



True North in
Canadian public policy

Commentary

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Embracing Taiwan: Why Canada Has More Options Than We Realize

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Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed guests, friends, it is a great honor to be here today. I thank the Macdonald-Laurier Institute (MLI) and the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office (TECO) for inviting me to speak at this event, which coincides with the 40th anniversary of the *Taiwan Relations Act* (TRA).

In recent weeks I have had to turn down a number of invitations to attend various events commemorating the 40th anniversary of the TRA back in Taipei. This includes a gala at the new American Institute in Taiwan compound in Neihu, which, I am promised, will finally open for business this year after several years of delays.

Upon learning that I could not attend the events as I would be traveling overseas - to Ottawa - a number of my colleagues wondered why I would be in the Canadian capital, and not in Taipei or Washington, DC. After all, the TRA pertains to US-Taiwan relations, and furthermore Canada does not have its equivalent to the TRA.


All of this is fair criticism. The TRA, an Act of Congress passed after the US switched diplomatic relations from the Republic of China (Taiwan) to the People's Republic of China (PRC), created an *institutionalized* mechanism to manage US-Taiwan relations. Yet the *spirit* of the TRA - that is, the will to continue engaging Taiwan despite official ties with the PRC - transcends the special relationship that exists between Taipei and Washington and applies to the entire international community.

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This became even more logical after Taiwan took off as an economic powerhouse in the 1980s and 1990s, and just as importantly, once it removed the shackles of authoritarianism and became a vibrant democracy.

In the second decade of the 21st century, as China rose to assume a pre-eminent role in international affairs and began to impose its will on others, with its money, influence, military and “sharp power,” the need to deepen our engagement with democratic Taiwan became all the more pressing and logical.

As we collectively seek to find ways to cope with a powerful economy run by a ruthless authoritarian regime, and as we endeavor to balance our economic requirements with the need to defend the integrity of our democratic institutions and the values that underpin them, there is no more ideal a partner than Taiwan, a democracy of 23.5 million souls that, for decades, has had to perform exactly this kind of balancing act. Only in its case, the threat is an existential and immediate one, as the PRC has long endeavored to annex Taiwan and incorporate it under the “one country, two systems” framework. As anyone who has paid any attention to developments in Hong Kong in recent years will realize, such a framework has proven quite disastrous to its residents’ freedoms, liberties, and democratic aspirations.



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In the past five years or so, the US government has begun to reassess its entire China strategy, which hitherto had operated under the assumption that patience and generosity, added to a strong dose of wishful thinking, would eventually help transform authoritarian China into something closer to a recognizable liberal democracy.

Instead, shortsightedness and self-interest yielded a “resilient authoritarianism” under Hu Jintao followed by dictatorship under Xi Jinping that now threatens the international system that has existed since the end of World War II. This reassessment – which it is important to mention *predates* and will survive Donald Trump – has, in turn, emboldened US officials to push the envelope on what is “permissible” under the ambit of the TRA and the US’s “one China” policy.

We must remember that in most cases, the limits to our engagement with Taiwan are self-imposed, a result of *us* allowing *Beijing* to define the nature of our laws. In the past two or three years, Washington has launched a series of bilateral activities with Taiwan, many of them under the Global Cooperation Training Framework (GCTF) and soon under the US Department of State’s Global Engagement Center (GEC), addressing a variety of topics from disease prevention to media literacy, law enforcement to religious freedom.

Finding in Taiwan a willing partner, the US has also sought a greater role for the island-nation in defending freedom, encouraging good governance and improving development aid in the Pacific Islands, six of which are official diplomatic allies of Taiwan and the target of strong pressure by the PRC.

Meanwhile, the US defence relationship with Taiwan has remained robust, with continued arms sales, joint training, US Navy transits in the Taiwan Strait, and various ongoing programs. There is no doubt in my mind that the US military understands the value of keeping Taiwan as an ally in the region, and that its loss would prove destabilizing to the entire Indo-Pacific.

This deepening of ties between Taiwan and the US since 2016 – and I think it is fair to say that those are at an all-time high – has been deeply troubling to the Chinese leadership.

Besides the changing international context and shifting perceptions of China, responsible, pragmatic and predictable leadership in Taipei, and a commitment to diversifying Taiwan's engagement with partners around the world, has been one of the key accomplishments of the Tsai Ing-wen administration.

Unlike her predecessor's often exclusive focus on China, or *his* predecessor's often reckless attitude, which alienated and scared off many potential international partners, President Tsai has wisely ascertained global attitudes and actively sought engagement where engagement was possible, while respecting the limits of foreign counterparts.

In many cases, this has meant quiet, semi-official work behind closed doors, prioritizing constructiveness over publicity. In my nearly 14 years in Taiwan, I don't think there ever has been a period when Taiwan received so many delegations of Members of Parliament, government officials, academics, and journalists. And this has occurred for a reason.

Still, there have been failures, such as efforts by the US and a coalition of democracies – including Canada – to ensure that Taiwan has meaningful participation at multilateral agencies such as the World Health Organization (WHO), Interpol, and the Montreal-based International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO).

In those cases, the international community has allowed Beijing to dictate the terms, often through its growing influence at the UN General Assembly. We, the world's democracies, must do more on that front, for disease, crime, terrorism and air safety recognize no borders, and we cannot afford to have a blind spot in our system, or to turn down a partner that not only is willing to do its part, but that has many contributions to make.

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Taiwan is Canada's 12th-largest economic partner and the complementarity of the two economies means that a lot more can be accomplished in terms of bilateral trade, investment, and collaboration. Year after year, the small team of trade experts at the Canadian Trade Office in Taipei (CTOT), Canada's unofficial embassy, has outperformed many embassies worldwide with several times the number of staff.

This accomplishment, which has been the envy of many a Canadian embassy in other countries, is testament to the hard work of dedicated Canadian officials, several of whom I have come to know and befriend over the years; it is also the result of the appeal of Taiwan's modern economy and what it has to offer. There are still some obstacles, and legal reform often is frustratingly slow, but progress has been made and I am sure we will see more over the coming years.

Exchanges between our two societies are also vibrant; every year, thousands of Taiwanese come to Canada to study. According to Canadian government figures, nearly 200,000 people of Taiwanese descent currently reside in Canada, and as many as 60,000 Canadian nationals have made Taiwan their home – I am one of them. Canada has a very positive image among the Taiwanese: it is seen as a country with a strong commitment to democracy and rule of law, and like Taiwan, it is a middle power that needs to make a space for itself despite its proximity to a powerful neighbor.

Now that Canada is at long last awakening to the potential pitfalls of forming a close relationship with a revisionist and undemocratic China, as the Huawei controversy and Beijing's retaliation have made perfectly clear, Canadians of all stripes – in government, in academia, in the media and in civil society – have renewed interest in reaching

out to their Taiwanese counterparts. This isn't only because of Taiwan's long experience of dealing with China, though no doubt this generates much of its appeal.

Taiwan doesn't have all the solutions, and it, too, is struggling to identify, track, and find appropriate ways to counter China's growing influence, interference, and "sharp power." More than ever, this challenge that threatens all our democracies calls for cooperation among likeminded countries so that we, together, can come up with a countervailing strategy. For this, we need countries like Taiwan.

And Taiwan needs us, too. We're in this together, and the more united we are, the more difficult it will be for China's United Front to undermine our institutions and the very fabric of our societies.

As I mentioned earlier, the US has taken the lead in adding Taiwan to its multilateral efforts in the Indo-Pacific. The GCTF model, for example, has proved appealing to other countries in the region, with Japan and Australia asking to join.

Canada, too, has every advantage in joining this fledging alliance. Either it can join GCTF projects, or it can emulate that format and create its own Track 1.5 or Track 2 initiatives with Taiwan. Among other things, I can think of cyber, counterintelligence, combating organized crime and human trafficking, good governance, media literacy, rule of law and humanitarian assistance as areas of possible collaboration between the two countries.

I would also encourage the Department of National Defence and the Royal Military College of Canada (RMCC) to explore the possibility of sending some of its cadets and students to Taiwan for language training. Taiwan provides a friendly and much safer environment in which to learn a new language than China does today, where cadets are bound to be spied upon and perhaps become the target of attempted recruitment.

In academia, there is much room for growth in exchanges between the two sides. On this front, MLI has done excellent work in recent years and serves as an example of what can be accomplished with Taiwan. Among other things, it recently signed a MOU with the Prospect Foundation in Taipei, a government-sponsored think tank that conducts research in the security area. Its collaboration with the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy (TFD) has also yielded some rather interesting results.

Others can follow suit. But none of this will be possible without leadership within our governments and the will to stand our ground whenever Beijing expresses its displeasure. As more and more countries begin to emulate the US model for interacting with Taiwan, I am confident that China will lose some of its ability to constrain Taiwan.

No doubt Beijing will complain and threaten. And why would it not, when, far too often, expressions of anger got it what it wanted? Last time I checked, Canada was still a sovereign country with its own "one China" policy, which is not to be confused with Beijing's "one China" *principle*. Canada can say "No" to China – and it can say "Yes" to Taiwan – when doing so is in its national interest.

Let me now turn to some of the challenges that Taiwan is facing today, and why I insist that Taiwan's fate is of concern to us all.



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For all its imperfections and contradictions, Taiwan is an extraordinary place, an experiment in democracy and modernity in the larger Chinese world without equivalent. Anyone who has visited it cannot but be impressed with the place and its people. Its freedoms and democracy, while also imperfect, are an example to a region where such liberties are an increasingly rare commodity.

On many issues, from freedom of speech to gender equality to LGBTQI rights to a vibrant, multifaceted civil society, Taiwan is light years ahead of most, if not all, of its neighbors. Its extinction, therefore, would be a great loss to the region and to the world. It would be a psychological blow to those who still hold on to the belief that the China model isn't the solution to the challenges we face in the 21st century. Its disappearance as a free, sovereign state would open a new front in the authoritarian assault that is being waged against democracies worldwide.

Taiwan isn't a domestic issue for China, nor is it simply, as some have argued, unfinished business in the Chinese civil war. Rather, Taiwan is a key piece of the puzzle in an increasingly important part of the world, and it is an intrinsic part of the international community, no matter how much it has been ignored by global institutions.

As such, whatever happens to Taiwan will inevitably have repercussions outside the immediate region. For one thing, if authoritarian China gets its way and annexes Taiwan, this will reward and embolden a regime that won't stop there. In other words, Taiwan's fate will determine the kind of China that the rest of the world will have to deal with for decades to come.

Sadly, Taiwan faces this existential threat amid widening divisions and polarization. Populism, disinformation, computational propaganda, United Front work and elite capture are at an all-time high and serve to weaken the ability of Taiwanese society to respond to the China threat accordingly.

Moderation is being replaced by irrationality at both ends of the political spectrum, and the political centre, which politicians like President Tsai occupy, risks being eroded. It is that centre that has given Taiwan the resilience it needs to defend itself against the external threat posed by China; when extremes take over the discourse, the centre does not hold and, to quote a famous poet, things fall apart. What "sharp power" does is to amplify already existing trends and contradictions by directing them in a way that tear a targeted society apart.

There are also worrying signs that intimidation, and even physical violence, by pro-CCP proxies will become more frequent in the not-too-distant future.

Meanwhile, China continues to establish links with civil society in Taiwan, bypassing central government institutions and working with politicians, elected or not, who are willing to play along. Beijing has realized over the years that traditional parties in Taiwan, whether the KMT or the DPP, have internalized the expectations of democracy to such an extent that neither will be in a position to deliver what Beijing wants - that is, "peaceful unification."

This realization has compelled Beijing to reach out to political "outsiders," either independent candidates, candidates from small parties, or members of established parties who are nevertheless outliers. A few examples of politicians through history who hijacked the party-system come to mind - among them, Alberto Fujimori,

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Rodrigo Duterte, and Donald Trump. All have exerted, shall we say, a negative influence on the democratic institutions in their countries. I sense that Beijing is now aiming to accomplish a similar feat in Taiwan and thereby to break the democratic firewall that has long frustrated its effort to take over the island-nation.

I need not name names: the politicians are out there. A few of them have already been elected; others are hoping to do so in future. We have yet to know who will be the candidates in Taiwan's January 2020 elections, but I can think of one nightmare scenario, involving politicians who incarnate the worrying trends in Taiwanese democracy, which would be disastrous to Taiwan's democracy. I hope this does not come to pass.

Amid all this, Beijing continues to insist that Taiwan recognize the so-called "1992 consensus" and "one China," which Xi Jinping has made perfectly clear no longer countenances the possibility of "different interpretations." He has also closed off the future to any alternative to unification, which violates the right of the Taiwanese to decide their own destiny.

Long ago Xi telegraphed his impatience and has made it clear that, in his view, the Taiwan "question" cannot be left unresolved indefinitely. Hence his insistence on more proactive efforts on the part of Taiwanese "compatriots" to achieve "peaceful reunification," as his January 2 address reminded us. And of course, accompanying the political warfare and economic incentives is the threat of military force, including the recent, deliberate intrusions by two PLAAF J-11 combat aircraft across the median line in the Taiwan Strait. This is the kind of behavior that has the potential to destabilize the region.

While still Xi's option of last resort, it is a real threat nonetheless. As China intensifies its sorties around Taiwan and crosses the centreline, the risks of accidents and miscommunication have increased markedly, and with that, the real possibility of disastrous escalation.

That is why, more than ever, the world's leading democracies – including Canada – must rally to the cause of freedom and international law, at the centre of which lies the very existence of Taiwan. Abandonment will only feed the wolves in Beijing, whereas closer *collective* ties with Taiwan will bolster its resilience, give its people the certainty that their defiance of oppression is worthwhile, and force Beijing to think twice about adopting harsh measures against the democratic island-nation.

No government acts altruistically. Government first and foremost serve the national interest. Taiwan therefore cannot expect that other countries will go out of their way to defend it unless its defence serves their own interests. This may sound cold and callous, but this is international politics for you.

My view, and much of my work over the years has reflected this position, is that Taiwan is an indispensable and *inseparable* part of the international community. Taiwan can and should do more to explain this to the rest of the world – and when it does, it is my fondest hope that other countries will meet it halfway.

About the Author



J. Michael Cole is a Taipei-based senior fellow with the Macdonald-Laurier Institute in Ottawa, senior fellow with the Taiwan Studies Programme at the University of Nottingham, U.K., senior fellow with the Global Taiwan Institute in Washington, D.C., associate researcher with the French Center for Research on Contemporary China (CEFC), assistant coordinator for the International Coalition for Democratic Renewal-Forum 2000 China Working Group, and chief editor of Taiwan Sentinel. He was chief editor of the Thinking Taiwan Foundation's Thinking Taiwan between 2014 and 2016, and deputy news chief and columnist at the Taipei Times between 2010 and 2013.

His work has appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, *Foreign Policy*, *South China Morning Post*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *China Brief* (Jamestown Foundation), the *Interpreter* (Lowy Institute), *National Interest*, *Diplomat*, *Globe and Mail*, *Hill Times*, *Ottawa Citizen*, *Maclean's*, *the Age*, *Jane's Defence Weekly*, *Jane's Intelligence Review*, on CNN and the Brookings Institution, among others. He is a regular commentator on BBC, al-Jazeera and Radio Taiwan International, and an adviser to various foreign governments and to the defence industry.

His latest book, *Convergence or Conflict in the Taiwan Strait*, was published by Routledge in fall 2016. Before moving to Taiwan in 2005, he was an analyst with the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) in Ottawa. He has a master's degree in War Studies from the Royal Military College of Canada.



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