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Bring Taiwan into the Visa Waiver Program

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On December 22, 2011, Taiwan was nominated by the U.S. Department of State for inclusion in the Visa Waiver Program. Since 1986, the Visa Waiver Program has facilitated travel and tourism in the United States for individuals from friendly member nations, and security measures added since the program's inception have made the program essential. Yet despite these many benefits, only one new nation has been added to the program since 2008.

Taiwan's recognition as a candidate country represents a key first step by the State Department toward expanding the program, but more should be done. With its recent presidential election demonstrating the maturity of Taiwan's political system and the nation's growth as a leader in economic freedom, Taiwan is poised to follow in the footsteps of its Pacific neighbors already admitted to the program. The Administration should seek to strengthen this vital relationship by granting Taiwan membership in the Visa Waiver Program.

The Visa Waiver Program. The Visa Waiver Program was created by Congress in 1986 as a pilot program intended to reduce the workload on U.S. consulate offices while encouraging travel to and tourism in the United States. The program was intended to ease travel for citizens of key friendly nations seeking to visit the United States, but it also enhanced security by allowing consulate officers to spend more time focusing on potentially dangerous

travelers, reducing the amount of time spent screening legitimate visitors.

Made permanent in 2000, the Visa Waiver Program (VWP) now allows citizens from member countries to travel to the United States for up to 90 days without obtaining a visa. In order to obtain pre-approval, visitors must first apply for authorization through the program's online portal. Through the Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA), potential travelers are screened to ensure that they do not pose a security risk to the United States. Once vetted and approved, travelers are then made eligible for visa-free travel to the United States for a period of two years.

In order for a country to become a member, a number of security and travel-related steps must be met, including meeting specific non-immigrant visa refusal rates (the percentage of visa applicants denied by the State Department from a particular nation), issuing all residents machine-readable biometric passports, and meeting a determination that membership presents no threats to U.S. law enforce-

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ment or security interests. Further, member nations must meet the numerous security measures added since the program's inception, including achieving greater information sharing with regard to lost or stolen passports, increased security at the airports of member nations, and other efforts to enhance security cooperation between the U.S. and member countries.

Membership is neither automatic nor permanent, as membership standards may be continually reviewed and nations removed from the program if they no longer meet the requirements.

Nearly at a Standstill. Under the Bush Administration in 2008, eight new nations were brought into the program, including Japan. These countries were brought in under the authority of new legislation that granted the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) the ability to consider the admittance of nations with visa refusal rates between 3 percent and 10 percent that otherwise met the requirements of the program. The conditions of this authority, however, centered on the ability of DHS to meet a mandate of biometrically tracking the exits of all foreign visitors from U.S. airports by July 1, 2009.

Linking biometric air exit and the VWP, however, made little sense. While the move was billed as a means to decrease the perceived number of VWP visitors who overstay their terms of entrance, the reality is that only about 1 percent of VWP entrants overstay. The biometric air exit mandate has little relevance to the security of the VWP, but the failure

of DHS to meet this mandate has resulted in the VWP being held at a near standstill.

With the mandate unmet, the authority of DHS to waive the 3 percent refusal rate and admit countries with visa refusal rates of up to 10 percent was revoked. Since that time, only one nation has been admitted to the program: Greece in 2010. In the meantime, friends such as Taiwan, Poland, and Romania have been made to wait on the back burner.

Admit Taiwan and Expand the Program. The recognition of Taiwan by the U.S. Department of State as a candidate for inclusion in the Visa Waiver Program represents an important first step in expanding the program. The recent election, resulting in Ma Ying-jeou's election to a second term as president of Taiwan, demonstrated the stability of the political process in the country. Taiwan's rapid growth—to become the 18th-freest economy worldwide—has demonstrated that it is a capable and vital U.S. partner.

It is well past time to bring Taiwan into the Visa Waiver Program and pave the way for the Administration to move forward in working with other interested nations.

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