

# Internationalization of cross-strait relations

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The Chinese Communist Party has always attempted to keep cross-strait relations as a domestic affair. Yet today, there is a rise in its internationalization by the parties involved.

The Philippines plays a key role in this regard. The carrot and stick approach to internationalize cross-strait disputes has created significant dilemmas for other countries, especially those in the Asian region. With rising tensions, it might be difficult for neighboring countries to take a neutral stand in a cross-strait conflict.

Cross-strait relations have remained a frosty issue in the region since the Republic of China (ROC) government led by Chiang Kai-shek moved to Taiwan in 1949. The strait saw a major military flare up in 1949; three missile crises in 1955, 1958, and 1996, and diplomatic flaps as recently as August 2022 when United States House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taipei, and in April 2023 when Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen conducted “transit stops” in the US and met Pelosi’s successor Kevin McCarthy despite repeated warnings from China. Two recent military exercises have slowly begun to set the base norms and push the ceiling of Chinese maneuvers around Taiwan, beginning from the August 2022 exercises, which “blockaded” Taiwan’s major ports and airports.

Taiwan has remained one of the top “core interests” of China, which considers it part of its internal affairs and allows no foreign interference. This is reflected in China’s statements warning any country, private and public organizations, to toe the line or face sanctions, among them the lack of access to the vast Chinese market. Countries such as Lithuania were sanctioned by the Chinese in 2022 for conducting high-profile visits to Taiwan. In contrast, it shows its appreciation for countries that support its narrative with massive economic aid. One of them is Honduras which switched diplomatic ties from Taiwan to China in March 2023, and was promised economic and social development support.

On this “internationalization” spree of the cross-strait dispute, the role of the Philippines has been brought to question. On April 14, 2023, during the 8th Manila Forum, Huang Xilian, China’s ambassador to the Philippines, raised concerns about the recently concluded Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement sites agreement with the US, a long-term ally of the nation. What caused a stir was his warning regarding the safety of approximately 150,000 overseas Filipino workers in Taiwan. Other Southeast Asian nations’ workers in Taiwan are in similar straits, with Indonesia having 250,249; Vietnam, 233,429, and Thailand 73,818. Post Huang’s statement, Indonesian newspaper Kompas reported that Indonesia has already prepared an exit plan for its workers.

The Asean countries mentioned above except Thailand have previously been embroiled in disputes with China and the ROC-Taiwan over their respective versions of maritime boundaries. Since President Marcos became president in June 2022, the Philippines has filed 77 diplomatic protests against Chinese aggressive maneuvers in the West Philippine

Sea. Meanwhile, the US state department has issued a statement recalling Article IV of the 1951 US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty, which states that any armed attack in the Pacific, including on the Philippines' armed forces including its Coast Guard, will allow the direct involvement of the US military.

As Mr. Marcos' spokesperson has mentioned, Ambassador Huang's remarks might have been "misinterpreted," and reflects a dialogue approach chosen by the country's leadership. Jonathan Malaya, National Security Council assistant director general and spokesperson recently reiterated the Philippines' neutral stance on Taiwan.

A conflict across the strait can significantly damage already strained world trade relations due to COVID-19 and the Ukraine-Russia conflict, causing more price increases and supply chain challenges. A conflict between China and Taiwan will also affect the production of semiconductor chips crucial for modern day electronics, which Taiwan produces. With such strategic complications, the Philippine leadership must make its choices wisely.

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