

The New Southbound Policy and Taiwan's Role in Facilitating Grassroots Connections in the Indo-Pacific Region

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Centuries ago, the winds of the monsoon trade system brought together merchants and sailors from far-flung lands across the Indian and Pacific Oceans, with India at the heart of all trading activities.

Today, the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific have once again become centers for global economic activity. As South and Southeast Asia continued to register high economic growth in the past decade, nations around the world start to look for avenues of cooperation with countries in this region. However, despite enjoying strong economic growth, the Indo-Asia-Pacific still faces many political and security challenges. The aggressive behavior of certain big powers in the name of safeguarding national territory, terrorism, transnational crimes, religious extremism and other ill practices have clouded the bright future for many countries in the region.

We believe that a healthy balance of power in favor of democracy is critically important to establishing an environment such that countries of all sizes can live in peace and avoid a situation in which

the strong can do whatever they wish while the weak have to suffer whatever they must. This configuration can also contribute to sustaining and strengthening the momentum for democracy and human rights in the region, though it has witnessed some backpedaling as of late.

We have also noticed that many of the political and security challenges that many countries face in the region cannot be managed solely through traditional political, economic and military means. Many of those problems are rooted in social, cultural, ecological and other dimensions. Our way of life is on the verge of going through dramatic transformations due to recent technological advancements, with some of them potential problem-solvers. This means that we need a new and holistic vision to tackle the challenges confronting the Indo-Asia-Pacific region.

I. The New Southbound Policy: Multi-layered Linkages

The New Southbound Policy is Taiwan's initiative to meet these challenges. As the flagship foreign policy of President Tsai Ing-wen, the New Southbound Policy seeks to strengthen Taiwan's relations with countries in Southeast Asia and South Asia, as well as with Australia and New Zealand.

The New Southbound Policy is a national strategy that seeks to reposition Taiwan's role in Asia, by providing an open framework that encourages multi-layered linkages with 18 targeted countries.

Most significantly, the New Southbound Policy highlights areas that are not part of traditional political-economic discussions. It seeks to facilitate a broad spectrum of cooperation, encompassing diverse fields such as trade, technology, agriculture, medicine, education and tourism. Municipal diplomacy, as well as parliamentary diplomacy

also form parts of the New Southbound Policy's expansive toolkit.

By focusing on people-to-people ties, the New Southbound Policy seeks to shift exchanges between Taiwan and the region from being primarily business-focused to a "people-centered" relationship based on mutual understanding, with an emphasis on the joint development of human resources. We hope to create grassroots connections from the bottom up.

For example, the role of NGO engagement, which displays the vibrancy of Taiwan's robust democratic society, is strongly emphasized in New Southbound Policy initiatives.

The Prospect Foundation hosted the inaugural "Yushan Forum: Asian Dialogue for Innovation and Progress" in 2017. This newly launched annual platform for regional dialogue is part of the New Southbound Policy's effort in building regional connectivity. Aside from featuring speeches by political dignitaries, the Yushan Forum also organized a panel that consisted of Asian NGO leaders – including the founder of India's SEEK Foundation based in Chennai – as well as a panel on youth leadership.

The youngest panelist at the forum was a 23-year-old undergraduate from Indonesia. The kind of diverse cast of the Yushan Forum reflects the energy and innovative spirit of the New Southbound Policy.

II. Convergence of Interests: Act East + Go South

India plays an essential role in Taiwan's New Southbound Policy in particular. Prime Minister Modi's "Act East policy" is strategically aligned with Taiwan's "New Southbound Policy," as both our nations

seek to reposition our roles in our neighborhood community.

India's enhanced presence in East Asia and Southeast Asia is highly welcome by Taiwan. As India seeks to establish new partnerships in the region and strengthen existing channels of dialogue, there will be fertile ground for opportunities for cooperation with Taiwan.

Taiwan is geographically situated at the center of India's Act East initiative, while India is one of the most important states in Taiwan's "New Southbound Policy." Both initiatives share a similar strategic perspective. When Taiwan moves south and India acts east, where do our paths intersect? We meet with our ASEAN friends in Southeast Asia:

Six countries are listed as Taiwan's priorities in promoting the New Southbound Policy: aside from India, of course, the five other countries are Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam.

To take Indonesian-bound projects for example, President Joko Widodo's vision of Indonesia as a "Global Maritime Axis" aims to strengthen Indonesia's maritime presence and improve infrastructure for inter-island connectivity. Taiwan has responded to Indonesian policies by facilitating cooperation among our shipbuilding industries. This provides many opportunities, as India strives to build its own ocean-based economy and increase its maritime activities in the region.

Another prime example is cooperation with Vietnam. Taiwan has long been one of the top foreign investors in Vietnam since the early 1990s, with established production chains in the local textiles, plastics, furniture, and mechanical industries. Taiwanese businesses would be glad to explore further prospects as India seeks to increase

economic investment and deepen its strategic partnership with Vietnam.

Moving beyond ASEAN, both Taiwan and India seek to pursue increased cooperation in regional initiatives with other partners, particularly with like-minded democracies such as the United States, Japan, South Korea and Australia. As the New Southbound Policy is an inclusive policy that maintains a complimentary relationship with other regional projects – including India's joint initiative with Japan, the Freedom Corridor – Taiwan is open to exploring new networks of cooperation with all other regional stakeholders.

III. Nurturing Bilateral Relations between India and Taiwan

Turning to Taiwan's bilateral relationship with India, I am glad to see that ties between our two nations have grown significantly over the past year.

In the field of trade and economic cooperation, Taiwan's government has been actively promoting closer economic exchanges with India. Last year, Taiwan signed an air services agreement and an MOU on agricultural cooperation to increase commercial opportunities in civil aviation and agriculture.

More recently, in October, Taiwan's Industrial Technology Research Institute also signed an MOU with India's Council on Scientific and Industrial Research to bolster exchanges in technological research. Along with existing agreements on scientific and technological cooperation, these new agreements strongly bolster bilateral cooperation in key industries.

In response to India's industrial policies, such as Make in India,

Smart Cities and Digital India, many Taiwanese enterprises are actively increasing investments in India. In April 2017, the Taiwan External Trade Development Council, or TAITRA, established an India Center in Taipei, with the goal of aiding local businesses in exploring market opportunities in India. A research team was also established to promote market research on the latest trends in India.

In terms of education and human resources, Taiwan's high-quality colleges and universities can help train engineers and R&D staff vital for the continued development of India's manufacturing industry. More than 1,400 students from South Asia studied in Taiwan in 2016, with the vast majority of them from India.

Looking forward, Taiwan will continue to offer scholarships to students from India and other countries targeted by the New Southbound Policy. I am confident that through cooperation in cultivating next-generation talent, Taiwan can make positive contributions towards furthering India's major industrial policies.

Another key area for cooperation on education is training in the Mandarin language. Taiwan has had decades of experience in teaching Mandarin Chinese as a foreign language. Taiwan can assist in India's efforts in training more Mandarin-language linguistic experts in specialized fields. In fact, currently, Taiwan's Ministry of Education is actively increasing the number of Mandarin-language instructors at "Taiwan Education Centers" in India.

IV. Conclusion: Taiwan and India as Natural Partners

Since its inception in 2016, the New Southbound Policy has received positive responses from many regional partners in Southeast Asia, South Asia and beyond.

We live in an exciting age in which social and technological advancements require us to think outside the box. In an increasingly dynamic environment, it is important for us to involve more participants and stakeholders to formulate effective solutions. This can only be achieved by combining the efforts of the public and private sectors as well as civil society.

The New Southbound Policy, with its emphasis on creating diverse forms of human linkages, seeks to foster civil society connections among the diverse countries in the Indo-Pacific Region. By creating multi-layered connections between Taiwan and India, this relationship will evolve into a stronger and more resilient partnership, as both countries are facing common regional challenges and working towards building regional prosperity. The sky is the only limit.

