



Sigur Center
for Asian Studies

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Multilaterals and Taiwan's Role: How is Cooperation on Security, Health, and Travel Evolving Amidst a Pandemic?

Taiwan's success story in the pandemic is bringing it unprecedented international attention. Against the backdrop of the current United Nations General Assembly meetings, the Sigur Center for Asian Studies' Taiwan Roundtable had an [in-depth discussion](#) on how Taiwan's international role may be played out more broadly in critical areas of international policing, travel, and health – all of which demand multilateral cooperation to be effective. This Asia Report reviews the reasons behind Taiwan's exclusion from international organizations, explains the need of Taiwan's international participation in functional organizations, and evaluates the strategy of promoting a greater international role for Taiwan.

Political Pressure from China

Ever since countries around the world began establishing diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China, international institutions started to exclude Taiwan from their rosters. Dr. Vincent Wang, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Adelphi University points out that the main reason behind Taiwan's exclusion in international organizations is China's rising international influence and Beijing's persisting pressure over the international

community. For instance, the Secretary General of International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) is a Chinese aviation official, whereas the Interpol was recently led by China's Vice Minister of Public Security, perches that allow institutional power.

Wang suggests that China possesses a great deal of influence within a wide range of international organizations because Beijing has been able to generate support from developing countries. Since major decisions in international organizations, including the participation of Taiwan, require consensus from the member states, a large number of developing countries – most of which are under the clout of Beijing's economic influence – have been consistently following China's vote. Similarly, Beijing often utilizes market access as an economic leverage to generate political pressure toward western democracies.

Shannon Tiezzi, the editor in chief of *The Diplomat*, adds that cross-strait tension – which is mostly affected by Beijing's benchmark of how the administration in Taiwan acknowledge the 92-Consensus – has been a key factor that determines Beijing's level of effort to exclude Taiwan's international participation. Under the rule of Xi Jinping, Beijing has been making a push for unification for Taiwan under One-Country-Two-System.

The recent protests in Hong Kong and the subsequent implementation of national security laws in the city have eliminated any prospect for the administration and the people in Taiwan accepting unification and One-Country-Two-System according to Tiezzi. The current level of cross-strait tension means that Beijing is likely to sustain its political pressure to exclude Taiwan from international organizations.

Benefits of Taiwan's Participation

After the outbreak of COVID19 pandemic and the success story of Taiwan's COVID response, countries around the world began to question the exclusion of Taiwan and ponder the potential benefit of Taiwan's international participation in functional organizations. Wang proposes that the exclusion is against the universalist principle of international cooperation. The World Health Organization (WHO) includes 194 state and non-state members, yet Taiwan, which has a population of 24 million, has been shut out.

Wang also suggests that international organizations are incomplete without the participation of Taiwan. The successful containment of COVID19 in Taiwan despite its proximity to China is an obvious reason to support Taiwan's participation in the WHO. Taiwan's Taoyuan airport is one of the major hubs for air travel in the world, surpassing the capacity of Newark, Houston, and Miami, yet Taiwan has been excluded from the ICAO. In contrast, as the world's 16th largest trader, Taiwan has been a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) since 2002.

Jessica Graham, an international security expert and the president of JG Global Advisory adds that the exclusion of Taiwan from Interpol could be a threat to the global effort to prevent cybercrime, counterterrorism, and organized crime. Taiwan could be exploited by terrorist and crime organizations since the exclusion of Taiwan prevents effective cooperation and information sharing between Taiwan and Interpol. Moreover, Taiwan has long been a target of cyberattack from China and is honing counter capabilities. The inclusion of Taiwan in international security organizations like Interpol would allow Taiwan to share its experience in cybersecurity.

Opportunities after the Pandemic

Given the benefit of Taiwan's participation, and the challenge of China's political pressure, what is the strategy to promote the inclusion of Taiwan in international organizations? Wang proposes that the COVID crisis has offer a great opportunity to break the institutional inertia of excluding Taiwan. To achieve such goal, however, Taiwan needs to depend on the leadership of the United States and a coordinated support from major democracies. Taiwan's international participation has seen substantial increase in the level of support from the US and major democracies in this regard. To make progress, it is necessary to further strengthen the relationship between Taiwan and the US, while the US needs to coordinate its effort with other democracies.

Graham agrees that international support for Taiwan's participation is crucial for achieving any serious change. The rising level of support at the moment could be a good opportunity for Taiwan to obtain an observer status in functional organizations like Interpol or WHO. The ability to attend the meetings would be a meaningful step

for Taiwan's international role, which could ultimately lead to Taiwan's return as a normal member in these organizations.

Tiezzi suggests that the main obstacle of Taiwan's international participation is China's political clout and Beijing's persistence to generate political pressure through economic influence. One possible way to promote Taiwan's participation is to side-step the existing international institutions and create new institutions among like-minded democracies around the world. Any potential progress, however, would again be dependent on the leadership of the US, which is currently an uncertain variable due to the upcoming election. Although the Trump administration has made progress by passing legislation to support Taiwan and selling more weapons to enhance Taiwan's security, how Biden will implement his Taiwan policy remains unclear according to her.

The COVID pandemic has clearly demonstrated the potential benefit of Taiwan's international participation, while the level of support for Taiwan's inclusion has grown substantially among like-minded democracies around the world. In an op-ed for *The Diplomat*, Joseph Wu, Taiwan's Minister of Foreign Affairs, makes a strong case for Taiwan's considerable contribution to the United Nation's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Taiwan has achieved remarkable sustainable development by reaching zero hunger, reducing the percentage of low-income households to under 2 percent, and improving literacy rate to 98.7 percent. Internationally, Taiwan has promoted sustained development by assisting developing countries via its International Cooperation and Development Fund (Taiwan ICDF) and various programs in the Pacific, Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean.

Discussion from the panel of experts shows that the inclusion of Taiwan will greatly benefit the international community. The main challenge to Taiwan's international participation comes from China's growing influence in the existing institutions. The pandemic has offered an opportunity to break the existing norm and make progress for Taiwan, but the prospect of Taiwan's international participation relies on the leadership of the US and the extent of cooperation among global democracies.

Errata: There was a factual error inadvertently attributed to Vincent Wang on Taiwan not being a WTO member. Taiwan has been a member of the WTO since 2002 and the previous statement in original version has been removed.

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About the Rising Powers Initiative and Sigur Center for Asian Studies

The Sigur Center's Rising Powers Initiative examines how domestic political debates and identity issues affect international relations in Asia. RPI acknowledges support from the MacArthur Foundation and Carnegie Corporation of New York for its activities..

The Sigur Center for Asian Studies is an international research center of The Elliott School of International Affairs at The George Washington University. Its mission is to increase the quality and broaden the scope of scholarly research and publications on Asian affairs, promote U.S.-Asian scholarly interaction and serve as the nexus for educating a new generation of students, scholars, analysts and policymakers. The Sigur Center houses the Rising Powers Initiative, a multi-year, multi-project research effort that studies the role of domestic identities and foreign policy debates of aspiring powers.

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