustaining economic growth and welfare at a time of great uncertainty; caring for an aging society and building a future for young people; and, above all, coping with China's ambition to bend Taiwan to its will. The stakes are high. Fostering broader unity will not be easy. It will require compromise and trust among all major political forces. But for politicians to keep Taiwan divided will not serve the interests of the citizens they represent.

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/05/21/taiwans-president-begins-her-second-term-with-a-call-for-unity/>