India Must Give Taiwan A Helping Hand

In dealing with Taipei, New Delhi should remember its mistakes when China annexed Tibet

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After swallowing Hong Kong, redrawing the South China Sea’s geopolitical map and encroaching on Indian and Bhutanese borderlands, an expansionist China is itching to move on Taiwan. This island democracy is a technological powerhouse central to the international semiconductor business. Taiwan also plays an indirect role in the defence of India because its autonomous existence ties up a sizable portion of China’s armed forces.

China’s exaggerated claims

Beijing’s claim that Taiwan has “always been” part of China is dubious, at best, and based on revisionist history. For most of its history, Taiwan was inhabited by Malayo-Polynesian tribes and had no ties with China until the island’s Dutch colonial rulers in the 17th century invited Chinese workers to emigrate. In that sense, Taiwan is closer to the Philippines than China. The world cannot afford to let Taiwan go the way of the once-autonomous Tibet, which was gobbled up by Mao Zedong’s regime in the early 1950s. Tibet’s annexation remains one of the most far-reaching geopolitical developments in post-World War II history, which resulted in China imposing itself as India’s neighbour and waging unending aggression.

Today, Taiwan has all the attributes of a robust independent state, and most Taiwanese want it to stay that way. But China’s new Mao, Xi Jinping, calls the island’s incorporation a “historic mission”. Xi is working to implement the expansionist agenda that Mao left unfinished, which explains why he has not spared even tiny Bhutan.

In the way a porcupine’s quills protect it from larger predators by making it difficult to digest, Taiwan needs to create porcupine-like defences with weapons like anti-ship and anti-aircraft missiles. By turning a Chinese invasion into a bloody and protracted guerrilla campaign, a porcupine Taiwan would inflict high costs on China, including major military casualties.

Creating international space

But no less important than bolstering its defences is Taiwan’s imperative to carve out greater international space for itself. If Taiwan gains greater presence on the global stage, it will be able to shore up its status as a de facto nation, making it more difficult for China to seize the island in the way it occupied Tibet and Xinjiang soon after coming under communist rule in 1949. The then-independent Tibet, for example, should have applied for United Nations membership shortly after that international body came into existence in 1945, but it never did.

China, as a step towards annexing Taiwan, is working to wipe out its international identity by bribing countries to break off diplomatic ties with Taipei and by vetoing Taiwan’s presence even in international forums. Its poaching has left only 13 nations and the Vatican still recognising Taiwan.

But recently, China has been forced to eat humble pie by a puny nation. Lithuania, with just 18,500 active military personnel, has set an example for bigger countries on how to stand up to the global Goliath’s bullying. Undeterred by China’s sanctions campaign against it, Lithuania has allowed Taiwan to open a de facto embassy. With some other European states—from the Czech Republic and Poland to Slovakia—already seeking to deepen ties with Taiwan, Lithuania indeed promises to serve as a bellwether of sorts.

The India connect

India, locked in several military standoffs with China, needs to think and act creatively, including helping Taiwan by learning from its historical mistake on Tibet. When China invaded Tibet in 1950, India opposed Tibet’s desperate plea for a UN discussion before acquiescing in the Chinese annexation of the buffer, including withdrawing its military escorts from Tibet and handing over Tibet’s postal, telegraph and telephone services that it was running.

If Taiwan is not to go Tibet’s way, India must do its part to help Taiwan reinforce its defences and self-governing status. India must follow the lead of Japan and the US in strengthening ties with Taipei. And it should emulate the example set by minnow Lithuania and allow Taiwan to rename its “Taipei Economic and Cultural Centre” in New Delhi as the “Taiwanese Representative Office”, while rebranding its own mission in Taipei as the “India Representative Office”.

Make no mistake: Taiwan is on the frontline of international defence against Xi’s totalitarianism and expansionism, which has spawned a Muslim gulag in Xinjiang, brutal repression in Tibet and Himalayan aggression. Major democracies must act before it becomes too late to save Taiwan, a democratic success story. If China succeeds in recolonising Taiwan, India’s security will come under greater pressure.

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