



Creating a Perspective for India-Taiwan Relations

Speaker: Prashant Kumar Singh

Chair: Vinod Khanna

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ICS Seminar Room

Following a brief opening remark by the Chair, Amb. Vinod Khanna, the speaker proceeded to provide the audience with a brief backgrounder on the Republic of China (ROC) and its role in the Chinese civil war, defeat in which has resigned it to exile on the island of Taiwan. The speaker highlighted the fervour with which the People's Republic of China (PRC) vies for reunifying Taiwan with the mainland, calling it the PRC's "biggest vulnerability and raw nerve." The presentation was aimed at addressing a particular question - with realism becoming a mainstay of Indian foreign policy, how likely is it that the ROC will be utilised as a source of leverage in its engagement with the PRC?

The speaker highlighted how ties between India and the ROC, on account of historical exigencies, have for long been circumscribed to the people-to-people domain. This reality finds its origin in what is considered an uncharacteristic display of pragmatism in Jawaharlal Nehru's foreign policy, which the speaker went on to describe in detail.

Prior to the end of the Chinese civil war in 1949, Nehru had, in fact, been a vocal supporter and admirer of the Nationalist leader of the ROC, Chiang Kai-Shek. However, once a Communist victory appeared imminent, Nehru's outlook on Chiang's leadership is recorded to have altered dramatically. Underscoring the fact that Nehru was not an unwavering idealist, the speaker drew attention to Nehru's condemnation of the Nationalist leader's militaristic demeanour and accused Chiang of having a vested interest in the Korean War that ensued shortly following the civil war. To be sure, this about-face was not engineered with unanimity among Indian policymakers. Opposition leaders criticised Nehru's jettisoning of India's support for the ROC on a number of grounds - often flawed - including balance of power, self-determinism and moral imperative. Ultimately, however, ties with the ROC were all but severed. The speaker noted that given the fact that the ROC was particularly intransigent in its foreign policy outlook, and patently undemocratic, it is unfair to criticise Indian leaders of the time for not exploring deeper ties.

The result of this legacy is that positions on vital issues of concern remain relatively unclear to both parties in the relationship, which has grown slowly and in an ad hoc manner. The speaker reiterated that ties are largely people-to-people and unstructured. India has since

viewed the relationship with a peculiar mix of optimism and circumspection. Starting from scratch in 1995, India and Taiwan made some headway in expanding visa and business ties, which comprised the first noticeable phase in the bilateral relation. Owing to the PRC factor, however, Taiwan's political overtures were treated with more suspicion in the period between 2000 and 2008.

The Modi administration, however, has provided a fillip to the relation, with ties between India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party and Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party intensifying. The speaker emphasised that seven out of the 12 agreements signed between Taiwan and India have taken place under the Modi administration, and a Taiwanese representative was even invited to Modi's swearing in ceremony as Prime Minister in 2014. Track 1.5 dialogues between India and Taiwan are becoming more frequent and there is renewed emphasis on a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and military cooperation.

According to the speaker, politics lies at the heart of this renewed vigour in the bilateral relationship. Much to China's chagrin, India stopped referring to the 'One-China policy' in 2008. Furthermore, in 2017, the Ministry of External Affairs even rejected China's imploration that India reiterate its recognition of the policy. As a result, India's silence on the One-China policy has become somewhat of a bargaining chip, particularly in its bid to solicit the PRC's attention to the border issue.

Nevertheless, India will only go so far with the ROC. According to the speaker, China's ties with India are of an un-substitutable scale and will continue to be a priority over Taiwan. Moreover, complementarities between India and Taiwan are relatively scarce, limiting the potential of more intensive ties. Three scenarios of varying likelihood were postulated. It is extremely unlikely that India would ever jeopardise ties with China by establishing formal diplomatic ties with Taiwan. Slightly likelier, is the prospect of enhanced contact, military cooperation and more structured engagement with strategic undertones between the two. The speaker admitted that the most likely scenario, given the importance of the PRC, would be one in which engagement is more structured but strategic overtones are absent. As such, diplomatic ties with Taiwan are unlikely to be used by India as a source of leverage with the PRC. According to the speaker, cosmetic and optical events such as the Wuhan meeting between Modi and Xi would not have any observable impact on India-Taiwan relations.

The speaker concluded with a call to action vis-a-vis India-Taiwan relations, suggesting that India needs a Taiwan policy review. For instance, the relation could be utilised to augment the Act East Policy. Moreover, it can benefit from Taiwan's expertise on matters such as the People's Liberation Army, China's elite politics and Southeast Asia. India's responsiveness to Taiwan's New Southbound Policy is a promising indicator of the drive to further improve the relation.

About the Speaker

Dr. Prashant Kumar Singh is Associate Fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA). He follows the strategic and domestic affairs of China. He is also a keen follower of state and society in Taiwan. And he has a deep interest in India's engagement with East Asia. His current research project is “Foreign Relations and Security in Xi Jinping’s Chinese Dream.” He obtained his PhD and MPhil degrees, respectively, from the Centre for East Asian Studies (CEAS), School of International Studies (SIS), Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi. He is a recipient of the prestigious CCS Grant for Foreign Scholars (2016) by National Central Library (Taiwan), Taiwan Fellowship (2014) and National Huayu Enrichment Scholarship, Taiwan (2011-12). Dr. Singh has been invited to speak at many renowned institutes including Chung-Hua Institution for Economic Research (CIER), National Central Library (NCL), National Chengchi University (NCCU), Asia Centre in France, and Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics and Thai Nguyen University in Vietnam. He has High School/Intermediate-level of fluency in Mandarin Chinese.

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