

Institute of Chinese Studies

WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*Cross-Strait Relations and
Challenges for Taiwan's
Indo-Pacific Policy*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Speaker :

Mei-chuan Wei

4 December 2024

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Speaker: Dr. Mei-chuan Wei, Associate Professor, Graduate Institute of Development Studies, National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan

Chair: Dr. Aravind Yelery, Associate Professor, Centre for East Asian Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi; and, Honorary Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi

Date: 11 December 2024

Venue: Zoom

- The seminar focused on cross-Strait relations and the challenges faced by Taiwan. Dr. Mei-chuan Wei began by providing the relevant background on Taiwan's post-World War II trajectory, which has been defined by its complex relationships with the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the United States and its evolving role in the Indo-Pacific region. Following Japan's surrender in 1945, Taiwan was placed under the administrative control of the Republic of China (ROC) with Allied consent, though its legal status remained unresolved.
- The superior grassroots strategies of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the internal corruption in the Kuomintang (KMT) allowed Mao Zedong to establish the People's Republic of China on 1 October 1949. The KMT, led by Chiang Kai-shek, retreated to Taiwan, which became the ROC's *de facto* stronghold. The Korean War in 1950 prompted US intervention, with President Harry S. Truman deploying the US Seventh Fleet to the Taiwan Strait, preventing a PRC invasion and solidifying Taiwan's US-backed autonomy.
- Taiwan's ambiguous international status crystallised after the ROC lost its United Nations (UN) seat to the PRC in 1971. While the ROC maintained *de facto* sovereignty over Taiwan, including its own armed forces, currency, and a democratically elected

government, it struggled with limited international recognition. Efforts to normalise US-China relations in the 1970s, including Nixon's 1972 visit to Beijing and the Shanghai Communiqué, further marginalised Taiwan diplomatically. These developments entrenched Taiwan's status as a politically isolated yet economically resilient entity, reliant on US support to maintain its autonomy.

- In 1948, the ROC adopted the Temporary Provisions Against the Communist Rebellion, effectively freezing its democratic constitution and declaring a state of war with the PRC. Subsequent leaders maintained policies of non-engagement with Beijing. However, cross-Strait relations began to thaw in 1987, when the ROC allowed limited civilian exchanges with mainland China, laying the groundwork for legal and diplomatic frameworks to manage increasing interactions.
- The speaker illuminated the different policies relating to cross-Strait relations under different leaders. In 1991, President Lee Teng-hui repealed the Temporary Provisions, formally ending the Civil War. Lee's "Two-State Theory" further asserted Taiwan's separate identity, while his successors, Chen Shui-bian and Ma Ying-jeou, adopted differing strategies to balance relations with the PRC, focusing alternately on liberalisation and stability.
- Current leaders, including Tsai Ing-wen and Lai Ching-te, have emphasised that the ROC and the PRC are not subordinate to each other. This principle, combined with Taiwan's rejection of Beijing's "One Country, Two Systems" model, underscores the island's efforts to preserve its *de facto* independence. At the same time, the contentious 1992 Consensus remains a divisive topic. While the KMT interprets it as "One China, Different Interpretations", allowing for ROC sovereignty, the CPC views it as affirming PRC control over Taiwan. Xi Jinping's 2019 call for peaceful unification under "One Country, Two Systems" met strong opposition in Taiwan, highlighting the persistent impasse.

- The speaker noted that Taiwan’s strategic significance in the Indo-Pacific is shaped by its precarious position between the US and China. While China remains both an economic partner and a security threat, the US provides critical yet ambiguous support. Taiwan’s New Southbound Policy (NSP), launched in 2016, seeks to reduce reliance on China by fostering economic, cultural, and people-to-people ties with South Asia, Southeast Asia, Australia, and New Zealand. The NSP builds on earlier “Go South” initiatives, focusing on four key areas: economic collaboration, talent exchange, resource sharing, and regional connectivity.
- Taiwan’s expanded investments in Southeast Asia, particularly in Vietnam and Thailand, were highlighted by the speaker, as businesses relocate from China due to the ongoing US-China strategic competition. However, Southeast Asia’s alignment with China through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) poses challenges to Taiwan’s influence. Noting its significance, Dr. Wei stated that India has emerged as a key partner under the NSP, particularly in semiconductor technology, though limited historical ties and India’s border tensions with China hinder deeper collaboration.
- Taiwan’s Indo-Pacific strategy faces significant hurdles, including navigating China’s coercive diplomacy and ensuring stable relations with regional partners who often rely on China for economic growth and the US for security. Taiwan’s diplomatic innovation, particularly its emphasis on non-governmental engagement under the NSP, demonstrates its resilience in maintaining international relevance despite political isolation. In conclusion, the speaker said that Taiwan’s ability to balance economic interests, safeguard its autonomy, and navigate the geopolitical pressures of US-China competition will be critical to its continued survival and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region.

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