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Taiwan weighs options after diplomatic allies switch allegiance

As China's footprint grows, Taiwan wants to keep its few formal allies close while deepening informal links with world

by RANDY MULYANTO

TAIPEI, TAIWAN — Taiwan calls it China's "dollar diplomacy," but after a month in which it lost two formal diplomatic allies to the mainland in the space of a week, the island is increasingly reliant on an informal network of international trade and military ties to shore up its position on the international stage.

The first to go was the Solomon Islands, which broke with Taiwan on September 16 ending a 36-year diplomatic relationship.

Four days later, it was Kiribati. The Pacific island nation had established diplomatic relations with Taipei in 2003.

Both countries were wooed by China with offers of development aid and assistance.

A defiant President Tsai Ing-wen, who is running for a second term in January 2020, promised that Taiwan would not abandon its determination "in the face of China's thuggish oppression."

"If we give up now, Taiwan's future generations will lose their sovereignty, their freedom, and their democracy; we will lose everything."

In all, seven countries have severed ties with Taiwan since Tsai, of the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), came to office three years ago. It now has formal diplomatic relations with just 15 nations, including the Vatican.

Some 70 years after China's nationalists fled the mainland to establish their capital in Taipei, the diplomatic tide has now almost completely turned in favour of the communist-led government in Beijing.

Taiwan has framed the tug-of-war over allies as part of China's attempt to influence its elections, which are due to take place in January, as well as to bolster its own image in the run-up to the 70th anniversary of the People's Republic of China, which falls on October 1.

Targeting Tsai

Shaohua Hu, professor in government and politics at New York's Wagner College and author of the 2017 book "Foreign Policies Towards Taiwan," noted that China's efforts to pick off Taiwan's political allies was a political strategy.

"As a whole, Beijing has tried to humiliate Tsai," said Hu, who once served as a research fellow at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing.

"South Pacific Islands are not important to China in political or economic terms. A few may claim that they have strategic values, but the values are exaggerated since they are too small and remote."

But with Taiwan, now one of Asia's most vibrant democracies, the mainland might have inadvertently helped strengthen Tsai's hand.

"My own survey research suggests that when maintaining formal diplomatic relations is framed as standing up to China, the public is more supportive," Timothy S Rich, associate professor of political science at Western Kentucky University, who has studied Taiwan's diplomatic relations told Al Jazeera.

"If Tsai's focus is about how China is squeezing out Taiwan's space, that would appeal to her base and likely to undecided voters as well."

Taiwan's changing fortunes

The Republic of China, Taiwan's official name, was originally founded in 1912 in mainland China. But after being defeated by the communists in the civil war in 1949, its nationalist leaders relocated to Taiwan, where they set themselves up in power.

Initially, they held onto China's seat at the United Nations, but as the mainland's relationship with the rest of the world normalised, countries began to recognise China instead of Taiwan. In 1971, the island lost its UN seat to Beijing, prompting many nations to switch allegiances too.

Taiwan moved to cultivate more informal links — generally around trade, culture and military issues — setting up offices in virtually every major city around the world, including Washington and Tokyo, which function as embassies in all but name.

But its formal allies have remained important to Taiwan because the government in Beijing insists the island is part of China and should be retaken — by force, if necessary. In China's view, the island has no right to establish state-to-state relations.

Following this month's losses, Taipei promised to "resolutely maintain relations" with its allies and "strengthen ties with friendly democratic countries."

Under pressure from China, which remains the island's biggest trading partner, Tsai has also sought to assert herself as a champion of Taiwan and democracy.

She has rejected the “one China” principle and shown support for Hong Kong’s pro-democracy protesters.

Political rival Han Kuo-yu of the pro-China Kuomintang (KMT), meanwhile, has blamed Tsai for a failure of leadership over the loss of diplomatic allies.

“As always, President Tsai blamed mainland China for her diplomatic meltdown ... But empty words will not bring Taiwan out of its diplomatic quandary,” Han said in an official statement on September 20.

The Kuomintang party was founded by the nationalists.

Building alliances

China’s more assertive approach to Taiwan has also prompted a response from democratic allies.

On August 20, the US State Department said it had “made a determination approving a possible foreign military sale” to Taiwan for aircraft, related equipment and support for an estimated cost of \$8bn.

“The US and Japan have strengthened their ties with Taipei. ... Tsai could brag that the US had better relations with Taiwan now,” Wagner College’s Hu said.

Since taking office in May 2016, Tsai has sought to broaden the island’s economic ties both in the Asia Pacific and further afield. Earlier this month, she said her government would continue working to build a welcoming environment for Muslims, highlighting her efforts to strengthen ties with Muslim-majority countries and the Islamic world.

Whether Taiwan’s remaining allies choose to switch may will depend on whether “China is able to combine incentives such as greater assistance packages with the enticement of other economic and political benefits that Taiwan cannot match,” Western Kentucky University’s Rich said.

In the Solomon Islands, some politicians lamented the change in allegiance but said the Pacific island would remain a friend of Taiwan.

“Sogavare and his MPs are a minority of the vast majority of Solomon Islanders who hold Taiwan dear,” Matthew C Wale, the country’s opposition leader told Al Jazeera.

The Marshall Islands also showed its support on Wednesday, adopting a resolution to show its “profound appreciation to the people and government of Taiwan,” saying it would maintain its diplomatic ties with the island.

“We’ve all seen China’s attempts to expand its territory and footprint, and this should be of great concern to democratic countries,” President Hilda Heine said.