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***ROUGH ROADS AHEAD FOR TAIWAN'S NEW PRESIDENT:
Tsai Ing-wen can't count on U.S. support when it comes to standing up to Beijing***

**Commentary by Rupert Hammond-Chambers
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When Tsai Ing-wen takes office as Taiwan's new president on Friday, it will represent another great moment in the island's recent history and further evidence that Taiwan is a beacon for democracy around the world. Ms. Tsai, Taiwan's first female president and its second from the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), is moderate, battle-hardened and experienced, with a clear understanding of what leadership at this level entails.

An early imperative of her presidency will be to break free from the inherited U.S.-Taiwan relationship of the past eight years, in which neither side placed any burden on the other yet both declared the relationship "the best ever."

Far from promoting peace and security in the Taiwan Strait, that strategy, under departing President Ma Ying-jeou, led to a China-centric approach that alienated Taiwanese voters. Ms. Tsai's election victory was a direct result of Taiwan's moving closer to China under Mr. Ma, as the populace acted decisively to counter that shift.

China is now pursuing harsher tactics, raising tensions. Gambia has switched its diplomatic recognition to Beijing from Taipei. Taiwan citizens from Kenya and Malaysia have been deported to China. The number of mainland tourist visits to Taiwan has declined. And Beijing continues to obstruct and complicate Taiwan's participation in organizations, such as the World Health Assembly later this month. Such provocations since Ms. Tsai's election win in January are all ominous signs of what's to come.

Chinese leader Xi Jinping is poised to increase the pressure on Taiwan if he doesn't like what he hears in Ms. Tsai's inauguration address. He may suspend cross-Strait engagement, impose a zero-tolerance policy on Taiwan's activities in international organizations and accelerate the Chinese military build-up across the Taiwan Strait.

Beijing appears to doubt that Washington will materially stand by Taiwan. A senior U.S. State Department official recently called on Ms. Tsai to frame "*positive vision[s] ... for developing cross-strait ties,*" placing the onus on Taiwan to promote peace and security. Alarming absent was any reference to China's already belligerent behavior. That's an ominous development, suggesting a willingness to ignore China's provocations while pressing Taiwan to make concessions in the interests of "stability."

Together with Premier-elect Lin Chuan, a respected academic with extensive government experience, Ms. Tsai has gathered an impressive group to serve in her cabinet. With strong economic headwinds and growth set to barely clear 1% in 2016, her appointments are focused on economic revival and renewal. Regrettably, Ms. Tsai has, like her predecessor, selected academics for almost every position, risking a cabinet that is overly bureaucratic and risk averse.

On national security, it appears that Ms. Tsai is developing a strategy based on three pillars: supporting democracy, improving the economy and increasing focus on Taiwan's national defense. The island's democratic way of life is a model for the region and a rebuff to China's authoritarianism.



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In economics, Ms. Tsai wants to consolidate whatever gains have already been made in trade with China, while pivoting toward Southeast Asia. She recognizes the economic imperative of having Taiwan join the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

But Ms. Tsai has been dealt a difficult hand by the Ma and Obama administrations when it comes to national defense. Opportunities to improve security ties and complete the sale of arms have been bypassed by her predecessor in order to curry favor with China. Ms. Tsai will instead focus on developing Taiwan's domestic-defense industry. This drive toward defensive self-reliance attempts to counteract the poor state of America's arms-sales commitment to the island, while also creating domestic economic opportunities. But playing catchup on defense after the past eight years of inattention is likely to expose her to accusations that she is provoking China.

Ms. Tsai's national-security team will engage with the Obama administration this summer and should be clear about what it wants from its relationship with the U.S. Taiwan needs to accept the risk of friction if it makes big requests such as material support for the design and production of submarines, new fighter trainers and a new front-line fighter.

Ms. Tsai could engage Taiwan's allies in the U.S. Congress. Yet after so many years of lackluster support for arms sales to Taiwan, the Obama team is likely to stall instead of acting. That will put further weight on the outcome of the U.S. presidential election and the willingness of the next U.S. president to uphold the Taiwan Relations Act.

As she takes power in Taiwan, there is much that Ms. Tsai can achieve unilaterally without relying on tepid U.S. support and while ignoring Chinese belligerence. But she should brace herself for a rough start with Beijing, and for disingenuous claims of support from Washington fueling a spike in cross-Strait tensions. The next eight months are going to be bumpy.

About the US-Taiwan Business Council:

The US-Taiwan Business Council (www.us-taiwan.org) is a membership-based non-profit association, founded in 1976 to foster trade and business relations between the United States and Taiwan. The Council provides its members with business intelligence, offers access to an extensive network of relationships, and serves as a vital and effective representative in dealing with business, trade, and investment matters.

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