

As Taiwan's international space remains constrained, formal government-to-government cooperation is often infeasible. Consequently, the utilization of alternative channels of international engagement, such as track II diplomacy or subnational diplomacy, remains key for Taiwan's idiosyncratic, people-oriented strategy for global engagement.

On the quinquennial of the New Southbound Policy, and amid a newfound openness between Taiwan and Europe, it is timely to revisit the question of international subjectivity of Taiwanese cities and consider the role they can play in the nation's quest to expand its international space.

Some of the most pressing global challenges — the climate crisis, social and economic inclusion of migrants, and income inequality — are often concentrated in cities, while some of the most productive solutions for enhancing resilience and sustainability of our communities are emerging within the context of inclusive and innovative urban politics.

Cities around the world, including in Taiwan, Southeast Asia and the EU, are increasingly asserting their subjectivity in global cooperation, and building up the skills and capacity required for this emergent role as influential and impactful actors on the world stage.

At the same time, the geopolitical precarity of Taiwan has constrained the international space in which Taiwanese cities can engage. For example, Taiwan's exclusion from the UN framework hinders the nation's participation in the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs and UN-Habitat, which constitute long-standing pillars of city diplomacy.

Yet, Taiwanese cities remain active contributors to international city networks whose work focuses on a broad array of topics, including public health, information and communications technologies (ICT), smart solutions, climate crisis, as well as equity, diversity, inclusion and well-being. Subnational diplomacy thus allows Taiwan to build stronger connections with overseas partners, bypass the sovereignty constraint and yield major economic benefits.

Southeast Asia is one of the key regions where Taiwan has yet to fully capitalize on the potential of subnational diplomacy. Cities in the region have attracted Taiwan's attention, albeit

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at a slow speed. The Philippines maintains sister city relationships with most major cities in Taiwan. Kaohsiung has established sister city ties with the Vietnamese city of Da Nang, and Surabaya in Indonesia.

As major hubs of Hakka culture, Taoyuan and Indonesia's Singkawang are also bound by a formal partnership. Manila, Cebu City and Da Nang are also members of the ASEAN Smart Cities Network, a collaborative platform launched in 2018 to generate economic growth and solve urban challenges among ASEAN's 10 members.

Yet, Taiwan's cooperation with Southeast Asia is not limited to formal sister city agreements, as its cities are becoming increasingly integrated with their overseas counterparts through other channels, including area-specific memoranda of understanding (MOUs) and multinational city networks.

In March 2017, Taipei signed an MOU with Malaysia's Selangor state on the development of smart cities. Both sides agreed on concrete joint action to transform Selangor into a smart regional state by 2025.

In August, Taiwan and Vietnam held a virtual industrial collaboration forum, during which Taipei and Hanoi shared their respective experiences in implementing smart city projects, and discussed future trends in cooperation between urban regions of Taiwan and Vietnam.

The focus on technology and smart city solutions in subnational cooperation brings about a fresh approach to these partnerships, and an important adjustment needed to address contemporary challenges to sustainability and resilience in an increasingly urbanized world.

Smart-city interventions have emerged around the world in an attempt to address issues of urbanization. As a global ICT hub, Taiwan is well-positioned to forge city-to-city cooperation with Southeast Asian countries, and the 10 ASEAN member states in particular, while simultaneously advancing its flagship New Southbound Policy.

At the Smart City Summit and Expo in March, President Tsai Ing-wen () reiterated her

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vision for fostering Taiwan's smart city development in the post-COVID-19 pandemic era. Importantly, the government plans to assist local firms in developing competitive applications that could be exported to emerging markets in Southeast Asia.

With ICT at the core of the economic pillar of the New Southbound Policy, smart city cooperation — which utilizes technologies such as artificial intelligence to address the developmental needs of urban regions — could constitute a key area for bolstering subnational initiatives bridging Taiwan and Southeast Asia.

Applications of high-tech solutions in urban governance and development buttress Taiwan's reputation as a like-minded and reliable partner in the production of actionable ideas for addressing common challenges, with cities positioned as key stakeholders in these transnational cooperation frameworks.

Smart city development is also an important area for cooperation between Southeast Asia and the EU.

EU-funded initiatives such as Smart Change contribute to the strengthening of urban governance, prosperity and innovation through facilitating exchanges between cities in Southeast Asia and Europe. This kind of cross-regional subnational cooperation between multiple partners in Europe and Asia sets a potentially consequential precedent for Taiwanese cities — regional leaders of the smart city transformation (“Taiwan, EU should link up policies,” Aug. 26, page 8).

The newly announced International City Partnership program, to be managed by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy, would bring together cities in the EU, Canada, South Africa and several Asian nations, including Taiwan, to promote sustainable and integrated urban development through the identification of innovative policies and programs.

The inclusion of two Taiwanese cities and Singapore in this pilot initiative would potentially allow Taiwan and the EU to productively examine the synergies in their strategies for fostering subnational partnerships, and include the shared priority areas of the New Southbound Policy and the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy in the implementation of their cooperation.

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In light of these synergies, the EU should consider encouraging the development of sister-city relations and other multilateral initiatives aimed at enhancing urban resilience and sustainability between Taiwan and the countries covered by its New Southbound Policy.

Post-pandemic recovery and resilience are some of the most pressing governance challenges. The achievements of Taiwanese cities in applying smart solutions to environmental, socioeconomic, transportation and governance challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic are attractive sources of best practices for key stakeholders around the world.

Technologically savvy cities might be holding the key to expanding Taiwan's international space, despite its "absurd" geopolitical status.

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