

Balancing through Humanitarianism: India-Taiwan Cooperation in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief

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Abstract

As Sino-Indian relations grow more tense amid violent clashes on the Himalayan border, and the tensions in the Taiwan Strait continue to rise, New Delhi and Taipei are inching closer to each other. India and Taiwan are both democratic entities in the Indo-Pacific region involved in disputes with China. Yet for a variety of economic interests and diplomatic legacies, security ties between India and Taiwan remain limited. India and Taiwan also share a common vulnerability with regard to the occurrence of natural disasters. Both countries have a long history of catastrophes that have devastated their populations, infrastructure, and both tangible and intangible heritage. To cope with the challenges posed by the augmentation in the frequency and severity of natural disasters, national armed forces have come to play a pivotal role in humanitarian response. This article explores the scope of interactions between the Indian armed forces and their Taiwanese counterparts. The key research question is: whether the substance and dynamics of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) activities can serve as a potential avenue for New Delhi and Taipei to deepen their bilateral engagement and consider the promotion of military cooperation. To address this research question, this article focuses on India and Taiwan's approach to disaster management examined through the lens of the theoretical foundation of realism. The changing Indo-Pacific geopolitical environment is giving a fresh impetus to India-Taiwan security ties. Sadly, the relationship between those two dynamic Asian democracies has been neglected and remains widely understudied in the academic literature. This article intends to rectify this matter and raise awareness about the massive potential of such a liaison.

Keywords: *India-Taiwan relations, Security cooperation, Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR)*

1. Introduction

As Sino-Indian relations grow more tense amid violent clashes on the Himalayan border, and the tensions in the Taiwan Strait continue to rise, New Delhi and Taipei are inching closer to each other. India and Taiwan are both democratic nations situated in the Indo-Pacific region, engaged in territorial disputes with China. Yet for a variety of economic interests and diplomatic legacies, security ties between India and Taiwan remain limited. India and Taiwan also share a common vulnerability with regard to the occurrence of natural disasters. Both countries have a long history of catastrophes that have devastated their populations, infrastructure, and both tangible and intangible heritage. Their adverse geo-climatic conditions and unique topographic features make them particularly prone to the ravages wrought by typhoons, floods, and earthquakes. To cope with the challenges posed by the augmentation in the frequency and severity of natural disasters, national armed forces have come to play a pivotal role in humanitarian response. Militaries are increasingly being called upon to complement relief efforts led by civilian agencies. This article explores the scope of interactions between the Indian armed forces and their Taiwanese counterparts.

The key research question is: whether the substance and dynamics of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) activities can serve as a potential avenue for New Delhi and Taipei to deepen their bilateral engagement and consider the promotion of military cooperation. To address this research question, this article focuses on India and Taiwan's approach to disaster management examined through the lens of the theoretical foundation of realism. The realist paradigm offers the most thorough theoretical framework for understanding alliance politics within the context of the emerging power distribution in the Indo-Pacific region. Realism is particularly significant in this scenario as it emphasizes power dynamics, state actions, and survival in an anarchic international system; these elements are especially relevant in the current Indo-Pacific landscape, where power is increasingly contested, notably due to the rise of China. Using a qualitative methodology, this article endorses a triangulation of sources, including academic sources, government documents, and news media publications. All information on natural disasters is based on the Emergency Events Database (EM-DAT)

maintained by the Center for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED).¹

The present article is organized as follows. The first section looks at international security engagement and the prospects of building partner capacity for HADR operations. The second section assesses the vulnerability of India and Taiwan to natural disasters and highlights the commitment of their armed forces to cope with complex emergency situations. The third section addresses the nature of India-Taiwan relations and the recent rapprochement observed between the two countries. Finally, the fourth section discusses the influence of the China factor and the cautious approach that New Delhi and Taipei need to adopt in order to avoid unwanted consequences. The changing Indo-Pacific geopolitical environment is giving a fresh impetus to India-Taiwan security ties. Sadly, the relationship between those two dynamic Asian democracies has been neglected and remains widely understudied in the academic literature. This article intends to rectify this matter and raise awareness about the massive potential of such a liaison.

2. Humanitarian Operations

Contemporary military collaboration has emerged as a crucial element of military diplomacy. This type of cooperation aids in fortifying strategic security alliances and tackling common security issues. Since the conclusion of the Cold War, a significant transformation has occurred in the nature and objectives of international military collaboration and support, which encompasses the evolution of the security concept, covering human, societal, and environmental security. The role of military collaboration is no longer limited to supporting allies and counterbalancing enemies but is increasingly used as a means of pursuing wider foreign policy goals, including in the capacity of states to engage with former or potential rivals. For instance, the organization of joint military training and exercises offers an opportunity to build a constructive dialogue that may facilitate further communication and, during a crisis, avoid confusion between cultures (Ebitz, 2019). In contrast, the suspension of a planned exercise by one of the participants is often perceived as a sign of displeasure or diplomatic tensions. The emergence of new security threats such as terrorism, drug trafficking, illegal migration, infectious diseases, and climate change, to name a few, is challenging long-held assumptions

about what a state's armed forces are for and how they should be structured and tasked (Edmunds, 2006).

Global phenomena such as natural disasters know no borders and can cause damage in multiple jurisdictions. Contrary to what is commonly assumed, the adverse effects of natural disasters are not limited to the loss of human life and destruction of physical infrastructure, but they also exacerbate pre-existing vulnerabilities and increase the risk of violent civil conflict. Although situations vary, the occurrence of a major catastrophe in an already fragile environment can lead to political and social turmoil. Over the last twenty years, there has been a noticeable increase in the deployment of military personnel and resources to deliver humanitarian assistance both domestically and internationally (Canyon et al., 2017). In that sense, the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami was a game-changer for both civilian and military authorities, especially in the Indo-Pacific region. As a result of the unprecedented scale of that catastrophe, HADR operations escalated from brief mentions in early strategy and defense documents into entire sections dedicated to the subject. Internationally, numerous lessons emerged from the experience of the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami, including education, preventive measures, and pre-coordination. Given that the same event affected so many states, this showed that governments that had conducted previous bilateral exercises and coordination events to prepare for natural disasters fared better in responding to an actual disaster (Cameron, 2016).

India's HADR efforts have gained in prominence with its economic rise. New Delhi has repeatedly stated its intent to be the region's first "responder" and a leading actor during emergencies (Chakradeo, 2021). India's cooperative activities include participating in capacity-building events run by the inter-governmental Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). Disaster risk management is one of IORA's eight focus areas with the objective to "facilitate and enhance regional cooperation on preparedness and response strategies to fragile and unpredictable situations" (Indian Ocean Rim Association, n.d.). The organization held the First IORA Expert Group Meeting on Disaster Risk Management on January 19, 2021. The meeting was set to finalize the IORA Guidelines for HADR, aimed at "developing a speedy, responsive, coordinated, and effective HADR strategy for IORA member states

when required, and serving the purpose of establishing a common understanding of HADR operations” (Cook and Chen, 2021: 10). India also leads the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), which has the potential to play an important role in disaster management. In 2016, New Delhi initiated discussions on closer regional cooperation and inter-governmental disaster response coordination. One year later, India hosted the first-ever four-day Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation Disaster Management Exercise (BIMSTEC DMEx-2017). Attended by around 135 participants from all BIMSTEC member states, the exercise served to develop synergy and synchronize the use of government and military resources to cope with an emergency circumstance (National Disaster Response Force, 2017). Similar exercises were held in 2020 and 2021 to further improve the BIMSTEC structure for joint strategy and capability development.

Additionally, India is one of the founding members of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), a regional political and economic organization that focuses on promoting regional peace, economic prosperity, and social empowerment for the people in the region (White, 2015). In 2006, a SAARC Disaster Management Center (SDMC) was inaugurated in New Delhi. Later, in November 2016, the Interim Unit (IU) of the SDMC was set up under the premise of the Gujarat Institute of Disaster Management. The IU provides policy guidance, technical assistance, capacity-building services, and professional training to help all SAARC member states manage disaster risks more effectively. It has also conducted regional consultations jointly with the United Nations Disaster Office for Risk Reduction on the Asia-Pacific Action Plan 2021-2024 (SAARC Disaster Management Center, 2021). The latter addresses how the ongoing threat of climate change is exacerbating the cascading nature of disaster risk. It calls for several actions around the need to strengthen innovative actions that emerged from good practices (United Nations Disaster Risk Reduction, 2021).

As a member of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) along with the United States (US), Japan, and Australia, India is committed to cooperating on non-traditional security issues and mitigating the threat from natural disasters in the Indo-Pacific region. On 23 September 2022, Quad leaders signed into operation the Guidelines for the Quad Partnership on HADR in the Indo-Pacific. These guidelines aim to create a framework for Quad countries

to strengthen coordination and improve interoperability during disaster responses. All four Quad partners are also regular participants in joint regional exercises such as the ASEAN Regional Forum Disaster Relief Exercise (Chen, 2023). Although Taiwan has gained considerable diplomatic support from Quad members over the past few years, its political and military relations with the Quad remain limited. The fact that none of the Quad countries officially recognizes the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan means that membership for Taipei is unlikely to occur in the near future.

While Taiwan's ambiguous international status certainly complicates its ability to join international organizations in which the rest of the world shares information and makes critical decisions for disaster management, it does not prevent Taipei from pursuing bilateral HADR training and exercises on its own (Coutaz, 2021). Through initiatives such as the Global Cooperation and Training Framework (GCTF), Taiwan has been able to share its expertise in public health, digital governance, and disaster resilience with partners in the Indo-Pacific region. This initiative aids countries in their capacity-building efforts by offering training programs for officials and experts, while simultaneously enhancing Taiwan's global presence and promoting collaborative networks across the Indo-Pacific. Founded in 2015 by Taiwan and the US, with Japan joining in 2019 and Australia in 2021, the GCTF functions through workshops, training sessions, and multilateral cooperation. Since its establishment, it has conducted over 85 events, reaching more than 130 countries (Global Cooperation and Training Framework, 2025). Although it holds an informal status, the GCTF operates as a *de facto* international forum that functions independently of formal recognition. This allows countries to leverage Taiwan's capabilities without the need to establish official diplomatic relations. For Taipei, this arrangement serves as a diplomatic workaround that enhances its soft power and provides a vital platform for coalition-building.

3. Living with Natural Disasters

Armed forces in the Indo-Pacific region are the main responders in the event of a natural disaster. Due to a lack of civilian HADR agencies, military involvement in domestic relief efforts often represents the safest way to bring assistance to those who need it the most. In India and Taiwan, civilian and

military disaster management structures have adopted various coordinating mechanisms to strengthen disaster risk governance, investing in all phases of disasters (i.e. prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery) and through HADR activities. When it comes to addressing the challenges associated with natural disasters, not all countries are equal. Some devote more resources to the issue and find themselves in a better position to deal with the impacts of natural disasters (Coutaz, 2021). Both India and Taiwan have experienced their fair share of disasters and remain constantly under threat of future catastrophes.

India is among the world's most disaster-prone countries, with 27 of its 29 states and seven union territories exposed to recurrent disasters (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, n.d.). The country's vast and variable geographical extent, diverse relief features coupled with climatic variations are the primary reasons for its vulnerability. Some 60 per cent of India is vulnerable to earthquakes, and around 40 million hectares are susceptible to floods. Two-thirds of its 7,500-kilometer coastline is exposed to typhoons, and 68 per cent of its area is prone to drought (World Bank, 2016). From 1970 to 2020, India was hit by 638 catastrophes, or 12.5 per year on average. Floods made up 42 per cent (268) of these, while typhoons (and convective storms) accounted for 26 per cent (164) and earthquakes 4 per cent (23). During that time, 203,928 people lost their lives due to natural disasters (3.999 per year on average). Floods (63,585), typhoons and convective storms (52,214) and earthquakes (49,872) represented 81 per cent of total fatalities. The total number of affected people, which includes the number of people injured and the number of homeless or those whose houses have been destroyed, was 2.4 billion (46.2 million per year on average). In terms of economic losses, natural disasters caused USD137.3 billion in damage, which amounts to USD2.7 billion per year on average. Floods caused the most damage and generated economic losses of USD84.6 billion (62 per cent), while typhoons (and convective storms) led to economic losses of USD40.3 billion (29 per cent) and earthquakes to USD5.3 billion (4 per cent) (ibid.).

Following the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami, the Indian government enacted the Disaster Management Act on December 23, 2005. The Act envisaged the creation of a National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) and State Disaster Management Authorities (SDMAs) to implement a holistic and integrated approach to emergency management across the

country (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2023). Despite the setting up of these institutions, the response of the civil authorities remains “sub-optimal and there is still a heavy reliance on the [national] armed forces” (Parmar, 2012: 94). On several occasions, the armed forces under the Ministry of Defense have been called upon to intervene and provide aid to local government and officials. Operation Surya Hope is a case in point. In June 2013, a flash flood came down upon the overflowing banks of the Chorabari lake in the state of Uttarakhand. The catastrophe coincided with the peak tourist and pilgrimage season, considerably enhancing the number of casualties (6,054). The army’s response included the deployment of infantry battalions, regiments of combat engineers, advanced dressing stations and other medical units, logistics and supply assets, specialized mountain forces, and army aviation corps assets. Over 8,500 troops and 83 aircraft participated in the operation (Tripathi, 2013). It was considered one of the largest humanitarian missions ever undertaken by the Indian armed forces (*New Delhi Television Limited* 2013). In 2019 and 2020, military resources and capabilities were also mobilized during the monsoon seasons and floods which killed 1,900 people and 1,920 people, respectively (*ibid.*).

India has carried out similar relief operations to assist its neighbors in the recent past. For instance, after the 2015 Nepal earthquake, the government in New Delhi was among the first to react, launching Operation Maitri and deploying the Indian Army, Air Force, and other specialized assets. Nepal’s then Ambassador to India recognized the country’s timely efforts and called the response “unique” in its scale (Chakradeo, 2021). In the following years, India’s external HADR included the deployment of military assets in Sri Lanka (2016), Bangladesh and Myanmar (2017), and Afghanistan (2018). The armed forces have also been engaged in regular bilateral exercises with multiple strategic partners, demonstrating a growing comfort in security cooperation. In 2022, India held joint military exercises with the US (“Yudh Abhyas”), Kazakhstan (“Ex KazInd”), and Nepal (“Surya Kiran”). The objective of these exercises is to share best practices, tactics, techniques and procedures for the successful conduct of the HADR. India contributes its resources to prevent or mitigate regional and international crises. New Delhi is demonstrating its commitment to assume the role of a leading power. Beyond narrow self-

interest, such contributions help project India's soft power abroad and portray the country in a positive light.

The specific location and distinct geography of the island of Taiwan have given rise to its beautiful scenery, but they are also responsible for the recurrent misfortune of natural disasters. Taiwan lies on the Pacific Ring of Fire along the collision zone between the Philippine Sea and the Eurasian plate, one of the most seismically active regions on the planet. Fortunately, most of the earthquakes are unnoticeable and cause minimal damage. In addition to earthquakes, Taiwan is prone to typhoons, floods, and landslides. Specific endogenous characteristics such as a fragile geological formation, steep terrain, and land given to erosion, combined with the country's uneven distribution of population, add to the vulnerability of the island (Coutaz, 2018). From 1970 to 2020, Taiwan suffered from 92 catastrophes (1.8 per year on average). Typhoons made up 75 per cent (69) of them, while earthquakes accounted for 11 per cent (10) and floods 10 per cent (9). Natural disasters killed 4,513 people (88.5 per year on average). Earthquakes (2,490), typhoons (1,714) and floods (119) represented 96 per cent of total fatalities. The total number of affected people was 3.8 million (75,473 per year on average). During that time, natural disasters resulted in economic losses of USD22.2 billion (USD435.6 million per year on average). Earthquakes caused the largest amount of damage and generated the majority of economic losses with USD15.9 billion (72 per cent), followed by typhoons at USD6 billion (27 per cent) (ibid.).

The traumatic experience of the 921 earthquake remains etched in people's memories as one of the worst natural disasters in Taiwan's history. On September 21, 1999, a magnitude 7.3 earthquake struck the island, killing more than 2,250 people and leaving 11,000 injured. Thousands of houses collapsed, leaving more than 100,000 homeless (Central Bureau Weather 1999). The unprecedented scale of the catastrophe compelled the government to strengthen its prevention and response policies, and increase the protection of people's life, property, and safety. The Disaster Prevention and Protection Act (DPPA) was enacted on July 19, 2000. Focusing on the development of "mitigation and preparedness before disaster, response actions during disaster and recovery after disasters," it serves as the legal basis for national disaster management plans (ROC Ministry of Justice 2022). The DPPA listed HADR among the military key's responsibilities. Because of its strict regulations and

excellent natural disaster management, Taiwan was able to keep the death toll of the magnitude 7.4 earthquake that struck off the coast of Hualien County on 3 April 2024 to fewer than 20 people (*The Economic Times*, 2024).

The ROC armed forces spend training time each year conducting disaster relief exercises alongside their civilian counterparts to practise prevention and rescue operations during composite disasters. The Min An No. 10 (The National Defense Mobilization and Disaster Prevention and Rescue Drill) public safety exercise is held with local governments, and attended by observers from international disaster relief organizations and NGOs from around the Indo-Pacific region. To monitor the occurrence of possible disasters, the military has prepositioned an HADR force of 1,844 personnel in 99 locations within 19 geographic areas situated across the island. Furthermore, there is a standby force of 39,000 personnel deployed in each area of operation (Coutaz, 2021). Since 2018, the armed forces have accomplished HADR tasks and mitigated losses to people's lives and property in several major events, including in 2018 the Hualien earthquake, torrential rains and typhoon Maria; in 2019 the dengue fever prevention efforts, typhoon Danas, typhoon Lekima and typhoon Bailu; and in 2020 the worst drought seen in decades and the rampant spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. To meet the needs of international HADR missions, the armed forces have organized a medical team equipped with medical supplies, tents, generators and lamps ready to be deployed for immediate response to disasters. In recent years, medical resources have been assigned to overseas emergencies in countries like Macedonia, Haiti, the Philippines, Palau, and Nepal (ROC Ministry of National Defense, 2019). During the period of the pandemic, contacts were maintained through various alternative means such as video and teleconferencing, and transmission of documentation.

4. Enhancing India-Taiwan Cooperation

Taiwan has consistently shared with India its unique perspective on the People's Republic of China (PRC). This relationship is rooted in the historical ties between India and the Kuomintang (KMT), which were firmly established during the visit of Chiang Kai-shek and Soong Mei-ling to India in 1942. The visit by the Generalissimo and his wife was instrumental in forging a closer bond

between India and the ROC. However, India's recognition of the PRC on 1 April 1950 marked the end of what had been cordial India-ROC ties. During a significant portion of the Cold War, there was minimal official interaction between India and Taiwan. Despite the fact that India and China maintained no relations for 15 years following the Sino-Indian War of 1962, New Delhi and Taipei did not pursue substantial engagement until avenues for informal communication were created in the 1990s (Hashmi 2020).

India and Taiwan have experienced a significant amelioration of their relationship in recent years. When ROC President Tsai Ing-wen of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), assumed office in 2016, one of her first policy moves was to launch the New Southbound Policy. During her inaugural address, President Tsai stated: "We will promote the New Southbound Policy in order to elevate the scope and diversity of our external economy, and bid farewell to our past over-reliance on a single market... We will broaden exchanges and cooperation with regional neighbors in areas such as technology, culture and commerce, and expand in particular our dynamic relationships with ASEAN and India" (Tsai 2016). The main objectives of the policy have been to reduce the island's dependence on China and to increase its international outreach. India is one of the focus countries of the New Southbound Policy and has occupied an important place in Taiwan's new strategy. James Huang, the first Director of the New Southbound Policy, called India "the 'jewel' in Taiwan's external economic strategy" (Hashmi 2020: 40).

Engagements between India and Taiwan gradually strengthened. In 2017, the Taipei Economic and Cultural Center in New Delhi and the India Taipei Association formalized a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the Promotion of Industry Collaboration, an agreement that was preceded by 21 MoUs signed earlier that year by Taiwan's Chinese National Federation of Industries and the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (Karackattu, 2019). Interactions further grew in 2018 with the inking of two agreements of an updated version of the "Bilateral Investment Agreement" and "Mutual Recognition of the Respective Authorized Economic Operation Programs." That same year, the Taiwan Tourism Information Center opened in Mumbai to boost people-to-people contacts (Strong, 2018).

After Tsai's reelection in 2020, bilateral ties gathered unprecedented momentum. In 2022, the trade volume between India and Taiwan reached

USD8.45 billion, an increase of 9.8 per cent from 2021. The number and interest of Taiwanese companies that were exploring strategic expansion into the Indian market rose rapidly. In November 2023, Foxconn's Hon Hai Technology announced an investment of USD1.6 billion for construction projects in India (Kar, 2023). In April, the world's largest contract manufacturer of electronics had already announced its intention to invest USD600 million in two component factories in the state of Karnataka. Additional companies such as the shoemaker Pou Chen and electric scooter maker and battery solutions provider Gogoro made similar announcements in 2023 (Everington, 2023). However, the deeper engagement between Taipei and New Delhi has not been limited to trade and investment alone. Taiwan is faced with a low birth rate and an aging population, and so the Tsai administration has projected a need to hire as many as 100,000 Indians to work at factories, farms, and hospitals in Taiwan. On 16 February 2024, the two countries concluded an agreement to facilitate the employment of Indian workers in Taiwan. Once fully implemented, this agreement would make Indians one of the largest migrant worker communities on the island after Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines (ROC Ministry of Labor, 2024).

Taiwan has also spared no effort in its promotion of educational exchanges with India. Since 2021, National Taiwan University, National Ching Hsing University and six other Taiwanese universities have signed MoUs with the Indian Institute of Technology Bombay and the Indian Institute of Technology Madras, among others (*Taiwan Today*, 2023). That same year, the ROC Ministry of Education launched the first "Taiwan Studies Project" at Flame University. The project is designed to extend Indian scholars' knowledge of Taiwan in the field of democratic governance, including disaster management and public health (ROC Ministry of Education 2021). Most recently, the Education Division of the Taipei Economic and Cultural Centre signed an MoU with the Er. Perumal Manimekalai College of Engineering in Tamil Nadu to provide Mandarin language courses for engineering students (ROC Ministry of Education, 2024). In addition to tourism, academic cooperation represents another meaningful way to promote interaction between people.

India does not have official diplomatic relations with Taiwan. New Delhi was one of the first non-communist governments to recognize the People's Republic of China (PRC), and only a few countries have held onto a more rigid

one-China policy than India. Even after the government of P.V. Narasimha Rao established formal contacts with Taipei after the Cold War, India remained extremely cautious in its engagement with the island-state (Mohan, 2023). That approach began to change after the election of Narendra Modi in 2014, who had once visited Taiwan in his capacity as the General Secretary of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) (Hashmi, 2020). Under Modi's leadership, India has pursued a more ambitious foreign policy agenda, including carving out a greater global role for itself within the Indo-Pacific region. Building on the Look East Policy of the early 1990s, Modi has initiated the Act East Policy, giving a new thrust to efforts to intensify economic, strategic and diplomatic relations with countries that share common concerns with India on China's growing economic and military strength and its implication for the evolving regional order (Kesavan, 2020). It is in this context that New Delhi has shown interest in expanding its economic and sociocultural ties with Taipei. Under a series of national strategies such as "Make in India," "Skill India," and "Digital India," the Indian government has welcomed the development of technological and high-end industrial engagements with Taiwanese companies (Focus Taiwan CNA, 2023).

On the political front, India is now paying greater attention to East Asia. In an increasingly fraught geopolitical neighborhood, New Delhi recognizes the role played by the seas in promoting sustainable progress in a secure and stable environment. It would like to see the Indo-Pacific not only better connected, but also free from traditional and non-traditional security threats that prevent the free movement of goods, people, and ideas (Ministry of External Affairs, 2019). Narendra Modi has termed sea lanes the "main arteries" of global trade and called for freedom of navigation and the need to adhere to international norms in order to maintain peace and support economic growth (*The Economic Times*, 2017; Bratton, 2023). India has voiced concerns over the militarization of the Taiwan Strait. It has obliquely criticized China by urging "restraint and avoidance of unilateral actions to change the *status quo*" (Reuters, 2022). In 2023, General Anil Chauhan, India's top military commander, commissioned a study to examine the wider impact of a conflict over Taiwan, and what action New Delhi could take in response. India would be a direct stakeholder in a scenario of war across the Taiwan Strait. That is not only because of the rapid deterioration of India-China relations, but also due to the larger role India seeks for itself, regionally and globally (Mohan, 2023).

According to leaked information, one option the Indian armed forces have been studying involves serving as a logistics hub to provide repair and maintenance facilities for allied warships and aircraft, as well as food, fuel and medical equipment for armies resisting China. A more extreme option is assessing the potential for New Delhi to get directly involved along its northern border, opening a new theater of war for Beijing (Sen, 2023). After years of silence, the Indian strategic community seems to be waking up to the pressing policy dilemma that a prospective Chinese invasion of Taiwan poses.

Taiwan's strategy for the Indo-Pacific is based on several fundamental national goals: ensuring national security against increasing threats from China, broadening economic partnerships to lessen dependence on the mainland market, improving its international presence despite diplomatic isolation, and actively participating in the global order as a dynamic democracy and technological frontrunner (Hashmi, 2023). These objectives illustrate Taipei's distinct vulnerabilities as well as its ambitions to contribute positively to the future of the region. Taiwan has positioned itself as a stronghold for democracy, a free press, and transparent technology. It has emerged as a crucial partner for India in protecting the information domain, due to its vast expertise in managing disinformation and cyber threats, which are frequently attributed to Chinese sources.

Bilateral relations in the area of defense and security remain the most sensitive point of India-Taiwan cooperation. Military-to-military contacts have been limited. However, India's recent attendance at a security forum in Taipei indicates that the possibility of security or military engagements and information-sharing are currently being explored. In August 2023, General Manoj Mukund Naravane, Admiral Karambir Singh, and Air Force Marshall Rakesh Kumar Singh Bhadauria traveled to the island to participate in the Ketagalan Forum, hosted by the ROC Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They were joined by two additional former military officials from the Army and the Navy, one of whom possessed experience in scenario simulation and planning for the National Defence College and the Army War College. The visiting delegation also held closed-door talks with the Institute of National Defense and Security Research (INDSR), the primary think tank of the ROC Ministry of Defense (Brar, 2023). The Indian government maintained that the visit was "private," but the amount of media coverage around it suggests otherwise. In the summer of

2024, INDSR and the United Service Institution of India held their first war games in New Delhi, simulating the potential effect of tensions in the Taiwan Strait on the Sino-Indian border. The exercise was attended by retired officers of the Indian armed forces (Chin, 2024). While it is certainly naïve to expect any dramatic shift in India-Taiwan security ties, it is fair to assume that there is an appetite for a low-key strengthening of defense diplomacy and joint security networking.

A broad consensus exists in India on the necessity of building a closer relationship with Taiwan. A growing number of influential voices have acknowledged that the time has come for a more active engagement with Taipei. In 2018, an official report by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs called for Modi's government to collaborate with Taiwan, and to not see the island through a China-centric lens. It stated that India could not continue with a "conventionally deferential foreign policy towards China," and had to adopt a more "flexible approach." It further stipulated that the government should contemplate "using all options including its relations with Taiwan, as part of such an approach" (Menon, 2022). The report was followed by a series of high-profile visits such as the participation of two BJP parliamentarians, Meenakshi Lekhi and Rahul Kaswan, in the swearing-in ceremony of President Tsai Ing-wen in 2020, and the invitation of lawmaker Sujeet Kumar, President and Chief Executive Officer of SEMI Ajit Manocha, and former Secretary of the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology Ajay Prakash Sawhney to the first Inaugural Taiwan-India Dialogue in 2022 (Taiwan-Asia Exchange Foundation, 2022). In light of the changing Indo-Pacific environment and economic security considerations, there is a favorable attitude toward Taiwan among the Indian elite. While the nature of India-Taiwan cooperation poses considerable challenges, the present moment provides a window of opportunity for both countries to build upon common synergies and give a fresh impetus to consolidating their relationship.

5. Mutual Concerns about China

Both Taiwan and India share the same apprehensions about China's rising military power and regional political influence. Beijing views the island as a renegade province and vows to eventually "reunify" Taiwan with the mainland. This is reflected in the Preamble to the PRC's Constitution, which says

that “Taiwan is part of the sacred territory of the People’s Republic of China” (Yin, 2006: 182). Beijing has a standing policy of potentially invading Taiwan if Taipei declares *de jure* independence. The policy was for a long time informal but in 2000 a Chinese white paper, titled “The One-China Principle and the Taiwan Question,” held that “China will do its best to achieve peaceful reunification, but will not commit itself to rule out the use of force” (Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council of China 2000). This position was later incorporated into domestic legislation with the 2005 “Anti-Secession Law.” China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has made preparing for a Taiwan contingency one of its top priorities. Since the election of Tsai Ing-wen in 2016, China has taken increasingly aggressive actions against Taiwan. Beijing employs various coercive tactics short of armed conflict to intimidate Taipei. These include sailing its warships and aircraft carriers through the Taiwan Strait and flying its fighter jets and surveillance aircraft over and around the island. In 2024, more than 3,000 Chinese warplanes were tracked entering Taiwan’s Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ), a 76 per cent increase from 2023 (PLATracker, n.d.). The PLA has also initiated joint air and naval live-fire exercises that included missile tests over Taiwan, as well as a simulation of a military blockade of the island. China’s recent demonstrations of force have been unprecedented in their intensity, frequency, and scale. The election of Lai Ching-te in January 2024, marking a third consecutive win for the DPP, did not reduce Chinese military pressure on Taiwan.

The modern Indo-China diplomatic relationship began in 1950 when India was among the first non-Communist countries to establish official relations with the PRC (Lu, 2017). India and China share a 3,400 km-long border, which the two countries have disputed for over 70 years. Relations between New Delhi and Beijing have soured over the past few years, particularly following a 2022 border brawl between Indian and Chinese troops along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), the notional demarcation that separates the two Asian giants. The skirmish was the worst since the summer of 2020 when deadly fighting in the Galwan Valley led to the most significant border escalation in over four decades (Yeung, 2022). Despite the fact that these confrontations are frequently succeeded by discussions and other measures aimed at alleviating tensions, both parties have progressively intensified their militarization of border policies and have exhibited no signs of retreating. Beijing considers the

government of Narendra Modi responsible for stirring up trouble along the Himalayan border and collaborating with other powers to contain the rise of China and counter its growing presence in South Asia. China also takes umbrage at India's burgeoning economy and growing military capabilities, and it is still absorbing the psychological impact of India overtaking China as the world's most populous country in 2023 (International Crisis Group, 2023). Likewise, India's grievances against China are not limited to border incursions. New Delhi views Beijing's close partnership with Pakistan, its expanding naval deployment in the northern Indian Ocean, and its commercial and operational involvement in Indian Ocean ports via the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as direct threats to India's traditional sphere of influence. The result has been a stronger willingness to oppose China and push back against Chinese influence across the region.

Despite a shared awareness of the security threat from China, both Taiwan and India maintain deep and extensive economic relations with Beijing. Taiwan's economy is reliant on trade with China, which is the island's largest trading partner. Under President Tsai, Taipei has tried to diversify its trade relationships, with mixed results. While Taiwan had some success boosting trade with and investment in countries in Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific through the New Southbound Policy, the island's exports to China still accounted for 35 per cent of the total in 2023 (Ryugen, 2024). As for India's economy, China is no less significant: Beijing remains New Delhi's second biggest trading partner. From 2015 to 2022, India-China bilateral trade grew by 90 per cent, an average yearly growth of 12. One major cause of concern to India is the continuously increasing bilateral trade imbalance. India's trade deficit with China reached the historically high level of USD87 billion in 2022 (Sahoo & Bishnoi, 2023). The economic importance of China makes Taipei and New Delhi vulnerable to retaliation in the event that Beijing is displeased by their individual or joint policies. Consequently, when reaching out to Taiwan, India has little choice but to keep a careful eye on China's response. Beijing plays an oblique role in India-Taiwan relations and sets real limitations on how far New Delhi's relationship with Taipei can progress.

In order to enjoy the benefits of their relationship with China, India and Taiwan need to find creative ways in which to deepen their security ties without jeopardizing their economic interests. Instead of direct military-defense cooperation, New Delhi and Taipei could profitably explore collaboration on

non-traditional security issues. Given that both countries have long experienced the severity and negative effects of natural disasters, there are many lessons that India and Taiwan have learned in the area of HADR that can be shared with each other. The armed forces of both countries have traditionally been part of their respective governments' response mechanisms for disaster relief. They have long since acquired key skill sets required to mitigate the negative impacts of natural disasters domestically while deploying know-how to aid neighboring powers afflicted by the same catastrophes. One of the most advanced examples of HADR interaction in the region, and a potential model for HADR cooperation for New Delhi and Taipei, is the "Tiger TRIUMPH", which stands for Tri-Services India-US Amphibious Exercise. Held since 2019, the third edition was conducted in March 2024 and involved an amphibious landing on Kakinada Beach, erecting a field hospital, and setting up a displaced persons camp. The objective was to discuss and refine Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), with participation from the Indian Navy, Army, and Air Force, as well as the US Navy, Marine Corps, and Army (Ministry of Defense 2024). The exercise not only aims to share best practices and SOPs in undertaking HADR operations, but also showcases the robust strategic partnership between the two countries. The scope and format of HADR interaction always depends on the interests of both parties.

Bilateral HADR cooperation offers several advantages. First, it is broadly supported by domestic audiences. Both Indian and Taiwanese populations have been the victims of natural disasters and would welcome joint efforts to reduce their country's vulnerability. Second, closer military engagement between India and Taiwan is expected to be received positively in Washington. In fact, promoting bilateral cooperation between American allies and partners is consistent with Washington's strategy to build a balance of influence in the Indo-Pacific region. Third, while a solid strengthening of HADR activities between New Delhi and Taipei might be seen by the PRC as a violation of the "One China" policy, it is unlikely to cross any of Beijing's red lines. This kind of seamless, restrained and low-key collaboration is by no means provocative to other parties. It will neither challenge the delicate *status quo* across the Taiwan Strait nor drag India into an unwanted war with China. There are no obvious reasons for India and Taiwan to reject putting forward potential

HADR schemes to improve their mutual disaster response capabilities and invigorate bilateral relations.

6. Conclusion

In the past several years, India-Taiwan relations have undergone massive transformations. Several agreements in the fields of economics, education, and science and technology have been inked. In the realm of security cooperation, military interactions are minimal and remain constrained by the island's unofficial diplomatic status. However, the changing dynamics in the Indo-Pacific are forcing New Delhi and Taipei to recognize their shared interests and consider deepening their security ties. Indian analysts and policymakers have a greater need to increase their understanding of China, including issues of language and culture, as well as improving their intelligence gathering on the Communist Party and the PLA. Meanwhile, in Taiwan, the experience of diplomatic isolation, coupled with the necessity for expanded interactions with countries that share similar values, has increased the recognition of India as a viable partner. Bilateral relations look highly promising but need to be handled with great prudence. Any attempt to strengthen security cooperation will have to walk a fine line between trying to boost military ties between New Delhi and Taipei, and doing so in a way that will not have disastrous consequences. Closer collaboration on non-traditional security issues, especially on disaster preparedness and relief, provides one such opportunity. In addition to sharing expertise and assistance on critical disaster risk management, the implementation of joint exercises on HADR will contribute to developing communication channels and logistical synergies between the Indian armed forces and their Taiwanese counterparts. Being non-combat in nature, HADR operations create trust between military personnel and capability building. Interoperability is not only vital to executing humanitarian missions, but it would be essential in the event of a joint defense against a future Chinese attack. India and Taiwan are important stakeholders in the Indo-Pacific. Both nations take pride in their democratic heritage and share a common interest in maintaining the international rules-based order.

This article has highlighted that India and Taiwan have both suffered greatly and continue to suffer from repeated natural disasters. The examination of military cooperation in HADR activities positively answered the

research question brought up in the introduction; such HADR activities represent an effective and pragmatic means of promoting bilateral security engagement. Faced with ever-growing pressure emanating from China, New Delhi and Taipei have every incentive to expand their strategic partnership, as well as share valuable experience on HADR. As the 30th anniversary of the establishment of representative offices in India and Taiwan approaches in 2025, it is imperative to bear in mind that the two countries share a significant convergence on regional challenges and global issues. It is time for New Delhi and Taipei to take their promising relationship to the next level and enable it to reach its full potential.

Notes

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1. EM-DAT comprises information detailing the occurrence and effects of more than 26,000 mass disasters globally from 1900 to the present. The database is assembled from a variety of sources, including UN agencies, non-governmental organizations, reinsurance firms, research institutions, and media outlets. To qualify for inclusion in the EM-DAT, a disaster must meet at least one of the following criteria: (1) 10 or more fatalities, (2) 100 or more individuals affected, (3) the declaration of a state of emergency, and (4) a request for international aid.

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