

Taiwan and Estonia: A Partnership for Peace and Democracy

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ICDS Director Kannik, former minister and Chairman Reinsalu; Chairman Mihkelson, Professor Leino, Japan Chair Professor Cornelis, Excellencies, Distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, Good afternoon!

What a great pleasure it is to be here in Estonia for the first time and speak at the prestigious International Center for Defense and Security, particularly as Taiwan's Foreign Minister. I have always felt a profound sense of kinship with Estonia, and it is wonderful to finally be able to visit your beautiful country. Of course, I would like to thank the ICDS for the kind invitation. I would also like to thank the Estonian government for opening the door for me. This is nothing easy. Some rich and powerful European governments are not equipped with the same courage. Here is my salute to Estonia!

Despite the geographical distance, our histories of facing authoritarian neighbors are actually quite similar. Taiwan and Estonia made great strides in democratization around the same time.

Estonia declared restoration of independence on August 20, 1991, following the Baltic Way two years earlier. Meanwhile, martial law and bans on political parties were lifted in Taiwan in 1987, and the direct parliamentary elections took place in 1991 and 1992, and the first popular presidential election in 1996. Isn't it a wonderful thing for two freedom and democracy-loving peoples to finally connect with each other after 30 years of separate developments?

Both Taiwan and Estonia are located next to large authoritarian powers. The unfolding of their ambitions is easily felt for small frontline democracies like us. China is flexing its muscles to intimidate Taiwan and escalate tensions in the Indo-Pacific, whereas in Europe, Russia launched a brutal invasion against Ukraine last February and continues to threaten other neighbors.

The most pressing issue of the day, especially for Europe, is to help Ukraine win the war against Russian aggression. The atrocities and war crimes committed by Russia prove, beyond doubt, that authoritarian regimes should have no place in modern civilization. Here, I would like to applaud Estonia's unwavering support for Ukraine. Not only were you one of the first countries to provide defense assistance to Ukraine, you are one of the biggest contributors on a per capita basis.

Taiwan was quick to join Europe to condemn and place sanctions on Russia. We have also worked with some European partners to provide humanitarian assistance to the displaced Ukrainians. And since the beginning of this year, we have joined hands with European governments and NGO partners in helping Ukrainians rebuild their schools, hospitals, and communities.

As of now, Taiwan has contributed more than one hundred million US dollars to help Ukraine, including in cooperation with the Estonian Refugee Council (ERC). All these will continue. Please be aware that we are not asking anyone for anything in return, for we are not transactional. We love to do the right thing together with good friends like you.

The geopolitical threats China and Russia pose in their respective regions may seem continents apart, yet the dangerous consequences of their actions and convergence loom large for countries in the Indo-Pacific. While the Russian military has been dramatically weakened by the brave men and women defending Ukraine, its forces in the Far East remain relatively intact. In fact, in June and August this year, China and Russia conducted two rounds joint military exercises in our region involving large numbers of bombers and warships.

The two autocracies may have stopped talking about the “unlimited partnership” with each other, but their actions certainly show otherwise.

Against this geopolitical backdrop, the PRC has been ramping up its threats and intimidation towards Taiwan. China exploits Taiwan’s open society through hybrid warfare, such as information operation and gray zone activities. As a matter of fact, one can say that China has already launched a quiet war against Taiwan in the information space.

Economic coercion is another tactic the PRC never gets tired of using. Just like Australian wine and lobsters and Lithuanian dairy products, several of Taiwan’s agricultural products have also become victims of China’s trade malpractices.

The PRC military posture in the Taiwan Strait is quite worrisome. It has been sending warplanes and vessels to cross the median line of the Taiwan Strait on a daily basis, with the median line a significant symbol of the status quo. On September 18, a record number of 103 PLA aircraft were detected around Taiwan. Through daily incursions, China is actively and deliberately altering the status quo across the Taiwan Strait. This could lead to catastrophic consequences with only a minor incident.

While Taiwan bears the blunt of the PRC threats, the countries in the wider Indo-Pacific region have not been spared from its insatiable expansionist appetite. PLA's daily activities in the East and South China Seas have now caught the international attention, especially with its reckless and provocative air and sea conducts that may cause consequential incidents.

Beyond the First Island Chain, in addition to military activities, the PRC signed a security agreement with the Solomon Islands last April, with an intention to do many more, causing serious concern for many, especially Japan, Australia and the United States.

In addition, China has been securing ports for future military use in the Indian Ocean, including Port Chittagone in Myanmar, Port Hambantota in Sri Lanka, and Port Gwadar in Pakistan, to name just a few. This "string of pearls" strategy has raised alarms for many security experts in South Asia.

Another development that may have escaped our attention is the PRC's activities in the Arctic region. Although far away from it, China has been using seemingly altruistic motives like research and infrastructure development to gain access to the region. For example, the PRC has invested over 90 billion US dollars there, mostly in the energy and mineral sectors.

In 2013, China signed an FTA with Iceland. And with Iceland's support, China was approved for observer status on the Arctic Council. Experience tells us that the motives of authoritarian countries are almost always aimed at reshaping the international order to fit their own models. And this is why we should all be concerned.

Nevertheless, the democratic community has noticed the danger and threats posed by the PRC expansionism. In response, Japan has started to strengthen its military deployment in its southwest Islands, the closest of which to Taiwan is only 110 kilometers. The United States is also clear-eyed about the PRC's agenda in the Indo-Pacific, and has been rigorously reviving old alliances and forming new coalitions to counter PRC expansionism. AUKUS, QUAD, and US-Japan-Korea alliance are just some of the most notable examples. The US also invites Japan and Australia to work closely with the Philippines, another close neighbor of Taiwan.

It is reassuring that EU countries are also aware of the threat posed by China. The EU leaders' summit in late June unequivocally affirmed for the first time that EU member states oppose any unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force or coercion. The G7 Leaders' Statement in May also expressed support for peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.

The EU is right to express their concern over a potential clash in the Indo-Pacific region. Taiwan is one of the EU's most important trading partners and also holds a critical position in global supply chains. More than 50% of global maritime commercial transportation goes through the Taiwan Strait, and more than 60% of semiconductors are produced in Taiwan. Therefore, any conflict in the Taiwan Strait will lead to severe consequences for not just the region, but the entire global economy. International concern over China's unilateral attempts to change the status quo is very effective in keeping PRC aggression at bay.

Facing these tough security challenges, Taiwan is working tirelessly with partners, especially the United States, to strengthen our defense capabilities. Although the delivery of some military items purchased by Taiwan have been delayed, the US has come up with creative methods, such as using the Presidential Drawdown Authority and the Foreign Military Financing program to ensure its military assistance to Taiwan can keep up.

We also do what we can on our own. President Tsai witnessed the launching of our first domestically developed submarine just a couple of months ago. We also utilize our industrial capability to produce indigenous weapons, including missiles and naval ships.

We have produced a number of advanced jet trainers, which can be quickly transformed into fighters. Moreover, we are in the process of strengthening our civil defense by learning from our Baltic friends. We are also making more investment in asymmetric capabilities, including procurement and training, with the assistance of the US. We have also extended the conscript period and toughened their training. I know it all sounds familiar. Yes, we have drawn our lessons from the very brave Ukrainians. They are inspirational to us.

To prevent war, other than strengthening our own defense capability to deter the aggressor, we will make every effort to maintain peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. Taiwan under President Tsai is known not bowing to pressure, but we don't provoke a conflict, either. Our government will continue the policy that we are willing to settle differences through dialogue on an equal footing and seek opportunities for Taiwan and the PRC to coexist.

In order for Taiwan to stay strong and resilient in the face of grave threat, we do need friends. And we are fortunate to have many friends voicing their support and stressing the importance of maintaining peace and stability and the status quo across the Taiwan Strait. I want to thank Estonia for doing all these.

Last August, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Estonian Parliament Marko Mihkelson visited Taiwan, along with his counterparts from the other two Baltic states. We really love the visit of the Three Musketeers. In September, former Prime Minister Andrus Ansip also visited Taiwan to take part in a high-level forum. Moreover, Health Minister of Estonia Riina Sikkut called for the inclusion of Taiwan during this year's World Health Assembly. We are truly grateful for these show of support. You make us feel not alone in facing the PRC coercion.

The world we live in is changing rapidly, as authoritarian regimes are trying to upend the current rules-based international order in every possible way. But I will assure you that Taiwan will not bow to authoritarianism, but continue to toughen its own ability to stay resilient. Of course, we will deepen our ties with like-minded partners like Estonia in every possible aspect to safeguard our values and the democratic way of life.

My dear friends present today, Taiwan and Estonia may be far apart geographically, but we are always bound by our shared passion for freedom and democracy. We may be small, but a strong bond of democracies can make us mightier than we could ever imagine.

Thank you!