‘Palestine’ Will Be There, But Taiwan Faces Exclusion From Annual UN Health Assembly

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When the World Health Organization holds its annual general assembly in Geneva this month, the “State of Palestine” will be among observers but – unless China relents – the independent island democracy of Taiwan will not.

For the first time in eight years Taiwan has not been invited to attend the World Health Assembly (WHA), the WHO’s decision-making body. Beijing’s refusal to assent this year has been attributed to its unhappiness with the policies of Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen, whose Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) leans towards formal independence from China.

The one-year-old Tsai administration signaled Tuesday that it would not be cowed, announcing that it will send a delegation to Geneva, headed by its health minister, whether or not it would be allowed to attend the May 22-31 WHA.

“We will never succumb to Beijing’s pressure, but will continue to make our voice heard in the international community, and fight for our right to participate in the WHA and other international organizations,” said the government’s mainland affairs council, which deals with relations across the Taiwan Strait.

WHO spokesman Christian Lindmeier confirmed to reporters in Geneva Tuesday that the registration deadline for the assembly has now passed but said he believed discussions over Taiwan were continuing.

Asked why it was the Palestinian territories were invited as an observer while Taiwan’s invitation was dependent on China, Lindmeier said, “To my understanding the ‘one China’ policy is a U.N.-wide accepted policy; Beijing is representing the one China.”

A reporter noted that “health for all” was part of the U.N.’s so-called [sustainable development goals](http://www.who.int/sdg/targets/en/) (SDGs), and asked, “when [Taiwan’s] 23 million people are carved out does that mean the SDG goals are undermined?”

Lindmeier said the WHO was in direct and ongoing contact with health authorities in Taiwan. If a health emergency occurs there, he added, the WHO is only expected to inform Beijing before intervening, not to seek its approval.

The dispute goes back almost seven decades: China’s Nationalist government fled from the mainland to the island of Formosa, or Taiwan, in 1949 after losing a civil war to Mao Tse-tung’s communists.

Beijing considers Taiwan a renegade province and has vowed to use force, if necessary, to reincorporate it into “one China.” In the meantime it works actively to deny Taiwan recognition in U.N. bodies, and refuses to have diplomatic relations with the small handful of countries that recognize Taiwan.

China’s stance on Taiwan’s WHA participation has closely mirrored the politics in Taipei.

The last time a DPP president was in power, President Chen Shui-bian from 2000-2008, his pro-independence agenda angered Beijing and it would not budge on the WHO/WHA issue.

Then President Ma Ying-jeou of the Kuomintang (KMT), which favors better ties with the mainland, took office, and from 2009 onwards China [allowed Taiwan to observe at the WHA](http://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/sovereignty-concerns-taiwan-after-china-okays-its-attendance-world-health-gathering). The 2999 WHA was the first time Taiwan was able to participate in a meeting of a specialized U.N. agency since it lost the “China” seat at the U.N. to Beijing in 1971.

With the DPP back in power, the communist mainland authorities have has reverted to the former position.

‘Doomed to fail’

In a derisive editorial Tuesday, the state-owned *China Daily* said the Taiwanese delegation would likely “make a scene” in Geneva, “and try everything possible to convey the message that Taiwan ‘is being bullied,’ and public health on the island is being put in jeopardy.”

It accused Tsai of “seeking to hijack public health in Taiwan to serve her political end of winning de facto statehood recognition for the island.”

“Tsai’s argument for Taiwan’s participation is misleading because it ignores the essential premise that the World Health Organization meeting is inter-governmental by nature, it said, “and that Taiwan is not a sovereign entity.”

The DPP has long argued that Taiwan’s WHA participation should be based not on China’s whim but on a formal WHO resolution permitting it to participate every year, as do other observers like “Palestine” – which, too, is not a “sovereign entity.”

Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang told a news briefing Tuesday that “the one-China principle must be followed when dealing with Taiwan’s participation in activities held by international organizations.”

Asked about Taiwan’s plan to send a delegation to Geneva anyway, he said, “whatever measures the DPP authorities are going to take, they are doomed to fail.”

Geng noted that “most countries around the world” support China’s stance, and it was “useless [for Taiwan] to court foreign support.”

U.S. backing for Taiwan’s participation came last month from James Moriarty, head of the American Institute in Taiwan, the quasi-official U.S. diplomatic mission in Taipei.

“We continue to support Taiwan’s meaningful and substantive contributions to the international community,” he [said](https://www.ait.org.tw/en/officialtext-ot1707.html) during a health event in the capital.

“In particular, the United States has welcomed Taiwan’s participation as an observer at the past eight World Health Assembly meetings,” Moriarty added. “We look forward to Taiwan’s continued participation at this important event.”

Last Friday, six U.S. senators introduced bipartisan legislation calling on the federal government to lift restrictions of visits to Taiwan by cabinet-level and other U.S. officials.

“The legislation is important, especially as China attempts to block Taiwan’s participation in international organizations,” said Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.), one of the six.