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Will Trump Continue to Slow Arms Sales to Taiwan?

By: Ghulam Ali

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Even though the two sides maintain no formal diplomatic ties, the United States remains the largest weapons provider to Taiwan. Since 1979—when the United States switched its diplomatic ties from the Republic of China (Taiwan) to the People's Republic of China (PRC)—roughly 77 percent of Taiwan's major arms imports have originated from the United States. The volume of US arms exports has significantly increased in the past several years. According to SIPRI, from 2019 to 2023, an astonishing 99 percent of Taiwan's imports of major conventional arms came from the United States.

After Donald Trump returned to the White House in January 2025, his transactional approach to strategic alliances, coupled with his decision to withhold some military aid to Taiwan, has raised concerns. These concerns bubbled into headlines when, in February 2026, President Trump stated that he had consulted with PRC President Xi Jinping over the specific issue of arms sales to Taiwan. Given that Trump made this statement in advance of his much-anticipated visit to China—originally expected to take place in April, now tentatively planned for mid-May—it fueled additional hype. There is now no shortage of speculation that Trump may agree to drawn down arms sales to Taiwan in return for some form of concession from Xi Jinping.

Nonetheless, this author argues that while US arms sales to Taiwan under Trump 2.0 might slow down for tactical reasons, sales to the island are likely to remain intact overall and may even increase further. In making this argument, this author analyses arms sales already concluded during Trump's first and second terms, his "America First Arms Transfer Strategy" executive order and its alignment with current Taiwanese government policies, and an active US Congress with bipartisan

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Trump's So-Called "Consultation" with China

On February 17, in response to a reporter's question on board Air Force One, Trump stated that "I've talked to him [Xi Jinping] about it [US arms sales to Taiwan]. We had a good conversation, and we'll make a determination pretty soon." In his answer, Trump was referring to a telephone conversation he had held with Xi on February 4.

The PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported that during the February 4 phone call, Xi urged the United States to "handle the issue of arms sales to Taiwan with prudence," and added that "the Taiwan question is the most important issue in China-US relations."

The meeting marked the first time since the United States announced its "Six Assurances" policy that an American president had consulted the Chinese leadership on weapon exports to Taiwan. The "Six Assurances," a non-binding United States policy framework formulated in 1982, directly stated that the United States would not consult with China on arms sales to Taiwan.

In response to this news, some analysts argued that Trump's so-called "consultation" set a "dangerous precedent." Others termed the consultation a "blatant violation" of established US norms, accusing Trump of employing Taiwan as a bargaining chip in trade talks with China and sending the wrong signal to allies regarding the United States' reliability.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported that, given the co-occurring flashpoints in US-China ties (such as Trump's efforts to finalize a trade deal with China), Washington might postpone or delay the supply of weapons to Taiwan until at least Trump's meeting with Xi in Beijing.

The confusion has spawned multiple overlapping questions, such as: whether Trump would permanently slow down arms deliveries to Taiwan; whether Washington was willing to employ arms sales as a bargaining chip in its trade deal with China; or whether the "consultation" was merely a tactical pause to attract PRC attention towards US-China trade negotiations.

Factors Rendering Continued US Arms Sales to Taiwan Likely

Three major political trends render the Trump Administration's continued support for Taiwan more likely. The first is the rapid pace of arms deals that Trump has already struck with Taiwan. The second is the current Trump Administration's "America First Arms Transfer Strategy" and its alignment with Taiwanese government policy. The third is longstanding support in the US Congress for Taiwan.

The Rapid Pace of Arms Sales to Taiwan under Trump

President Trump's actions towards Taiwan during his first full term (2017-2021) can provide a useful baseline for assessing his second term policies. During his first term, Trump authorized approximately USD 18.3 billion in arms sales to Taiwan. This was roughly equivalent to the total value of arms sales over the two consecutive terms of his predecessor, Barack Obama (around USD 20 billion). It amounted to more than double the arms sales of his successor, Joe Biden (USD 8.4 billion).

Even if Trump set a record for arms sales to Taiwan in his first term, the rapid pace of arms sales in the first year of his second term has encouraged some analysts to argue that he may soon break his own record for arms sales to the island. For instance, in December 2025, Washington announced about USD 11 billion worth of arms sales to Taiwan, the largest single US weapons deal with the island to date. It was against the backdrop of this record deal that President Trump spoke with Xi Jinping on February 4. Despite the fact that Trump reportedly discussed arms sale to Taiwan with Xi, multiple outlets reported just a few days after the call that the United States was weighing additional arms packages for Taiwan, potentially worth up to USD 20 billion. While this package has not yet been reported to the US Congress, it would dwarf sales made by any prior US president.

The "America First Arms Transfer Strategy" Aligns with Taiwanese Policy

President Trump's strategic thinking, reflected in his executive orders, can also serve as a guide for his second term intentions. On February 6, 2026, Trump issued an executive order (EO) outlining an "America First Arms Transfer Strategy." This EO introduced foundational changes to the United States' arms export policy. It prioritizes weapons exports to countries that spend more on their own defense and occupy critical strategic geographies. It explicitly seeks to use foreign purchases and capital to support US domestic reindustrialization and the resilience of America's defense industrial base. The EO effectively elevates industrial and economic objectives in arms-transfer decisions, while giving comparatively less weight to traditional foreign policy and normative considerations.

The commercially driven "America First Arms Transfer Strategy" aligns well with the policies of the incumbent Lai Ching-te (賴清德)Administration in Taiwan, both strategically and economically. In response to the

PRC's sustained military pressure, Lai's government has adopted a more assertive deterrence posture. The Taiwanese president has introduced structural defense reforms, under strategies such as "peace through strength," "all-of-society resilience," and the "porcupine" doctrine—which emphasizes asymmetric defense capabilities.

To meet defense objectives, the Lai government moved to raise the annual defense budget from about 2.4 percent of GDP to roughly 3.3 percent in 2026, with a stated goal of reaching 5 percent by 2030. Furthermore, in November 2025, the Lai government proposed an additional supplemental defense budget of roughly USD 40 billion spread over eight years, although the proposal has remained stalled in the legislature.

These ambitious defense modernization efforts have only been made possible through Taiwan's burgeoning economy, which has benefited from a surge in AI-related exports and investments. Taiwan's statistics office projected real GDP growth of 7.37 percent in 2025, the fastest pace in 15 years and sharply higher than its earlier 4.45 percent estimate. Economic growth is expected to remain resilient, with an estimated growth rate of 7.7 percent in 2026. Strong global demand for semiconductors and AI technology continues to underpin expansion.

As Taiwan's economy grows, its government has greater leeway to obtain expensive, US-made weapons. Trump's arms sales strategy and Taiwan's increased ability to finance purchases are therefore mutually reinforcing. Moreover, the "America First Arms Transfer Strategy" has targeted "inefficiencies" in the supply of weapons, which have led to long delays in delivering weapons systems once sold. The EO aims to streamline arms transfer procedures, improve interagency coordination, and accelerate reviews and approvals to reduce delivery delays. This could help ease the backlog in arms deliveries, a long-standing concern for Taiwan.

Bipartisan US Congressional Support for Taiwan

Although the US president holds significant power over arms transfers, the US Congress has consistently provided bipartisan support for accelerated arms supplies to Taiwan. Both Democrats and Republicans have backed efforts to speed deliveries and expand Taiwan's access to US-made systems. This support is evidenced by the fact that the 119th Congress has introduced over a dozen Taiwan-related bills since January 2025.

Furthermore, when Taiwan's Legislative Yuan (LY, 立法院) stalled President Lai Ching-te's proposed USD 40 billion multi-year special defense budget, a bipartisan group of 37 Congressional lawmakers sent a letter urging Taiwanese lawmakers to approve the legislation. The letter emphasized that both the United States and Taiwan must "do more to deter PRC aggression," and called the special budget "critical" to closing Taiwan's capability gaps. The letter warned that without substantial increases in defense spending to the proposed levels, Taipei's recent progress in readiness and asymmetric capabilities would be "insufficient."

Given the US Congress's obvious appetite for expanded arms sales to Taiwan, President Trump can supply weapons to the island with relatively little domestic political cost.

Conclusion

Though unprecedented, Trump's "consultation" with Xi on the issue of arms sales to Taiwan should not be construed as a shift in US policy. Trump's decision to discuss arms sales with Xi in a telephone call could merely be a tactical move to smooth his expected visit to China. After all, Trump is aware of the sensitivity of arms sales to China. At most, the United States might choose to temporarily slow or pause weapons transfers until the conclusion of Trump's May visit to Beijing. In the long-term, the Trump Administration and US Congress' historical appetite for arms sales to Taiwan, coupled with the island's expanded fiscal capacity to purchase weapons, suggests that Trump's second term may even bring about a qualitative expansion of arms transfers between American and Taiwan.

The main point: Trump's unprecedented February 2026 "consultation" with Xi over Taiwan arms sales could simply be a tactical pause driven by trade and summit diplomacy. Trump's track record of arms sales to Taiwan, coupled with the island's growing economy, indicates not only continuity but possibly an increase in US arms transfers to Taiwan for the remainder of his term.

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As Taiwan Builds New Alliances, its Climate and Food Security Diplomacy Across Africa is Gaining Momentum

By: Francis Annagu

Francis Annagu is a freelance journalist and researcher. He earned his bachelor's degree in political science from Kaduna State University. He has been a fellow of Tiger Eye Foundation and Code for Africa/Global Forest Watch since 2022, and a grantee of the Pulitzer

Center, the Rainforest Journalism Fund, and the Africa-China Reporting Project from 2021 - 2023. He has collaborated on research with international teams at the Curatorial Research LAB (South Korea) and curated a botany project with Co-iki (Japan). Annagu is a Dataphyte Fellow and researcher for the Eric Hosking Charitable Trust. He is also an expert on political and economic affairs between Greater China and Africa.

In the lowland fields of Eswatini, a modest demonstration farm stands among some maize farms and vegetable patches. On one side, a solar-powered irrigation pump hums; on the other, a group of local farmers inspect new varieties of leafy greens that were grown under the guidance of Taiwanese agronomists. This exemplary project demonstrates how Taiwan continues to use agricultural and climate diplomacy as an instrument of foreign policy and development engagement in Africa. This form of modest farm projects is part of a vigorous push by Taiwan through its International Cooperation and Development Fund (ICDF, 國際合作發展基金會) to combine climate-smart agriculture, interventions in food-security, and diplomatic outreach throughout the continent of Africa.

Image: Rural agricultural landscape in the Shiselweni Region of Eswatini (April 2014). (Image source: Wikimedia Commons)

Though Taiwan's agricultural diplomacy is not a luxuriously grand infrastructure project, it represents a strategic model of micro-diplomacy, intentionally targeted with high-impact interventions that demonstrate Taiwan's technical expertise and global relevance. Over the years, it has become a series of targeted technical cooperation modules, training programs, seed interventions, and massive efforts in capacity building. In the international landscape of climate change and food insecurity, these small projects are propelled beyond the strategic boardroom as they are designed to advance Taiwan's global presence, strengthen its soft-power linkages, and show that Taipei—like the People's Republic of China (PRC)—can contribute meaningfully to shared global challenges, despite its constrained formal diplomatic recognition in many African states. As most African countries are pushing Taipei out of their political capitals due to growing pressures from the PRC, only Eswatini currently maintains full diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Still, through technical missions and development partnerships, Taiwan sustains informal yet resilient relationships that cover extensive landscapes of African countries.

From Taiwan's Islands to Outreach

At the same time, Taiwan's domestic realities provide a clue to the strategy it projects to the international community. With its high population density, an aging agricultural labor force, and declining food self-sufficiency, Taipei has long recognized the importance of agricultural innovation to sustaining its growing economy. As one review noted, "Taiwan is not only internationally renowned in the fields of agriculture and science and technology… but has also been able to use this comparative advantage over the years to provide assistance" to ensure a sustainable global food security.

Beyond its borders, the ICDF's annual report for 2020 shows that agriculture and rural development remain the crux of Taiwan's overseas assistance. Taiwan has placed much emphasis on countries with which it can still partner. Looking at Africa, this simply translates into a purposeful engagement wherein technical assistance sits well with broader diplomatic objectives that include reinforcing Taiwan's relevance, building linkages through exchange of human capital, and the engagement of African governments through development goals that are beneficial for both parties. In this sense, agricultural cooperation serves as both a bridge of goodwill and a soft-power tool, reinforcing Taiwan's identity as a responsible and reliable stakeholder in the world's affairs. For example, one study of Taiwan's "Africa footprint" notes the dispatch of agricultural missions, university partnerships and youth service schemes to African nations, even where formal diplomatic ties are minimal.

Africa as a Proving Ground

The scope of the project is enormous. In Eswatini, the

Taiwan Africa Vegetable Initiative (TAVI, 臺灣非洲蔬菜倡議), which is funded by the Taiwan's Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Foreign Affairs and implemented with local partners, supports school-feeding programs, seed kits, and "champion farmers" who supply highly nutritious African vegetables to schools and poor neighborhoods. As this initiative is gaining ground, a new gene bank was inaugurated at the Malkerns Research Station in 2024, and mobile kitchens supported by TAVI have reached more than 120,000 people in Eswatini in the first full year of operation.

Meanwhile, in Burkina Faso, the support Taiwan has offered through the ICDF has a longer history. As early as 1994, it contributed rice strain development and irrigated reclamation work at the Bagré reservoir region, which eventually accounted for some 26 percent of the nation's rice production, according to Taiwanese technical staff. In eastern Africa, Kenya is facing one of the worst droughts in over 40 years. Due to that, the ICDF has partnered with a Swiss children's rights group to launch a Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH, 水、衛生與個人清潔) project in Garissa county, enabling ICDF to tie in human security of food and water with Taiwan's technical assistance.

Image: Experimental Farm of National Taiwan University, Taiwan (April 2024). (Image source: Wikimedia Commons)

These practical interventions illustrate Taiwan's multi-layered approach towards food security in Africa. In this regard, it has been engaging in training African agricultural specialists in Taiwan: for example, it created a 2025 training course at the National Pingtung University of Science and Technology (國立屏東科技大學) on "sustainable and smart agriculture" with participants from Eswatini and Somaliland, pairing it with field demonstrations, seed and technology transfers, and local institutional partnerships. What is the logic? It's clear: building capacity. Including Taiwan's technical footprint and fostering networks can outlast the project lifespan.

Navigating Local Challenges

Taiwan's strategy has been rolled out alongside operational challenges. Fortunately, several practical and geopolitical solutions have shaped its Africa agenda over time.

One issue is the significant logistical and infrastructural challenges involved in rural African communities. In Eswatini, for example, running a cold chain or mobile kitchen infrastructure must take into account the realities of the poorly maintained rural roads, the lack of reliable electricity, and limited farmer familiarity with newer methods. The structure of the partnership is designed so that it can adapt to local capacity. Just as the TAVI mobile kitchen model is noteworthy for its localized flavor and community outreach, such models require local partner-capacity, supply chains, and continuity. This flexibility and responsiveness in aid design, which are some of Taiwan's comparative strengths, emphasizes its adaptability (as compared to larger and more bureaucratic donors).

In addition, bureaucratic and institutional obstacles are common. This is because projects need to fit into host country agriculture ministries, university partners, or local extension agencies to work efficiently. The model Taiwan has adopted emphasizes "training the trainers" and demonstration farms to mitigate dependency and ensure sustainability. In 2009, Chen Yu-chi (陳昱齊), who studied agriculture at National Taiwan University (NTU, 國立臺灣大學) in Taipei City, noted, "the growth cycles of crops exceed the time that overseas service participants work on a given project."

Another challenge that is particularly acute is geopolitical. Taiwan's international space is often limited by the PRC's widely known aggressive diplomatic campaigns in Africa. While Taiwan can deliver development assistance efficiently, its efforts are restrained by its lack of formal diplomatic status. One recent example is South Africa, which was reported to have asked Taiwan to relocate its Trade Representative Office from Pretoria without any precedent tensions. After Pretoria's or-

ders, many interpreted the move as a show of Beijing's pressure on Taipei. In such environments, Taiwan is left with no other option than to operate under the radar—mainly through technical missions, university exchanges, and NGOs, rather than state-to-state programs. Such indirect channels make for reduced visibility for Taiwan's assistance programs, but arguably increase their resilience to diplomatic turbulence.

Impact and Limitations

What, then, are the results? The truth is, Taiwan's model is replicable. Indeed, it continues to generate credible outcomes, although quantification and longitudinal evaluation remain uneven.

As has been demonstrated in Burkina Faso's Bagré region, the ICDF mentioned some transformation in the reclamation of land as well as rice output improvements. One Taiwanese technician noted that locals "used to work under the scorching sun without ever taking a rest… now they know they can get a good price for their crops." Similarly, the TAVI model in Eswatini has reached more than 120,000 people and counting through outreach events in its first year of operations alone. The program is widely considered to be a notable demonstration model of this kind.

However, these outputs' limitations are worth noting. For Taiwan, many projects are small in size compared to ones funded by major donors from Asia, Europe, or the United States. When measured, data on year-over-year resilience gains, climate-shock adaptation, and impact on national food-security metrics is thin. Due to that, there are calls for stronger monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL, 監測, 評估與學習) frameworks in Taiwan's development assistance so that improvements would demonstrate evidence of sustainable impact.

Moreover, the challenge of diplomatic recognition means that Taiwanese programs may be bereft of full access to bilateral or multilateral financing, even limiting their reach or replicability. There is also the challenge of visibility. Where it occurs, smaller scale may limit the narrative power that large infrastructure projects would enjoy—though arguably, the embedded nature of these programs in local communities may foster deeper ties.

Policy Implications for Taiwan and its Partners

The agricultural diplomacy of Taiwan in Africa offers several policy implications. First, smaller African states can build meaningful global engagement through selective capacity building, rather than seeking large-scale infrastructure transformation. Taiwan's strategy always puts technical excellence on its priority list, as well as sustainable agriculture, customized training, and institutional linkages.

Second, relating technical assistance to global challenges helps Taiwan integrate into current broader international policy debates. Taiwan's ability to tie its work to "SDG 2," or "Zero Hunger" (永續發展目標 2：消除飢餓), the United Nations goal to end hunger and promote food security, and to broader climate action frameworks, further strengthens its relevance.

Third, sustainability and scaling require stronger and more accurate measurement. It will benefit Taiwan's development agencies to develop more robust MEL systems, publish independent evaluations, and quantify resilience gains. That step would enhance legitimacy, especially if Taiwan seeks to coordinate with other donors or multilateral organizations across Africa. Data transparency could also increase the credibility of Taipei in the international development community.

Fourth, African partner countries benefit from Taiwan's approach, but should also consider how to integrate programs into their national systems—and to ensure that technical transfers lead to lasting change. African ministries, farmers' associations, and universities can strengthen their partnerships with Taiwan by institutionalizing staff trained by Taiwan, improved program design, and locally relevant monitoring.

Fifth, geopolitical vulnerability means that diversification is important. Although Taiwan's low-profile and technical engagement model is resilient, Taipei might consider greater coalition building to enhance visibility and influence. Examples include joint programs with other like-minded donors; seeking deeper private-sector linkages (for example, with Taiwan's technology firms); and more outcomes for public communication. As one example, Taiwan's soft-power engagement in Nigeria is already exploring technology-supply-chain ties via diverse Taiwanese tech firms and agricultural missions.

Conclusions

Taipei suffers from diplomatic isolation, but remains an important contributor to global public goods, food security, climate mitigation, and innovation. This helps reframe the identity of Taiwan in international relations from the issue of its contested sovereignty to constructive partnerships.

Taiwan's agricultural commitment in Africa may not dominate headlines in mainstream media, but precisely because of its modest dimension, technical focus,

and local embedding, it deserves attention as a model of effective and beneficial diplomacy. Through training programs, demonstration farms, mobile kitchens, and vegetable seed systems, Taiwan is planting seeds of cooperation that may grow long beyond diplomatic limitations and outlive the challenges currently being faced.

The key question now is whether Taipei can convert these seeds into a visible harvest: one that strengthens institutional presence, broadens program reach, and deepens African integration. If it succeeds, Taiwan's field tractors and solar pumps may become more than development tools; they may become the pillars of Taiwan's global engagement narrative and new soft-power strategy. For farmers in Eswatini harvesting green leafy vegetables, for students in Burkina Faso trained in sustainable rice production, and for Taiwanese agronomists working across the length and breadth of the continent, the work is real. For policymakers in Taipei and capitals across Africa, the challenge is less about high-brow gestures and more about sustaining the growth of cooperation.

The main point: Taiwan is using technical, small-scale, agricultural and climate programs in Africa to build partnerships that have impacts beyond formal channels of diplomacy. By linking food security, capacity-building, and climate adaptation, Taipei is redefining its development diplomacy and showing that effective partnerships can thrive even without formal recognition.

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Georgia's Ruling Coalition Stokes Sovereignty Concerns to Justify an Extreme Stance on Taiwan

By: James Baron

James Baron is a Taipei-based journalist, whose writing is focused on Taiwan's history, culture, and foreign relations.

At some point around July 2018—the exact date is unclear—the government of Georgia began barring Taiwanese nationals from entry to the Caucasus nation. Since then, several Taiwanese travel vloggers have documented their experiences of trying to enter Georgia across the Armenian border. The reason behind the decision to deny entrance to Taiwanese nationals remains obscure.

However, former officials and scholars who spoke with the author in autumn 2025 have offered their views as to when and why this policy began. The consensus among these observers is that the ruling Georgian Dream party—a populist party that has held power in Tbilisi since 2012—adopted this approach to curry favor with Beijing, while citing Georgia's own sovereignty concerns as a factor, knowing that this remains a sensitive issue with the public.

The "Piggy Team Mates" Case

On one occasion in 2020, a vlogger pair employing the handle "Piggy Team Mates" (豬豬隊友生活日常, AKA Scott & Wendy) managed to enter Georgia using a US visa. However, on a subsequent trip they were turned back at a checkpoint between Bavra in Armenia and Ninotsminda in Georgia, despite Georgian immigration laws permitting entry for third country nationals traveling with a valid US visa. Border officials invoked Article 11 of Georgia's law on the *Legal Status of Aliens and Stateless Persons*, claiming the couple's status was that of "foreigners without nationality."

Image: A still image from a posted video by the vloggers "Piggy Team Mates," discussing how they were denied entry to Georgia on ROC (Taiwan) passports in spring 2020. (Image source: "Piggy Team Mates" YouTube Channel)

Yet, there is no such provision under this or any other article of Georgian law (except as pertains to people applying for residence in the country.) In the end, the deportation document cited Article 11, specifically Section 1, Subsection i, which refers only vaguely to "other cases envisaged by Georgian legislation." The couple's requests for clarification were met with the recommendation that they lodge a protest with "your consulate"—an impossible task since Taiwan does not maintain a diplomatic presence in Georgia (The couple was then promptly sent back across the border, where further obstacles confronted them when Armenian officials argued that they could not return, as they had single-entry visas. Eventually, they were allowed to apply for new ones—ending several hours in limbo in

freezing cold conditions).

Quite why Tbilisi found it necessary to take these unprecedented measures is unclear. Nevertheless, those who have challenged the government on this policy have found themselves branded agents for Taipei in Georgian state-backed media. Elsewhere, some analysts believe security concerns and the desire for an alliance with Moscow, Beijing, and Tehran—in the face of deteriorating relations with Europe—could have played a role.

The "Travel North Taiwan" Case

Another Taiwanese vlogger, part of a duo called Travel North Taiwan, fared better on a visit to Georgia by using a workaround: a temporary travel document issued by the Chinese consulate in Tbilisi. The vlogger was required to declare himself as a "Chinese compatriot" and was admitted by the Georgian immigration authorities with minimum fuss. However, the vlogger stressed that he would not encourage people to follow his example, as others had been rejected outright when pursuing this course. When I reached out to him to offer his thoughts for this article, he regretfully declined, stating that he had experienced considerable online "backlash" for documenting his experience. "It is pretty sad that even travel content is taken as political propaganda by some people," he told me—though he was unsure as to the identity of the trolls.

Multiple inquiries to Georgia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its parliament's Foreign Relations Committee remained unanswered at the time of writing. Georgia's parliament and its committees and organs are essentially an extension of the ruling Georgian Dream party, given that the main opposition parties have boycotted the legislative body following the disputed October 2024 parliamentary elections that sparked ongoing protests within the country.

A Turning Point in Georgia-Taiwan Relations

Some observers point to the 5th Open Government Partnership (OGP) Global Summit in Tbilisi in July 2018 as a concrete turning point in Georgia's stance toward Taiwan. The OGP, an initiative that promotes open and accountable governance, holds an annual gathering in different cities worldwide, with participation from government bodies and civil society organizations (CSOs). Although Taiwan is not an OGP member, it has regularly participated in the summits through delegations from agencies such as the National Development Council (國際發展委員會), under the Executive Yuan (EY, 行政院).

"I know for a fact there were many Taiwanese representatives there that year, because I was a keynote speaker and they approached me after the conference," Tinatin Khidasheli, chairperson of Civic Idea, told me in an interview. Civic Idea is a think tank that advocates for security and defense reform in Georgia, with a focus on Russian malign influence. "That was the last time a non-sportsman Taiwanese came to Georgia for an official international event," she says. [1]

As a former member of the Republican Party of Georgia, which was part of the Georgian Dream coalition government from 2012 to 2016, Khidasheli served as minister of defense from 2015-2016. In 2016, the Republican Party of Georgia, alongside other parties, abandoned the coalition over its increasingly authoritarian, pro-Moscow turn.

Although Georgia was granted candidate status for membership of the European Union in 2023, the process was subsequently put on hold over EU concerns regarding Tbilisi's democratic backsliding. In November 2024, the Georgian government announced that it was suspending the EU accession process until 2028. Key to these developments was Georgian Dream's introduction of a repressive "*Foreign Agent Law*" in August 2024, designed to gag dissent from CSOs, as well as widespread questions over the legitimacy of the parliamentary elections two months later.

Khidasheli has been a frequent target. Georgian Dream allies ramped up pressure after Khidasheli made a Facebook post following a visit to China by then-Georgian Dream chairman and current Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze. The post claimed that Kobakhidze "must have been sent to receive Beijing's blessing." A weeks-long vilification campaign ensued, stoked by Georgian Dream legislators' state-backed media—independent media has been slowly circumscribed in the country—which portrayed Khidasheli as a stooge of Taiwan. "They started this massive attack, talking about me being bribed and conspiring with Taiwanese security agencies and spies on behalf of the Japanese government," she says. "It was like the Soviet-era accusations where it makes no sense at all." [2]

Allegations that Civic Idea had been compromised by a grant from Doublethink Lab, a Taiwanese NGO that receives a reported 5 percent of its funding from the Taiwan government, compounded matters. However, as clarified by Doublethink Lab, a one-time grant was given to Civic Idea to undertake research for the China In the World Network, which analyses Beijing's malign influence and disinformation strategies across more than 100 countries. Doublethink cofounders Wu

Ming-hsuan and Puma Shen—now a legislator with Taiwan's ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民進黨)— met with Khidasheli in Tbilisi, providing further ammo for her detractors.

Leveraging Sovereignty Concerns

Like other observers, Khidasheli connects the regime's anti-Taiwan stance to Georgia's own disputes over the sovereignty of the "breakaway" republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (commonly referred to as the Tskhinvali Region in Georgia)—both of which are backed by Moscow. While China does not officially recognize either state, it maintains an ambiguous approach, voting against or abstaining from Georgian resolutions at the United Nations on the return of some 200,000 internally displaced people (IDPs). [3]

Informal exchanges, including a September 2025 visit to China by the Abkhaz Chamber of Commerce and Industry, have underscored Beijing's ambiguous approach. The timing of these interactions must have particularly rankled Georgian leaders, with the visit occurring just as China's ambassador to Georgia, Zhou Qian (周谦), was trumpeting the strength of relations in Tbilisi to commemorate the 76th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China.

While Beijing keeps its options open, Georgian Dream continues to make comparisons between the sovereignty questions regarding Abkhazia and Taiwan, aware that it resonates with the public. "Taiwan is a great case for them to put an equal mark with Abkhazia, by saying that whatever the attitudes of different countries and different people are towards Taiwan, it is exactly the same for Abkhazia," says Khidasheli. "So, how can you support those who support Taiwan?" Yet this rings hollow in the face of Chinese ambivalence. "Of course, every time China votes [against the IDP resolutions], we go public with the information that China is not our friend," she says. "That is another reason why [the authorities] attack us."

However, with the Georgian public largely unconcerned about China and oblivious to cross-Strait issues, the Taiwan parallel is a red herring, Khidasheli emphasizes. The fact is, "nobody in the world is even saying hello to them"—and legitimation, along with alternatives to EU trade (which has dropped dramatically under Georgian Dream), is the real goal. [4]

Hedging on Security, Eyeing Alternative Alliances

George Melashvili, founder and president of the Europe-Georgia Institute, and the author of an upcoming book, *Taiwan: Island of Freedom*, told me that, "They [Georgian Dream] utilize any situation for their own benefit, and since they need Beijing right now, they are of course pushing narratives on Taiwan that are understandable to China." Like Khidasheli, he notes that the parallels between Abkhazia and South Ossetia and Taiwan are unfair and spurious, as the historical circumstances are very different.

Still, the longstanding policy of successive Georgian regimes on the non-recognition of the "breakaway" regions, and the strength of public feeling on these sovereignty questions, makes the Georgian Dream's strategy a win-win gambit for placating China and earning public support. "Most people do not know or care about Taiwan, so appeasing China at all costs makes sense," says Melashvili. There is also a security angle. "Although I don't think they realize how grievous the threat from Russia is, they do understand there is *some* threat," he says. "By at least adding some additional security hedging factors through China, they might hope to slow down any Russian plans to attack Georgia." [5]

Such concerns might superficially make sense, says Giga Bokeria, a former Secretary of the National Security Council of Georgia—an advisory body to the president, which was slated for abolishment in 2025. "The fear factor is not being protected and, if China and Russia are both against us, then that adds to the insecurity," Bokeria tells me. "Too proactive or positive an attitude toward Taiwan could provoke China, so I would not criticize this government on that just because I'm an opponent." However, the current position "goes far beyond that," he says. The refusal to grant entry to Taiwanese nationals, which makes Georgia the only country in the world to adopt such a position, exemplifies this. "This has nothing to do with rational cautiousness," says Bokeria. "It is not just cultivating an image of China, Russia and even Iran as being at minimum equal to the West, but saying that this is the alliance we need to survive." [6]

Conclusion

The precise logic behind Georgian Dream's extreme stance toward Taiwan remains murky, but all roads from Tbilisi inevitably lead to Beijing. While the legitimacy of Tbilisi's sovereignty concerns is questionable, the issue remains emotionally provocative among Georgians. Beijing's foreign relations maneuvers are carefully calibrated and, as such, the ambiguous approach to the "breakaway" regions is not accidental. The reception of Abkhaz officials to China is one clear example that will doubtless have caused consternation in Tbilisi.

Tbilisi's approach to Beijing may be part of a hedging approach. With EU relations rapidly deteriorating and Moscow looming large, Tbilisi's strategy on China—and, by association, Taiwan—may just be part of a precarious balancing act to keep a powerful partner onside. This could be just for symbolic value, as Georgia has seen scant benefits from warmer relations with Beijing since the inking of a Strategic Partnership in 2023. If toeing a tougher line on Taiwan gives Georgian Dream an achievement to brandish before domestic audiences, expect more Taiwanese travelers to be turned away at the door.

The main point: Georgia's ruling Georgian Dream party began denying entry to Taiwanese nationals circa 2018. The government and state-controlled media have also accused former officials and civil society actors who criticize its pro-China policies of being agents for Taiwan. While the reasons for Georgian Dream's extreme stance on Taiwan are unclear, analysts cite sovereignty concerns, linked to the "breakaway" regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which Georgia claims as its own territory. Tbilisi may also be pursuing a hedging approach to keep authoritarian powers such as China, Russia, and Iran onside in the face of strained relations with Europe.

[1] In the interim, Taiwanese athletes have competed in international competitions in Georgia under the Chinese Taipei banner—as required by most sporting bodies, which follow the lead of the International Olympic Committee in denying Taiwan's sovereignty at Beijing's behest. Examples of Taiwanese participation in such events include the yearly Tbilisi Grand Slam, a tournament on the International Judo Federation World Tour.

[2] During the Great Terror of 1936 to 1938 in the Soviet Union, trumped-up accusations of spying for Japan were commonplace. For discussion of this, see: Hiroaki Kuromiya and Andrzej Pepłoński, "The Great Terror", *Cahiers du Monde Russe*, 50/2-3 / 2009, https://journals.openedition.org/monderusse/9736?lang=en.

[3] These IDPs are ethnic Georgians who were driven from the regions during the conflicts that that erupted between 1991 and 1993, in the wake of Georgia's independence from the Soviet Union, and during renewed hostilities in 2004 and 2008. The latter conflagration serving as a pretext for Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008.

[4] Author's interview, conducted in Tbilisi on September 3, 2025.

[5]. Author's interview, conducted in London on October 22, 2025.

[6]. Author's interview, conducted online on September 14, 2025.

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The Bamboo Doctors: How Taiwan's Medical NGOs Became Asia's Silent Humanitarian Superpower

By: Noa Wynn

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In theory, international aid should shift in accordance with need. In practice, it moves through diplomatic channels, United Nations coordination mechanisms, and bilateral agreements between governments. When disaster strikes, who gets help depends not only on who needs it, but on who has the institutional access to deliver it.

Taiwan's status as a country lacking widespread diplomatic recognition creates a strange reversal of this logic. It's blocked from nearly every major international health institution, cannot send representatives to World Health Organization (WHO) meetings, and can only watch as other nations coordinate disaster responses through official channels. Yet, Taiwanese doctors and nurses continue working in disaster zones, often arriving before representatives from larger countries and better-funded organizations.

Few of these medical teams are sent by Taiwan's government—instead, most are deployed by independent organizations that developed precisely because the island had to build its own humanitarian infrastructure outside official channels. The largest of these is the Tzu Chi Foundation (慈濟基金會), which is now one of the world's biggest relief organizations, operating across dozens of countries. But the organization did not begin with global ambitions or institutional backing. Rather, the origin story is the opposite of what one might expect for an organization of this scale.

How Bamboo Banks Became a Global Network

Tzu Chi started in 1966, when a Buddhist nun named Cheng Yen (證嚴) convinced thirty housewives to save spare change in bamboo coin banks. The money went

to help poor families in their local area. This was happening in Hualien, on Taiwan's east coast—an impoverished rural area where over 1.3 million people lived in poverty and medical care was scarce. There was no grand vision of global humanitarian work, merely neighbours helping neighbours with whatever they could spare. The bamboo banks would grow into activism on a much larger scale, but the core idea stayed the same: ordinary people contributing what they can to help others in need.

Today, Tzu Chi mobilizes over 9,000 physicians and health professionals to provide free medical services to more than 4 million people worldwide. Taiwan Root Medical Peace Corps (TRMPC) has conducted 422 medical missions across 50 countries since 1995, with the participation of over 17,000 volunteers. Participants pay their own travel expenses and use their vacation time to work in refugee camps, remote villages, and disaster zones. The scale of Tzu Chi's work is comparable to what many governments accomplish through their entire foreign aid budgets, despite relying primarily on volunteer participation.

Even in the People's Republic of China (PRC), Tzu Chi operates on a huge scale. Despite the ongoing cross-Strait tensions, the organization has conducted humanitarian work, such as the construction of schools and hospitals, in 28 Chinese provinces since 1991. Tzu Chi maintains a strict policy that volunteers are not to discuss business, politics, or preach religion while giving aid, which allows it to operate where overtly political or religious organizations cannot. In 2010, Tzu Chi became the first overseas non-governmental organization to receive permission to set up an office in China, where it identifies as a charity rather than as a religious group. At the same time, Beijing authorized the organization to become the first overseas non-profit organization to establish a nationwide charity foundation across the PRC.

Buddhist Values Guide Service across Global Communities

Its disaster relief efforts have opened doors in China, but Tzu Chi's largest impact has been in Taiwan. The organization has built eight major hospitals that provide quality healthcare at affordable prices, based on Buddhist principles prioritizing compassion and service. Yet, these principles are not pushed on to patients. There is no religious pressure and patients are not required to be Buddhist. The medical care itself remains secular even though Buddhist values guide the volunteers.

This orientation matters when working internationally because it allows Tzu Chi to operate in places where overtly religious organizations face restrictions. Volunteers receive training not just in medical procedures but in the core philosophy of service that need not accompany religious outreach—such as humility, treating every person with dignity regardless of background, and giving without expecting credit or return. That philosophical foundation creates consistency across hundreds of missions in dozens of countries with different religious and cultural contexts.

Because Tzu Chi combines practical medical expertise with values that most cultures respect, the Buddhist organization from Taiwan has been able to provide care in Muslim, Christian, Hindu, and secular communities without friction.

Meanwhile, the grassroots nature of the organization has allowed Tzu Chi to largely—but not entirely—circumvent the political currents holding back the Taiwan government's international engagement. Ultimately, a grassroots approach was exactly the model Taiwan needed when it lost its UN seat in 1971 and diplomatic doors began closing. The government could not work through normal diplomatic structures, but civil society organizations like Tzu Chi were not bound by those restrictions. Taiwanese civil society learned to operate independently, building relationships directly with communities and local organizations rather than working through governmental channels. The Taiwanese government has sometimes supported civil society with logistics, and occasionally takes credit for their work, but NGOs have performed the actual services and continue to operate on their own terms.

Image: Volunteers at a Tzu Chi Foundation-supported health clinic in Xochimilco (a borough of Mexico City) provide basic healthcare services to local residents (undated, 2019). (Image source: Tzu Chi Foundation / YouTube)

China's Aid Seeks Alignment, While Taiwan's Aid Builds Trust

Most international aid—whether from China or the

West—comes attached with conditions and political calculations. China does not provide aid without strings attached: build a port with PRC money, and Beijing may ask for political concessions; take a loan from the Bank of China and expect PRC diplomats to call for your support in the United Nations. Similarly, Western aid moves through governmental and multilateral channels that require formal relationships and coordinating structures. Even Western "untied" aid (aid without political conditions) is criticized for its slow-moving, bureaucratic nature. However, Taiwan's medical NGOs are not constricted in this way.

The founder of Taiwan Root Medical Peace Corps, Liu Chi-chun (劉啟群), explicitly stated that "medical services should transcend national borders and exceed the limitations of politics, race, and religion," illustrating how Tzu Chi's humanitarian programs are free from political agenda. This approach fosters a different kind of international relationship between foreign countries and Taiwan: one built on trust and practical help, rather than formal agreements or political leverage.

When Political Pressure Overrides Emergency Needs

The real test of this model comes during disasters, when speed matters most and Taiwan's teams are often among the first that are ready to deploy. Unfortunately, being ready does not necessarily mean being allowed in. Countries hit by earthquakes or floods have faced pressure from Beijing to reject Taiwanese assistance, even when people are still trapped under rubble. In such cases, political considerations tend to outweigh medical qualifications.

For example, when an earthquake in Nepal killed over 8,700 people in 2015, authorities in Nepal turned down an experienced Taiwanese rescue team despite having few of their own response teams on the ground. When an earthquake in Myanmar killed over 3,600 people in March 2025, Taiwan assembled a 126-member rescue unit with six search dogs and 15 tons of specialized equipment. Myanmar's military government made them wait 48 hours, then denied them permission to enter the country. The rescue team returned to Taiwan unused.

This is a well-documented pattern: disaster strikes, Taiwan offers help, and governments calculate whether accepting the aid will upset Beijing. More often than not, remaining on good terms with China takes precedence over utilizing Taiwan's experienced rescue teams.

Decades of Tzu Chi's Work Reach Millions Globally

Despite working against these political constraints, Taiwan's medical NGOs find ways to help – working through informal channels and partnering with local organizations when governments prefer not to cooperate directly. Tzu Chi operates through a network of local branches and volunteer organizations in over 50 countries. This gives them grassroot access that does not require government approval. When there is an emergency, Tzu Chi volunteers often coordinate with local religious groups, community leaders, or existing NGOs already on the ground rather than waiting for official invitations from national governments.

The organization follows five principles of disaster relief: direct, focused, respectful, practical and timely; and volunteers bow to recipients at a 90-degree angle to show their respect and dedicate themselves wholeheartedly to the mission. They show up in places that will accept them and do the work regardless of official recognition. It has operated in this manner for three decades.

This reflects the moral clarity at the heart of the issue: Taiwan is restricted from accessing WHO surveillance networks or technical guidelines in real time, yet Taiwanese medical professionals are present in refugee camps and disaster zones, undertaking essential work to save lives.

Year after year, Tzu Chi sends additional volunteers to new places. The scale of their operations continues to grow. What started as housewives with bamboo banks, now reaches millions of people across dozens of countries. It is important to note that none of this aid moves through official channels, nor does it count toward formal international health coordination. Nevertheless, patients get treated, surgeries happen, and education work advances. Over decades, Tzu Chi has proven that institutional access is not always necessary when the goal is to show up and help people. Effective humanitarian work does not need to depend on diplomatic status.

It Is Time to Remove Politics from Humanitarian Relief

While Tzu Chi has reached more locations than it has been turned away from, the organization suffers from its own challenges. Because it relies heavily on volunteers, response capacity can be uneven depending on local branch strength and volunteer availability. In some regions, Tzu Chi struggles to maintain a long-term presence after an initial disaster response.

The strict apolitical stance, while necessary for access, sometimes prevents Tzu Chi from addressing the root

causes of humanitarian crises that are fundamentally political. Volunteers cannot talk about politics or criticize governments while providing aid, which is exactly why authoritarian regimes let them in. They're rebuilding schools in regions where the government won't fund education and treating patients in areas where the government stopped funding medical care. But mentioning those connections would cost them access. So the help continues, while the systems creating the need for help stay in place. The choice to stay completely apolitical lets them work in more countries and reach more people, but it means they sometimes provide relief in situations where the real solution would require political change for which they are not allowed to advocate.

In addition, funding remains heavily dependent on donations from Taiwan and the Taiwanese diaspora. That narrow donor base means less flexibility and smaller reserves than groups that fundraise globally. The organization has also faced criticism for lack of financial transparency in some operations, particularly regarding how donations are allocated across different programs and countries. Better coordination with international health organizations could improve efficiency, but Tzu Chi's informal structure sometimes makes it difficult to integrate into broader relief efforts.

The solutions are not complicated, though they require political will. Taiwan's medical NGOs have spent decades proving what they can do in disaster zones. What is missing is not capability or willingness to help, but the framework that lets them do their work without getting blocked by political calculations at the worst possible moment. A few practical changes could make that difference.

Countries facing natural disasters should establish pre-approved humanitarian corridors that allow certified medical NGOs like Tzu Chi to deploy regardless of diplomatic status, based on their track records and capabilities.

Taiwan's government could create a formal "Humanitarian Passport" program that gives medical volunteers from recognized NGOs expedited entry to disaster zones. International bodies like the WHO should develop a registry of pre-certified disaster response organizations that can deploy immediately without case-by-case government approval.

Taiwan issuing special passports for aid workers will not change anything if recipient countries still refuse entry. What matters is whether governments facing disasters are willing to set up humanitarian visa systems that let qualified rescue teams through customs based on their expertise, not their diplomatic standing.

Taiwan itself could strengthen Tzu Chi's capacity by offering tax incentives for medical professionals who participate in international missions, and creating humanitarian leave programs that allow doctors to take extended leave without career penalties.

The main point: Medical professionals should not require diplomatic recognition to tackle an epidemic or treat earthquake victims. While Taiwanese disaster response organizations have been turned away by certain countries, Tzu Chi has built a thriving grassroots model that allows it to carry out humanitarian work around the world—in spite of Taiwan's diplomatic isolation.

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