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On his Twitter (now X) account, on Jan. 15, 2024, President Marcos congratulated recently elected Lai Ching-te (William Lai) in the presidential elections in Taiwan. He emphasized “close collaboration, strengthening mutual interests, fostering peace, and ensuring prosperity for our people in the years ahead.”

The congratulatory message led to sharp criticism from Beijing, with Mao Ning, China’s foreign ministry spokesperson, warning Manila about “playing with fire.” Such a strongly worded remark provoked a response from Philippine Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro who called out Mao Ning’s “low and gutter level talk [and for] insulting our president and the Filipino nation ...”

Since last year, the war of words between China and the Philippines over Taiwan has escalated. In his speech at the 9th Manila Forum for China-Philippines Relations on April 14, 2023, Huang Xilian, Chinese ambassador to the Philippines, warned the Philippines about the safety of approximately 150,000 overseas Filipino workers in Taiwan if war broke out. China’s attempt to keep the cross-strait affairs as strictly a domestic issue has regularly faced challenges, with more governments and diplomats becoming more vocal in their support of Taiwan.

The Philippines was not alone in congratulating President Lai and wishing the people of Taiwan another successful election. Other countries like the United States, Germany, Japan, Britain, Australia, Singapore, and India have acknowledged the elections and their growing ties with Taiwan post its 2024 presidential

elections.

Taiwan is a crucial partner for the Philippines because of strong economic connections between the two countries, and for hosting thousands of overseas Filipino workers. Taiwan recently increased the minimum wage of foreign workers from \$851 to \$885, which is expected to bring a positive change in their life. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Taiwan donated masks and personal protective equipment kits, which helped in the fight against the virus. In other calamities, its generous donations have helped restore emergency services early and provide relief. It has also offered visa-free travel to tourists from the Philippines, Brunei, and Thailand for up to 14 days, which allows family members of foreign workers to visit Taiwan.

The win secured by William Lai of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) is crucial for the Philippines and other Southeast Asian countries. DPP securing the top position in Taiwan means a continuation of the New Southbound Policy (NSP). Introduced by President Tsai Ing-wen in 2016, the NSP aims to increase nonpolitical ties with 18 countries, the Philippines among them. Taiwanese companies like I-Mei Foods Co., Ltd. have started recruiting Filipinos directly starting in 2023. Direct recruitment saves broker fees and other legal issues when a worker applies to work in Taiwan.

Meanwhile, China's high-sea maneuvers against Philippine vessels during their regular rotation and resupply missions to BRP Sierra Madre and other shoals have only created distaste among Filipinos toward China. Such aggressive tactics have led Indo-Pacific defense chiefs and senior military leaders to express shock and condemnation against China. Though both the Philippines and China agreed, on Jan. 18, to follow a diplomatic path to reduce tensions between them, including more maritime communication, it is unlikely that both countries will compromise on their sovereignty claims over disputed territories in the West Philippine Sea.

According to a 2023 Economist Intelligence Unit report, the Philippines stands to be the most exposed to a conflict over Taiwan. Its reliance on trade with China and its being a treaty ally with the US—which allowed its presence in nine sites (bases) across the Philippines through the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement—will put the country at the forefront during China's military tension with Taiwan. With their proximity to the Taiwan Strait, US military sites in the Philippines and Japan could be used to support military operations in the area. The US is duty-bound by its treaty to come to Taiwan's defense should China use military force to change the status quo of the cross-strait.

The importance of understanding Philippine foreign policies has only increased while studying cross-strait affairs due to its proximity to potential conflict areas. On May 20, when President William Lai gives his inauguration speech, will he talk about the policies his new administration might have for the Philippines?

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