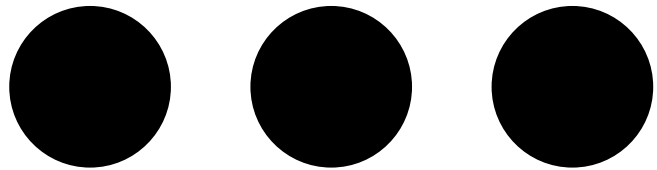




Taiwan Ally Guatemala Mulls Commercial Ties With China

Guatemala is contemplating reaching out to develop formal trade ties with China, the Central American country's foreign minister told Reuters on February 5, although it plans to maintain its existing ties with Taiwan.

The Central American country is one of a handful of Taiwan's remaining allies, as countries increasingly back the world's second-largest economy, China, which claims independently ruled Taiwan as its territory, to be reunited by force with the mainland if necessary. Taiwan dismisses China's sovereignty claims.



"We are going to continue working with Taiwan at the levels we have been doing," Foreign Minister Carlos Ramiro Martínez said in an interview. "But the president has pointed out that we cannot ignore the weight and power China represents."

Oleksii Liskonih/iStock/Getty Images Plus

President Bernardo Arévalo came to office in mid-January amid a fraught transition process, pledging to put an end to corruption and also establish relations with China.

"We are interested in approaching them to try and develop some relationship around trade," Martínez said, saying this could materialize as an "office of trade interests" that would help find a Chinese market for Guatemalan products.

"We are making it public, this is not an ambush against Taiwan or the United States," he added.

Taiwan will continue to boost exchanges and cooperation with Arévalo and his new government on the grounds of upholding their shared values of democracy and freedom, its foreign ministry said.

The United States is Taiwan's most crucial international backer, despite the lack of formal diplomatic ties, and acts as a major arms supplier to Taipei.

China has in recent years increased its economic clout in Latin America, where countries have historically held closer ties with the United States. Many Central American countries have in recent years switched loyalties from Taiwan to China.

When questioned about Martínez's remarks, the Chinese foreign ministry said the "one China" principle is "the fundamental premise and political basis for China's cooperation with all countries, including Guatemala".

"It is hoped that the new government of Guatemala will respond to the historical and contemporary trend and make a correct decision as soon as possible that is in the fundamental and long-term interests of the Guatemalan nation and people," spokesperson Wang Wenbin told reporters on February 6.

Taiwan, meanwhile, has indicated that it no longer wants to compete with China in so-called



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“checkbook diplomacy.”

Regarding migration, Martínez expressed a rights-based approach, alleging that the new government would not repeat the “repression” of prior administrations, such as throwing tear gas at groups crossing Guatemala hoping to reach the United States.

Cooperation on fighting corruption and drug trafficking will be major issues to discuss with U.S. counterparts, Martínez added, noting that U.S. aid channels that were frozen under the previous administration are being reinstated.

“The doors of cooperation are being reopened,” he said.

In Taiwan, the pro-Beijing Han Kuo-yu, a former mayor and presidential candidate of Taiwan’s main opposition party Kuomintang (KMT), was elected as speaker of the island’s new Parliament on February 1.

Han was confirmed in the role after he obtained 54 votes in a second round of voting, which is based on a plurality. All eight members of the Taiwan People’s Party (TPP) had abstained then. No one had emerged the winner in the first round, which required an absolute majority of at least 57 votes.

With Han now sworn in as speaker, Taiwan’s President-elect Lai Ching-te of the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) will face challenges in setting the island’s direction.

Hours before the vote started on February 1, dozens of young Taiwanese held banners outside the Legislative Yuan in Taipei and shouted, “We reject China’s choice.” Some scaled the walls surrounding the building before they were stopped by the police.

A huge fear among Han’s critics is that his Beijing-friendly leanings would make him susceptible to China’s pressure to do its bidding.

For one thing, that could mean fewer parliamentary exchanges with other like-minded nations, given that China disapproves of them, observers have said.

Han has repeatedly endorsed the 1992 Consensus — a tacit agreement that both sides of the Taiwan Strait belong to “one China,” with each side having its own interpretation of what that meant.

It was on the basis of the 1992 Consensus that former president Ma Ying-jeou of the KMT had cultivated cordial ties with Beijing, but the concept has become increasingly isolated in Taiwan after Chinese authoritarian leader Xi Jinping equated it with “one country, two systems” in a 2019 speech.

While serving as Kaohsiung mayor in 2019, Han stoked contention when he became Taiwan’s first administrative chief to set foot in the Liaison Office of the Central People’s Government in Hong Kong, an agency tasked with carrying out the city’s “one country, two systems” framework.

Prominent historian Chou Wan-yao from National Taiwan University, who is independence-leaning, doubted Han’s ability to convey mainstream Taiwanese opinion to foreign legislators.

“He might send the wrong message to the international community — that the Taiwanese people are willing to accept the same fate as Hong Kong,” she told reporters.

Others had questions regarding Han’s ability to carry out the role in a professional manner. While serving as Kaohsiung mayor, he was slammed for being tardy or skipping important meetings. His move to run for president less than a year after becoming mayor earned him the nickname “runaway mayor,”



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leading him to be removed from the post in a recall motion.

By law, although the speaker must remain neutral in Parliament, he will decide the agenda in the legislature, which controls spending.

Analysts say there are ramifications for how cross-strait dynamics and Taiwan's parliamentary diplomacy would play out amid the island's diplomatic isolation.

Besides the routine duty of chairing legislative proceedings, the speaker has the key role of expanding the island's international outreach through parliamentary cooperation — regarded as necessary given the sensitivities surrounding Taipei's political status.

“Through parliamentary diplomacy, Taiwan has been deepening ties with democratic partners (and others) that share similar values,” former Speaker You Si-kun of the ruling DPP told Nikkei Asia in an interview days before he lost the role.

“We have broken China's diplomatic blockade,” he added in the report published on January 26.

Despite having only 12 official diplomatic allies, Taiwan has enhanced its informal relations with like-minded countries through parliamentary exchanges, which are seen as less official than if they were organized by the executive branch.

“As legislative Speaker, You has had meetings in Europe, Japan and the US, and he has also welcomed legislators from other countries to Taiwan. If he had retained the position, we would see more of the same,” said Associate Professor Chen Shih-min, a political scientist from National Taiwan University.

“But it's less clear about the direction that Han will take, especially given his Beijing-friendly stance.”

Han, 66, was widely tipped to become speaker after the smaller TPP made the surprise declaration one day before the vote that it would be fielding its own candidate for the post, instead of rallying its eight legislators to support either of the two main political parties.

As the KMT is the largest party in the 113-seat legislature with 52 seats to the DPP's 51, it was anticipated that the former mayor would beat You as long as every voter cast his ballot along party lines. The final two legislative seats are held by independents ideologically aligned with the KMT.



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