



True North in
Canadian public policy

Commentary

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The Canary in the Coal Mine: Taiwan's Vital Role in the International Order

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

As someone who runs a think tank that focuses on Canadian public policy, you may be wondering why I am on a panel discussing regional public health collaboration in Asia. I have wondered the same thing myself, particularly given the knowledgeable and distinguished company the organisers have paired me with for today's discussion. I am truly honoured.

Do not despair, however, for I think I have something to add to today's discussion. In particular I think I can put today's exchange in the larger context of global geopolitics, to invite us all to lift up our eyes from the details of regional health care policy to consider the global context of this discussion.

No one here will be surprised if I say that cross-Strait relations colour every aspect of Taiwan's efforts to achieve international recognition and make an international contribution commensurate with its tremendous talents, energy, and expertise, including in health care. And how the West reacts to Taiwan's constructive efforts, as well as to China's attempts to intimidate and silence those who disagree with its policies, will have a preponderant influence on the outcome.

So in the few minutes allotted to me, with your permission I will undertake three tasks:

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- First, to underline the admiration so many of us have for Taiwan’s efforts, particularly in the field of public health, but more broadly as well;
- Second, to lament China’s increasingly belligerent assertion of its policies, which seek to divide and isolate those countries, including Taiwan, that believe in the rule of law, freedom of navigation, democracy, and the peaceful settlement of disputes through international organisations.
- And, finally, to look at ways the West does, can, and should use to engage Taiwan, open doors for its influence, and help to signal to China that peaceful and respectful dialogue are the only acceptable means for it to pursue its Taiwan policy.

Let me begin, then, with a few words about Taiwan’s determination and ambitions to contribute to the world. This is my third visit to Taiwan and I can say without exaggeration that my admiration for Taiwan’s commitment to constructive international engagement grows with each visit.

Of course it should surprise no one that Taiwan, with its 24 million people, its world-leading health care system (one that my colleagues and I at my think tank have had occasion to hold up as a model in many respects in Canada), and the 23rd largest economy by GDP in the world, should want to share its success with others who could benefit. This panel and the great successes it represents in public health collaboration are ample testament to Taiwan’s ability to marshal both money and impressive technical expertise on a large scale in the pursuit of a better world. I thought President Tsai, a fellow graduate of my alma mater, the London School of Economics, said it best in her National Day Address yesterday when she noted, “The best way to defend Taiwan is to make it indispensable and irreplaceable to the world.” In field after field, including health care, Taiwan is doing just that.

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But while the world needs more Taiwan, the People’s Republic of China, just across the Strait, is determined that the world shall have less Taiwan. Not only is this an unacceptable diminishing of the well-being of those Taiwan seeks to help and of Taiwan’s right to self-determination, but it is also an egregious attack on the integrity of numerous international organisations, including the World Health Organisation (WHO) and its chief deliberative body, the World Health Assembly (WHA).

Despite its commitment to protecting and promoting the health of all of humanity without reference to politics, under Chinese pressure the WHA blocked Taiwan’s participation in 2017 and 2018 after it enjoyed observer status in that body for seven or eight years. This retrograde step deprives the Taiwanese of information and expertise vital to the health and well-being of its citizens in violation of the WHA’s universal mandate and, given the ease and speed with which infectious diseases can now travel, endangers people much farther afield as well. Similarly, the WHA and WHO are preventing the rest of the world from using those organisations to learn from Taiwan’s extensive and impressive expertise in areas such as, among others, enterovirus infections, a matter to which I shall return in a moment.

Nor is this China’s only offence against the international order painstakingly built up over the last seven decades or so, an order that underpins all of our hopes for a free, open, and secure Indo-Pacific region. These breaches are too numerous to list exhaustively, but certainly include:

- Unfair trading practices;
- Theft of intellectual property, including through industrial espionage;
- United Front work aiming to mobilise and politicise Chinese diaspora populations in many countries, pressing them to become fifth columnists in support of Beijing’s policies;
- Direct intervention in other countries’ politics and elections;
- Unilateral and illegal militarisation of the South China Sea;
- Egregious and widespread human rights violations including, but not limited to, those of many minority groups in China.

I am sorry to report that the international community has been slow to become alive to the dangers that China’s bad behaviour represents, but that complacency is starting to yield rather quickly to the glaring and painful facts we have allowed to accumulate on the ground. Moreover, people are increasingly coming to understand that Taiwan acts very much as the world’s canary in the coal mine with respect to the dangers posed by China’s behaviour.

For those of you unfamiliar with this expression, it refers to the fact that coal miners in Britain used to take small birds called canaries with them into the coal mines because the birds would react far more quickly than people to the presence of poisonous gases accumulating in the mine shaft. The canaries were an early warning system that enabled the miners to escape disaster. Taiwan is playing this role for the international community. And the West is therefore increasingly looking for ways to come to the aid of Taiwan, not only for its own sake, but also as a means of signalling to China that the era when Beijing could call the tune in many fields is rapidly drawing to a close.

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The trick, of course, is to increase the pressure on China measurably but proportionately without tipping over into overt conflict that no one wants. China’s bad behaviour will not change until it comes to realise that other countries will exact a price for that behaviour that is unacceptable to China, and are resolute in their determination to call Beijing to account. I don’t want to wander too far afield from today’s topic, so I will limit myself to noticing that the health care field offers several notable examples of such incremental signalling to Beijing, using Taiwan as the trigger for action.

I am glad to report, as an example, the work of my home government in Ottawa. Despite the fact that the current government is keen to reach a trade agreement with Beijing (and just signed a new trade agreement with the US and Mexico) it has been willing to brave Beijing’s displeasure by strongly backing Taiwan’s efforts to be readmitted as an observer to the WHA. I am also pleased to report that Canada is part of an international coalition that includes the US, the EU, New Zealand, and therefore the vast bulk of Western governments supporting Taiwan’s bid to return. This international pushback against Chinese obstructionism needs to be continued and intensified under Western leadership.

But to make that pressure effective, Beijing must be shown that its ability to suborn the votes of developing and other nations will not be enough to frustrate the determination of Taiwan and the West to see this country succeed.

To return yet again to our health care policy theme, it is my view that Western countries have the pleasurable burden of ensuring that, even when China succeeds in blocking Taiwan's ambitions to be a full participant in institutions such as those charged with international public health care co-operation, that Taiwan is nonetheless given every opportunity to make the positive contribution to world affairs that is one of its highest ambitions. Of course, Taiwan and its neighbours, particularly among the partners in the New Southbound Policy so well represented here, do not need countries in the West to collaborate successfully among themselves. But the West nevertheless has an important role to play.

I am glad to say that the United States continues to show the way in this regard, and I am here to call on other Western governments, including my own, to follow the path that Washington has blazed. In particular, please allow me to hold up the example of the US-Taiwan Global Cooperation and Training Framework, or GCTF, as an illustration of what can and should be done by Western governments keen to support Taiwan's legitimate ambitions.

In the words of Kin Moy, president of the American Institute in Taiwan, the GCTF exists to connect experts from Taiwan and abroad and provide opportunities for them to share best practices among each other, especially on issues such as public health, where collaboration is critical.

The GCTF has brought together hundreds of experts, government officials, and civil society leaders from over two dozen countries for workshops on public health, women's empowerment, and the digital economy, among other topics.

This brings me back, as I promised, to the issue of enterovirus infections, one of the most common causes of hand, foot, and mouth disease, oftentimes with serious neurological, or even fatal, complications. Women and children are all too frequently the victims. This is a public health problem of the highest order.

Just 20 years ago, Taiwan suffered a severe enterovirus outbreak that affected hundreds of young children. And now Taiwan is partnering with the United States and numerous other countries, particularly here in Asia, to improve our collective understanding of enteroviruses. This is an area where Taiwan's own experience, and its impressive expertise in health care technologies such as vaccine creation, is being made available to others through the intervention of Western countries anxious to see Taiwan take its rightful place among the family of nations. We in the West need to do more of this, both for its own sake and to show China that their efforts to block Taiwan's progress shall not succeed.

In conclusion please let me recall something intriguing and inspiring that Taiwan Asia Exchange Foundation Chairman Hsiao said to us this morning in his opening remarks. Taiwan, he said, is not a question but an answer. I agree. But he did not tell us to *what question* Taiwan is the answer. Let me tell you what I think the question is. The question to which Taiwan is the answer is this: Is there proof that the Chinese people are not condemned by history, ethnicity, genetics or any other factor, to live without freedom, security and safety of the person, democracy, and the rule of law? Taiwan answers: we are the proof that this is no mere dream. The society where Chinese people enjoy these values and institutions is a reality, here and now and all around us in this room, in this city and in this country. Because Taiwan IS the answer to this question. If it did not exist, we would have to invent it. Fortunately, it does exist and every one of us has an immense responsibility to ensure that it continues not only to exist but thrive, in health care, in international collaboration, and in every other field.

Thank you.

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About the Author



Brian Lee Crowley has headed up the Macdonald-Laurier Institute (MLI) in Ottawa since its inception in March of 2010, coming to the role after a long and distinguished record in the think tank world. He was the founder of the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies (AIMS) in Halifax, one of the country's leading regional think tanks. He is a former Salvatori Fellow at the Heritage Foundation and a former Senior Fellow at the Galen Institute, both in Washington. In addition, he has advised think tanks in Canada, USA, France, Britain, Brussels and Nigeria.

Crowley has published numerous books, most recently *Northern Light: Lessons for America from Canada's Fiscal Fix*, which he co-authored with Robert P. Murphy and Niels Veldhuis and two bestsellers: *Fearful Symmetry: The Fall and Rise of Canada's Founding Values* (2009) and MLI's first book, *The Canadian Century: Moving Out of America's Shadow*, which he co-authored with Jason Clemens and Niels Veldhuis. Crowley twice

won the Sir Antony Fisher Award for excellence in think tank publications for his health care work and in 2011 accepted the award for a third time for MLI's book, *The Canadian Century*.

From 2006–08 Crowley was the Clifford Clark Visiting Economist with the federal Department of Finance. He has also headed the Atlantic Provinces Economic Council (APEC), and has taught politics, economics, and philosophy at various universities in Canada and Europe.

Crowley is a frequent commentator on political and economic issues across all media. He holds degrees from McGill and the London School of Economics, including a doctorate in political economy from the latter.



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