Taiwan’s relationship with the Middle East is an understudied topic in academic research and often an invisible issue in policy debates for governments on both sides. Indeed, policymakers in Taiwan and the Middle East, who face diverse sets of internal and external challenges, have placed greater weight on their relations with the United States and China in their respective policies rather than prioritizing each other. Historically, Japan was the first Asian power in the post-World War II period that made significant in-roads into the Middle East, motivated by the imperative of acquiring the abundant energy resources necessary for economic reconstruction. Since the 1990s, China has emerged as the most consequential Asian partner for the Middle East. Initially motivated by similar energy needs to fuel its economic growth, Beijing has expanded its interests in the region to include cooperation with regional governments on issues relating to peace, security, and terrorism.

In this broader context—in which the United States and China constitute key external powers in the Middle East—Taiwan is often an afterthought. However, small and medium-sized countries such as Taiwan and Middle Eastern states are affected by regional and international strategic environments shaped by major powers and their relations with them. Taipei and Middle Eastern governments have learned of the inherent risks of putting too many eggs in one basket—that is, depending too much on either China or the United States—and thus have adopted hedging strategies. Governments on both sides also understand the utility of diversifying political and economic ties with other major powers, emerging economies, and friendly nations.

Especially for the Republic of China (ROC), the Middle East has historically been an important region to pursue its national interests, including forging economic ties, garnering diplomatic support, and escaping international isolation. As early as the 1930s and 1940s, the ROC realized the importance of newly independent Muslim countries in the Middle East.
and sent Chinese Muslim delegations to seek their diplomatic support for the ROC’s resistance war against Japan. [1]

During the Cold War, a shared opposition to communism united Taiwan and Middle Eastern powers such as Saudi Arabia. [2] Indeed, Saudi Arabia and the smaller Arab Gulf countries were a key source of diplomatic support for the ROC after it lost the Chinese Civil War and retreated to Taiwan in 1949. Repelled by China’s communist and atheistic state ideologies and bound by its strong ties with Taipei, Saudi Arabia was the last Arab country to recognize the PRC on July 21, 1990. [3] One key source of soft power utilized by the ROC was the installation of Chinese Muslim ambassadors and diplomats in Middle Eastern countries, who not only promoted diplomatic objectives but also strengthened transnational religious and cultural ties. The prime example of this diplomacy was the Chinese Muslim warlord Ma Bufang (馬步芳), who fled with the Kuomintang (KMT, 國民黨) to Taiwan and later served as the ROC’s first ambassador to Saudi Arabia in the 1950s and 1960s. Even after Taiwan lost several Middle Eastern allies and with the rise of Chinese influence in the region, Taipei and many Middle Eastern governments—including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates—continue to forge new avenues of cooperation. [4]

This special issue on Taiwan-Middle East relations sheds light on the historical and contemporary development of Taiwan-Middle East diplomatic relations and later unofficial relations, challenges posed by China’s rise, and the expansion of economic links and people-to-people ties. Furthermore, it delves into Taiwanese diplomacy and relations in the Middle East and North Africa, including Taipei’s offers to mediate third-party conflicts, and how its diplomatic priorities have changed over time.

Scholars and experts from the United States, Taiwan, Turkey, and Israel have contributed five articles that reveal the intricacies of Taiwan’s relations with Iran during the Cold War, the ROC-PRC diplomatic competition in the region, Taiwan’s diplomatic history and people-to-people relations, Taiwan’s economic links in the region, and recent developments in Taiwan-Turkey relations.

The articles in this special issue have been ordered chronologically by historical time periods and also thematically starting with diplomatic history, followed by discussions on economic and other relations, and ending with a case study on Taiwan-Turkey relations.

Li-Chiao Chen’s article, “Uncertainty and Instability: Taiwanese-Iranian Relations in the Early Cold War Period,” discusses an early period in the Cold War that tested the ROC’s relations with Iran, a complex relationship between two Asian countries that began with a friendship treaty in 1920. Both sides also faced powerful communist neighbors after World War II. Amid a changing international situation that saw the United States and the Soviet Union vie for alliances and partnerships—including with Iran—and a growth in the PRC’s number of diplomatic allies, Taipei grew anxious about its relations with Tehran. This early Cold War period would foreshadow Iran’s eventual decision to establish formal diplomatic ties with the PRC in 1971.

In his piece, “Will and Capabilities: The PRC-ROC Imbalance in the Middle East,” Yitzhak Shichor argues that the ROC missed opportunities to build relations with Middle Eastern countries, including Israel, and to consolidate its presence in the region. Taiwan belatedly moved to build unofficial ties with Middle Eastern nations after it was expelled from the United Nations and lost its diplomatic allies in the region. Shichor points to the ROC’s mistake of putting all its eggs in one basket, namely its overdependence on the United States.

In his article, “Reviewing the History of Taiwan–Middle East Relations: Official Relations and Citizen Diplomacy,” Hsiu-Ping Bao argues that the Taiwan-Middle East relationship has been dynamic and shaped by international politics, people-to-people ties, and political transitions over the past seventy years. Bao discusses the role of Chinese Muslims in ROC diplomacy towards the Middle East, pointing out that many of Taiwan’s Muslims who studied in Middle Eastern countries later became ROC ambassadors to the Middle East and professors in Middle Eastern studies in Taiwan.

Anchi Hoh’s piece, “Positioning Taiwan’s Middle East Policy in its National Development Plan,” delves into the impact of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on Taiwan’s ties in the Middle East. Taiwan has developed the New Southbound Policy for South and Southeast
Asia, but does it have a regional strategy for the Middle East? Hoh points to the need for a more comprehensive Taiwanese policy towards the Middle East to better respond to challenges from China’s BRI. Hoh argues that closer economic cooperation with the region could also promote Taiwan’s own national development goals.

Selçuk Çolakoğlu’s article, “Turkey’s Policy Towards Taiwan: From Cross-Strait Relations to Syrian Refugees,” discusses the current state of Turkey’s relationship with both China and Taiwan. He argues that the state of cross-Strait relations during successive Taiwanese presidential administrations has affected Turkey’s calculations towards Taiwan in each period. While Ankara has prioritized political and economic relations with Beijing, it has also expanded economic and trade ties with Taiwan and cooperated on humanitarian assistance for Syrian refugees.

We hope that this collection of articles on Taiwan-Middle East relations will shed light on the unique nature of Taiwan’s relations with the Middle Eastern nations, in particular Iran and Turkey, and how its diplomatic and economic priorities have shifted in response to changing international strategic contexts and its own national development goals. These articles also provide insights into the transnational religious and cultural linkages between communities in Taiwan and the Middle East. It should be highlighted that despite the challenges presented by international realpolitik and great-power competition, Taiwan has managed relations with the Middle East at various levels and with multiple actors ranging from governments, NGOs, companies, and citizens, making Taipei’s presence and soft power known throughout the region.

[2] Ibid., 80.
[4] Ibid., 79.

Uncertainty and Instability: Taiwan-Iran Relations in the Early Cold War Period

By: Li-Chiao Chen

Li-Chiao Chen is an associate professor in the Department of History at Fu Jen Catholic University in Taiwan.

Today, Taiwan—formally known as the Republic of China (ROC)—has no diplomatic relations with Iran. This was not always the case. As far back as June 1920, Qajar Iran and the ROC under President Yuan Shikai (袁世凱) signed a treaty of friendship that meant to politically unite the two Asian countries. [1] Both governments had faced similar challenges, struggling to maintain their independence and territorial integrity from the onslaught of foreign powers since the 19th century. The ROC, led by the Kuomintang (KMT, 國民黨), and Iran then formally established diplomatic relations in 1944. [2] Yet, the rise of the PRC injected uncertainty and instability into Taiwan-Iran relations during the early Cold War period and Tehran ultimately broke off diplomatic relations with Taiwan and recognized the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1971. [3]

Iran and ROC Accusations against the Soviet Union

After the outbreak of the Second World War, Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran, announced his country’s neutrality. [4] However, Britain and the Soviet Union preemptively occupied Iran in September 1941 to prevent Iran from becoming an ally of Germany, led by Adolf Hitler. After the occupation, Reza Pahlavi fled the country, and his son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was later enthroned. In February 1942, the Anglo-Soviet-Iranian Treaty of Alliance was signed, which acknowledged Iran’s independence and integrity and pledged the withdrawal of all British and Soviet troops no more than six months after the defeat of Germany. [5]

Nevertheless, after the Second World War, the Soviets had no intention of withdrawing their troops from Iran, especially from the northwestern part. The Iranian government criticized the Soviet occupation in the newly formed United Nations (UN) at the end of January 1946. [6] James Byrnes, the US Secretary of State, argued that the Soviet action was nothing more than an attempt to secure Iranian oilfields in Baku, near northwestern Iran. [7]
At the end of World War II, the Soviets also entered northeastern China after the Yalta Conference in 1945, which allowed Soviet troops to march into Manchuria to fight the Japanese army. After the Soviet Union provided support to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP, 中國共產黨), the ROC also accused the Soviets of trespassing in Chinese territory to the UN in September 1949. [8] Both Iran and the ROC were united in their suspicions of the Soviets.

**Iran’s Choice between China and Taiwan**

From the beginning of the 1950s, Taiwan and Iran encountered several obstacles that shook their relationship. The PRC, established in October 1949, began to gain a growing number of diplomatic allies to the detriment of Taipei. Taiwan, at that time, was concerned about whether Iran would maintain their friendship. Since Iran had been the first Asian country to sign a treaty of friendship with the ROC, its position on China was considered a significant issue for Taipei.

In the meantime, the ROC’s representation in the UN was challenged by the Soviet representative to the UN, Yakov Malik, who did not recognize the ROC but rather supported the PRC. [9] There were also rumors that the Soviets asked Iran to recognize the PRC. [10] The Soviet Union withdrew its troops from Iran after 1946 and showed friendliness towards Iran, abandoning its past aggression and hostility. Although the United States wanted to approach Iran to provide economic and military assistance, Shah Pahlavi was aware that perhaps improving ties with the Soviets was more urgent than help from a distant country such as the United States. Under this context, Taipei desired to know Iran’s decision regarding their relationship. [11] In response, the Iranian government told ROC chargé d’affaires in Tehran, Hsu Shao-Chang (許紹昌), that they would support Taiwan and ROC representation in the UN. [12] In September 1954, the First Taiwan Strait Crisis broke out. President Chiang Kai-shek viewed this as an opportunity to make US President Dwight Eisenhower aware that Taiwan faced a worse situation than before and that American military assistance to Taiwan was urgently needed. [13]

In April 1955, Iran and China were invited to the Bandung Conference, which was attended by other Asian and African countries and organized by Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who had recognized the PRC in 1950. The purpose of the conference was to fight against imperialist forces in the Cold War era. [14] ROC Ambassador in Tehran Tsai I-Tian (蔡以典) told the Iranian government that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) would accrue political and diplomatic advantages from the Bandung Conference, and that Iran could only attend the conference once a truce was declared in the Taiwan Strait. [15] Eventually, the Iranian government decided to attend the conference, but stated that they would not violate any interests of Taiwan. [16] For Iran, joining the Bandung Conference was an opportunity to let the world know that Iran was a member of the family of nations. For Taiwan, however, it meant more uncertainty from its Asian friend.

**Drifting Relations between Taiwan and Iran**

After World War II and the start of the Cold War, Iran was careful to avoid joining the Western bloc that was aimed at containing Soviet expansion into the Indian Ocean and Middle East. From 1954 to 1955, Britain preferred to cooperate with Pakistan, Turkey, and Iraq—a relationship referred to as the Baghdad Pact—for the purpose of promoting anti-communism and isolating Egypt. In October 1955, Iran joined the Baghdad Pact. The Soviets claimed that the nature of the pact was not simply for regional cooperation, but also to counter communism. [17]

When Egypt tried to build closer relations with China in 1955, Iran, by contrast, was more concerned about maintaining good relations with the Soviets than with the Chinese. Subsequently, Egypt announced its recognition of China in May 1956, largely because Beijing had supported Egyptian independence at the Bandung Conference. The United States feared that Iran would possibly lean towards the Soviet Union as Egypt had previously done, especially when Shah Pahlavi decided to go to Moscow in 1956 to emphasize Iranian friendliness towards the Soviets. [18]

Following the Moscow visit, the ROC Ambassador in Tehran Wu Nan-ru (吳南如) sent a telegram to Taipei, stating that Shah Pahlavi was satisfied with the trip, while the Soviets showed their hospitality. [19] It could be argued that the attitude of the Soviet Union towards Pahlavi’s visit was careful and serious. While it was perhaps difficult to make Iran an ally, the Soviets
made sure that Iran at least did not join the American side. Ambassador Wu asserted that this was evidence of the Soviet’s “Smile Diplomacy” and expressed his fear that Iran would join the communist bloc and recognize the PRC soon. [20]

During this time period, it seemed that Iran did not necessarily favor Taiwan, particularly when it came to relations with the United States. In Mohammad Reza Pahlavi’s biography “Mission for My Country,” he argues that the United States had paid more attention to Taiwan than to Iran. He writes, “Taiwan has in the same period obtained about four times as much American military and non-military aid from America as has Iran. Admittedly Taiwan’s situation in the Far East is strategic, but I maintain that the Middle East ours is no less so.” [21] In the broader context of the Cold War competition—which was more severe in East Asia than in the Middle East—Taiwan earned more attention from the United States than Iran. Even the visit of Shah Pahlavi to Taiwan in 1958, in fact, did not signify that Iran and Taiwan had a close and durable relationship.

**Conclusion**

After the end of the Second World War, Iran and Taiwan faced the challenges posed by the Cold War. In the late 1940s, the two countries encountered immense pressure from communist countries. From the early 1950s, Taiwan was under threat from the PRC, while Iran was met with friendliness from the Soviet Union. During this period, Taiwan felt uncertainty and instability due to Iran’s desire to have good relations with both the United States and its northern neighbor the Soviet Union. Tehran expected help from the United States and also wished to be friendly with the Soviet Union. Once Iran had the opportunity to recognize the PRC—despite having good relations with the United States—and ultimately the ROC would lose Tehran’s support for maintaining its representation in the UN. The drift in relations between Tehran and Taipei during this period would foreshadow Iran’s eventual switch of formal recognition from the ROC to the PRC in 1971.

**The main point:** Between 1949 and 1956, the ROC and Iran, which had been allies since 1920, were under threat from communism. Yet, Taiwan could not secure its representation in the UN and faced military attacks by China, while Iran had an opportunity to join the international community.


Will and Capabilities: The PRC-ROC Imbalance in the Middle East

By: Yitzhak Shichor

Yitzhak Shichor is Professor Emeritus at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the University of Haifa in Israel.

Although an imbalance has existed between the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) and the Republic of China’s (ROC) Middle Eastern relations since the early 1950s, the nature of this imbalance had changed—even reversed—by the mid-1970s. Initially, the ROC, which is Taiwan’s formal name, had several potential advantages over the PRC. As one of the Big Five founders of the United Nations (UN) and a permanent member of its Security Council (thus holding veto power) as well as in other international organizations, the ROC maintained long-standing diplomatic relations with the United States, most Western powers, and some Middle Eastern countries. For nearly seven years following the establishment of the PRC in 1949, the ROC maintained diplomatic advantages in the Middle East. This encompassed relations, going back to the 1930s and 1940s, with the most important Middle Eastern countries, including Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt (where the ROC had been represented by Ma Bufang, a former Chinese Muslim warlord who later became ambassador to Saudi Arabia). [1] The ROC was also represented later in Jordan, Sudan, Morocco, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—though in some cases only for a short time. Yet, during these years, the ROC missed opportunities to solidify its Middle Eastern presence. Now—despite its unofficial diplomatic status—Taiwan should find, and use, its relative domestic scientific and technological advantages as fast as possible to restore, at least partly, its earlier presence in the Middle East.

Pre-1971: ROC Advantages, PRC Disadvantages

In the years prior to 1971, Middle Eastern countries’ United Nations votes on the PRC admission were not consistent, as these states were divided in terms of international affiliation, domestic politics, social structure, and cultural-religious characteristics. Every year until 1971, the UN General Assembly voted on interim resolutions to postpone the discussion on China’s representation, and to consider this issue “an important question” that would require a two-thirds majority to settle. Some Middle Eastern countries—primarily those associated with the United States and the West (notably Turkey, Iran, Jordan, and Lebanon)—voted consistently for the ROC and against the PRC. Conversely, countries which recognized the PRC between 1956 and 1959 (Egypt, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Morocco, and Sudan) abstained on votes before their recognition of the PRC and later voted for its admission and, presumably, against the ROC. Saudi Arabia consistently abstained, while Israel’s vote fluctuated between the two, though with few exceptions it voted for the ROC, considering the PRC’s representation “an important question.” [2]
Among these secondary resolutions, two were of primary importance. First, the UN General Assembly voted against the USSR intervention in China on behalf of the communists, and in favor of affirming the ROC as the central government of China (Resolution 505, February 1, 1952). Three Middle Eastern countries supported the resolution (Iraq, Lebanon, and Turkey), five abstained (Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Yemen), and one opposed (Israel, which had already recognized the PRC). By that time, most of the countries which abstained still had official relations with the ROC. The second, Resolution 2758 (October 25, 1971) on the admission of the PRC to the UN at the expense of the ROC, reversed the outcome of Resolution 505. Most Middle Eastern and North African UN members—14 out of 19—voted for the resolution (Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Kuwait, Libya, Morocco, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, Yemen, and South Yemen). Four abstained (Bahrain, Jordan, Lebanon, and Qatar) and only one (Saudi Arabia) opposed, continuing to vote for the ROC.

Even after 1956, when the PRC established diplomatic relations with Egypt, Syria, and Yemen, at the expense of the ROC (followed by Iraq and Morocco in 1958 and Sudan in 1959), the ROC maintained its advantages over the PRC in the Middle East. [3] In addition to keeping its seat on the UN Security Council and its official relations with the leading Western powers, the ROC was still represented in some of the most important Middle Eastern capitals: Ankara, Riyadh, and Tehran. However, despite having vast (potential) political influence, the ROC did not seem to have the will to increase its presence in the Middle East nor the drive to use its UN political capabilities, whatever they were, on behalf of Middle Eastern countries. One reason may have been its dependence on Persian Gulf oil and its careful policy to avoid upsetting Arab oil suppliers. [4] Consequently, the ROC had made no significant attempt to win the goodwill of those Middle Eastern countries that wavered in their attitude toward the ROC and the PRC, especially those undermined by PRC radicalism and support of communist and revolutionary groups. This was also true about Israel, though for different reasons.

Although Israel was the first Middle Eastern country to recognize the PRC, on January 9, 1950, this recognition—officially acknowledged by PRC Premier and Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai (周恩来)—was practically rejected shortly after it was extended. Moreover, because of Israel’s participation in the October 1956 Anglo-British offensive against Egypt, the foundation of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1964, and the radicalism of the Cultural Revolution, the PRC’s attitude toward Israel became increasingly hostile. [5] Potentially, this created an opportunity for the ROC, a loyal ally of the US, to attempt to win Israel to its side. It is unlikely that Israel would have changed its mind, since Israeli Foreign Ministry officials believed—notwithstanding Beijing’s defamations and slanders—that diplomatic relations with the PRC would ultimately be established. [6] Still, a serious ROC proposal to exploit this opportunity and to set up official relations with Israel, especially in the 1960s at the height of PRC hostility to Israel (expressed not only in rhetoric but also in military support of the Palestinians), may have been accepted. Yet, such proposal was never made. This ROC indifference may have affected its relations with other Middle Eastern countries. Dependent on Middle Eastern oil, the ROC failed—or did not even try—to create a counter-dependence, which would have made it more difficult for Middle Eastern countries to side with the PRC later on.

**Post-1971: ROC Disadvantages, PRC Advantages**

From the early 1970s on, the PRC-ROC balance in the Middle East has changed dramatically. Expelled from official international diplomacy, the ROC lost its political assets, and nearly all its embassies, in the Middle East, which it had failed to use earlier. Now, denied official presence in regional and global capitals, as well as in international organizations, the ROC has gradually begun—belatedly—to build its unofficial presence in the Middle East. As of today, the ROC maintains economic and cultural missions in Saudi Arabia (which moved from Jeddah to Riyadh in 2017 and is also responsible for Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Pakistan, Qatar, and Yemen), Jordan (also responsible for Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, and Syria), the UAE (also responsible for Iran), Turkey (also responsible for Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan), Oman, Bahrain, and Israel. Supposedly non-governmental, these missions actually function as de facto embassies, enjoying diplomatic immunity and benefits that usually apply to...
official envoys—though with less responsibilities and commitments. The websites of all of these missions have the domain name “roc-taiwan.org,” except the office in Saudi Arabia, which also keeps the previous official “embassy” in its domain name (https://www.taiwanembassy.org/sa/) even today, on Taiwan’s Foreign Ministry website, over 30 years after diplomatic relations were cut off.

Saudi Arabia is Taiwan’s most important crude oil supplier, providing nearly one third of Taiwan’s crude oil needs (practically all of Taiwan’s crude oil is imported). [7] Kuwait is Taiwan’s second most important oil supplier, providing around 20 percent of all needs. [8] Other Middle Eastern suppliers are the United Arab Emirates, Iraq, and Oman—altogether accounting for an average of 78 percent of all of Taiwan’s crude oil consumption (in 2012-2018, Table 1). [9] In addition, Taiwan used to import nearly half of its LNG from a single Middle Eastern country—Qatar, declining to around 30 percent in 2017 and 2018 (Table 2). [10] Although the PRC imports much larger quantities of crude oil from the Middle East than the ROC, the share of Middle Eastern oil in the PRC’s total oil import is only around 42 percent. [11] However we look at it, Taiwan is heavily dependent on Middle Eastern oil and gas, more so than even the PRC.

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### Table 1: Taiwan Crude Oil Import from the Middle East, 2012-2018
(In 10,000 barrels and percent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Saudi Arabia Qty</th>
<th>Saudi Arabia %</th>
<th>Kuwait Qty</th>
<th>Kuwait %</th>
<th>United Arab Emirates Qty</th>
<th>United Arab Emirates %</th>
<th>Iraq Qty</th>
<th>Iraq %</th>
<th>Oman Qty</th>
<th>Oman %</th>
<th>Total Qty</th>
<th>Total %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>100,233</td>
<td>31.5</td>
<td>67,218</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>21,600</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>23,999</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>33,945</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>318,420</td>
<td>77.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>106,058</td>
<td>35.8</td>
<td>62,214</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>18,224</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>23,264</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>26,724</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>295,935</td>
<td>80.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>103,893</td>
<td>33.0</td>
<td>59,947</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>29,256</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>34,501</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>32,023</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>315,220</td>
<td>82.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>99,285</td>
<td>32.3</td>
<td>67,642</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>23,319</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>26,894</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>38,901</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>307,701</td>
<td>84.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>100,112</td>
<td>31.9</td>
<td>66,464</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>18,737</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>21,686</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>24,695</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>313,844</td>
<td>73.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>98,215</td>
<td>31.5</td>
<td>61,569</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>30,887</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>16,262</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>19,508</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>312,217</td>
<td>72.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>99,767</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>66,904</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>27,003</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>24,393</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>21,186</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>322,532</td>
<td>74.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


### Table 2: Taiwan LNG Import from Qatar, 2012-2018
(In 10 million tons and percent of total)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>5,784</td>
<td>46.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>6,107</td>
<td>48.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>5,824</td>
<td>43.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>6,620</td>
<td>46.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>6,210</td>
<td>41.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>5,089</td>
<td>30.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>4,833</td>
<td>28.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


For many years, the ROC has made the usual mistake of a beginning investor, putting all of its eggs in one basket and choosing total dependence on the United States. However, and certainly in a retrospective view, a more sophisticated investor would have spread his investment so that when the market crashes or declines, he does not lose all his investment. Having lost all of its advantages, the ROC failed to create alternative “investments” in advance—and this is exactly what happened in its relations with the Middle East (and other regions as well), where the ROC ignored numerous opportunities. A more proactive approach could probably not have prevented Middle Eastern countries from switching their recognition to the PRC, but it could have created a more solid basis for unofficial relations afterwards. It is too late and unrealistic to fully make up for this loss, as the PRC has established a solid base...
in the Middle East, but the ROC could still achieve a change by pursuing more creative policies and thinking outside the box.

**In Sum**

Until the early 1970s, the PRC had the will to become involved in Middle Eastern affairs, but no capabilities. Conversely, the ROC had the capabilities, but not the will. Since the 1970s, the situation has reversed: the PRC now has the capabilities—but not the will to become involved, while the ROC has lost its capabilities—but not the will. Although still heavily dependent on Middle East oil imports, the PRC has used its political assets to create what I call “counter-dependencies.” Middle Eastern countries need Beijing’s support in the UN, the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency), and other global organizations, enabling China to exert influence on them. [12] Even more heavily dependent on Middle Eastern oil (and LNG), the ROC cannot create “counter-dependencies,” as it does not have the political, economic, or military assets to compete with the PRC—save one: scientific and technological innovation. According to some rankings, Taiwan is number four in innovation capabilities, number seven in scientific infrastructure, and number eight in technology infrastructure—way above Middle Eastern countries. This may enable the ROC to create a “counter-dependency,” which would remain even if and when the PRC would catch up.

**The main point:** In the past, the ROC missed opportunities to consolidate its Middle Eastern presence. Now, with its unofficial presence, it should find and use its relative advantages as fast as possible and to the best it can, to help Middle Eastern countries reduce their asymmetric dependence on the PRC, if and when they wish to create an alternative with US backup.


[6] Director General to the Foreign Minister, “‘Gabriel’ Sale to Taiwan,” August 2, 1971, Abba Eban Center for Israeli Diplomacy, the Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, container C-20, File F-187; Yitzhak Shichor, “The Importance of Being Ernst: Ernst David Bergmann and Israel’s Role in Taiwan’s Defense,” *The Asia Papers*, No. 2 (Center for International and Regional Studies, Georgetown University, 2016), 21.


[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.


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Reviewing the History of Taiwan-Middle East Relations: Official Relations and Citizen Diplomacy

By: Hsiu-Ping Bao

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Works on the history of Taiwan-Middle East relations from 1949 to 2020 usually revolve around the economic sphere. Much attention has focused on Taiwan’s large imports of energy supplies from the Middle Eastern countries, as well as Taiwanese technical and agricultural development assistance to the region. Yet despite their robust economic and trade ties, Taiwan and the Middle East lack intimate diplomatic relations, largely as a result of geographic, cultural, religious, and linguistic barriers. For many Taiwanese, their first impressions of the Middle East are usually grounded in stories of mystery and unsettled problems. For governments and people in the Middle East, Taiwan is seldom a top priority either in foreign policy or domestic politics. Besides, Taiwan-Middle East relations are weak in comparison to the relative strength of US-Taiwan relations and US-Middle East relations. However, the history of Taiwan-Middle East interactions over the past seventy years reveals that the relationship has not always been stagnant. Global politics, citizen diplomacy, and political and social transitions in Taiwan have shaped the dynamic of Taiwan-Middle East relations over that period. Accordingly, the history of Taiwan-Middle East relations could be observed from the perspectives of official relations and citizen diplomacy.

Official Relations (1949–1990)

Official relations between Taiwan and the Middle Eastern countries began under the government of the Republic of China (ROC) when it was based in China. The ROC government in China established official relations with Turkey in 1934, Egypt in 1934, Iraq in 1942, Iran in 1944 [1] and Saudi Arabia in 1939. [2] After the ROC government retreated to Taiwan in 1949, the government formed official ties with Lebanon in 1955, Jordan in 1957, Libya in 1959, and Kuwait in 1963. [3]

During the Cold War, Taiwan-Middle East diplomatic relations were in line with the US principle of containment towards communist countries. To curb the incursion of the Soviet Union into global affairs, the United States promoted defensive organizations in Europe, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and East Asia. For example, the United States encouraged Turkey, Iran, and Iraq to join the Baghdad Pact (1955-1979), a major security grouping in the Middle East. Taiwan, under Chiang Kai-shek’s (蔣介石) government, also signed a defense pact with the United States in 1954. Meanwhile, Chiang’s government executed a foreign policy of anti-communism and anti-Russian aggression (反共抗俄), which also served to strengthen relations between Taiwan and the Middle Eastern countries during the Cold War. The new Egyptian government—led by the Society of Free Officers after the 1952 coup—attempted to negotiate with the United Kingdom over British control of the Suez Canal, which had been a longstanding problem for Egypt. Cairo, however, did not make much progress at the negotiation table. Considering that the Soviet Union had offered preferential conditions to Egypt, the ROC ambassador in Egypt Ho Feng-Shan (何鳳山) told Egypt’s deputy prime minister that the ROC government was willing to mediate between Egypt and the United Kingdom. [4] However, the ROC government’s mediation never materialized. Egypt ended its official relations with the ROC in May 1956 when Egypt recognized the PRC [5] and later established firm diplomatic and military relations with the Soviet Union after the Suez Crisis in 1957. [6]

ROC-PRC Competition in the Middle East

The diplomatic competition between the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the ROC was a major variable affecting Taiwan-Middle East relations during the Cold War. Since its inception in 1949, the PRC government had been desperate to marginalize the ROC by any means. China’s representation in the United Nations (UN) was the most contentious issue. To seek full endorsement from the Middle Eastern countries in the UN, the ROC’s Minister of Foreign Affairs George Kung-chao Yeh (葉公超) visited Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, and Jordan in November 1957. [7] Yeh invited their leaders to visit Taiwan, emphasizing their common interest in anti-communism. [8] As leaders from these countries were Muslims, Yeh also planned to invite them to visit Chinese-speaking Muslims (回教徒)
in Taipei. However, he found that the old wooden Taipei mosque used by Chinese Muslims could not meet the standards for receiving the Middle Eastern leaders. Yeh suggested that the Executive Yuan (行政院) sponsor the construction of a new mosque, which became the center of the Muslim community and remains a landmark in Taipei today.

Invited by Yeh, Abdullah, the crown prince of Iraq, Adnan Menderes, the prime minister of Turkey, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the king of Iran, and Hussein bin Talal, the king of Jordan paid visits to Taiwan between November 1957 and March 1959, which was unusual in the diplomatic history of Taiwan-Middle East relations. [9] They met with President Chiang and his top officials and addressed the dangers of communism, corresponding with the ROC’s anti-communist and anti-Russian aggression foreign policy.

However, when the PRC replaced the ROC as China’s representative in the UN in October 1971, Taiwan faced an unprecedented diplomatic crisis. It lost membership in all the international organizations related to the UN, and a large number of countries terminated their diplomatic ties with the ROC. From 1971 to 1990, the ROC lost all of its official diplomatic relations with the Middle Eastern countries. Today, the ROC only has unofficial offices covering economic and cultural activities in Bahrain, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates.

After the ROC left the UN, Saudi Arabia became Taiwan’s most important ally in the Middle East. The formal relationship between the ROC and Saudi Arabia lasted for forty-four years (1946-1990), longer than the ROC’s formal relationships with any other Middle Eastern countries. [10] The relationship between Taiwan and Saudi Arabia was reciprocal. Saudi Arabia provided stable oil and loans to Taiwan for ten major construction projects during the oil crisis in the 1970s. In return, the ROC dispatched specialists, such as doctors, nurses, engineers, and aircraft pilots, to assist in Saudi Arabia’s modernization project. [11] Makio Yamada, who specializes in East Asia-Middle East relations, claims that “Taipei’s relationship with Riyadh exemplifies the most successful case of Taiwan’s diplomacy in the Arab world and, perhaps, even that in the developing world in general.” [12]

### Citizen Diplomacy and Public Images

Citizen diplomacy between Taiwan and the Middle East can be divided into two stages. The first stage included religious activities during the Cold War. Muslims in Taiwan performed the Hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca, and propagated the voices of anti-communism and anti-Russian aggression through their participation in Islamic conferences from the 1950s to the 1980s. [13] At the same time, nearly one hundred Chinese Muslim students and a few non-Muslim Taiwanese students studied in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Libya, Jordan, and Turkey. Some of them notably became ambassadors to Middle Eastern countries [14] and professors of Middle Eastern studies afterwards. [15]

In the second stage—the post-Cold War era—citizen diplomacy has extended beyond religious activities. In lieu of formal diplomatic relations with Middle Eastern countries after 1990, people-to-people diplomacy has been drawing Taiwan and the Middle East ever closer, aided by democratization, globalization, and the growing social diversity of Taiwan. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the United Arab Emirates and Turkey were the most-visited countries in the Middle East by Taiwanese people, who could take regular direct flights. Small communities in both countries are comprised of Taiwanese merchants and students. In addition, Taiwanese non-governmental organizations have provided medical, educational, and social services to hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees in Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon. Meanwhile, a number of people from the Middle East living in Taiwan run Middle Eastern restaurants and speak fluent Mandarin, introducing Iranian, Turkish, Arabic, and Kurdish culture and history to Taiwanese audiences through food, TV, and the Internet.

Despite the fact that Taiwan’s relations with the Middle East have strengthened in recent years, genuine people-to-people interactions have not been far-reaching. [16] While hundreds of people from the Middle East study and work in Taiwan, and most of them have praised Taiwan as a friendly country, their perspectives on Taiwan have never shaken the Middle Eastern governments’ support of the “One-China Policy.” At the same time, most Taiwanese people’s perceptions of the Middle East are often entangled with an orientalist mindset mainly focused on images of war.
terrorism, headscarves, and oppressed women across the region. Meanwhile, Taiwanese political elites and intellectuals have often praised Israel as a role model for Taiwan in terms of military and technology, while seldom considering the suffering of Palestinians under Israeli occupation, which is facilitated by Israel’s advanced military equipment and technology. However, as growing Taiwanese nationalism shifts the island’s national identity away from an exclusive Chinese identity, young Taiwanese people have started to view the Middle East through the prism of independence and self-determination. Many young Taiwanese sympathize with the conditions of Palestinians under Israeli oppression and have discussed the impact of the global community’s denial of Kurdish independence from Iraq and the US betrayal of Kurdish fighters in Syria. In sum, Taiwan-Middle East relations might not achieve a breakthrough in official relations, but people-to-people interactions could continue to grow in the foreseeable future, particularly if more and more Taiwanese are willing to engage the region through educational institutions, the news media, commerce, and humanitarian aid.

The main point: Overall, the history of Taiwan–Middle East relations is dynamic, determined by shifting global politics, people-to-people interactions, and political and social transition in Taiwan over the past seventy years.


[7] “George Kung-chao Yeh, Minister of the Foreign Affairs, Visited the Middle East (1956.4-1957.10),” Archives of Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Archives of Institute of Modern History, no: 112.21/0010.

[8] Ibid.

[9] From 1949 onwards, five top leaders from the Middle Eastern countries visited to Taiwan. Four of them visited to Taiwan during 1957 and 1959, indicating that the official relations between Taiwan and these Middle Eastern countries were close in the late 1950s. The last Middle Eastern leader who visited to Taiwan in 1971 was King Faisal of Saudi Arabia.


[12] Ibid., 79.


[14] Examples include Ibrahim Chao Shi-lin (趙錫麟) and Abdulhameed Ma Chao-yuan (馬超遠), who served the representative to Saudi Arabia and Libya, Ismail Mae Ruey-ming (買睿明) , who is the current representative to Jordan, and Ali Yang Syin-yi (楊心怡), who is the current Director-General of Department of West Asian and African Affairs.


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**Positioning Taiwan’s Middle East Policy in its National Development Plan**

By: Anchi Hoh

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In recent months, Taiwan reached two agreements on economic and humanitarian issues in the Middle East in a sign of enhanced cooperation with the region. In November 2020, Taiwan signed a funding arrangement with the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) to provide stabilization assistance to central areas of Syria. The next month, Taiwan signed an agreement with Saudi Arabia on avoiding double taxation of income tax and preventing tax evasion. Both developments invite a closer look at Taipei’s relations and policy concerning the Middle East. While Taiwan has been disadvantaged on its diplomatic front, particularly since the 1970s due to China’s pressures, its economic and trade ties with the Middle East remain strong. Xi Jinping’s global economic and foreign policy initiative, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, 一帶一路, formerly known as “One Belt, One Road”), launched in 2013, could further affect Taiwan’s status in the world and its ties with the Middle East. Simultaneously, the role of the United States in the Middle East will continue to evolve, particularly following the transition from the Trump to the Biden administration. In a region that is filled with domestic challenges, area conflicts, and external interference, Taiwan’s Middle East policy should work to support the nation’s economic upside in that region.

**Diplomatic and Trade Ties**

Taiwan’s current relationships with countries in the Middle East fall into three groups. First are countries in which Taiwan has an economic and cultural representative office or a commercial office. These countries include Bahrain, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). These offices handle Taiwan’s trade, economic, cultural, and educational activities across the region. Second are countries in which Taiwan currently does not have a representative office. These countries include Iraq, Lebanon, Qatar, Syria, and Yemen. The nearby representative offices cover these countries. Third are countries that only host Taiwanese non-profit organizations. Iran, which currently does not host Taiwan’s representative office, belongs to this category. The Taiwan External Trade Development Council (TAITRA, 中華民國對外貿易發展協會)—a nonprofit trade-promoting organization—has an office in Tehran.

The following table offers an overview of Taiwan’s diplomatic interactions and the locations of its representative offices:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Official Diplomatic Relations</th>
<th>Current Office</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bahrain</td>
<td>Formal relations were never established</td>
<td>Taipei Trade Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>Diplomatic ties were terminated in 1972</td>
<td>No representative office in lieu of Taiwan Economic &amp; Cultural Representative Office (TECRO) in Dubai, the Taiwan External Trade Development Council (TAITRA) has an office: Taiwan Trade Center in Tehran.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>1942-1958</td>
<td>No representative office in lieu of TECRO in Jordan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>Formal relations were never established</td>
<td>TECRO in Tel Aviv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuwait</td>
<td>1963-1973</td>
<td>Taipei Commercial Representative Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>1954-1977</td>
<td>No representative office in lieu of TECRO in Jordan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oman</td>
<td>Formal relations were never established</td>
<td>TECRO in Tunis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qatar</td>
<td>Formal relations were never established</td>
<td>In lieu of TECRO in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>1948-1990</td>
<td>TECRO in Riyadh.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>Formal relations were never established</td>
<td>No representative office in lieu of TECRO in Jordan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Arab Emirates</td>
<td>Formal relations were never established</td>
<td>Commercial Office of Taipei in Dubai.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yemen</td>
<td>Formal relations were never established</td>
<td>No representative office in lieu of TECRO in Riyadh.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Taiwan.
Taiwan maintains active trade relations with the Middle East. According to the 1989-2020 trade data of the Directorate General of Customs of the Ministry of Finance, Saudi Arabia is Taiwan’s 10th largest trade partner, followed by Kuwait (19th), the UAE (21st), Iran (28th), Qatar (30th), Oman (34th), Turkey (36th), Iraq (37th), Israel (38th), Bahrain (65th), Jordan (67th), Syria (79th), Lebanon (88th), Yemen (99th), and the Palestinian territories (240th).

According to the data of Taiwan’s Ministry of Economic Affairs from 1982-2019, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Oman have been steady oil exporters to Taiwan. The UAE began exporting oil to Taiwan in 1984. In 2019 alone, Saudi crude oil exports to Taiwan exceeded 102 million barrels (31 percent of the overall imports), followed by Kuwait’s 63.8 million barrels (20 percent), the UAE’s 36.7 million barrels (11 percent), and Oman’s 21 million barrels (6 percent). Since 1998, Iraq has also been exporting oil to Taiwan annually, with exports reaching 33 million barrels at their height. In 2019, its share was 13.6 million barrels (4 percent of Taiwan’s total crude oil imports). Iran began more consistently exporting oil to Taiwan in 1990, and in 2003 reached a peak of 59.7 million barrels. Over the following decade or so, Iran’s oil exports continued to decline and ultimately halted under the Trump administration’s oil sanctions that began in late 2018. Qatar, on the other hand, has provided Taiwan with between half a million and close to 10 million barrels from 1982 to 2019, with small intermissions in between.

As for other natural resources, Qatar has also been a major Middle Eastern supplier of liquefied natural gas (LNG) since 2006. In 2019, its exports reached 4.7 million metric tons, or 28 percent of Taiwan’s overall LNG imports.

Although Taiwan holds large trade deficits with the Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, business opportunities in the region remain lucrative. Currently, for instance, several major Taiwanese companies maintain a presence in Saudi Arabia, such as Taiwan Fertilizer Co. Ltd. (台灣肥料股份有限公司), CTCI Corporation (中鼎集團), and TECO Electric and Machinery Co. Ltd. (東元集團). The number of small businesses could also
further increase under the encouragement, guidance, and protection of the Taiwanese government.

**Opportunities via Policy and Strategy**

In the complex geopolitical terrain of the Middle East, Taiwan has managed to establish an economic foothold in some areas and has yet to explore opportunities in others. With the advent of China’s BRI, Taiwan is likely to face more competition from China. China plans to build closer ties with the Middle East through the BRI’s *China-Central Asia-West Asia Corridor* (中國-中亞-西亞經濟走廊), as this region is a key midpoint between China and the final destination for exporting its products and services—the affluent European market. While keeping a critical eye on this initiative, Taiwan should develop countermeasures in at least two respects. First—policy wise, Taipei should proactively define its objectives and roles specific to the region, covering such aspects as politics, economy, science and technology, education, and cultural exchange. To pursue a more comprehensive foreign policy toward the Middle East, the government should tap into Taiwan’s academia and think tanks focusing on Middle Eastern studies—in combination with other relevant academic disciplines—and conduct regional and country-specific analyses and assessments for the purposes of comprehensive policymaking.

Subsequently, Taiwan should more clearly define its policy goals, objectives, and anticipated outcomes, and use these to devise a region-focused strategy. The Middle East policy implementation strategy could resemble the *New Southbound Policy* (NSP, 新南向政策). Announced in 2016, the New Southbound Policy aims to enhance cooperation with countries in Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Australia. As part of its Middle East policy implementation strategy, Taiwan should proactively pursue enhanced bilateral or multilateral relationships through mutually beneficial cooperation programs. In implementing the BRI, one of China’s strategies has been to seek strategic alignment with Middle Eastern countries’ national development plans, including Saudi Arabia’s *Vision 2030*, Kuwait’s *Vision 2020*, and Qatar’s *Vision 2030*. A central goal of all of these plans is economic diversification and reducing dependency on oil. Taiwan’s recent national development plan, known as the *5+2 Industry Innovation Plan* (五加二產業創新計畫), could link to the national plans of these Middle Eastern countries by offering expertise in the fields of information and communications technology, green energy technology, biotechnology, and medicine—areas for which Taiwan is known globally.

In terms of dealing with countries facing political turmoil, economic hardships, or wars, Taiwan has been active in supporting international relief efforts and recovery initiatives. One example of this is Taiwan’s interest in the US Congress’ passing of the BUILD Act (*Better Utilization of Investment Leading to Development*) in 2018. Reuters reported in September 2020 that Taiwan is teaming up with the United States to promote international infrastructure investment projects in developing countries. Although the role of the United States continues to evolve in the Middle East and Taiwan generally hews closely to US Middle East policy, the region’s needs for contributions to humanitarian crisis relief and infrastructure recovery are ongoing and require international support. Offering such international assistance could help Taiwan strengthen its relationships and expand its economic links in the region.

In sum, the Middle East is important to Taiwan not only because its rich natural resources are essential to the island’s domestic needs, but also because the region offers potential for international cooperation and economic development that could aid Taiwan in implementing its own national development plan. Furthermore, a comprehensive Middle East policy, accompanied by feasible implementation strategies, could better prepare Taiwan for countering potential challenges presented by China’s BRI in this region.

**The main point:** A comprehensive Middle East policy, supplemented with implementation strategies, is important to Taiwan in two ways. First, it could counter the potential challenges brought by China’s BRI in the region. Second, and more importantly, Taiwan could advance its own national development plan by strategically furthering business prospects in the Middle East. The African and Middle Eastern Division of the Library of Congress. The opinions expressed here are solely her own and do not represent those of the Library of Congress.

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Turkey’s Policy towards Taiwan: From Cross-Strait Relations to Syrian Refugees

By: Selçuk Çolakoğlu

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Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) expressed her condolences to people affected by a 7.0 magnitude earthquake that struck Turkey’s third-largest city Izmir back in October 2020. Subsequently, the Taipei Economic and Cultural Mission in Ankara (驻土耳其代表处)—Taiwan’s de facto embassy in Turkey—donated USD $70,000 to victims of the Izmir earthquake. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan thanked the countries and organizations that reached out to Turkey after the Izmir quake by posting pictures of their flags—including Taiwan’s flag—in his tweet on October 31. However, the tweet was later taken down and replaced with a new one that did not include the Taiwan flag. In response, Taiwan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) said Chinese authorities had pressured the Turkish government to take down the tweet. Beijing rejected the claim that it had pressured Ankara to remove the Turkish president’s tweet containing Taiwan’s flag, but expressed its appreciation for Turkey’s adherence to Beijing’s “One-China Principle” by deleting the tweet. This incident has shown the extent of Chinese influence on Turkey’s approach towards Taiwan.

Turkish Policy Towards Taiwan

Turkey has considered the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as the sole representative of China since August 1971. [1] Turkey closed its embassy in Taipei in 1971 and opened a new one in Beijing in 1972. Turkey and Taiwan reopened their representative offices in the early 1990s and intensified their economic relations without facing a strong reaction from China. However, starting in 2000, Ankara adopted a more Beijing-leaning policy, which had implications for its relations with Taiwan. When Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民進黨) became president in 2000, cross-Strait relations became strained, and thus Turkey did not want to be seen as being too close to the Chen administration. [2] Beijing does not usually object to other countries having economic relations with Taiwan unless it involves a formal agreement. However, Turkish decision-makers were not well familiarized with the nuances and delicate balance of cross-Strait relations, and due to its deepening political and economic relations with Beijing, Ankara preferred to stay away from Taipei during this period. Nonetheless, Ankara has tried to develop economic relations with Taipei as long as there was no objection from Beijing under the “One-China Principle.”

After the Kuomintang (KMT, 國民黨) came to power in 2008 under the leadership of President Ma Ying-Jeou (馬英九), Taiwan’s relations with China grew decidedly closer based on the Ma administration’s commitment to the so-called “1992 Consensus” (九二共識). [3] Ma drew up a roadmap in 2010 to improve relations with Turkey and reassured Ankara that advancements in bilateral relations would not upset Beijing. Taipei specified four main policy priorities to improve relations with Turkey, consisting of: (1) a visa-waiver agreement; (2) direct flights between Taiwan and Turkey; (3) opening an economic and cultural office in Istanbul; and (4) a free trade agreement (FTA). While the Ma administration successfully achieved the first two targets, the plans for opening a Taipei representative office in Istanbul and signing an FTA with Turkey were not realized.

When the DPP came to power again following President Tsai Ing-wen’s election in May 2016, cross-Strait relations took a turn for the worse, due in part to the DPP’s rejection of the PRC’s “One-China Principle.” As a result, Beijing adopted a more assertive strategy to curb Taipei’s relations with other countries. China’s changing position regarding Taiwan has caused concern in Turkey. Turkey’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) have formed an anti-West coalition and view China and Russia as balancing powers against leading Western countries such the United States and Germany. At this juncture, the AKP-MHP government has been very keen to keep friendly relations with Beijing, and has thus adopted a more reluctant stance towards Taiwan and ignored human rights concerns regarding China’s treatment of the Uyghurs.
**Deepening Economic Partnership**

Bilateral trade has become the backbone of the economic partnership between Turkey and Taiwan. Annual trade numbers had fluctuated between USD $1.5 billion and USD $2.2 billion from 2011 to 2019 according to the Turkey Statistic Institute (TurkStat). The bilateral trade volume reached its highest level of USD $2.2 billion in 2017, but dramatically dropped to USD $1.5 billion in 2019. According to Taiwan’s Ministry of Economic Affairs (MOEA), the bilateral trade volume in the first eleven months of 2020 was around USD $1.3 billion. The emerging problem of Turkey’s trade with Taiwan is that it is highly imbalanced—to the detriment of Ankara. In fact, according to MOEA, Taiwanese exports to Turkey comprised USD $1.6 billion of the USD $1.8 billion in bilateral trade in 2017.

Considering Taiwan’s competitive advantage, Ankara wants to compensate for this imbalance through tourism and Taiwanese foreign direct investment (FDI) into Turkey. For instance, Taiwan Cement Corporation (TCC, 台灣水泥) bought 40 percent of Turkey’s OYAK Cement Group shares, at USD $1.1 billion, in October 2018. As of 2019, Taiwan’s commercial banks, security firms, and fund management companies have invested around USD $4.5 billion in Turkey. Taiwanese FDI to Turkey has signaled the potential for future economic cooperation between Ankara and Taipei.

Yaser Tai-hsiang Cheng (鄭泰祥), representative of the Taipei Economic and Cultural Mission in Ankara, said in July 2019 that Turkey and Taiwan are cooperating on culture, healthcare, medicine, agriculture, science, and development of smart cities. According to Cheng, Taiwan wants to use Turkey as a regional investment hub for Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. However, the two countries’ continuing double-taxation problem has shifted Taiwanese investors away from Turkey and towards Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, which are also investment hubs within the European Union (EU) customs union with lower production costs. Indeed, avoiding double taxation and developing investment facilitation agreements are concrete priorities for both sides. Furthermore, Ankara’s additional customs duties of up to 25 percent on 78 categories have had immediate adverse effects on Taiwanese exports to Turkey since February 2018. In addition to growing economic ties, people-to-people exchanges between Taiwan and Turkey are also blossoming. In 2019, around 100,000 Taiwanese visited Turkey, while several thousand Turkish nationals visited Taiwan.

Reaching a bilateral FTA would further strengthen economic relations between Turkey and Taiwan. As a member of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), Taiwan has already signed FTAs with various countries in the Indo-Pacific. Taipei is also interested in signing an Economic Cooperation Agreement (ECA) with Turkey to expand bilateral economic ties. However, reaching an FTA would require both Taipei and Ankara to overcome the “China factor.” Given the tense circumstances in cross-Strait relations, Taiwan’s desire for signing an ECA with Turkey is unlikely to be realized in the near term. Furthermore, as a member of the EU customs union, Turkey will likely follow a parallel course with the EU on the issue of ECA talks with Taiwan. This means that progress on the EU-Taiwan ECA talks could positively impact Turkey-Taiwan FTA talks.

**Taiwanese Aid to Syrian Refugees**

In recent years, Taiwan has adopted an active strategy to aid Syrian refugees living in Turkey, which has hosted around 4 million Syrians since 2012. In June 2020, the Taipei Economic and Cultural Mission in Ankara launched a humanitarian assistance effort to help Syrian refugees in Turkey fight COVID-19. Taiwan’s representative office distributed 100,000 Taiwanese-made surgical masks, 7,500 pairs of gloves, and 2,100 head covers to the Syrian refugees living in Turkey’s southern provinces of Kilis and Hatay. In addition, a Taiwan-funded civic center on the border between Turkey and Syria was completed in October 2020. The Taiwan-Reyhanli Center for World Citizens in Hatay serves the Turkish government—as well as non-governmental organizations and enterprises from around the world—by providing logistical support for aid campaigns for Syrian refugees. The Taiwanese government and private sector have committed to supporting the project.

In November 2020, Taiwan also donated a total of USD $500,000 to education programs supported by the Global Coalition to Defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (D-ISIS Coalition) to help students resume formal education in northeast Syria. The donation was made during a virtual ceremony attended by Hsiao Bi-khim (蕭美琴), representative of the Taipei
Economic and Cultural Representative Office (TECRO) in the United States, and Ingrid Larson, managing director of American Institute in Taiwan. However, the Turkish government considers northeast Syria—a terrorist hub, because the People’s Protection Units (YPG), the dominant actor within the SDF, are viewed as the Syrian offshoot of the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK). Therefore, Taiwanese aid to northeast Syria will likely anger Turkey, particularly if there is no policy coordination between Ankara and Washington towards the Syrian Kurdish region.

Turkey’s Taiwan Policy under the Trump Administration

Generally speaking, the status of Turkey’s relationship with Taiwan is a political problem between Ankara and Beijing. Unlike the Xinjiang Uyghur issue, Ankara and Beijing have never faced a downturn in the relationship over Taiwan. However, some problems between Ankara and Beijing have emerged due to the deterioration of cross-Strait relations. After the DPP came to power in 2016, Beijing has adopted a more hardline stance towards Taiwan, including by preparing for potential unification by a military intervention.

It is not clear whether the incoming Biden administration will continue the Trump administration’s tough stance towards Beijing on trade issues and Taiwan. It is highly likely that President Joe Biden will be more critical of China’s human rights violations in Xinjiang and Hong Kong. Following Beijing’s crackdown and implementation of a national security law for Hong Kong, President Biden will likely continue US political support for democratic Taiwan. Thus, the chaotic relationship between Beijing and Washington could potentially affect Ankara’s approach to Taipei in a positive or negative manner. After the recent US CAATSA (Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act) sanctions imposed on Turkey over its purchase of Russian S-400 missiles, Turkish-American relations have moved to a critical juncture. If Washington and Ankara can overcome their differences on the Russian S-400 missile, then Turkey will have freer hands in its relations with both China and Taiwan. If not, the AKP-MHP government will likely seek to use China as an alternative economic hub against the United States and the EU and will continue to adopt a more Beijing-leaning approach towards Taiwan. In conclusion, further development of bilateral relations between Ankara and Taipei will depend upon the status of cross-Strait relations and the evolving nature of the “Taiwan question” between Beijing and Washington.

The main point: While economic ties between Turkey and Taiwan and cooperation on humanitarian issues have grown in recent years, the future of this relationship will depend on the state of cross-Strait relations.

