

The risks of Taiwan's “Austronesian” diplomacy

by Jess Marinaccio

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Taiwan President Lai Ching-te in Guam, December 2024

Photo Credit: Wang Yu Ching/Office of the President, Republic of China

On 30 November 2024, Taiwan's president Lai Ching-te embarked on a **week-long visit** to Taiwan's three Pacific diplomatic allies: Marshall Islands, Tuvalu and Palau. During the trip, Lai made a transit stop in Hawai'i on the way to Marshall Islands and another transit stop in Guam between visits to Tuvalu and Palau.

Because China currently claims Taiwan as part of its sovereign territory, Taiwan occupies a contested diplomatic position. It struggles to achieve international acceptance as an independent nation beyond the recognition provided by its official diplomatic allies, which **now number only 12**. Consequently, a tradition in Taiwan's diplomatic outreach is for Taiwan's president to visit as many of Taiwan's official diplomatic allies as possible during their term while transiting through non-recognising countries (like the US) along the way to strengthen ties with them and defy China.

This strategy has sometimes been called “**transit diplomacy**“, and it has often been used in Taiwan's engagement with its Pacific diplomatic allies because Hawai'i and Guam — both locations in the Pacific controlled by the United States — can be leveraged as convenient transit points when Taiwan visits its Pacific partners.

Diplomatic visits to the Pacific and transit diplomacy are something Lai's predecessors Chen Shui-bian, Ma Ying-jeou, and Tsai Ing-wen have **all engaged in** with varying levels of success. For example, in 2005, when then President Chen Shui-bian **visited three of Taiwan's Pacific allies** at the time, that is, Tuvalu, Marshall Islands and Kiribati, he also made a surprise stopover in Fiji, which did not have diplomatic relations with Taiwan. This was **held up by Chen** as evidence of widespread international support for Taiwan. In 2017, then President Tsai Ing-wen stopped in Hawai'i on her way to three of Taiwan's Pacific allies at the time — Marshall Islands, Tuvalu and Solomon Islands — in **a move described** as “[a] transit that is more like a visit”.

Yet, there is an inherent tension in Taiwan's presidential visits to Pacific allies as

they frequently seem to place more emphasis on the transits than on the visits to actual allies. Visits to the Pacific have sometimes **highlighted ethnocentric views** about Taiwan's Pacific allies or generated **disappointment among citizens** in allied countries at rushed preparations and short stays (Lai **spent only several hours** in Tuvalu in 2024). This tends to suggest Taiwan is often more interested in making splashy layovers in non-recognising countries that will **inevitably anger China** than in actually reinforcing ties with its Pacific partners. Lai's trip, **which carried the theme** "Smart and Sustainable Development for a Prosperous Austronesian Region", even more clearly highlighted the conflicting aims of Taiwan's presidential visits to the Pacific.

The word Austronesian in the title of Lai's visit **refers to the fact** that the Indigenous peoples of Taiwan and the peoples of most Pacific countries are part of the Austronesian language group, and share linguistic connections. Although the majority of Taiwan's population is not Indigenous but rather Han Chinese, Taiwan uses **this linguistic connection** as part of its Austronesian Diplomacy to foster closer ties between Taiwan, its Pacific allies and non-allied Pacific places. Hence, the theme of Lai's Pacific trip is meant to signal Taiwan's intimate and respectful relationships with countries in the Austronesian language group. Lai echoed this idea throughout his trip, **including in speeches** in Marshall Islands, Guam and Palau statements like "We ... share Austronesian culture, which makes us like family".

Yet, while attempting to strengthen Austronesian ties, Lai was clearly also using his visit to signal Taiwan's strong relationship with the US by transiting through Hawai'i and Guam. Although the US does not maintain diplomatic relations with Taiwan, the fact that the president of Taiwan can stop in US-controlled locales, **meet with officials** like the governors of Hawai'i and Guam and **receive US reassurances** of its support for Taiwan undermines the legitimacy of China's claims to the archipelago. In Guam, Lai conspicuously **switched back and forth** between referring to the territory as part of the "Austronesian" region and part of the "Indo-Pacific" region, a nod to the US's preferred terminology for the Pacific. Overlooking struggles for Indigenous sovereignty in Taiwan, Guam, and Hawai'i and attempting to distinguish Taiwan from China, Lai said, "[while] the three countries that the delegation visited and the two places where it made transit stops ... are all located in different time zones, they all have the same free air".

This type of rhetoric not only serves to reinforce the assumption that the US-controlled islands of Hawai'i and Guam unarguably belong to the US and are, consequently, "free" but also undermines any claims by the Taiwan government that it accords priority to interests of Austronesian partners. Hawai'i and Guam are both part of the Austronesian language group yet Taiwan's presidential visits to Hawai'i and Guam **draw the ire** of China and further focus China's attention on these two

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places as likely targets in competition between the US, China, and Taiwan. Guam, which is heavily militarized by the US, is **already a target** for China given its proximity to that country. A Taiwanese presidential visit to Guam only **threatens the safety** of the Indigenous people there in an attempt to show the world that Taiwan is a friend of the US despite China's opposition.

China has already lodged protests with the US about Lai's visit to Hawai'i and has also begun to **take countermeasures** by increasing military deployments around Taiwan. Taiwan's belief in its right to international recognition overlooks how its transit diplomacy increases military threats to the Pacific, which are already high enough, and supports the ongoing settler colonialism of the US in the region.

If Taiwan's transit diplomacy continues in this vein, this will clearly indicate that Taiwan's motivations for visiting Pacific allies are more about deepening ties with the US than with its "Austronesian" partners — in other words that Taiwan's diplomatic goals have little to do with a prosperous Austronesian region and more with its own survival.

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