

Improving Ties between India and Taiwan: An Assessment

Sumit Kumar

The relationship between India and Taiwan has witnessed significant progress over the last one year. In fact, Taiwan was a one of the dominate issues in Indian media 2020 largely because of its success in containing the Covid-19 and its increasing popularity among the Indian people. China's increasing assertiveness against India has also led sections of Indian experts and scholars to argue to foster a strong relationship with Taiwan. Moreover, there is an increasing voice about India revisiting its commitment to the One China Policy. It is in the context of these developments, this article tries to assess the nature and future of India-Taiwan relations.

True, India and Taiwan do not enjoy the diplomatic relationship and therefore the engagement which began to unfold in the post-Cold War era between the two sides has been limited to a few spheres. Unfortunately, even in these areas the countries have not been able to expand and deepen bilateral cooperation. Thus, while economic, trade and commerce hold huge prospect for both the countries, structural barriers continue to prevent the two sides from realising the full potential in this area. Of course, several agreements have been signed, with the Modi and Tsai governments having shown their interests in improving cooperation. Consequently, the trade volume reached to US\$ 7.5 billion in 2019. The time has come when India should expedite the process of a free trade agreement with Taiwan, especially while Taiwan is exploring the possibility of access to other markets in order to reduce its economic engagement with China. At the same time, improved economic ties with Taiwan will also help India in managing its relationship with China.

Taiwan possesses huge foreign reserves and is known for its expertise in the field of hardware manufacture, construction, mines exploration, electronics, and automobiles, among others. Thus, it can undoubtedly play a critical role in the success of the current government's Make in India, Digital India, and Skill India initiatives. A case in point being a possible collaboration between India's expertise in software and Taiwan's in hardware. Additionally, by providing a market of its size to

Taiwan, India would be able to address the deepening economic ties between China and Taiwan. Soft diplomacy has been given primacy in the current government's foreign policy. In this, religious tourism has great potential, considering Buddhism is the majority religion and India is its birth place.

Another area where two countries should foster cooperation is the health sector. The last year, Taiwan received global recognition for controlling the spread of COVID-19. This is indeed a remarkable accomplishment, keeping in mind close geographical proximity, people-to-people contact, extensive economic engagement and flight connectivity between Taiwan and China. Undoubtedly, despite all these odds, Taiwan's efforts to minimise coronavirus cases has largely been possible due to Taiwan's advanced health care system, preparedness and past lessons.¹ Thus, while Taiwan had already information about some cases of a severe pneumonia in Wuhan, its Center for Disease Control immediately ordered inspections of passengers arriving to Taipei from Wuhan and also implemented 124 safety protocol on December 30, 2019, the same day China notified the World Health Organisation (WHO) about the outbreak of COVID-19. The visit of a Taiwanese fact-finding committee to Wuhan further enabled Taiwan to know about the rapid spread of COVID-19.² Consequently, on January 20, the Central Epidemic Command Centre, which was established soon after the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2003, was activated and Taiwan also became the first country to suspend flights from Wuhan and later from Hong Kong. The temperature monitors installed at airports after the 2003 SARS outbreak and the integrated digital database of its National Health Insurance, immigration and customs agencies enabled Taiwan to know passengers' travel and health history in the last 14 days. At the same time, data from citizens' household registration systems and foreigner's entry cards helped the Taiwan government to identify individuals at high risk.³

Apart from these robust preventive measures, Taiwanese government immediately halted the export of medical items like globs, masks and others to ensure their sufficient supply in the country. The Armed forces were asked to help increase the production of essential medical equipment and items. Taiwan also took efforts to keep its people clam. These measures, in turn, have limited the number of COVID-19 cases to 382 and 19 deaths in Taiwan at the time of writing of this article.⁴ Now, with no immediate relief in sight, several countries have begun to raise questions about how and why WHO ignored Taiwan's early message about the transmission of this virus from human to human. This in turn

clearly underscores the valuable contribution that Taiwan would have made to the global fight against the coronavirus, had it been a member of WHO. While the current global health crisis has given a strong reason for the international community to pave the way for inclusion of Taiwan in WHO, some countries have already begun to work with Taiwan in the health sector.⁵

India should expedite the efforts to benefit from Taiwan's expertise in the health care system. First, Taiwan is known for its high-quality medical system. In fact, it was declared to have one of the best health care systems in the world by the CEOWORLD magazine Health Care Index in 2019.⁶ On the other hand, India has poor health infrastructure and a huge shortage of doctors and Nurses among other impediments. Thus, India should foster cooperation with Taiwan for the purpose of knowing best practices, promoting medical personnel training, getting technological capabilities to prevent communicable disease and others. Second, since Taiwan is a leading exporter of medical materials, working with this country will help India in introducing the best practices in the manufacturing of medical products. At the same time, India can also have access to Taiwanese medical items including contact lens, blood glucose meters, assistive devices, instruments and accessories for dental and veterinary use and others. Third, with its expertise in the implementation of the National Health Insurance since 1995, Taiwan can contribute significantly to the successful implementation of India's National Health Mission. Fourth, India can also learn from Taiwan about how effectively informational communication technology can be used in the health sector. We have observed how a huge digital data base of the entire passenger and its people have enabled Taiwan to quickly respond to the spread of the coronavirus. Fifth, as the Indian government under Prime Minister Modi has given emphasis on Ayurveda medicine and Taiwan's push to promote traditional Chinese medicine in recent years, the two sides were eager to discuss how to further promote development of these traditional Asian schools of medicine. And lastly, India can also learn from Taiwan about setting up an integrated health emergency centre to make timely and effective response to the spread of a disease like COVID-19.

A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between National Cheng Kung University Hospital of Taiwan and South India-based Center for Health and Development (CHD Group) has been signed to engage on exchange programmes, research and development centered on global health, community development initiatives and publications.⁷ During the second Taiwan Expo 2019 in New Delhi organized by Bureau of

Foreign Trade and Taiwan External Trade Development Council there was an “Taiwan Healthcare Pavilion” themed as “Medical Science and Technology” and Taiwan-India Medical Cooperation Forum provided Indian companies an opportunity to learn about Taiwan’s current healthcare development, its diverse strength in the field of medical equipment, economic, trade etc. and the areas in which the two countries can co-operate in the future.⁸ But, a fruitful cooperation between the two sides can take place only when the Indian government indicates its willing to engage Taiwan on government-to-government level. It can be hoped that learning from its experiment of the coronavirus pandemic, the Modi government will take measure to realise the potential of the bilateral relationship in the health care sphere.

The Strategic Imperative

Undoubtedly, the recent increased bonhomie between the two countries has increased largely because of China’s assertive posturing towards both the countries. Thus, several Indian experts, former diplomats and other have asked India to revisit its commitment to the One China Policy when the Xi Jinping regime has shown no interest in honoring India’s territorial interiority and sovereignty. Thus, they argue that India should think about elevating ties with Taiwan. In this context it can be mentioned that the Tsai government has already shown its desire to cement ties with India under the New Southbound Policy. Through this, Taiwan can further consolidate its identity as an independent state and India can ensure freedom of navigation in the South China Sea through which 50 per cent of its trade takes place. India can further expand its oil and gas exploration activities in the region. Taiwan has a better understanding of China’s strategic depth because of their close geo-strategic proximity and linguistic and cultural ties. A closer relationship with Taipei will help New Delhi understand Beijing’s strategic thinking. While the Modi government has given special attention to developing triangular and quadrilateral coalitions with the US, Japan and Australia as part of its regional security strategy, and the inclusion of Taiwan can prove to be crucial in this endeavour. Delhi can advance its economic interests by working with Taipei.

With Taiwan and India being the two strong pillars of the US administration’s Indo-Pacific strategy, India can take a step ahead to include Taiwan in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, which now consists of the US, Japan, India and Australia. This move will help India strengthen its counter-Chinese strategy and at the same time boost Taiwan’s independent identity. It will also help it ensure the freedom

of navigation in the South China Sea through which 50 per cent of India's trade takes place. At the same time, India also has an interest in ensuring the uninterrupted exploration of oil and gas in the said region.

New Delhi and Taipei need to institutionalise their cooperation in the technology sector so as to achieve their shared interests. At the same time, by providing a big market, India can significantly reduce the deepening economic ties between China and Taiwan, a stated goal of the Tsai administration as part of her New Southbound Policy. Meanwhile, with the use of Taiwan's agro-technology, India could transform its agriculture sector as well. Since the Modi Government has attached huge importance to soft diplomacy as part of India's foreign policy to achieve its national interests, promoting tourism with Taiwan could also be an attractive way of cementing ties between the two nations, given that Buddhism is the religion of the majority of Taiwanese and India is its homeland.

As the Indian Government has decided to review local chapters of Confucius institutes in India, agreements between Indian and Chinese institutes as also several MoUs regarding the Chinese language programme, New Delhi can strengthen ties with Taiwan to run the Chinese language programme in the country. But these efforts would be more effective in cementing ties between the two sides only when the Indian leadership decides to institutionalise the relationship in an effective form. In this regard, India can take a cue from the US' adherence to improving ties with Taiwan, despite accepting the "One China Policy." It remains to be seen if India and Taiwan succeed in transforming their bilateral cooperation or the relationship continues to be hostage to the shadow of the Dragon.

While it is true that one major obstacle that hampers close ties between India and Taiwan is India's acceptance of the "one China policy", this, should not deter New Delhi from seeking close security and economic ties with Taipei in the same way as Beijing is expanding its involvement with Islamabad in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK). India should take bold initiatives to reach out to Taiwan and it should also assert its right to decide what type of relations it wishes to have with Taiwan. It would be interesting to see how the DPP government and India sustain and expand their bilateral ties, with China in their backyard.

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