

Taiwan: Lessons from the Asian orphan for Ngorno Karabakh?

At first glance it may seem ridiculous to compare Taiwan with Ngorno Karabakh. Taiwan is located approximately 100 miles off the south east coast of China. It is widely known as one of Asia's economic dragons for its record for moving from relative poverty in the 1950s to one of the wealthiest countries in Asia. Moreover it has been able to achieve this with relatively equitable wealth distribution, thus avoiding the high levels of inequality seen in many other developing countries. In fact judged in purchase power parity terms it is actually wealthier than many West European countries. It is an economic powerhouse, ranking as the world's 16th largest exporting nation and 17th importer. Though only about three times larger than the sparsely populated Ngorno Karabakh in terms of geographical size, with a population of over 23 million Taiwan is one of the most crowded countries in the world.

I am an academic in the field of comparative political science, specializing in North East Asia, particularly on Taiwan. My university recently introduced an academic programme about Armenian studies. This made me curious about whether there is any scope for comparison between Taiwan and the former communist states in the Caucasus. Therefore I made my first visit to Ngorno Karabakh last year. What increasingly strikes me is that there are actually far more similarities that I had originally expected.

Like Ngorno Karabakh, Taiwan is a disputed territory. Beijing claims Taiwan to be a province of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and that the administration in Taipei is no more than a local government. It constantly exerts enormous diplomatic and economic pressure on other countries to accept its position that Taiwan is part of the PRC. Like Ngorno Karabakh, Taiwan is internationally isolated. It has become known as the orphan of Asia, as only about 20 countries have formal diplomatic relations with it and it is excluded from most major international organizations, such as the United Nations. Like Ngorno Karabakh, Taiwan exists under the constant threat of possible Chinese military attack. China frequently warns that it does not rule out using military means to resolve the Taiwan question and lists a range of scenarios which it claims would justify an attack on Taiwan. China has been building up its military capabilities with such an attack in mind and has well over 1,800 ballistic missiles targeted at Taiwan.

Despite living in the shadow of an Asian military superpower and its diplomatic isolation, Taiwan has been able to preserve its de facto political independence from China since 1949. So how has it managed its challenging international status and does it offer any potential lessons for the unrecognized states in the Caucasus region?

Taiwan has needed to be extremely resourceful and flexible in finding loopholes to break through China's diplomatic stranglehold. Thus for instance, it has built up a global network of offices under a wide array of titles that operate as de facto embassies. Its Ministry of Foreign Affairs puts particular stress on developing close de facto diplomatic relations with the United States, Japan and countries in the European Union. Maintaining strong relations with the United States has been crucial, as it is the only country that sells advanced weapons to Taiwan and offers it an ambiguous security guarantee.

Taiwan has needed to be flexible in its attempts to join international organizations by using unofficial titles. For instance, it participates in the World Trade Organization and the Olympics under the name

Chinese Taipei rather than its official title. It has also lobbied hard since the early 1990s to rejoin the United Nations and its affiliated bodies. Even though these bids have ultimately failed, they served to raise international awareness and sympathy for Taiwan's plight. In contrast China's practices have made it look like a bully on the international stage.

Taiwan has made extensive use of its economic muscle to develop relations with countries it does not have formal diplomatic relations with. Although most countries will pay lip service to China's position over Taiwan, they also hope to benefit from lucrative trading possibilities with Taiwan. Taiwan has developed such relations with states in South East Asia by offering possibilities of contract labourers from the region to work in Taiwan and also by encouraging Taiwanese business to invest in the region. It has also used the incentive of government infrastructure projects as bait to improve relations with advanced economic countries in the European Union and Japan. Taiwanese tourists are also widely welcomed abroad and the government has successfully negotiated visa free agreements with over 100 countries. Similarly, advanced countries in the West compete fiercely to attract Taiwanese students to come for higher education.

Taiwan markets itself internationally as a model successful democracy with a free media and exemplary human rights record. Taiwan has had direct presidential and parliamentary elections since the 1990s and is ranked by Freedom House as one of the freest countries in Asia in terms of its civil and political rights. Much of Taiwan's diplomatic language stresses its democracy in stark contrast to China's complete lack of democracy and appalling human rights record. It frequently portrays itself as the first and only ethnic Chinese democracy, an image that gives it significant credit in China and the influential overseas Chinese communities throughout the world. It has attempted to offer itself as a democratic model and created its own Taiwan Foundation for Democracy to promote democracy and human rights abroad. It even has engaged in pink diplomacy, for instance it has gained the reputation as one of the most tolerant countries in Asia regarding homosexuality and is likely to legislate for civil partnerships in the near future. It is no coincidence that Taiwan hosts the largest gay pride parade in Asia. Taiwan's status as a free, tolerant liberal democracy is central to its international support and positive international image, particularly that from Japan, Europe and the United States. In fact Taiwan's democracy is a far greater source of security than any advanced military defence systems it can procure.

Taiwan has also been quite successful at promoting its international status through its cultural products. Its free society has provided much more scope for its creative industries to flourish and given them a major advantage compared to other Chinese speaking societies under authoritarian rule. Despite its size Taiwan has punched above its weight in terms of winning prestigious film prizes and increasingly also had commercial success. These films as well as adding to Taiwan's international visibility have served as a means of highlighting the uniqueness of Taiwan's society and history. This has even had a major impact in the country seen as most threatening to Taiwan, China. Taiwanese music and film have served to improve its image in China and offered a more realistic image of the island than that portrayed in the official Chinese media.

Over the last four decades as more Taiwanese moved abroad for work and study significant expatriate diaspora communities have developed in countries that play a key role in Taiwan's international relations. Such communities are particularly large and influential in the United States, Canada, Japan, Australia and South East Asia. They serve an important role in influencing domestic

public perceptions of Taiwan, lobby their governments to adopt more Taiwan friendly policies and serve as ambassadors to explain Taiwan's uniqueness to overseas publics that often confuse Taiwan with Thailand or China. In fact now the largest expatriate Taiwanese community is in China. They have played a growing lobbying role both China and Taiwan to take a more conciliatory line in their relations. In short, Taiwan's diaspora matter.

A final method that Taiwan has employed to maintain its de facto independence has been to establish closer relations with what on the surface is its enemy. Since the late 1980s Taiwan has been developing increasingly close economic integration with China while simultaneously diverging politically. At a time when there were no negotiations and often quite hostile political relations, Taiwan's business community was investing heavily in China and trying to profit from the vast Chinese market. Today China is Taiwan's largest trading partner, with whom Taiwan has a healthy trade surplus. Since 2008 such ties have become even closer. Although the two sides cannot yet recognize each other's government, they use semi-official bodies for direct de facto negotiations. These have produced a range of tangible economic agreements that liberalize trade, allowed direct flights and shipping, and for Chinese tourists and students to come to Taiwan. So the two sides have laid aside deep political differences to facilitate a mutually beneficial economic relationship. China hopes that such integration will promote its goal of annexing Taiwan. In contrast Taiwan is quite cautious about allowing the scope of negotiations to move on to political topics that might involve anything that erodes its sovereignty. In other words, Taiwan is hoping that closer economic relations will actually strengthen its de facto independence.

Each country in the world is unique. There will always be limits on the degree that a country can serve as the model for another. My view is that Taiwan's flexible and soft diplomacy, the successful use of its image as a tolerant democracy, exporting of its cultural products and trading relations with its potential enemy may hold some lessons for other countries struggling to gain international recognition. It is also possible there are lessons that Taiwan could learn from the Caucasus region. One thing that struck me in my own conversations with Taiwanese diplomats has been how none of them I have spoken to so far have even to heard of Ngorno Karabakh!