

RETURNING TO THE INDIAN OCEAN: MARITIME OPPORTUNITIES ARISING FROM TAIWAN'S NEW TIES WITH SOMALILAND

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Since Tsai Ing-wen of the pro-Independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) acceded to the presidency in Taiwan in 2016, the country has been under severe diplomatic pressure from China that claims the island as a 'renegade province'. Beijing's "chequebook diplomacy" has seen Taiwan continually lose diplomatic allies across wide geographies — Panama in 2017 and São Tomé and Príncipe in 2016, for instance — with the result that Taiwan has been left with only 15 States in the world that officially accord it diplomatic recognition.

Indeed, China under President Xi Jinping has been engaged in a steady strategy of trying to isolate Taiwan diplomatically and constrain its international space. The latest instance came in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, in which Beijing absolutely refused to allow Taiwan any formal representation or participation at the World Health Assembly or in the World Health Organisation. It has, thus, in unequivocal terms declared its unwillingness to seek any form of accommodation with Taiwan under Tsai Ing-wen, or perhaps, a lack of belief in any possibility of forward movement as long as she is in power.

Against this background, and just a few months after being sworn-in for a second term, Tsai managed something of a diplomatic coup by entering into formal diplomatic ties with another country that remains unrecognised by most of the world, namely, Somaliland.¹ Situated in East Africa, Somaliland had declared independence in 1991 after a civil war in Somalia. Taipei has shown that not only does it lose diplomatic allies but that it can also gain them, and was quick to dismiss criticism by the Chinese foreign ministry over the move, calling it "*pragmatic diplomacy*" and underlining its own sovereignty and its right to take such a decision.²

The successful establishment of ties with Somaliland thus has remarkable strategic symbolism in the context of Tsai Ing-wen's second term and growing diplomatic offensives and military pressure from China.

¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China (Taiwan), "Taiwan announces mutual establishment of Representative Offices with Republic of Somaliland", Public Diplomacy Coordination Council, 01 July 2020, https://www.mofa.gov.tw/en/News_Content_M_2.aspx?n=1EADDCFD4C6EC567&s=57C4CB95C8BAC4C0

² Emerson Lim, "Taiwan slams Chinese criticism of Somaliland ties", *Focus Taiwan*, 07 July 2020, <https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202007070020>

The strategic geographical location of Somaliland signifies a potential for Taiwan to establish a “forward base” either for diplomatic or strategic purposes. The port of Berbera in Somaliland, which is about just 250 km southeast of Djibouti, by sea, has attracted international investments from countries like the United Arab Emirates and Ethiopia.³ With an abundance of experience in port-management and operation, Taiwan could use its capacity a fulcrum to further its relations with Somaliland, whose location serves Taipei, as well as other friendly forces in monitoring Chinese activities and military presence in neighbouring Djibouti.

Tsai can already justifiably take credit for the management of the COVID-19 pandemic at home. As she pointed out in her second inaugural address, “*Taiwan’s name has appeared in headlines around the world, thanks to our successful containment of the coronavirus outbreak.*”⁴

The decision of Taiwan and Somaliland to exchange representative offices doubtless kept Taiwan in the headlines for a bit longer. As Tsai also pointed out in her address,

*“The coronavirus has profoundly affected our world. It has changed the global political and economic order...It has even changed the way the international community views Taiwan and developments in the surrounding region. These changes present us with both challenges and opportunities.”*⁵

In other words, Tsai and her advisers have been alive to the possibilities that the crisis offered, and the move involving Somaliland must be counted as a positive result. If China has used the pandemic situation to further its aggressive territorial claims from the South China Sea to South Asia, Taiwan, too, has used the opportunity to expand its international space in the Indo-Pacific, albeit within the bounds of widely-accepted international norms of good behaviour.

The Maritime Dimension

In fact, in her inauguration speech, Tsai, specifically stated, “*We hope that Taiwan can play a more active role in the peace, stability, and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific region.*”⁶ In this regard, Taiwan’s establishment of formal ties with Somaliland are a particularly important demonstration of several facets and possibilities in international politics that could potentially become significant.

In the first place, these are two well-run democratic polities that have decided to come together despite the absence of formal acceptance in the international community of nations. It suggests a new kind of development in international politics that goes beyond traditional concepts of State recognition. At the same time, it is impossible to believe that they would have had this opportunity were it not also for their maritime identities and outlooks. All but three of Taiwan’s current diplomatic allies are maritime nations.

³ Matt Kennard and Ismail Einashe, “For Somaliland and Djibouti, Will New Friends Bring Benefits?”, *Foreign Policy*, 19 March 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/03/19/somaliland-somalia-horn-of-africa-djibouti-military-oil-uae-qatar-berbera-port/>

⁴ Office of the President, Republic of China (Taiwan), “Inaugural address of ROC 15th-term President Tsai Ing-wen”, 20 May 2020, <https://english.president.gov.tw/News/6004>

⁵ Office of the President, Republic of China (Taiwan), “Inaugural address”

⁶ Office of the President, Republic of China (Taiwan), “Inaugural address”

Second, Taiwan and Somaliland have a high degree of complementarity, and, given Taipei's record in foreign aid and investment as well as its strengths in agriculture, public health and telecom,⁷ there is much that it can offer Somaliland. In many ways, Taiwan is in a position to extend its huge economic capabilities to Somaliland⁸ with the possibility of creating a model of economic development in Africa that can rival, at least in terms of impact, if not of scale, China's much vaunted 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI). Moreover, unlike the case with the latter, such an impact is likely to be positive, given that Taiwanese projects are far more likely to follow international good practices of accountability and transparency. An area of stability and economic growth in a largely poor littoral region would make Taiwan look very good indeed.

Third, a potential area of such Taiwanese involvement is in the fisheries sector, which was specifically mentioned in the official announcement on ties by the Taiwanese side.⁹ After years of being responsible for IUU fishing in the Indian Ocean, Taiwan has begun to improve its record¹⁰ and this, in and of itself, is a valuable contribution to anti-piracy efforts in the region and thus to regional stability, a goal that is well in keeping with India's own interests.

Fourth, with the bilateral relationship deepened and upgraded, the potential for port-calls by the Republic of China Navy (ROCN) — the official name of the Taiwanese naval forces — in the future will also surface on the horizon. Every year since 1967, the Taiwanese Navy has sent the *Dunmu*¹¹ Fleet of Friendship and Long-distance Sea-training (*Dunmu yuanhang xunlian zhidui*) formed by naval officers, cadets and graduates of the ROC Naval Academy for port-calls to allied countries to fulfil training with allied navies, and for diplomatic purposes such as visiting local Taiwanese immigrants. However, since the end of formal diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia (1990) and South Africa (1998), the ROCN has not been in Indian Ocean waters for the past several decades. The last ROCN visit to Saudi Arabia was in 1982 and to South Africa in 1997.¹²

The new connection with Somaliland will provide an opportunity for the ROCN to once again expand its presence to the coast of East Africa for port-calls. This will not only create the need for further military exchange between Somaliland and Taiwan, but also enhance the potential for greater collaboration of the Taiwanese forces with those of the US, Japan and other interested parties in the Horn of Africa and its maritime environs, for purposes of refuelling and R&R.

This diplomatic connection would also prompt the ROCN, and related military personnel and units, to acquire and nurture capacities in naval missions such as anti-piracy, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) and even counterterrorism ones. In the current scenario,

⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China (Taiwan), "Taiwan announces"

⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China (Taiwan), "Taiwan announces"

⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China (Taiwan), "Taiwan announces"

¹⁰ European Commission, "Questions and Answers—Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing in general and in Taiwan", *Press Corner*, 27 June 2019,

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA_19_3398

¹¹ *Dunmu* originally means "to further and nurture the relations with relatives and neighbors" (*dunqin mulin*).

¹² Yue Yih-Chun. 2005. "Woguo haijun yuanhangxunlianzhidui chufang suosheji pingshi haiyangfa zhi shiwu" (The Practice of Peace-time Maritime Law on the Visits by the Long-distance and Sea-training Fleet of our Country)", *MA Thesis*, Department of Diplomacy, National Chengchi University. Taipei: 56-57.

by way of contrast, the Taiwanese military (navy and marines, especially) has had only limited opportunities to plan and exercise for such operations.

Implications for India-Taiwan Relations

The presence of the ROCN could create good (and natural) opportunities for India and Taiwan — and their navies as well — to interact within the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). In 2016, while on a training mission to Central American partners after visiting the South Pacific islands, the *Dunmu* Fleet had a “chance encounter” with the *USS Chafee* (DDG-90) near Hawaii. Such encounters have occurred frequently between the US and Taiwanese navies.¹³ In the 2020 annual trip to Palau, crews on the *Panshi* Fast Combat Support Ship (AOE-532) of the *Dunmu* Fleet were reported to have contracted COVID-19 due to an unreported surface-ship exercise with “a friendly navy” on the return trip to Taiwan. The navy in question is presumed to be the US Navy operating in the South Pacific.¹⁴

If the government of Taiwan can successfully upgrade and maintain its relationship with Somaliland and such port-calls can be arranged in the future, it should not be unusual to expect ‘chance encounters’ between the Taiwanese and Indian navies in the Indian Ocean Region. Such “natural encounters” could then be used in an agile and diplomatic manner by the Government of India to counter increased presence of the People’s Liberation Army’s Navy (PLAN) in regional waters or countries of the Indian Ocean.

The opportunities for India from Taiwan’s latest action are obvious. However, to achieve them New Delhi needs to step out of what has hitherto been an excessively conservative approach on cooperation with Taiwan. India has approached navies such as the French¹⁵ for access to their base in Djibouti in order to keep an eye on both, these strategically significant waters, as well as on Chinese activities in the region. Nevertheless, it would not hurt to have access to other alternatives as well, such as additional information through Taiwan.

Taiwanese electronic/signal intelligence-gathering should be of especial interest to other navies in the region that consider the PLA Navy an adversarial presence. It is unlikely that the Americans, Japanese or the French will not, informally at least, connect with the Taiwanese for precisely such cooperation. There is no reason why India should not, as well. Indian interest in strengthening international norms and good behaviour in the Indian Ocean can certainly increase the opportunities arising out of the Taiwan-Somaliland relationship.

¹³ Jessica Marinaccio, “Soft Power in a Hard Shell: The Fleet of Friendship of the ROC Navy and Taiwan’s Performative Cultural Diplomacy in the Pacific”, *Issues & Studies*, 53, No. 2: 14. <https://doi.org/10.1142/S1013251117500047>

¹⁴ Hroung Tsi-cheng. “Dumun Jiandui chuhang chuan cengyu mou youhao guojia caoyan (The Dunmu Fleet believed to have exercised with a friendly navy)”, *Udn.com (The United Daily News)*, 26 April, 2020, <https://udn.com/news/story/121072/4519857>.

¹⁵ Dinakar Peri, “Navy seeks access to French base in Djibouti for refuelling”, *The Hindu*, 19 April 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/navy-seeks-access-to-french-base-in-djibouti-for-refuelling/article26881399.ece>

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