



Sigur Center for Asian Studies

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Prospects for Expanding Taiwan's International Role

Taiwan faces a host of challenges in its cross strait relations with a rising China. Among these challenges, Taiwan's sovereignty and status affect Taiwan's ability to effectively navigate international institutions and organizations. Nonetheless, Taiwan has made some gains in its participation in international institutions, particularly in the fields of global health and disaster relief. What are the implications of these gains for Taiwan, moving forward? These issues came under scrutiny at a Taiwan Roundtable on "[Prospects for Expanding Taiwan's International Role](#)," held at the Sigur Center for Asian Studies. The panel included Wei-chin Lee, Professor of Political Science, Wake Forest University, Bonnie Glaser, Senior Adviser for Asia and Freeman Chair in China Studies, Center for Strategic & International Studies, and Jacques deLisle, Professor of Law and Political Science and Director, Center for East Asian Studies, University of Pennsylvania.

Introduction

Following the UN's expulsion of Taiwan from the General Assembly in 1971, Taiwan's participation in inter-governmental organizations (IGOs) dwindled as China sought to limit Taiwan's influence. Encountering an unyielding "one China" principle, Taiwan has instead pushed for international

engagement through non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as an alternative to its participation in IGOs. NGOs offer an avenue for Taiwan to expand its international space through the promotion of issues such as human rights, public health advancement, environmental sustainability, agricultural assistance, and humanitarian relief. They also represent a means for Taiwan to share its experiences, learn from the experiences of others, and expand its networks and connections.

Opportunity and Potential in Disaster Relief

Disaster relief constitutes one such area where Taiwan has utilized NGOs to promote its interests. Taiwanese NGOs have created very effect networks for disaster relief and have enabled Taiwan to play a role in areas where Taiwan would otherwise be barred. Taiwan's Red Cross facility, for example, enables cooperation across other Red Cross organizations around the world, most notably in the 2010 Sichuan earthquakes. Innovative responses by the Taiwanese government prompted the creation of the National Science and Technology Center for Disaster (NCDR) to do research on disaster relief technology while also training personnel. These actions have positively impacted Taiwan's image and soft power. When Taiwan provided \$260 million in aid for the Fukushima earthquake, a poll in Japan conducted two years after the donation found that Taiwan came in second amongst countries that were viewed as making an impact and providing assistance to Japan.

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At the same time, Taiwan is limited by several factors. Because so many countries do not recognize Taiwan as a sovereign entity, meeting to discuss issues such as disaster relief becomes challenging. At the same time, opposition and interference from China has resulted in self-restraint and/or self-censorship by countries that are fearful of punitive action by China if they allow Taiwan to provide disaster relief. Most recently, for example, the Nepalese government declined Taiwan's offer of assistance following the 2015 Kathmandu earthquakes, citing a lack of diplomatic ties and the "great distance" between the two countries. Taiwan has also been excluded from some military exercises as well as UN related disaster relief groups. The inability of Taiwan to participate has two impacts. First, Taiwan is unable to contribute its expertise and knowledge. Second, Taiwan is unable to learn up to date practices in humanitarian and disaster relief. Where then, can Taiwan find opportunities?

To make itself more effective and increase its participation, Taiwan needs to develop niche capabilities that are easily deployed abroad. While Taiwan's abilities at home are significant, it has yet to develop a logistically mobile unit, which oftentimes results in Taiwan relying on others to deliver disaster relief materials. Instead, Taiwan can develop expertise on disaster relief best practices, assembling small units of managers, researchers, and doctors that can move quickly during a disaster. Having these dual use capabilities would enable Taiwan to provide more effective relief both at home and abroad.

Mixed Gains in Public Health

On the public health front, Taiwan's international gains are mixed. Taiwan's participation as an "observer" under the name "Chinese Taipei" at the World Health Assembly – the decision making body of the WHO- in 2009 marked a significant development for Taiwan's quest for international space. Taiwan's participation in the WHA was expected to generate positive ripple effects in Taiwan's memberships in other multilateral organizations, allowing Taiwan to showcase its role as a responsible international stakeholder. It also constituted a victory for public health, providing Taiwan with access to share and receive health-related information and expertise. However, the victory came with limits. What are these limits, and what are their implications for Taiwan's international status?

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Taiwan's status in the WHA comes with multiple caveats. First, Taiwan's status is merely observatory and ad hoc (i.e., must be renewed annually). Additionally, the membership is under the name "Chinese Taipei" - not "Taiwan" or any other names that do not contain "Chinese". In subsequent memorandums and documentation, Taiwan is referred to as "Taiwan province of China," while Taiwanese ports are listed as Chinese ports in the WHA quarantine rules. Moreover, Taiwan's participation in WHO/WHA technical meetings remain "intermittent and sporadic," - a disappointment for the Taiwanese, who saw the observer status accession as a breakthrough and seek full engagement in public health issues. This reflects the ongoing debate in Taiwan on whether Taiwan should seek formal

status (without much substance) or meaningful participations in international public health efforts. Most importantly, the reality of Taiwan's participation (or lack thereof) in the WHA sets important precedents for Taiwan's participations in other multilateral forums.

The context against which Taiwan's 2009 WHA status came about provides insight on why this particular scenario is unique. China's treatment of the 2003 SARS outbreak created support in the international community for Taiwan's increased participation in public health, especially since Taiwan was a victim of the SARS outbreak and the loss could have been minimized if China had cooperated with other countries and the WHO more. The Taiwanese successfully argued that given Taiwan's importance in Asia, it was in everyone's interests to let Taiwan have access to information and assistance in public health issues to prevent a next outbreak. Simultaneously, the Hu administration was adopting a policy of winning hearts and minds of Taiwanese to improve cross strait relations at the time, so it recognized President Ma's bid for WHO/WHA membership status. Overall, it was the combination of several factors that led to the 2009 agreement on Taiwan's status in the WHA, a condition that can be rarely met for Taiwan's membership in other multilateral organizations.

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Conclusion

Going forward, Taiwan's international space vis-à-vis multilateral organizations appears to be at a standstill. Since 2009, Taiwan's participation has neither increased nor decreased; it has not achieved any "dignified and meaningful participations"- a goal for the Taiwanese government. On the positive side, Taiwan's soft power has increased in that the country has emphasized its role as an active participant or responsible stakeholder in public health, disaster relief, and other issues. At the recent WHA summit, the Taiwanese health minister emphasized Taiwan's role in dealing with Ebola and the Nepal earthquakes. Taiwan has also promoted

its robust domestic health system (which effectively managed the SARS outbreak) as a model for other countries. On the negative side, Taiwan's role remains limited in the foreseeable future due to Mainland China's opposition and a lack of international support for Taiwan's increased engagement. China sees blocking Taiwan in UN-related forums as a cheap but effective way to curtail Taiwan's international status and role, partly because Taiwan has little presence in these forums to begin with, and because China can use its influence to keep the Taiwan issue off the table. Even if China accommodates Taiwan, there is still debate on the Taiwan side whether the nomenclature used (e.g. "Chinese Taipei" as opposed to "Taiwan") is acceptable to the Taiwanese public. As such, prospects for expanding Taiwan's international role remain in flux.

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