To Post or Not to Post: Social Media as Digital Diplomacy

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Tsai Ing-wen, President of Taiwan

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Social media has become another way for politicians to engage in diplomatic relations. It gives them an outlet to address the population directly, as well as operate outside of traditional power balances in the international world. For a country like Taiwan, with its recognition as a country contested by China and its allies, the unregulated characteristics of free internet and social media has become an important way to increase and showcase power. Tsai Ing-wen, the president of Taiwan, has an Instagram account that does exactly that.

Power is informally defined as the ability to get what you want. We can break this down into three different types: material, relational, and ideological. Material power refers to the physical capabilities that states have (like money or a big army). Relational power deals with how powerful a state is compared to others. Every state wants to gain more power relative to each other, so they often use material power to display that their power is greater than other countries. Finally, ideological power is about the ability for a country to get other countries to follow their ideas. Taiwan, as an island country, is relatively low on all three, given its status in the international community and restrictions placed on it by China. However, Tsai Ing-wen is using her Instagram account as a platform to display the country’s good relations with other states, demonstrating that Taiwan isn’t necessarily excluded from all international relations. She’s even used the story feature to ask viewers to fill in a crossword puzzle stating that “Taiwan is a sovereign and independent nation”. A further look into her Instagram reveals that she also posts about the country’s military capabilities, which reveals that Taiwan is not defenseless against a bigger power. Using Instagram allows Tsai Ing-wen to try to increase her relational power by showing off her diplomatic relations and the capabilities her country currently possesses.