



# विश्वनीति VIŚVANĪTI



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# From the Dean



As we begin the Spring of 2025, the School of International Studies is in the midst of celebrating its 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary. We hope to showcase the different aspects of scholastic life at SIS in many of our programmes this year. In February, the Hridaya Nath Kunzru Memorial lectures brought together the finest minds from our fourteen academic centres, over five days, to reflect on “Why International Relations Matter.” These incisive lectures invited us to take a deep dive into the fundamentals of our discipline and the discussions that followed, demonstrated the sharpness of the young minds studying in the School. All those who missed out on being there physically can watch the videos online.

In this issue, we give you a brief academic glimpse of the Centre for East Asian Studies. Prof Alka Acharya pays tribute to the great polymath, one of the pillars of Chinese studies in JNU, her “guru”: Govind Deshpande. Additionally, we focus on Taiwan.

I am particularly thrilled because late last year I visited Taiwan to deliver a keynote address at a conference in Taichung. Although I spent just a few days at Taipei and Taichung, I was deeply inspired and by the beauty of the land, the gentleness and graciousness of our hosts, the genius of its innovators, the ubiquitous commitment to our fundamental shared values, the indomitable spirit of its people and the formidable courage I witnessed almost everywhere.



One of our first encounters with Taiwan, and the formidable talent of its people, was through the Liaison Officer who met us in Taipei and accompanied us to many of our meetings in the capital, over two days. He had grown up in New York, as an American citizen of Taiwanese origin, studied in Columbia University and then at John Hopkins and acquired a JD degree from Wisconsin Madison, summa cum laude. He could have found a place in a top tier Law firm in New York city, but chose to give up his American citizenship, return to Taiwan do his obligatory military service and join the country’s prestigious diplomatic corps. For me, this young officer is a symbol of a new Taiwan, and – hopefully - the future of Taiwan: cosmopolitan and cultured in the best global and traditional values, committed to Taiwan with passion and caring about its future, and with exceptional talent with a capacity to excel in almost every field of human endeavour.

Let us face it, and not shy away from reminding ourselves, Taiwan’s journey towards democracy and its vibrant democratic ethos today is a beacon hope in a region seeped in turbulence. Emerging from a complex past, Taiwan has firmly established itself as a model of respect for freedom and diversity. Taiwan is a symbol of hope that needs nurturing and protection.

**Amitabh Mattoo**  
**Dean, School of International Studies**

## Pioneers of SIS

### Remembering Prof. Govind Purushottam Deshpande

*Alka Acharya*



Schooled in ancient Indian history, equally at home in the world of Sanskrit texts, medieval Bhakti poetry, and modern Indian and European thought and philosophy, GPD crossed boundaries with panache and indeed, insouciance. Saluted as GPD in the groves of academe, the School of International Studies, JNU, from where he retired in 2004, provided the perfect multidisciplinary foil to his equally multifaceted intellect and personality.

To those who were studying/watching China's domestic politics and international relations, GPD's interventions provided fresh and unencumbered perspectives. One particularly recalls his discursive framework in connection with two momentous upheavals in post-1949 China - the Cultural Revolution of 1965-69 and the Tiananmen incident of 1989. These are easily the most perceptive and incisive analyses of contemporary China in India. At a time when our papers and journals were full of western reportage and commentaries, GPD's assessments helped one step away from the clamour and commotion and deconstruct the events in all their complexity. This was neither easy nor without repercussions – politically and academically. At a particularly memorable public discussion organized at the JNU in the wake of Tiananmen, after the usual arguments on democracy and human rights were done with, GPD shifted the focus to the roots of the demonstrations – the contradictions inherent in the economic reforms undertaken by the Communist Party and was possibly the lone intellectual from the Indian left who categorically stated that such events were bound to occur again and again.

GPD was also a founder member of the China Study Group in 1969 – along with China scholars/academics in Delhi. This group has gone on to become an independent Institute of Chinese Studies in Delhi – of which he also was the Director. The cultural, literary and theatre worlds venerated him as GoPu – his stature as an eminent Marathi playwright best exemplified by his introduction of what can be called the "discussion play" to Marathi and Indian theatre audiences. He created a modernist theatre, which explored the ways in which politics permeates our life, and in turn shapes it. No wonder that the awards just kept flowing his way, including the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award and, the Tanvir Samman.

But there was one thing, on which all these worlds that GPD straddled, converged – the quintessential brilliance of his approach to or treatment of any issue – it was fresh and unexpected, rooted yet not insular or parochial, political but not politicized – which imparted a certain timeless quality to his writings. There was wit, irreverence and candour; a blithe disregard for prevailing literary or political fashions and a huge dose of humour - all of which went into creating a style that became GPD's alone – clear, unforced, often with colloquialisms and quotations that seemed to be tailor made for his argument. The prose flowed easily – no hint of carelessness, and yet, the erudition of his essays - particularly his ability to scatter references and parallels from all nooks and corners of the Indian political and cultural history left one feeling rather stunned. And "the elements were so mixed in him" that it seems more than apt to consider GPD as our very own 'renaissance man'.

**Alka Acharya is Professor and Chairperson, Centre for East Asian Studies, SIS, JNU.**

## Viewpoint

### **More than just a Counterweight: The Choices that should Shape India - Taiwan Relations**

***Alka Acharya and Arvind Yelery***

By all accounts, the 2.0 Trump administration is set to send shockwaves in the global economic realm, which is likely to lead to significant upheavals in international politics. Throughout his campaigning, the President-elect harped on protecting the American economy and 'Making America Great Again', chiefly by imposing tariffs on its trading partners who have favourable trade balance vis-à-vis the US, and by severely restricting immigration avenues. Not surprisingly, this is a major worry for India, which is the source of the largest outflow of high-skilled young professionals. This potentially far-reaching setback from a major economic and strategic partner and ostensibly, a democratic ally, is prompting Indian policymakers to devise new approaches and explore other avenues. Enter Taiwan – an economic and tech powerhouse with which trade and investment is gradually on the rise, a friendly and democratic partner, which is rapidly becoming an attractive destination for students and researchers, and which has evinced keen interest in welcoming Indian talent whose dreams may be thwarted by the new American policies.

Given its smart power capabilities, the Taiwanese government has a natural interest in India's pool of scientifically and technically skilled graduates, as well as its expanding tech markets. In recent years, Taiwan's inclination towards India's tech complementarities and market projectiles has raised the bar of bilateral engagement. Beyond their restrictive diplomatic nomenclatures, both sides have explored practical methods to elevate their engagements beyond the usual lines of

'political constraints'. Despite shared concerns—such as power assertions by a common neighbour, territorial aggression, gradual border encroachments, militarization, technological weaponization, and trans-regional debt traps—India-Taiwan engagements have traditionally remained limited. With newer narratives of self-reliance, identity and economic nationalism coming to the foreground, new spaces are opening for bilateral engagements.

Complementarities in the tech-centred industries, labour mobility, education, connectivity, culture, and people-to-people are the gateways to exploring stronger linkages between India and Taiwan. Labour mobility is a much-debated issue within Taiwan's Legislative Yuan and political leadership, it has been estimated that the demographic dividend enjoyed by Taiwan since 1990, is set to end in 2027. According to the data published by the National Development Council (NDC), Taiwan's working-age population, aged between 15 to 64, will make up less than two-thirds of the total population by 2028. This is even more critical given that studies are also warning that Taiwan's working population is expected to fall by 10 per cent by 2034. The high-tech industrial bases in Taiwan urgently need to devise policies and initiatives to address labour mobility, talent retention, and human resource development. Taiwan's New Southbound Policy (NSP) prioritizes deeper economic, cultural, and educational ties with South and Southeast Asia, including India, to enhance labour mobility. In a recent move by President Lai Ching-te, Taiwan announced a significant step

toward attracting India's skilled labour force. The announcement was strategically timed when the row over the H-1B visa between India and the United States (U.S.) flared up. Skilled immigrants have played a significant role in innovation, with a substantial percentage of U.S. patents and tech start-ups linked to immigrant founders. Taiwan's labour mobility initiatives stand as a golden opportunity, i.e., the Employment-Seeking Visa and the Taiwan Employment Gold Card.

India has been increasingly prioritizing innovation-led growth across various industries. In this endeavour, Taiwan's experience in technological advancements serves as a valuable model. Taiwan's knowledge of semiconductors, electronics manufacturing, and innovation hubs is critical in creating an ecosystem without significant dependence on external tech add-ons. Taiwan's central role in technological supremacy is in India's interest as it would shield India from the abrupt hiatus of tech wars and develop independent parallel tech industries. Taiwan's commitment to fostering continuous cycles of innovation has led to a surge in start-ups, particularly in technology, green energy, and biotechnology—areas of strategic significance for India as well. This linkage would thus be of great mutual benefit and can gain more impetus in view of the fact that in the coming years, Taiwan's supremacy in technology will also face structural challenges regarding resources and disruptive cycles of growth.

By addressing Taiwan's labour mobility challenges, Indian tech talent can contribute to sustaining Taiwan's competitive edge in global technology. In turn, this collaboration could drive India's ambitions for technological self-reliance. Given Taiwan's acute interest in Indian tech capabilities in semiconductors, artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and renewable energy, this is an opportune moment for leveraging Taiwan's technological expertise and India's growing innovation

ecosystem. Taiwan's strength in high-tech industries would help augment and indigenize the skill development in sectors such as electronics, IT, and robotics in India.

Education is a crucial bridge for India and Taiwan to achieve their shared technological and economic objectives. Combining new technology and hands-on vocational skill sets through different teaching methods is crucial for innovators hoping to create new businesses. India has a formidable set of challenges in accelerating the tempo of the Start-up India campaign. Promoting entrepreneurship and innovation through financial support, incubation, and policy frameworks, which would encourage local manufacturing and innovation across industries, is vital in fulfilling the ambitions of a Self-Reliant India (Aatmanirbhar Bharat). With regard to electronics, IT, and robotics, Taiwan's strength in high-tech industries will be critical in building partnerships for skill development in India. For instance, Taiwanese companies can collaborate with Indian technical institutions for workforce training. At present, a rising number of Indian students are enrolled in programs in engineering, science, medicine, and business management at several Taiwanese universities. According to the Taipei Economic and Cultural Centre in India, currently, 3000 Indian students are studying in Taiwan. Taiwanese and Indian institutions can work to establish semiconductor education and research facilities, aligning with India's growing emphasis on its semiconductor sector. During the visit of Taiwan's Deputy Minister of Education to India in November 2023, Taiwanese Universities signed 50 MOUs with Indian Higher Educational Institutions to start joint degree programs in semiconductor technology. This also underlines the goals set by the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which aims to integrate technology, research, and innovation in education. Taiwan is the best partner for focusing on R&D and promoting interdisciplinary innovation.

There are several other sectors which India and Taiwan can explore to strengthen their ties. Re-starting the direct flights between the two sides is the first essential step towards the realisations of the expanding opportunities as well as to open new avenues that follow from convenient and faster logistical connections for business and leisure passengers between the two sides. These flights will facilitate stronger cultural and economic ties between the two sides. Moreover, this includes re-establishing air connectivity and exploring opportunities to step up air connectivity across the Pacific. The increasing route options indicate airports in Taiwan as an option for time and cost-effective travel choices for travellers from India. The North Pacific (NOPAC) Route System flies across the North Pacific between Alaska and Japan (with Taiwan just 1200 miles away). At present, the travel demand routed from Singapore and Japanese airports might not precisely reflect the actual travel demand for Taiwanese hubs because the data is recorded only for those travellers who flew using a single PNR (Passenger Name Record) and connected through other airports like Singapore (SIN), Bangkok (BKK), Narita (NRT), Haneda (HND), etc. This acquires greater salience, given that the travel routes over the Eurasian and West Asian geographies are affected by the widening conflict zones and contracting air spaces. Regarding goods travel, the cargo has tremendous scope to stop in Taiwan. Indian Airlines has limited choices, such as HK and Japan. There is a rising need to start the air passages across the Asia-Pacific. Taiwan can become an essential linchpin in Indian Airlines' hub-and-spoke model of air-logistics supplies, and both sides can join hands. There is a rising market for both Taiwanese and Indian airlines. The India-Taiwan people-to-people connection

undergirded the historical and cultural exchanges between the two sides. Taiwanese tourists visit India for its rich cultural heritage, but the number is too small. As per the 2024 records, around 30,000 Taiwanese visited India, and around 500 Taiwanese are residing in India. According to the Indian Ministry of External Affairs data, 5,804 Overseas Indians reside in Taiwan. Creating a tourist circuit, institutional promotion of tourists, and cross-cultural collaborations in cinema, music, and traditional art forms will promote the creation of shared experiences. Taiwan's cinema and power of storytelling have mesmerised a global audience. The Ang Lee directed Academy Award-winning movie *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) and the adventure-survival drama movie *Life of Pi* (2012) or Edward Yang's *Yi Yi* (2000), which won accolades at Cannes and earned critics acclaims, have also been greatly appreciated by Indian audiences. The new genre of experimental storytelling in Taiwanese and Indian Cinemas resonates with the themes of identity, colonial history, and the tension between tradition and modernity. Both India and Taiwan have cinematic synergies in preserving and celebrating diverse narratives.

As India moves ahead to capitalise on its advantageous positions in technology and human resources and integrate innovation to revitalize its manufacturing sector and achieve sustainable economic growth, Taiwan offers India a historic choice. India and Taiwan must actively explore their numerous opportunities for collaboration. Diplomatic constraints should not deter both countries from pursuing mutually beneficial partnerships that serve their people's interests.

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# Analysis

## Taiwan: Eco-politic Conundrums

*Raviprasad Narayanan*

Taiwan, originally established as the Republic of China under Sun Yat-sen, exemplifies a society that has undergone profound political transformations—shifting from totalitarianism to authoritarianism, and from controlled democracy to full democracy—all within five decades. The Cold War and post-Cold War periods broadly define Taiwan's geopolitical significance in international relations. From Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang (KMT) government in 1949 to Lai Ching-te's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) victory in May 2024, Taiwan has remained central to political, economic, and strategic developments in Northeast Asia. This write-up focuses on the economic and political conundrums both sides of the Taiwan Straits.

### Politics

Lai Ching-te assumed office as President of the Republic of China (ROC) on May 20, 2024, marking an unprecedented third consecutive term for the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). He previously served as Vice President under Tsai Ing-wen for two terms. Taiwan's domestic politics has frequently been contentious. Lai's term could see the Legislative Yuan, its Parliament, going through several tussles amongst legislators on various issues. The DPP did not win a majority in the Legislative Yuan, meaning that Lai may have to enlist the aid of his erstwhile electoral opponent, Ko Wen-je, whose Taiwan People's Party (TPP) could be the swing votes needed to get bills passed. In the elections, KMT won 52 seats and DPP won 51 making TPP a swing player when bills come up for voting. The 113 seats of the Legislative Yuan is where the political traction is robust, in contemporary Taiwan. As the third-place political party with

more than one-fourth of the popular vote, the TPP is likely to play a very important role, and could become a major player. Equally likely, given their stance on China ties, the TPP could team up with the main opposition party, the Kuomintang (KMT), to thwart Lai's policy initiatives. The KMT was Beijing's preference in the recent elections as it favours closer cross-strait relations, robust China trade, and has adopted a stronger narrative of US skepticism of late. For Beijing, Taiwan is more than a political maverick or outlier. It is an ideological existential alternative construct, challenging the idea of the Communist Party of China (CPC) remaining in power interminably.

The CPC too has different voices within, on Taiwan. Beijing's injunction regarding strong- and unquestioning- centralised Party control is listened to, but not taken seriously in coastal provinces closest to Taiwan. Guangdong and Fujian have provincial interests uppermost since a large percentage of population on Taiwan descends from these two coastal provinces. To Beijing, this is discomfiting, and it will not permit the 'virus' called 'democracy' from the political system of the 'renegade island,' as the discourse on the mainland refers to Taiwan, to permeate the CPC. This is a primary reason for AI rules in China, being framed with control only by CPC to monitor information flows.

### Economics

Taiwan is a major economic success in Northeast Asia, where science and technology drive growth. With a GDP of USD 840 billion in September 2024 and USD 1.6 trillion in terms of purchasing power parity (PPP), a population of 23.5 million, Taiwan has a nominal per

capita income exceeding US\$38,000, making it Northeast Asia's second richest economy after Japan. As member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) - albeit under the unflattering designation Separate Customs Territory of Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen and Matsu (Chinese Taipei)— as recognition of its difference and separateness from China, Taiwan trades with China, United States, European Union, Japan and other countries. As president, Lai Ching-te will have to straddle trade compositions with caution, without ruffling its Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA), partner. This was an agreement signed with Beijing during the presidency of the KMT's Ma Ying-jeou (2008-2016).

Taiwan's economic success is largely owing to innovative research in computer electronics, making the island a hub for micro technologies, especially microchips and semi-conductor manufacturing. Since mid-1980s when Chiang Kai-shek's equally authoritarian son, Chiang Ching-kuo was at the helm, the island identified technical, electronic and technological advantages to become its economy determinants, competing with the Japanese electronics products manufacturers. Smartphone manufacturers like Apple source their microchips, nano-chips, micro-nano chips, robotics and peripherals from companies like MediaTek, Qualcomm and Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Corporation (TSMC), respected names for the cutting-edge quality of their products. More than 70 percent of Taiwan's GDP comes from international trade, and almost 90 percent of global advanced electronic chips are from Taiwan, with a digi-system of compact firms contributing to larger corporations with a global presence.

The CPC covets the digital technologies created and fabricated in Taiwan—a success story that Beijing wants to replicate. Hsinchu is Taiwan's Silicon Valley and is located not far from Taipei. Despite China's economic dominance

and aggressive rhetoric, Taiwan has maintained its commitment to the ECFA. Not surprisingly, China has a large trade deficit with Taiwan, with bilateral trade in 2023 around US\$224 billion. Taiwan exports to the mainland were around US\$190 billion in 2022. Trade with China is deeply intertwined, as Taiwanese private investments in the mainland are estimated to be more than US\$100 billion, and a few million mainlanders are working in factories owned by Taiwan companies. Guangdong and Fujian enter here, as primary investments from Taiwan are in these two provinces. This is where Xi Jinping's concerns are located, following the reports of Taiwan's investments being re-routed to Vietnam - northeast Asia's latest economic dynamo. Having been Governor of Fujian province (1999-2002), he cannot be seen as precipitating economic crises of any sort in this province with job losses and pay freeze. Interestingly, after Fujian, Xi Jinping was Governor of Zhejiang province where incentives for investments from Taiwan are currently being offered, luring in investment from Taiwanese businessmen with shared family histories.

## Conclusion

Cross Straits interactions between the mainland and Taiwan are marked by one interlinked constant - bellicose rhetoric and trade continuum. CPC and DPP make statements galvanizing outside region actors to pontificate on strategic security being compromised in international waters and UNCLOS being violated. The 'domestic' has to be considered as Xi Jinping has to handle excess verbosity of the PLA and not upset deep commercial ties with the 'renegade.' In Taiwan, DPP statements are to ensure that domestic stakeholders, commercial especially, do not see their largest trading client walking back in time and adopting the sloganeering of prominent political personages of past. Simply put, both sides of the Taiwan Straits are averse to replicating what some other geographical

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locales are going through and prefer conviviality with no outside actors deciding for them.

For Taiwan, international engagement serves as a means to reinforce its economic and diplomatic legitimacy, especially after losing its UN seat to the People's Republic of China in 1971. As the first signee of the UN Charter in

June 1945, the Republic of China (Taiwan) upholds all its tenets and wishes to advance basic temperaments of equality, liberty and universal rights for all. A "graded responsibility" as Hu Shih, philosopher, political observer, historian, and founder of Academia Sinica in Taipei had once said, is needed in contemporary times.

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## Opinion

### **Taiwan's Evolving Global Standing: Shifting from a China-centric View to a Distinct Identity**

*Sana Hashmi*

#### **Taiwan's Standing amid the China Challenge**

For many, discussions about Taiwan are dominated by cross-Strait tensions. The most common question is not if China will invade, but when. While this remains a pressing concern, Taiwan has made determined efforts in recent years to step out of China's shadow and assert its own identity. This shift has become increasingly necessary as Beijing continues to poach Taipei's diplomatic allies and restrict its international presence. Since the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) came to power in 2016, rejecting the 1992 Consensus as the basis for cross-Strait dialogue, Taiwan's relationship with China has soured. In response, China suspended official talks and labelled the DPP as a pro-independence administration. Beyond pressuring Taiwan's allies, Beijing also blocked its participation in the World Health Organization during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, China ramped up efforts to limit Taiwan's global engagement, coercing countries into restricting their interactions with the country. A key element of China's strategy has been its misrepresentation of United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2758. This resolution addresses the People's Republic of China's (PRC) legal status and its membership in the United Nations but does not determine Taiwan's status or endorse Beijing's claims over the island. Despite this, China has leveraged the resolution to advance its narrative, demanding stricter adherence to the One China policy and pressuring countries to curtail even economic and cultural exchanges with Taiwan.

A recent example of China's coercive tactics is its protest against the opening of Taiwan's third representative office in Mumbai, India.

Though such offices are within the scope of unofficial relations, China's foreign ministry responded by stating: "There is but one China in the world, and Taiwan is an inalienable part of China's territory. China strongly opposes all forms of official contact and interaction between Taiwan and countries having diplomatic relations with China, including the establishment of representative offices for each other. We have lodged solemn representations to the Indian side."

Beijing perceives any form of international engagement—even economic ties—as a challenge to its authority, treating Taiwan's growing global presence as a threat to its interests. However, this approach constitutes diplomatic coercion and pressure, as economic, technological, and cultural exchanges remain within the scope of unofficial relations. Moreover, many countries do not accept China's unilateral interpretation of the One China policy. Most merely acknowledge Beijing's position without endorsing it, and in India's case, it has refrained from mentioning the policy altogether since 2008 due to its own territorial dispute with China. China's reaction reflects a deliberate distortion of facts and a misrepresentation of other countries' policies.

#### **Taiwan's Efforts to Counter Isolation**

Taiwan has undergone a remarkable transformation—from being perceived as a passive target of Chinese aggression to emerging as a resilient democracy standing firm against an authoritarian power. This evolving landscape has required Taiwan to adapt, and its leadership has consistently emphasised that the island's future will be determined by its people, reinforcing the principle of self-determination. A substantial reflection of this shift is the changing

Taiwanese identity, as mapped by the National Chengchi University's Election Study Center. According to its survey, only 17.6 percent of people identified exclusively as Taiwanese in 1992, but by 2024, this figure had surged to 63.4 percent. In contrast, those identifying solely as Chinese declined sharply from 25.5 percent in 1992 to just 3.2 percent in 2024. These numbers underscore a profound shift in how the people of Taiwan see themselves, highlighting a growing sense of national identity distinct from China. This shift is the result of China's military and economic intimidation, Taiwan's proactive efforts, and shifting global geopolitical dynamics. Over the past decade, Taiwan has sought to resist growing pressure while finding new avenues for international cooperation.

Taiwan has strengthened its ties with key partners, particularly the United States and Japan. In 2016, Taiwan launched the New Southbound Policy, designed to diversify Taiwan's economic and diplomatic outreach beyond China. The policy prioritised engagement with Indo-Pacific nations, including India and Australia. In addition to governmental initiatives, Taiwan has expanded its influence through think tanks and high-level foreign policy dialogues, further solidifying its position in the region. Taiwan's outreach to European countries is also noteworthy, with growing support and visits from countries such as Lithuania, Poland, and the Czech Republic. Taiwan has also actively demonstrated its role as a responsible stakeholder with valuable expertise across various sectors. During the COVID-19 pandemic, under the "Taiwan Can Help, Taiwan Is Helping" initiative, it donated millions of masks, personal protective equipment, and medical supplies to countries

worldwide. Taiwan also established the Global Cooperation and Training Framework (GCTF), a platform to share its best practices in areas such as public health, cybersecurity, and disaster relief. Over time, the GCTF has grown to include the United States, Japan, Canada, and Australia as key partners.

### **The Path Ahead**

China views Taiwan's expanding global engagement as a direct challenge to its interests. However, Taiwan's international standing continues to rise, with more countries recognising that economic, cultural, and technological cooperation with Taiwan need not come at the expense of ties with China. Rather than a political statement, engagement with Taiwan is increasingly seen as a matter of pragmatism, mutual benefit, and strategic diversification.

Additionally, regardless of how countries view their role in a potential conflict in the Taiwan Strait, there is consensus that a conflict, invasion, or Taiwan under China's control would be detrimental to their own interests and harm regional stability. Therefore, Taiwan's status as a self-governing entity, de-escalation of tensions, and preservation of the status quo are instrumental.

As Taiwan continues to carve out a distinct identity on the world stage, its ability to sustain and expand partnerships with like-minded countries will be crucial. The challenge remains formidable, but Taiwan's resilience has already reshaped its global narrative—one no longer solely defined by its complex relationship with China.

**Sana Hashmi is a fellow at Taiwan-Asia Exchange Foundation and an alumna of SIS, JNU.**

## Perspective

### **Democracy by People: Reading Taiwanese Elections (2024)**

***Abhishek Pratap Singh***

In the last few years, Taiwan has evolved as a 'centre of geopolitics' amidst competition and power projections between major global powers, particularly China and United States. Much of this is also linked to the transformation of Taiwan's story, from a security concern to an economic and geopolitical opportunity. Taiwan, once dubbed 'the world's most dangerous place' by The Economist, has transformed into a global leader in silicon production and a critical link in the global software supply chain. Perhaps, this transformation is one of the key reasons why the 2024 Taiwanese Presidential Election has drawn global attention and significance. While the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) was able to secure third term for the office of Presidency in the general elections 2024, the election results in Taiwan also hold major significance for the regional and global geopolitics. These challenges extend beyond trade and investment concerns; they are primarily political, given China's overtly expressed desire for Taiwan's reunification with the mainland.

If we look back to the year 2024, more than 50 states went through the general elections. This includes major states such as the United States, India, France, the United Kingdom, Germany, Hungary, and Italy, among others. Many of these elections have faced new challenges due to the unethical use of technology and increased scope of diversion of public attention from various quarters. In States like Taiwan, this trend in electoral processes also remained evident and much of these challenges and concerns were raised given the overshadow of misinformation campaigns from adversarial states. In case of Taiwan, this was much drawn and was shaped by state of China. In the democratic history of Taiwan, this is not for the first time that Chinese state has shown similar pattern of "intended interventions" in Taiwan's quest for

democratic electoral processes. During the first Presidential election in 1996 in Taiwan, China has pushed for escalation in military exercises and other diplomatic nuances making an effort to divert public attention of the Taiwanese voters to elect a favourable candidate for Presidency. While much of this was well designed and diplomatically executed, the desired intention of China was to influence domestic opinions of Taiwanese was overtly visible. Similarly, in 2000 Presidential elections, China was more aggressive in political posturing given military demonstrations and issuing direct threats to influence electoral processes.

All this was in reference to the comment of desired 'state to state' relationship by then Taiwanese leaders Lee Teng hui. While most major states, including India, adhere to the 'One China Policy,' external influences from Beijing have consistently played a role in Taiwan's elections.

Taiwan's 2024 presidential election serves as a testament of its people's ability and resilience of civil society to stand up against Chinese state led extensive and well-coordinated interference efforts to undermine its democratic process. It also highlights the essential requirements for democracies worldwide to devise effective and coordinated socio-political strategies to address these interventionist tendencies, thereby maintaining the integrity of democratic systems globally. China's authoritarian state led a technically sophisticated misinformation campaign aimed at shaping the favourable public opinion and built faulty narratives to create political confusion, but failed to convince or alter democratic values and spirit within Taiwanese people. The 'civil society initiatives' and 'media literacy' in Taiwan played a major role as a counter measure to misinformation campaign in the post truth era.

India one of the largest functional democracies in the world also went through general elections in the year 2024. India has successfully upheld the rule of law while safeguarding its constitutional and democratic values. Having said that, the Taiwanese elections offer three key lessons for the democratic processes in India.

Firstly, it is vital to strike an appropriate balance between transparency and security in democratic process to strengthen more trust in the electoral process. Taiwan's practice of counting votes and announcing results on the same day highlights the effectiveness of its electoral system. Despite being a far less numbered electorate in comparison to India, this level of real-time accountability not only strengthens the credibility of the electoral process but also downplays the chances for misinformation and any kind of speculation, domestically or globally. In case of India, a highly competitive and bitter party politics system allowed every counter measure for any misinformation campaigns driven by partisan interests or any kind of adversarial overtures.

However, the opposition was consistent in its critique for a non-indubitable electoral process. Secondly, the political battles in democracies are not primarily drawn on party ideology rather populism and economic anxieties do shape and dominate the political discourse. In case of India, the political opposition was banking on rising concerns for unemployment,

wage stagnation and rising cost of living. The tendency to capitalise on economic discontent is a consistent feature in Indian elections and in other states. In case of Taiwan, high cost of living and economic survival in urban life style remained a concern for the citizens. On the question of economic equality, although Taiwan stands much better but the last decade has witnessed rising trends in economic parameters at different levels. In democratic states, social and economic inequality do remain a relevant concern and challenge globally.

And thirdly, Taiwan's peaceful election and the resilience of its democratic values serve as a beacon of hope for other democracies amid rising concerns over democratic backsliding. In the age of 'competitive populism' it is imperative to muster and express political courage to allow fairness in electoral processes while strengthening democratic credentials of a democratic state.

To sum it up, one can say that it is of no lesser relevance that the Taiwanese election does offer a unique case of study and analysis for the democratic processes across the globe, given rising concerns on misinformation campaigns and false narrative building by oblivious proponents of partisan politics and adversarial states, while offering suggestive measures to counter these tendencies and designs.

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## Book Review

### **Taiwan: Contested Democracy Under Threat by Jonathan Sullivan & Lev Nachman**

*Swati Kanwar*

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is increasingly defined by conflicts and contestations over sovereignty. Major events disrupting global peace include the Russia-Ukraine war, the Israel-Palestine conflict, and cross-strait tensions between China and Taiwan. The latter impacts the geopolitical balancing between the US and China and the jostling identity and place of Taiwan and its people. The launch of the book "Taiwan: Contested Democracy Under Threat" comes at an opportune time to introduce readers to the 'Taiwan question,' central to discussions on the future of East Asia, global security, critical supply chains, and the US-China relationship. Globally, Taiwan remains underappreciated despite being a liberal democracy of 24 million with a diverse population. Taiwan has emerged as a top 20 global economy and a technological powerhouse, making its study crucial since it is "a liberal democracy on the front line of authoritarian pressures and a pivotal component in a free and open Indo-Pacific. Its future will have an outsized impact on the direction of travel for regional peace and the global order."

The book is co-authored by Jonathan Sullivan, Associate Professor in the School of Politics and International Relations at the University of Nottingham and a former Director of the China Policy Institute, and Lev Nachman, Assistant Professor in the College of Social Sciences at National Chengchi University in Taipei and a Non-Resident Fellow with the Atlantic Council Global China Hub. The book consists of ten chapters exploring different areas of Taiwanese politics, but all have an underlying theme of Taiwanese identity. The first chapter, titled "Why Taiwan Matters," is an ode to the authors' mentor Shelley Rigger, who has a book of the same name that has long been a guide to introducing Taiwan to Western scholars. This chapter introduces certain pertinent questions by explaining what the Taiwan problem or question is. The authors

argue that the PRC's claim over Taiwan remains steadfast and unchanging, regardless of Taiwan's policies. China labels Taiwan as a "rogue province" and is guided by nationalistic sentiment, with its claims described as "sacred and inviolable," a theme discussed at length in Chapter 5 of the book. It is important to understand where the PRC's claims over Taiwan are coming from. Taiwan was considered part of mainland China only during the late Qing dynasty, with much of its integration resulting from conquest, political maneuvering, and military threats. The authors contend that in the entirety of historical documentation, there has been none supporting the claim that Taiwan was ever part of China. To understand these claims, it becomes necessary for a scholar to have a clear understanding of Taiwan's history, which is dealt with in Chapter 2, titled "Taiwan's Many Histories," including a section on the indigenous population. This chapter serves as a good starting point to see Taiwan in its historical entirety. However, the main timeline that much of the book deals with is post-20th century. While reflecting on the title of the book as to what makes Taiwan a contested state, the authors argue that the fundamental political question in Taiwan is not defined by cliched Left-Right issues; rather, it is the inquiry about the future of Taiwan with respect to its relation with China. Chapter 3, titled "Decide by the Taiwanese People," goes to great lengths to discuss how only "few Taiwanese people identify as Chinese, let alone identify with the PRC. All Taiwanese people have to make political decisions with China's claims in mind." It is the story of Taiwan's domestic politics and its democratization. The question of how domestic politics actually functions in Taiwan is answered by examining voter behaviour and its relationship with the PRC during presidential elections, as the authors contend, without negating other socio-economic determinants. Historically, the KMT (Kuomintang) has framed elections as a choice



between war and peace, whereby the KMT offers peace and the DPP (Democratic Progressive Party) will bring war with respect to the China equation. On the other hand, the DPP proclaims that elections are a choice between democracy and autocracy, whereby the DPP hails democracy, and the KMT is labelled as autocratic. This narrative is heavily borrowed from Taiwan's history post-China's Civil War. The KMT, the Chinese Nationalist Party that came from mainland China to Taiwan after its defeat in the Civil War, advocates for a close relationship with mainland China. Meanwhile, the DPP, founded a year prior to the end of Martial Law in Taiwan, emerged as an effort toward Taiwan's democratization, advocating for Taiwanese sovereignty. The 2024 Presidential elections in Taiwan also saw discussions revolving around this overarching narrative. While the PRC's stance remains a key factor in Taiwan's democratization, its influence fluctuates from election to election. For instance, the 2020 presidential elections were predominantly about Hong Kong, while the 2016 elections were heavily influenced by the Sunflower Movement. However, one might be critical of the view taken by the authors regarding the extreme centrality of the PRC in Taiwan's domestic politics. This perspective overlooks Taiwan's political-economic structure and its integration into global supply chains, particularly in the semiconductor industry. The "silicon shield," to borrow former President Tsai's phrase, has been able to deflect the negative consequences of the critical minerals embargo placed by China in 2023. Economic determinants also factor into voter choices. The book falls short of discussing these determinants, which is quite understandable given the length and breadth of the book, as it is a herculean task to weave all the threads together while keeping the read accessible for the general public. The authors have done a proficient job in presenting various concepts like "strategic ambiguity," "strategic clarity," "One China Principle," and "One China Policy," which are often sprinkled liberally into common usage. This clears the ambiguity associated with these terms in general and the question of Taiwan in particular.

The book is written in a very accessible manner, making the "Taiwan issue" seem approachable to the general public. The book could act as an updated guide for scholars or global Taiwan watchers, providing an introductory passage into this magnanimous labyrinth intersecting with themes of domestic politics, 'Taiwanese-ness,' the semiconductor critical supply chain, cross-strait relations, and diplomatic engagements. Due to a lack of awareness among the general public, intensified by information operations and political efforts stemming from China's aggressive diplomacy and its 'One China Policy,' Taiwan faces international marginalization. Despite prevailing uncertainties, the authors remain optimistic about Taiwan's future, describing it as 'one of the freest societies in East Asia.', the text does not neglect the more pressing issue at hand: the long-standing aspiration for the self-determination of the people of Taiwan. It is this thread that guides both the domestic and international politics surrounding Taiwan.

Since the PRC's claims continue to impinge on Taiwan's diplomatic engagements due to the One China Policy, and Taiwan's domestic politics are heavily dependent upon leaders' stances on the issue, as seen in the recent 2024 Taiwan presidential elections, the assertion of sovereignty comes through loud and clear, for it manifests in both political and economic power. An apt quote by Achille Mbembe encapsulates the essence of sovereignty in the international arena: "To be sovereign is to exert one's control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power." The authors argue that any war over Taiwan will not bode well for global peace, as too many stakeholders are involved in the process. They appeal to the empathetic human agency to bear in mind Taiwanese perspectives, but in no way does the text come out as an explicit exposition of the authors' subjectivities. Instead, the book presents multiple perspectives, embodying the hallmark of scholarly work—rigorous critique and thoughtful inquiry. Although sympathetic towards Taiwan, it illustrates the true intricacies of this contested nation.

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