

Actions Speak Louder Than Words: TFD, EADF, and the Future of Democratic  
Defense in East Asia

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[Draft, please do not quote. Some arguments need further elaboration.]

Abstract:

While witnessing regression of democracy around the world in the past decade, many people from policy circles and academia proposed to build a coalition to prevent further backsliding in democracies. Nevertheless, these efforts have continued to be challenged by the fact that leading democracies are reluctant to leading the coalition, and that authoritarian regimes are investing more resources to sharpen their influence.

This paper plans to take Taiwan's efforts as an example to explain how a young and full-fledged democracy engages in the defense of democracy in the Indo-Pacific region. Details in this paper include: (1) a brief discussion of factors and actors in Taiwan's process of democratization; (2) explanation of the mechanism through which the East Asia Democracy Forum (EADF) aims to incorporate and influence actors for democratic defense in this region. This is a qualitative research, with a process-tracing method.



## I. Introduction

While witnessing regression of democracy around the world in the past decade, many people from policy circles and academia proposed to build a coalition to prevent further backsliding in democracies. Nevertheless, these efforts have continued to be challenged by the fact that leading democracies are reluctant to leading the coalition, and that authoritarian regimes are investing more resources to sharpen their influence.

This paper takes Taiwan's efforts as an example to explain how a young and full-fledged democracy engages in the defense of democracy in the Indo-Pacific region. Details in this paper include: (1) a brief discussion of factors and actors in Taiwan's process of democratization; (2) explanation of the mechanism through which the East Asia Democracy Forum (EADF) aims to incorporate and influence actors for democratic defense in this region. This is a qualitative research, with a process-tracing method.

## II. Taiwan as a full-fledged democracy

Taiwan began its journey to democratization in the 1980s and the national level elections in 1991 and the first presidential election in 1996 marked the transition to democracy. Two major political parties, namely, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and the Kuomintang (KMT) had won the presidential elections alternately as other major democracies in the world ever since. Though two major political parties have held contrast views on many issue areas, ranging from Taiwan's relations to China, domestic political and economic development, welfare and pension reforms, to

gender equality, both parties and the general public have agreed that democracy is the only game in town.

Taiwan enjoys an identity as mature democracy, which constitutes the major resource of Taiwan's soft power. Most Taiwanese agree that political attractiveness, culture, and diplomacy are the elements of soft power, the conception dubbed by Joseph Nye. In particular, they emphasize democracy as being the most valuable soft power asset Taiwan holds internationally. This view seems to be shared by various political groups. For instance, explicitly citing Nye, President Chen Shui-bian refers to democracy and civil society as a source of Taiwan's soft power.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, on his trip to Europe in February 2006, then Kuomintang (KMT) chairman Ma Ying-jeo claimed that "soft power," featuring democracy, peace, and prosperity, was crucial for Taiwan in the future in terms of its domestic politics and cross-strait relations.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the people in Taiwan who appreciate democracy, the international community also tend to see Taiwan as a role model for transition to democracy and further consolidation. With this in mind, the Taiwanese government sees "democracy" as a major source of Taiwan's attractiveness to the international community.

"Democracy is a shared value between US and Taiwan," says a senior Taiwanese official stationed in Washington DC, "and democratization indeed makes it easier to sell Taiwan's image in the States."<sup>3</sup> Peaceful transition and political party turn-over from the longtime ruling party KMT to the opposition DPP in 2000 made pundits and experts argue that Taiwan's democratization could be a great example for non-democratic countries, just as Taiwan's economic achievements set an example for the

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<sup>1</sup> *A-Bian Zongtong Dianzi Bao*, No. 141, (24 June 2004), available at: [http://www.president.gov.tw/1\\_epaper/93/930624.html](http://www.president.gov.tw/1_epaper/93/930624.html)

<sup>2</sup> *The China Times* (Taipei), (13 February 2006), p. A04.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with a senior official at Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in the US (TECRO), Washington DC, Nov. 23, 2005.

developing countries in the 1980s.<sup>4</sup> In comparison, a free and democratic Taiwan makes the Chinese Communist Party's tight control over the society look really poor internationally. [More discussions on Taiwan's democracy to be added]

### III. Establishment of Taiwan Foundation for Democracy

Democracy and human rights have become a new nation brand to Taiwan, and this new brand is expected to enhance people's will and confidence to defend Taiwan.<sup>5</sup> In line of this reasoning, the general public on the island is eager to improve Taiwan's international status and expand its international participation. While it is difficult for Taiwan to compete materially with China in international arenas, it is believed that Taiwan could employ multilateral and regional institutions to showcase its capability and willingness to contribute to international cooperation.<sup>6</sup>

The pursuit of this image as a democracy has brought about institutional changes in Taiwan. To promote democratic values and to connect to the international community, the Taiwan government has established major institutions in the past few decades, and the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy (TFD) is one of those institutions. TFD was established by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) in 2003,

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<sup>4</sup> Samuel C.Y. Ku, "Southeast Asia and Cross-Strait Relations: The Policy of Separation of Politics and Economics," *Journal of Contemporary China* 7(19), (November 1998), pp. 421-442; Lu Hsiu-lien, "Taiwan Miracle: The Power of Soft Power [Taiwan Chiji: Ruoxing Guoli]"; Lin Bi-jaw, "Wielding Soft Power to Open a New Round in the Cross-Strait Relations [Yi Ruanxing Liliang, Kai Liangan Xinju]"; Shane Lee, "A New Interpretation of 'Soft Power' for Taiwan," *Taiwan International Studies Quarterly* 1(2), (Summer 2005), pp. 1-23.

<sup>5</sup> Shane Lee, "A New Interpretation of 'Soft Power' for Taiwan".

<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of ROC (Taiwan), *Foreign Relations Yearbook 2003*, available at: [http://multilingual.mofa.gov.tw/web/web\\_UTF-8/almanac2003/01/01\\_01.htm](http://multilingual.mofa.gov.tw/web/web_UTF-8/almanac2003/01/01_01.htm); Wu Lin-jun, "To Actively Participate in Regional Organizations [Yi Jiji Touru Quyu Zuzhi]," *ET Today*, (22 May 2004), available at: <http://www.ettoday.com/2004/05/22/11081-1633735.htm>; Cheng Tuan-yao, "Expanding International Participation [Kuoda Guoji Canyu]," *ET Today*, (22 May 2004), available at: <http://www.ettoday.com/2004/05/22/11081-1633764.htm>.

and has been chaired by the Speaker of the Legislative Yuan. According to TFD, it has an inter-related, two-tracked mission. Domestically, the TFD strives to play a positive role in consolidating Taiwan's democracy and fortifying its commitment to human rights; internationally, the Foundation hopes to become a strong link in the world's democratic network, joining forces with related organizations around the world. Through the years, Taiwan has received valuable long-term assistance and stalwart support from the international community, and it is now time to repay that community for all of its efforts.<sup>7</sup>

The primary source of funding for the TFD is the government. However, it is operating independently, non-partisan, and non-profit. According to its By-laws, the Foundation may accept international and domestic donations. TFD's core activities include: Building relationships with related institutions around the world; Participating actively in the global promotion of democracy and supporting the improvement of human rights conditions; Supporting democracy promotion activities of NGOs and academic institutions; Promoting research and publications on democratic developments at home and abroad; and Organizing and sponsoring seminars, workshops, conferences, and other educational activities in the field of democracy and human rights.<sup>8</sup>

TFD is devoted to serve as a bridge between mature and aspiring democracies. For instance, the TFD convened the first World Forum for Democratization in Asia (WFDA) Biennial Conference in 2005 in Taipei, with more than 100 attendees. Most participants were from other democracy aid foundations, including the People in Need Foundation of the Czech Republic, International Center for Democratic

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<sup>7</sup> Official website of TFD, available at: <http://www.tfd.org.tw/opencms/english/about/background.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Official website of TFD, available at: <http://www.tfd.org.tw/opencms/english/about/ourTasks.html>.

Transition of Hungary, Aide for Democracy and Peace Building of Japan, Korea Democracy Foundation, Club of Madrid, and two Washington, DC-based transnational organizations – Community of Democracies and World Movement for Democracy. Several US-government supported foundations also joined the discussion, including International Republican Institute, National Democratic Institute of US, Center for International Private Enterprise, and National Endowment for Democracy. It also publishes the *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* to attract attention worldwide.

#### IV. The launch of East Asia Democracy Forum (EADF)

While engaging in multiple international initiatives in democracy promotion, TFD launched the East Asia Democracy Foundation (EADF) as a flagship project in this enterprise in defending democracy. Some scholarship points out that regional organizations can contribute to democratization in their member states through pressure, persuasion, and reward.<sup>9</sup> As for new democracies, democracy promotion as a foreign policy goal also serves to enhance internal legitimacy of the incumbent governments by reducing the possibility of coup attempts.<sup>10</sup> Some also argue that in some cases, regional organizations though with limited capacities in advancing members to become liberal democracies, at least can serve to endure defective democratic members from backsliding to authoritarian regimes.<sup>11</sup> Regional efforts to

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<sup>9</sup> Jon Pevehouse, *Democracy from Above: Regional Organizations and Democratization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Hayam Kim and Uk Heo, "International Organizations and Democracy Development: The Indirect Link," *Social Science Quarterly*, Vol. 99, No. 1 (March 2018), pp. 423-438.

<sup>11</sup> Mathew Davies, "Regional Organizations and Enduring Defective Democratic Members," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (2017), pp. 174-191.

promoting openness (first economically and followed by political terms) constitutes a major factor to democratic transition.

In addition to the “from above” regional efforts, China’s growing assertiveness in both domestic and international arena can be understood as another contributing factor to Taiwan’s further consolidation of democracy and to the joint efforts in establishing regional platform to the promotion of democracy. This statement may seem ambivalent, but the role of regional powers with authoritarianism in nature may buoy up other small countries to hasten the process of democratization.<sup>12</sup> In the case of East Asia, a growing concern about China’s intention behind its behaviors (such as Xi Jinping’s lift of the terms serving as the president, reclamation in the South China Sea, unfair trade practices, etc.) makes it an urgent issue for all members in this region.

Against this backdrop, TFD launched EADF. This forum is a network of civil society movements and organizations that aim to promote and consolidate democratic development in the region. Due to the fact that East Asian region is still lacking a solid platform where different civil society organizations can gather to further strengthen democracy and human rights. The TFD decided to invite organizations and individuals focusing on democracy and human right in East Asia to establish this new platform. As an international forum to advance democratic progress in Asia, the EADF focuses on strengthening solidarity in Asia and serves as a platform for exchanging ideas, sharing best practices, and empowering civil society in Asia. In September 2014, the TFD held the founding assembly of the forum in Taipei, Taiwan, with the aims to providing a solid platform for civil society organizations (CSOs) to make a joint effort in advancing democracy and human rights in East Asia. These

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas Risse and Nelli Babayan, “Democracy Promotion and the Challenges of Illiberal Regional Powers,” *Democratization*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (2015), pp. 381-399.

representatives of various CSOs from China, Hong Kong, Macau, Mongolia, Japan, South Korea, North Korea and Taiwan. During the meeting, participants confirmed the membership of EADF, the structure of the steering committee, and manifesto which includes EADF's tasks and action plans for the future. In addition, participants shared their experience in how to promote democracy and human rights in their countries. There were also a further discussion on how to enhance the cooperation and communication among EADF members.

TFD co-hosted the EADF platform with partners in Japan and in Mongolia in 2015 and 2016, respectively. In early 2016, Taiwan had another political party turn-over in presidency, and the TFD continued to engage in the EADF in Mongolia to showcase our endeavor in democracy promotion. In 2017, the TFD brought the forum and assembly back to Taipei and invited our partners from South Korea, Japan, Indonesia, Mongolia, Hong Kong, Vietnam, the Philippines, and the US to share their experiences on issues including democratic development in the digital era, the promotion of CSOs in East Asia, women empowerment, gender-based violence in Asia, and information security for human rights advocates.

In 2017, nevertheless, China's top leader Xi Jinping revealed his roadmap to secure more political power to become a strongman, which cast doubt and anxiety to the world and was seen a grave threat to democracies in East Asia. In his opening remarks, TFD President Szu-chien Hsu noted that in the regional context, East Asia has its own battle against democratic recession, having experienced uneven economic development, unequal distribution of wealth under globalization, as well as cultural and religious extremism. "More disconcertingly, authoritarian regimes like China are efficiently promoting their governing model as the effective solution and alternative to democracy," Hsu said, calling on the world to keep a watchful eye on their democracies and defend democratic values to prevent such an attempt by authoritarian

regimes from succeeding. Hsu also stressed that it is imperative for democracies to work more closely together, especially at the civil society level, to prevent the backsliding of democracy.

Our events in 2017 have an overarching theme of preventing democratic recession or democratic breakdown. For example, in June, TFD hosted a meeting of academics where the participants examine and explore the variables that prevented democratic breakdown in, and at critical political junctures. Subsequently, in November, TFD hosted an international conference to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the lifting of Martial Law in Taiwan. Since 2017, the EADF has extended its program to reach more members of civil society and the general public in addition to invited guests. Also beginning this year, the EADF initiated more practical and professional trainings to advocates. For example, the 2017 EADF includes three workshops: Cyber Security, Gender Equality, and Securing Civic Spaces for Civil Society Organization. The trainer organizations are professional NGOs in Taiwan.

The EADF is functional and consultative in nature, and it is expected to be more institutionalized in structure to grasp the momentum. In early 2018, the TFD hosted a reorganization meeting for EADF to further strengthen the steering committee, and the meeting also designated TFD as the Secretariat of EADF. And in this meeting, participants agreed the primary purpose of the EADF is to promote regional cooperation and mutual support to consolidate the hard-won democratic progress, to prevent democratic regression in all our societies, and to resist encroachment by authoritarian forces. Ever since, the Forum has been holding annual events including Steering Committee meetings, international conferences, and workshops in Asia.

## **Themes of EADF [description and analysis on each year needed]**

Year	Theme
2014	
2015	Immigration policy, migrant worker, and multiple culture and indigenous people.
2016	Political and social participation of East Asian women, youth initiative and democracy movement, transparency and governance, and progresses and problems of democracy.
2017	Strengthening Democracy in Asia
2018	Prevent Democratic Backsliding
2019	Combating Authoritarian Influence
2020	Challenges of Democracy under COVID-19

### **2018 The 5<sup>th</sup> EADF: Prevent Democratic Backsliding**

The Taiwan Foundation for Democracy held the fifth East Asia Democracy Forum in Taipei on June 26th. The theme of this year's forum is "Prevent Democratic Backsliding." Democracies around the world are experiencing various predicaments, including the loss of confidence in the democratic system in those more mature democracies and the democratic regression in the new and fragile democracies. The core values of democracy such as freedom of speech, freedom of press and political and social pluralism are encountering great challenges in the era of social media and new informational technologies and in a time when authoritarian regimes are offering what they call the "alternative model." In light of this, the 2018 Fifth East Asia Democracy Forum invited those democracy advocates and defenders who have been fighting for democracy, via this forum as a platform, to discuss how to protect

freedom of speech, combat disinformation, develop counter-narratives to show how democratic norms can complement traditional values, and prevent democratic principles from being manipulated to suppress democratic norms. TFD President Szu-chien Hsu said in the opening remarks that the East Asia Democracy Forum, or EADF, is one of the flagship forums for the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy. “The goal for this forum is to provide a platform for civil society organizations and individuals to discuss, strategize and join efforts to advance democracy and human rights in the North, Southeast and South Asia. In the past few years, the EADF was held in countries such as Japan and Mongolia. Last year, we brought the EADF back to Taipei, and we are again holding the forum in Taipei this year,” he said. President Hsu raised concerns about the development of the democracy in Asia: “Democracies in the Asia Pacific region have the commonality of experiencing pressure externally and from inside. Externally, we face authoritarian regimes’ aggressive attempt to promote its counter narrative, saying democratic systems are inefficient, chaotic and sluggish, and the authoritarian model is productive, effective and efficient. Internally, disgruntled segment of population are growing increasingly impatient, as socioeconomic inequality grew, while populism and extremism extends its tentacles in societies.” He called attention to the worrying signs of democratic backsliding in many countries in Asia today. “In facing these internal and external challenges, the goal of this year’s EADF, is to come together to think about and develop plans to safeguard our hard-earned democracy. As democrats, we have the responsibility and obligation to do so. We should begin to inform each other of authoritarian activities in our respective countries and assist and support one another to fend off such encroachment and prevent such corrosion. I believe, we can be successful in combating such decomposition when we work together,” he added.

The four panelists of this year's EADF came from the Philippines, Indonesia and Taiwan. They illustrated the hurdles of their respective democracy has come to encounter, which include disinformation, the compatibility of religious/traditional values and democratic values, and how the democrats can fight/communicate with those with opposing ideas in the society through democratic means.

Mandeep Singh, manager of Bersih 2.0, or the Coalition for Clean and Fair Election, was invited by the TFD to give a speech at the EADF as well. Bersih 2.0 was also the 2017 Asia Democracy and Human Rights Award laureate. Malaysia has achieved last month its first transition of political power since its independence in 1957. Calling himself a “proud Malaysian,” Singh’s remarks met applause from the audience. “For the past years, doors of the government institutions were shut and closed for us...only the prison doors were open for us. Today, reform became a household name,” he said. “But the change did not come easily; it took years of hard work from among the members of the civil society, political parties, international and regional solidarity movement and Malaysians.” Singh encouraged his fellow human rights defenders who are experiencing hardships to remain positive. “Do not despair. Do not give up in fighting that you want in your country. Do not stop mobilizing and organizing. Repressive regimes will never cease to divide us, but we cannot be afforded to be divided at any given time. Remember, people power can never be defeated.”

### **2019 The 6<sup>th</sup> EADF: Combating Authoritarian Influence**

The annual East Asia Democracy Forum was held in Taipei, Taiwan on 6/26. Each year, the forum takes on on issues or problems that are most salient or urgent that need to be addressed and tackled. Disinformation, a concern around the globe in the recent years, was again the focus this year's forum, following the discussion last year

on how democracies should work together to combat disinformation and develop counter-narratives to the authoritarian models. Deputy Foreign Minister Szu-chien Hsu and President Liao of the TFD gave welcoming and opening remarks stressing that Taiwan, on the frontline of an authoritarian regime's influence tactics, requires efforts from the government, the civil society, and the private sector to face up to the mounting pressure from China. Their speeches echoed the presentations of the following four speakers at the forum, who also called for awareness and vigilance against authoritarian influence and disinformation that can disturb a democratic society and weaken its democratic composition.

### **2020 EADF Steering Committee Meeting and Discussion on Challenges of Democracy under COVID-19**

The East Asia Democracy Forum held its 2020 Steering Committee Meeting virtually on June 15th. The Steering Committee endorsed the Mongolian Women's Fund (MONES) as EADF chair and the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy as the secretariat for the next term (2020-2022). Member of the Steering Committee will continue to recruit democracy and human rights advocacy civil society organizations to join as Forum members.

In addition to choosing the next leadership, the EADF Steering Committee also hold a webinar to highlight the challenges for democracy and its institutions under the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants of the webinar shared the current situation and status of democracy in their respective countries under the pandemic. The participants further agreed that even under the COVID-19 outbreak, countries across Asia should not undermine democratic values and institutions. Governments across Asia should maintain substantive communication with the people when implementing prevention

measures. As the social and economically vulnerable and minority have been heavily impacted by the pandemic, the participants also agree that these groups need more protection and supportive measures from civil society and their government. Finally, the webinar participants also shared initiatives from civil society that help more people weather the impact of the pandemic.

#### V. In defense of democracy

[To be added as conclusion, with some discussion on achievements and limitations for

EADF]