

# IDSA

## *Issue Brief*

# When the Taiwanese Came Calling: Chinese Reaction and the Indian Response

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## **S***ummary*

The Brief places in perspective the Chinese reaction to the visit of the Taiwanese delegation to India. It makes an attempt to delineate the best course for India-Taiwan relations away from the Chinese shadow. Clarity, firmness and sticking to the positive territory of the relations have to be essential elements in India's approach towards Taiwan.

A Taiwanese delegation which included three parliamentarians among others visited India in February 2017. The visit elicited a sharp reaction from the People's Republic of China (PRC) foreign ministry. Its spokesperson Geng Shuang commented, 'We hope that India would understand and respect China's core concerns and stick to the "One-China" principle and prudently deal with Taiwan-related issues and maintain sound and steady development of India-China relations'.<sup>1</sup> A *Global Times* commentary warned that 'By challenging China over the Taiwan question, India is playing with fire'.<sup>2</sup> It is hard to recall a previous occasion when the PRC reacted to an event related to India-Taiwan relations with reference to its One China policy. The visit was not in variation with the long-standing normal pattern of India-Taiwan relations. Moreover, Taiwanese legislative delegations visited the US and Malaysia around the same time. As the leader of the delegation Legislator Kuan Bi-ling suggested, Beijing's criticism was directed only at the delegation which was visiting India.<sup>3</sup> The strong Chinese reactions though can be attributed to the growing strategic uncertainty in Sino-US, Cross-Strait as well as the India-China relations.

### **Tibet and Taiwan: Different Attitudes towards India over 'One-China'**

Chinese exhortation or 'warnings' to India so far with respect to the One-China policy has been in the context of Tibet — latest examples being US Ambassador Richard Verma's visit to Arunachal Pradesh in October 2016, the Indian government's approval in October 2016 for the Dalai Lama's forthcoming visit to Arunachal Pradesh in March 2017 or his meeting with President Pranab Mukherjee in December 2016.<sup>4</sup> In comparison, China has shown a relaxed attitude towards India-Taiwan ties since they established unofficial relations in 1995. The difference in response can be attributed to history and the manner in which China implements its One China policy.

The Dalai Lama and the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), popularly known as Tibetan Government-in-Exile (TGIE), are based in Dharamshala in Himachal Pradesh. India houses more than 100,000 Tibetan refugees. The Tibet issue also makes an interface with the India-China boundary dispute, with the Chinese claim over Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh being the case in point. The 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama escaped to India after an unsuccessful rebellion against the Chinese in 1959. The

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<sup>1</sup> 'Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang's Regular Press Conference', February 15, 2017, at [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2511\\_665403/t1438808.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1438808.shtml) (Accessed February 18, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Yu Ning, 'New Delhi will Suffer Losses If It Plays Taiwan Card', *Global Times*, February 14, 2017, at <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1033001.shtml> (Accessed 18 February 2017).

<sup>3</sup> 'Legislators' Visit to India Prompts Chinese Protest', *Taipei Times*, February 17, 2017, at <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2017/02/17/2003665149> (Accessed February 18, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> 'India Slams China for Objecting to US Envoy's Arunachal Visit', *The Indian Express*, October 24, 2016, at <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/india-slams-china-for-objecting-to-us-envoys-arunachal-visit-3100475/> (Accessed February 18, 2017); Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lu Kang's Regular Press Conference', October 28, 2016, *FMPRC*, at [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2511\\_665403/t1411259.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1411259.shtml) (Accessed February 18, 2017); PTI, 'China Protests Pranab's Meeting with Dalai Lama, Warns of Disturbance to Ties', *The Times of India*, December 16, 2016, at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/china-protests-prezs-meeting-with-dalai-warns-of-disturbance-to-ties/articleshow/56018728.cms> (Accessed February 18, 2017).

situation in Tibet further deepened Chinese mistrust of India around the border dispute, over which the two countries fought a war in 1962.

In case of Taiwan, India has met the Chinese expectations of upholding the One China policy. China expects that the countries which recognize the PRC must not recognize the existence of the Republic of China (ROC, Taiwan) and must not have diplomatic relations with the government in Taipei. However, it does not object to their cultural and economic relations with Taiwan.

India has been steadfast in its support for the One-China policy since 1949 when it switched the diplomatic recognition from the ROC to the PRC, followed by India's championing of the cause of the PRC's international socialization in the 1950s.<sup>5</sup> In 1950, India moved the resolution in the UN General Assembly for the PRC's entry into the UN. India's support to the One China policy has been oblivious to the setbacks the bilateral relations have suffered. Even India's defeat at the hand of the Chinese in 1962 did not impact the support. Except for some private thinking, the opposition's exhortations, and some furtive contacts leading nowhere, there is hardly any material available to suggest that India ever seriously contemplated looking at Taiwan from a balance of power perspective to counter-balance China in the wake of the 1962 War.

It is worth recalling that between 1949 and 1995 when the so-called unofficial ties were established, India and Taiwan did not have any institutional contacts. After 1995, India has conducted its relations with Taiwan with utmost caution and within the domain of the people-to-people relations, without ceding any signs of sovereignty or diplomatic recognition to Taiwan. India did not indulge in any maneuvers in the troubled waters of the Taiwan Strait for instance, a flashpoint between the US and China.

## Strategic Uncertainty

President Donald Trump reiterated the US support for the One-China policy in his telephonic conversation with President Xi Jinping on February 8, 2017. This put to rest concerns that arose in the aftermath of Trump accepting greetings from Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen over telephone and his questioning of the One China policy in an interview to Fox News in December 2016.<sup>6</sup> While a clear picture of Sino-US relations under Trump will take some time to emerge, the US

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<sup>5</sup> For historical references with regard to India-Taiwan relations, see Prashant Kumar Singh, *Transforming India-Taiwan Relations: New Perspectives*, IDSA Monograph Series, No. 35, New Delhi, April 2014; D.P. Tripathi and B.R. Deepak, *India and Taiwan: From Benign Neglect to Pragmatism*, Vij Books, New Delhi, 2016; Fang Tien-Sze, 'Taiwan's Relations with India: Issues and Trends', *China Report*, 49 (4), 2013: pp. 425-439.

<sup>6</sup> 'Trump Agrees to Support 'One China' Policy in Xi Jinping Call', *The Guardian*, February 10, 2017, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/10/donald-trump-agrees-support-one-china-policy-phone-call-xi-jinping> (Accessed 18 2017); Trump informed the world about the telephone call from Tsai Ing-wen by tweeting on Twitter on December 2, 2016. The widely reported tweet is from Trump's twitter handle <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/804848711599882240?lang=en> (Accessed February 18, 2017). See also 'Trump Says U.S. Not Necessarily Bound by "One China" Policy', *Reuters*, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-china-idUSKBN1400TY> (Accessed February 18, 2017).

withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) — which was a critical pillar of US rebalancing strategy, has caused uncertainty about the US commitment for Asia-Pacific security.<sup>7</sup>

This strategic uncertainty, combined with the disarray in US foreign and security policies being felt under Trump, cannot be reassuring for Taiwan. China has already unilaterally suspended the Cross-Strait talks in June 2016 and has taken steps to hurt Taiwan economically in order to make the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) — a perceived ‘pro-independence’ party that rejects the PRC’s One-China framework for the talks, feel the heat of Beijing’s displeasure.<sup>8</sup> The prevailing strategic situation should force the ruling DPP, which stands for diversification of Taiwan’s international relations and forging friendships with leading democracies of the world, to act with even a greater sense of urgency.

It should be noted that India has found a prominent place along with the US, Japan and Australia in the DPP’s vision for friendship among democracies.<sup>9</sup> Tsai in her elections speeches during her two Presidential contests, first unsuccessfully in 2012 and then successfully in January 2016, has stressed India as the democracy with which Taiwan should have a robust friendship. In 2012, as a senior DPP leader, she visited India. India received a special mention along with the ASEAN region in the New Southbound Policy unveiled at her swearing-in speech in May 2016, though in later versions, it has been replaced by the word ‘South Asia’.<sup>10</sup>

India-China relations have also been witnessing similar strategic uncertainty in the recent past. Events which have fed this uncertainty include two military standoffs in India’s Ladakh region in April 2013 and then in September 2014; Chinese vetoes blocking India’s resolutions in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to get Pakistan-based terrorists Masood Azhar, Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi and Syed Salahuddin sanctioned; the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that runs through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir valley disregarding Indian sentiments and the Chinese objection to India’s entry into the Nuclear Supplier Group (NSG).

India is also becoming expressive in raising its concerns with China. India identified China by name as a roadblock to its entry to the NSG, has pushed China on the issue of Chinese support for Pakistan on terrorism and the CPEC. It has further allowed the Dalai Lama to meet with President Mukherjee at the Rashtrapathi Bhavan. Although the Modi government’s ‘One-India’<sup>11</sup> is not yet a

<sup>7</sup> ‘Presidential Memorandum Regarding Withdrawal of the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership Negotiations and Agreement’, Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, January 23, 2017, at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/01/23/presidential-memorandum-regarding-withdrawal-united-states-trans-pacific> (Accessed February 18, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Prashant Kumar Singh, ‘Cross-Strait Relations: The Lull before the Storm?’, November 23, 2016 at [http://idsa.in/issuebrief/cross-strait-relations\\_pksingh\\_231116](http://idsa.in/issuebrief/cross-strait-relations_pksingh_231116) (Accessed February 18, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> *Democratic Progressive Party White Paper on Foreign Policy for the 21st Century*, November 28, 1999, at <http://www.taiwandocuments.org/dpp02.htm> (Accessed February 18, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> ‘Full Text of President Tsai’s Inaugural Address’, *Focus Taiwan*, May 20, 2017 at <http://focustaiwan.tw/news/aip/201605200008.aspx> (Accessed February 18, 2017). The Guidelines for ‘New Southbound Policy’, Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Brunei Darussalam, at [http://www.roc-taiwan.org/bn\\_en/post/644.html](http://www.roc-taiwan.org/bn_en/post/644.html) (Accessed February 18, 2017). While the inaugural speech specially mentions India, the guidelines mention South Asia.

<sup>11</sup> Prashant Kumar Singh, ‘The ‘One-India Policy’ Needs More Thought’, *The Diplomat*, Tokyo (Japan), November 5, 2014, at <http://thediplomat.com/2014/11/the-one-india-policy-needs-more-thought/> (Accessed February 18, 2017).

fully developed and actionable policy, it can be gauged that the government is not inclined to go soft and turn a blind eye to Chinese actions which can potentially impinge upon India's sovereignty. New Delhi appears to be sending a message to Beijing that its support for the One-China policy might no longer be unconditional.

Except for Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's and a few political leaders' public airing of views on the Formosa problem in the 1950s and 60s, India has been self-censored on Taiwan. This is in line with the international community, which has similarly become progressively self-censored on the Cross-Strait issue in deference to PRC's One-China policy. It seems that the US and its Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), 1979 has relieved the international community from any obligation towards the Cross-Strait issue. However, in a hypothetical scenario of the US withdrawal from the region, there may be stakeholder countries which might not like to overlook the existence of Taiwan and reinvent it as a rallying point to assert their positions in regional politics vis-à-vis China.

One major country that can play an important role in this context is Japan, which has got its share of serious political and security problems with China. These have aggravated since September 2012 when Japan nationalized the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. In the Guidelines for Japan-US Defense Cooperation (1997), the phrase 'in situations in areas surrounding Japan' was considered as a reference to Taiwan.<sup>12</sup> Although the latest 2015 guidelines do not contain this phrase, Japan has subtly upgraded its representative office in Taiwan from January 2017 with a change in nomenclature — from the Interchange Association, Japan to the Japan-Taiwan Exchange Association.<sup>13</sup>

It is against this backdrop that India's 'Act East' policy may have to confront the reality of the Taiwan-related developments. It would be relevant to recall that the DPP's first government (2000-08) coincided with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government (1998-2004). During that period, many strategic overtures from Taiwan to India were noticed. The idea of India-Taiwan-Japan strategic triangle, premised on shared security concerns vis-à-vis China, was floated by the DPP affiliated scholars and activists.

George Fernandes, Defence Minister in the NDA government who became famous for his 'China is India's Enemy No. 1' statement after India's nuclear tests in 1998 — visited Taipei in 2004 and 2006. He did not hold a ministerial portfolio then. However, that was also the time of rising hope in India-China relations, particularly after Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's visit to China in 2003. These hopes clashed with tensions and the dangerous dip in Cross-Strait normalcy when the Chen Shui-bian led DPP government (2000-08) was in power. The BJP, which is a trenchant critique of Nehruvian legacy including his China policy, and the DPP are again in power almost simultaneously. The hope and enthusiasm of the 2000s in India-China relations has currently given way to uncertainties, unintentionally placing India and Taiwan on the same page vis-à-vis China. The aforementioned

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<sup>12</sup> 'The Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation', September 23, 1997 and 'The Guidelines for Japan-US Defense Cooperation', April 27, 2015, at [http://www.mod.go.jp/e/d\\_act/anpo/](http://www.mod.go.jp/e/d_act/anpo/) (Accessed February 18, 2017).

<sup>13</sup> 'China Upset at Name Change of De Facto Japan Embassy in Taiwan', *Reuters*, December 28, 2016, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-japan-taiwan-idUSKBN14H0GQ> (Accessed February 18, 2016).

fluid strategic situation and its potential implications for India-Taiwan ties therefore cannot go unnoticed in Beijing.

## Reading the Visit

The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) spokesperson stated the following in response to the Chinese reaction:

'We understand that a group of Taiwanese academics and business persons, including a couple of legislators, is visiting India. Such informal groups have visited India in the past as well for business, religious and tourist purposes. I understand that they do so to China as well. There is nothing new or unusual about such visits and political meanings should not be read into them'.<sup>14</sup>

While the statement has essentially underlined the continuity and the people-to-people nature of the relations, India has reminded China that it cannot determine the scope of India-Taiwan people-to-people ties, which is not very different from China-Taiwan people-to-people exchanges. And the statement has been issued without reiteration of pledging support for the One-China policy which is in keeping with India not mentioning this routine pledge since 2010. The statement therefore is yet another sign of increasing firmness in India's approach towards China.

Such delegation-level and individual visits have indeed taken place in the past. Although this delegation was publicized as one composed of parliamentarians, the fact is that it had a mixed composition. Ms. Kuan, in remarks to the media stated Taiwan has been a *de facto* and fully independent country from the very beginning. Some countries may not recognise Taiwan's independence, but that has no impact on our sovereignty and freedom'.<sup>15</sup> Taiwanese dignitaries haven't been generally reported making such straightforward remarks on their India visits. Also, China's reaction has enhanced the delegation's significance and made Taiwan a talking point in India, thus contributing to Taiwan's foreign policy objectives.

It would be premature to argue with certainty whether the visit was planned to convey any larger message. Earlier too, the relations have seen some major events, which were speculated as some shift or a departure but eventually were proved as isolated events. India sending serving Indian Foreign Service officials as Director-General to its *de facto* embassy, the India-Taipei Association (ITA), beginning from 2003, the announcement of a joint study on India-Taiwan Free Trade Agreement (FTA) by Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao in 2011, President Ma Ying-jeou's stop-over in Mumbai in 2012 and Vice President Den-yih's layover in New Delhi in 2014 are pertinent examples.<sup>16</sup> These events however had no strategic impact on ties.

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<sup>14</sup> 'Official Spokesperson's Response to A Question on the Visit of a Taiwanese Delegation to India', February 15, 2017, at <http://mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/28063/Official+Spokespersons+response+to+a+question+on+the+visit+of+a+Taiwanese+Delegation+to+India> (Accessed February 18, 2017).

<sup>15</sup> Kallol Bhattacharjee, 'We are Fully Sovereign, Says Visiting Taiwanese Leader', *The Hindu*, February 14, 2017, at <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/We-are-fully-sovereign-says-visiting-Taiwanese-leader/article17298533.ece> (Accessed February 18, 2017).

<sup>16</sup> Singh, *Transforming India-Taiwan Relations: New Perspectives*, pp. 113, 118.

In spite of aforementioned assertiveness of the MEA vis-à-vis China, the Modi government has sent mixed signals on Taiwan. It has embraced Taiwan in its Make-in-India programmes and has signed two important MOUs — Air Services Agreement (June 2016) and MoU for Agriculture and Allied Sector Cooperation (June 2016). India extended the e-visa facility to Taiwan in August 2015.<sup>17</sup> An India-Taiwan Parliamentarian Friendship Forum was set up in December 2016.<sup>18</sup> The setting up of the forum and the latest visit of the Taiwanese delegation contribute to keep the Indian political class alert about Taiwan, an important requirement for the growth of the relations that have been handled at the official levels.

However, at the same time, Indian parliamentarians have reportedly been stopped from going to attend Tsai Ing-wen's swearing-in ceremony.<sup>19</sup> In another instance, Taiwanese interlocutors maintain that India gave a green signal to Vice President Chen Chien-jen's stopover in New Delhi on route to the Holy See quite late in time due to which the Taiwan government had to change his route. Incidentally, New Delhi is a natural stop-over for China Airlines flight from Taipei to Rome via New Delhi and there is a past precedent of Vice-President Den-yih's layover in New Delhi in 2014.<sup>20</sup>

### **Charting an Independent Course Away from the Chinese Shadow**

Indian approach towards Taiwan has always been shaped by the China factor; and India-Taiwan ties have all along sailed through under Chinese shadow. If Taiwan is a reality that India's Act East policy might have to confront, China is a bigger reality that India has been facing for decades. India-China relations operate on a much larger strategic canvas which would be difficult to match for any shared strategic canvass that can be visualized for India-Taiwan relations.

China is a much bigger trade partner and investment opportunity. India has to resolve the 4,500 km long boundary dispute with it. China remains suspicious about Indian involvement in any unrest in Tibet. India has to deal with China in international forums ranging from the Asian Development Bank (ADB), Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the World Trade Organization (WTO) to the NSG and the UNSC. In forums like the NSG or the UNSC, China is in the leading

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<sup>17</sup> Taiwan's Foxconn, HTC, Sanyang Corporation, Gigabyte Technologies, Quanta Computer Inc, Wistron Corporation, Tongtai Machine Tool Company, Fair Friend Group and Chain Headway Machine Tool Company and many other Taiwanese companies have explored opportunities as part of Make-in-India since 2015. They have either committed investment or looked for joint ventures. Actual materialization of their efforts may vary from their declared pledges or may take time in fructify.

<sup>18</sup> Charu Sudan Kasturi, 'Delhi gamble on Taiwan', *The Telegraph*, December 23, 2016, at [https://www.telegraphindia.com/1161223/jsp/frontpage/story\\_126365.jsp#.WKrUkjgppq2A](https://www.telegraphindia.com/1161223/jsp/frontpage/story_126365.jsp#.WKrUkjgppq2A) (Accessed February 18, 2017).

<sup>19</sup> Sutirtho Patranobis, 'India Backtracks on Sending MPs to Inaugural of New Taiwan Prez', *Hindustan Times*, May 19, 2016, at <http://www.hindustantimes.com/world/india-backtracks-on-sending-mps-to-inaugural-of-new-taiwan-prez/story-fKU1XVbkjYSWc37sgdDT6M.html> (Accessed February 18, 2017).

<sup>20</sup> 'Vice president arrives in Rome', *Focus Taiwan*, September 3, 2016, at <http://m.focustaiwan.tw/news/aip1/201609030026.aspx> (Accessed 18 February 2017). The information has been shared with the author by the visiting Taiwanese interlocutors in India and during his visit to Taiwan from October to December 2017.

position and India is struggling to get membership. The disruptive value of China is huge for India either directly or, as many would argue, through Pakistan. It is not in India's national interest therefore to offend China on the One-China policy.

Taiwan's role in helping India achieve its strategic objectives needs to be dispassionately assessed. While it is to India's credit that it has never played to the gallery on the Cross-Strait problem, its capability and acceptability constrains would not have allowed it to do so either. Good relations with China, and rightly so, will always be a priority for Taiwan regardless of the party in power. There is little room for India to maneuver in the Taiwan Strait. Moreover, there are points of view in Taiwan beyond the DPP too. Taiwan may like to ingratiate itself with India, but on its own terms and for the objectives defined by it. Any plans to offset the China factor with each other's help would be unmerited. Therefore, misplaced enthusiasm needs to be shunned.

Finally, the best course for India-Taiwan relations is the course independent of China. The two sides do enjoy reciprocal importance for mutual development, growth, innovation and joint broadening of cultural and educational horizons. Taiwan is an island of innovation and opportunity and an alternative window to the Chinese society, whereas India remains an untapped market and the country where Taiwan can promote its international personality with relative ease. The best strategic message to China and the region India can give in the context of Taiwan is that it will conduct its people-to-people economic, cultural and scientific ties with Taiwan with confidence and dignity, which will hold true for India's relations with others in the region too, in their own specific contexts. Thus, in the short- and the medium-term, injecting a dose of greater confidence in the bilateral relations should be India's strategic objective towards Taiwan. India should not succumb to any undue Chinese pressure and must allow the high-level contacts to grow and develop further, which is logical between two trading partners whose annual trade is around \$5 billion, with a potential for further growth. Clarity, firmness and sticking to the positive territory of the relations are what are required in India's approach towards Taiwan.

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