Playing with Fire: Taiwan and India’s Long Courtship
By James Baron

The rivalry between India and China for influence in Asia takes many forms, as the recent standoff on the Doklam Plateau in Bhutan attests, but a longstanding and little discussed venue is Taiwan.

While a visit of Taiwanese legislators to India earlier this year provided the latest spark for a war of words between Beijing and New Delhi, James Baron explains that India’s complex engagement with what China considers a renegade province has a long history.

THE VISIT TO INDIA by a group of Taiwanese parliamentarians in February drew predictable guard-dog growls from Beijing. Any country fool-hardy enough to flout the sacrosanct one-China policy can expect a swift rebuke. But, for a powerful neighbor and competitor with whom it has fought border skirmishes as recently as 30 years ago, China uncocks a bottle of vintage vitriol. “A provocateur,” fulminated the Global Times, Beijing’s English-language state mouthpiece. “By challenging China over the Taiwan question, India is playing with fire.”

In response, Indian officials played down the visit. “Such informal groups have visited India in the past as well for business, religious and tourist purposes,” observed Vikas Swarup, a spokesman for India’s Ministry of External Affairs. “I understand that they do so to China as well. There is nothing new or unusual about such visits, and political meanings should not be read into them.”

Leaving aside Swarup’s sleight of hand in conflating tourist trips with visits by lawmakers, his point seemed fair. There was little fanfare for this event, despite the media attention it garnered in Taiwan. The Global Times’ statement that “some Indians view the Taiwan question as an Achilles heel of the mainland” and seek to “use the Taiwan question … as a bargaining chip in dealing with China,” appeared unjustified. Yet Beijing’s concerns are not entirely without foundation.

The visit came a week before a strategic dialogue between Beijing and New Delhi on issues including India’s bid for admission to the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). With China wielding its veto, the issue didn’t even make the discussion stage at the NSG plenary in Seoul in June. This was widely perceived as a political decision based on two considerations: Beijing’s refusal to have its primacy in Asia challenged and a desire to assure the concerns of its ally Pakistan.

Ties with Islamabah informed other crucial discussion points. India’s worries over the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, a US$50 billion infrastructure project, remain a problem, with Chinese and Pakistani intelligence services accusing Indian spy networks of attempting to subvert the project. There is also the issue of Pakistani militant Masood Azhar, founder of the Kashmir-based Jaish-e-Mohammed group, whose stated goal is the destruction of India. China has persistently blocked efforts to have Azhar added to the UN’s 1267 sanctions list, which prevents states from supporting individuals or groups designated as terrorists.

Meanwhile, in early June, China’s construction of a road in the Doklam plateau, the tri-junction region of Bhutan, pushed border tensions to a point not seen since the 1987 Sino-Indian skirmish. In early June, days before the onset of this latest face-off, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping had met at the Shanghai Co-operation Organization in Kazakhstan. Things were already strained after India’s decision to boycott China’s Belt and Road conference in Beijing in May. In early July, with the standoff in full effect, the pair reportedly broached the issue on the sidelines of the G-20 Summit in Hamburg. Beijing pointedly refused to acknowledge such a discussion. The standoff has since been diffused by both sides, with Modi and Xi meeting at the BRICS summit in Xiamen on September 5 to affirm the importance of “healthy, stable” ties. The day before, the BRICS nations for the first time issued a declaration condemning terror groups, including Jaish-e-Mohammed.

LONG HISTORY
On the back of this impasse, hardline Hindu nationalists in Modi’s government have been accused of attempting to use Taipei as leverage. It wouldn’t be the first time that such charges have been leveled.

Modern Sino-Indian relations can be traced to the beginning of the 20th century when émigré Indian revolutionaries found common cause with Sun Yat-sen during the latter’s first period of exile in Japan beginning in 1895. Sun’s Japan-founded Tongmenghui movement was later to express support for the efforts to achieve Indian freedom.

In 1915, members of the US-based Ghadar Party launched an attempt to infiltrate the Burma Military Police in Thailand. Founded by and comprising a mainly Sikh contingent, Ghadar hoped its overtures would be well received by members of the colonial police and armed forces who were similarly dominated by Sikhs and Muslims — traditionally marginalized groups.

The Siam-Burma Plan, as it came to be known, was part of a wider German-backed conspiracy to destabilize the Raj in the midst of the First World War. The first attempt at cooperation with the Chinese had come just after the 1911 revolution, when the Ghadarites launched an attempt to infiltrate the Burma Military Police in Thailand. Founded by members of the colonial police and armed forces who were similarly dominated by Sikhs and Muslims — traditionally marginalized groups.

Despite these failures, Ghadarites continued to operate from bases in China. During the Kuomintang’s Northern Campaign of 1926 to 1928, they were in the transitional capital of Hankou with some reportedly even seeing action in the campaign to pacify China’s warlords. It is interesting to consider that some of these independence agitators may have personally observed the KMT’s occupation of the British concession at Hankou in 1927 and the signing of the Chen-O’Malley Agreement that effectively ended British interests there. This blow to the British in Asia would certainly have served as a source of inspiration to the Indians.

The Ghadarite presence in China ended with the collapse of the alliance between the KMT and the communists later that year, but a united front of a different sort emerged, as India and China issued a joint manifesto at the Brussels Congress...
Against Imperialism, which took place at almost the same time as the Chen-O’Malley negotiations. Noting these developments, the British blocked members of the Indian National Congress (INC) from participating in labor conferences in China. In 1928, they similarly denied a visa to Sun’s widow, Soong Ching-ling, who had been invited by the INC to attend its national session in Calcutta.

Nevertheless, efforts to form links continued. In August 1939, with China in the midst of its War of Resistance against Japan, Jawaharlal Nehru visited China in his capacity as general secretary of the INC. In Chongqing, he met Chiang Kai-shek and KMT top brass, bringing “a message of sympathy from India” and the “supreme respect” of INC chairman Mahatma Gandhi and Nobel prizewinning poet Rabindranath Tagore. Nationalist Chinese media reciprocated, with a newspaper editorial hailing Nehru as a “close friend of the Chinese nation.” At a welcome speech, the renowned Chinese philosopher Wu Zhihui told Nehru: “The sympathy and support rendered by India to us has deeply moved the people of China.”

On August 28, Nehru visited Chiang at his private residence and, when Japanese bombers struck that night, shared a candlelit bunker with the Generalissimo. Apparently, the Indian leader did most of the talking, with Chiang recording a favorable impression of Nehru in his diary. Prior to his visit, Nehru had been corresponding with Mao Zedong, who had thanked India for a medical team it had dispatched to China. Mao responded with a letter to Nehru, inviting him to establish a precedent that, while not explicitly referenced, would be in the back of people’s minds in any future multilateral peace negotiations. It would repair some of the damage done to China’s image by its role in the Korean War a year earlier and, more importantly, Zhou hoped, drive a wedge between the US and Europe.

While it would be difficult to attribute events that were unfolding elsewhere to the Five Principles, they certainly reflected China’s desired outcome. For example, almost contemporaneous with Nehru’s Beijing visit was the Geneva Conference to end the First Indochina War. When the Americans declined to sign the Geneva Agreement that concluded the conference, the Chinese must have been rubbing their hands in glee. “In Geneva, we have adhered to the slogan of peace, thereby portraying an image of being for peace,” said Mao. “Whereas the US refuses to adhere to such a slogan and thus forges an image of being for belligerency.”

**FLIRTING WITH TAIPEI**

Regardless of the diverging aims the two sides had in espousing the Five Principles, they continued to serve as a touchstone for relations throughout the 1950s. However, the violent border clashes that followed the 1959 Tibetan Uprising put a severe strain on the pact, and with the outbreak of the first Sino-Indian border war of 1962, they fell by the wayside. It is interesting to note that Xi reportedly referenced Panscheel as potential guidelines for improved relations at the BRICS meeting. In late 1961, things took an unusual turn as exchanges between Taipei and New Delhi began. The first reported instance was the visit of the Indian ambassador to the Philippines, who attended the Republic of China’s National Day celebrations. In 1963, Minoo Masani, a Member of Parliament and cofounder of India’s one-time opposition Swatantra Party, went on a 10-day tour of Taiwan.

The following June, the ante was upped as a delegation of 10 legislators visited Taipei. These trips were hardly clandestine, as the Generalissimo himself welcomed the latter group. The Indians, for their part, raised the possibility of renewing relations, and Taipei showed itself receptive to the idea. In 1966, then-ROCN Defense Minister Chiang Ching-kuo reportedly told a group of Indian journalists that India should break ties with Beijing and “join hands” with Taipei. The high point was undoubtedly a visit in 1968 by then-Deputy Prime Minister Morarji Desai. Following his visit in Taipei, Desai visited Japan, where he was quoted as referring to “two Chinas.” Interestingly, as prime minister, Desai was to help restore relations with Beijing following India’s nuclear test in 1974.

This was by no means one-way traffic. Dozens of Taiwanese officials made their way to New Delhi during this period. The participation of Economic Minister Li Kwoh-ting — heralded as the archetypal “Taiwan’s economic ace” — and Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Sampson Shen in a UN conference in India in 1966 enraged Beijing. When a Taiwanese delegation attended another UN event in 1968, China charged New Delhi with the “new crime” of trying to create two Chinas.

Perhaps the most striking rebuke came in response to the use of the term “Communist China” in the Indian Parliament. An editorial in the Peking Review raged against India “openly using the reactionary, shop-worn US imperialist term … while calling the Chiang Kai-shek gang, the sworn enemy of the Chinese people, the ‘Republic of China.’”

In the end, though, these exchanges were little...
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atal Bihari Vajpayee.

Cultural Revolution.

flexible and pragmatic diplomacy under Chiang Ching-kuo and his successor Lee Teng-hui, substantive, albeit unofficial ties with India were no longer unrealistic. Nevertheless, tact was called for. To this end, when Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao gave the green light to the India-Taipei Association (ITA) in 1995, he wanted to make sure he had a safe pair of hands at the helm.

The choice of the experienced Sinologist Vinod C. Khanna showed how seriously Rao took the matter. As head of the East Asian Division of the foreign ministry, Khanna had been tasked with trying to mend relations in the wake of the 1962 confrontation and was posted to Beijing after the Cultural Revolution.

Khanna's pedigree and history with the PRC might have made his appointment contentious, had Rao not run everything by the Chinese in advance in order to secure their blessing. In fact, the Indian officialdom was squeamish about acknowledging [he]...was moving to Taipei," writes Nayar. "In fact, [he] had to turn down many farewells in Washington lest India's Taiwan connection became a talking point."

In some ways, this attitude is commendable. For, as the Indian academic Joe Karackattu has noted, "If the partnership with Taiwan is allowed to degenerate into chessboard politics [with measures that tease the red lines of the 'One China' policy], as opposed to genuine pursuit of economic interdependence, complications are bound to rise."

Others see the newfound candor with which New Delhi is approaching relations with Beijing as refreshing. "The Modi government, which is reviewing its China policy, may have found in Taiwan a partner as it enhances its profile in the Indo-Pacific," writes Harsh V. Pant, Professor of International Relations at King's College London. "A robust engagement with Taipei might help India better understand Beijing's strategic thinking. New Delhi is now seeking to conduct its China policy on strict reciprocity. It has been advising China that it ought to respect other countries' sensitivity and sovereignty, if it wants the same for itself. Taiwan's emergence from the backwaters of Indian foreign policy might be a sign that Indian policy-makers are serious about their rhetoric."

The February parliamentary visit to India was followed up with a four-day tour of the country by Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je in April. Interestingly, this drew a lot less attention. Seeking to bolster support for Taiwan President Tsai Ying-wen's trumpeted “southbound policy,” Ko talked up India's potential as an emerging market for Taiwan.

Not everyone is convinced, however. Business leaders who accompanied Ko cited gaping cultural differences as a serious obstacle and expressed the view that Indian infrastructure falls well short of Taiwanese investment requirements. Speaking to Taiwan News, one unnamed source branded Tsai's southbound policy "aimless." The US$70 million increase in Taiwanese imports to India for the first quarter of 2017 compared to the same period for 2016 will have done little to assuage these misgivings. As things stand, India could conceivably pip Australia for 14th place in Taiwan's rankings of export partners by the end of the year. With India now the world's fastest growing economy and set to overtake the US as the world's second largest economy by 2050, Taiwan would be foolish not to want in on the action. Yet poten-

tially insurmountable hurdles remain. If Taiwan is to have any chance of benefiting from India's rise, creating a viable trade and investment environment will be just as important as ensuring that feathers remain unruffled across the Strait. The further concern that Delhi hardliners are simply playing the Taiwan card means Taipei will have to proceed with courage, savvy and caution.

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