

Taiwan should seek regional allies

Written by Huynh Tam Sang
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Taiwan has been in the spotlight at the Shangri-La Dialogue this year, with officials and delegates voicing worries over escalating tensions in the Taiwan Strait.

At the summit, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin shared their long-term vision of security in the Taiwan Strait, and of regional countries working together to safeguard multilateralism and upholding a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region.

Kishida said that “peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait ... is also of extreme importance,” while Austin underlined Washington’s commitment to “providing Taiwan with the military means to defend itself in accordance with the Taiwan Relations Act.”

Kishida’s keynote speech about the importance of maintaining “peace and stability” in the Taiwan Strait — one of the flashpoints in Asia — could be read as a verbal response to China’s growing aggression in Taiwan’s waters and airspace, but with a nuanced approach. Austin’s speech on Washington’s support for Taipei demonstrated the US’ commitment to forging bilateral ties with Taiwan, and engaging with like-minded regional countries on a multilateral basis. The official messages from Japan and the US are in line with these powers’ continuing support for Taiwan.

Chinese leaders have long sought a clear-cut answer from the US and Japan on their Taiwan policies. Yet the US and Japan affirmed that they were opposed to any changes that could trigger military conflict in the Taiwan Strait. As the US and Japan have consolidated their ties, Taiwan will continue to hold importance to these leading powers.

The official messages from the US and Japan could make Taiwan a valuable growing partner in the region, especially nations in Southeast Asia. Officials from ASEAN nations at the dialogue would take the messages from regional powers seriously.

Speaking via a video address at the dialogue, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy also voiced his support for Taiwan, calling on the international community to help Taiwan navigate Beijing’s coercion. Zelenskiy said that, instead of waiting for crises, countries should be

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prepared, and that “we need a diplomatic resolution to support countries that are in need of help.”

The dangers for Ukraine and Taiwan are parallel, as Kyiv and Taipei have faced authoritarian coercion that has presented a peril to the international order. At the forefront of efforts against authoritarian regimes, Ukraine and Taiwan share democratic principles, and the need to respect the freedom and sovereignty of their countries. Hence, the dire message of Zelenskiy is a deep-rooted motivation for Taiwan.

Chinese Minister of National Defense Wei Fenghe (魏凤河), in his speech at the summit, rebuked the support of countries in the region for a stable environment in the Taiwan Strait.

“We will fight at all costs, and we will fight to the very end. This is the only choice for China,” Wei said, while calling Taiwan a “province of China.”

He also sent a terse warning to the US following Austin’s show of support for Taiwan: “We request the US side to stop smearing and containing China. Stop interfering in China’s internal affairs.”

To China, there is no room for sincere dialogue toward a peaceful region. This is contrary to Taiwan’s official view.

“As long as there is equality, reciprocity and no political preconditions, we are willing to engage in goodwill with China,” Premier Su Tseng-chang (苏贞昌) recently said.

As Japan, India, South Korea, Australia, the UK, Canada, France, Germany and New Zealand are pivoting to buttress their presence in the Indo-Pacific region, the importance of maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, aside from supporting Taiwan, is of strategic significance for both the self-governed nation and these countries. Great and middle powers have also highlighted their own stakes in the Indo-Pacific, where Taiwan has become a technological and democratic hub, and is being endangered by the revisionist China.

Before the outset of the Ukraine war, pundits were skeptical about great powers coming to defend their so-called core interests at the expense of condemnation, diplomatic isolation and sanctions. The Ukraine crisis has revealed that the uneasy status quo in the Taiwan Strait is being challenged. Moreover, it should become clear that the vulnerability of Taiwan and potential imminent crisis in the Taiwan Strait is more likely than previously thought.

As the balance of power in the region is shifting, growing concern for Taiwan's security and future could generate a shared perception among Indo-Pacific powers that a Taiwan crisis or great-power confrontation could lead to disaster. Hence, regional countries could be more willing to support Taiwan in case of uncertainties.

President Tsai Ing-wen's (蔡英文) administration should comprehensively promote Taiwan's strategic values and vision. Taiwan should not frame the security surroundings of its environment as a potential conflict or even a war between Taiwan and China. Instead, it should frame its security within the broader framework — possibly an “inclusive security” that would matter to all stakeholders that have recognized their interests in the region. Under that framing, like-minded countries can foster like-minded interests with Taiwan toward an open and inclusive region free from constraint, confrontation and conflict.

Taiwan should also seek closer ties with countries that have underlined their interests and commitments to enhance their presence in the Indo-Pacific region. Windows for cooperation with intertwined benefits are open for Taiwan and like-minded partners, and this opportunity should not be overlooked. For instance, under the encouragement and support of the Tsai administration, the engagement of Taiwanese businesspeople with their Indo-Pacific counterparts could be a good start.

The risk of miscalculations and errors could not be mitigated unless regional nations find a common vision and concrete efforts to work together. Taiwan should thus be proactive in embracing opportunities laid out by states' growing interest in the Indo-Pacific region. A clear vision for Taiwan's engagement in the region and how it will pursue collaborative activities with regional countries should be a priority.

Issues evolving around Taiwan and growing tensions between Taiwan and China at the Singapore security forum, with the participation of government ministers, high-ranking officials,

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policymakers and academics, have proved that recognizing the strategic value of Taiwan is essential and timely amid regional geopolitical unrest.

The government should recognize its assets and embrace the nation's growing importance in the eyes of great and middle powers in the Indo-Pacific region to seek closer ties with potential partners via concrete initiatives while consolidating its ties with long-established partners, such as the US, Japan and Australia.

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