

INTERVIEW: Taiwan unfazed by Chinese obstruction: Joseph Wu

Taiwan will continue to make contributions to the world, despite its exclusion from most international organizations because of Chinese pressure, which has only brought Taiwan and like-minded countries closer, Minister of Foreign Affairs **Joseph Wu** said in an interview with *Taipei Times* reporter **Stacy Hsu**

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Taipei Times (TT): You revealed earlier this month at the Legislative Yuan that some of our diplomatic allies have shown signs of wavering. Who are those allies and what are the signs?

Joseph Wu (吳釗燮): I cannot pinpoint them because doing so would not be good for our ties, but we did notice that China has been making particular efforts [to poach] some allies. Like-minded countries like Australia and the US have noticed this too.

[China] has been making [these efforts] on several fronts. There are contacts through diplomatic channels and [an expressed] intention to increase investment and other economic exchanges. We have also noticed a higher frequency of contacts between China and the local politicians [of target countries]. These are all worrisome signs.

We are trying to collect more intelligence and to do more to consolidate our ties with those allies, but things are quite different today than what they were before.

Taiwan had to rely on itself in the past, but now, many like-minded countries, such as the US, prefer to help and their support could be quite strong sometimes.

TT: It has been a while since Beijing last poached an ally from Taiwan, with the last one being El Salvador in August last year. Are you worried about that happening again during or immediately after President Tsai Ing-wen's (蔡英文) state visit to Pacific allies? Also, will there be any new cooperations announced during her visit?

Wu: I do not think that is likely to happen, but all of our embassies are paying close attention. As for Central and South America, based on our observation over an extended period of time, [relations with] the diplomatic allies there are relatively stable and [there is] nothing imminent.

During President Tsai's state visit, we plan to sign an agreement with Palau and Nauru on coast guard cooperation. We have already signed one with the Marshall Islands. We will also gift them with patrol vessels, but as the ships are still being manufactured, we will present them with a model during our visit. [The Pacific] is a vast body of water, but these countries' patrol capacity is quite limited, that is why many countries like the US, Australia and Japan have also sent them patrol vessels.

TT: You and President Tsai have proposed the idea of engaging in security dialogues with Japan, but Tokyo does not seem too enthusiastic about it given recent comments by its officials. Based on your first-hand knowledge, does Japan welcome the proposal or have reservations about it?

Wu: Japan and Taiwan face many common challenges, especially non-conventional ones, which are less sensitive and there is a lot of room for cooperation. For example, natural disasters are a serious challenge we both face. Even though we have both demonstrated a willingness to come to each other's aid in the event of a disaster, there is no institutionalized cooperation. People from both sides would enjoy an extra layer of protection if we could forge more cooperation in this area.

If we expand the scope and look at the entire region, Taiwan and Japan are not the only ones facing threats of natural disasters, so are the Philippines, Indonesia and sometimes Malaysia. Taiwan always wants to help, but what we can actually do is often limited due to certain factors. If we could join hands with Japan in offering assistance to a third country, it would benefit all the nations [in the area].

There are also the issues of combating transnational crimes, combating maritime crimes, and emergency and rescue operations at sea. They all require cooperation to see substantive results. If we do not confine security cooperation to military issues, there is a lot of room for cooperation for Taiwan, Japan and surrounding nations.

TT: It has been almost five years since a Cabinet-level US official last visited Taiwan. Many US lawmakers have called on their government to send another one here next month for an event organized by the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the US' Taiwan Relations Act. Are you optimistic about this?

Wu: It is something we hope would happen, as our people really value exchanges between Taiwan and the US. As you can see from yesterday's [Tuesday] press conference, the US government has been working hard to increase the level of Taiwan-US interactions. [Note: Wu and AIT Director Brent Christensen held a joint press conference at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to announce the creation of a new annual dialogue on democratic governance.]

As to when and whether a US Cabinet-level official would come to Taiwan, I believe the US government is trying hard to reach this goal, but it cannot be achieved by simply wanting it to happen. We have to see if a certain official is available and whether there is a fitting occasion for he or she to attend, so that the visit would have a substantive effect rather than a purely symbolic one.

TT: Despite growing support from the US and Europe for Taiwan to participate in the WHO and other global events, it does not seem to have stopped international organizations from succumbing to Chinese pressure and excluding Taiwan. What are your views on this?

Wu: We must admit there are some objective difficulties that we have had a hard time overcoming. One of them is the loyalty China enjoys among high-level officials at several important international organizations, who are either Chinese or people Beijing holds control over.

Given the situation, it is difficult for Taiwan to actually be able to participate in these events, but even so, we will continue our efforts and let the world see that Taiwan is a nation capable of making contributions.

Take the WHO as an example. Despite our exclusion from the organization, Taiwan has never been absent when there was a major global epidemic, such as Ebola. We have also helped to almost eradicate malaria in Sao Tome and Principe, and had our major medical institutions assist with the establishment of medical facilities in all our diplomatic allies. These are examples of Taiwan's concrete contributions to global health and we will not stop contributing even if the WHO continues to reject us.

Another perspective to look at the issue is our efforts to secure support from other countries. Many like-minded nations spoke up for us last year and I believe we are going to see an even stronger support this year. So even though we were not able to participate at the WHO, the issue has only brought us and like-minded countries closer and more united.

TT: Chinese President Xi Jinping (習近平) in January proposed unification under the “one country, two systems” formula, followed by the Chinese Nationalist Party’s (KMT) expressed interest in signing a cross-strait peace agreement if it returns to power. Given the backdrop, are you worried about Chinese interference in next year’s presidential election?

Wu: We have seen signs of Chinese interference in almost every key election in Taiwan since our first direct presidential race in 1996, when Beijing resorted to verbal intimidation and saber rattling before the election.

In 2000, then-Chinese premier Zhu Rongji (朱鎔基) warned Taiwanese against electing a pro-independence president. For the 2004 and 2012 races, Beijing used Washington and China-based Taiwanese businessmen to pressure voters. In the last legislative election [in 2016], we also perceived Chinese attempts to influence people online.

We do not know yet what method China might use to influence the next race, but what we can know for sure is that it did not always succeed. I believe our voters are mature and I have faith in the choices they are going to make through our mature democratic system.

However, we should be quick and decisive when we see China trying to manipulate public opinions or Internet [users], so that the information voters receive would not be distorted.

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