

Unpacking Taiwan’s ‘People-Centred’ New Southbound Policy in Indonesia: A Transnational Perspective

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Abstract

Almost eight years since the start of Taiwan’s people-centred New Southbound Policy (NSP) in 2016, various discussions have arisen regarding the policy’s efficacy in enhancing Taiwan’s external relations with targeted countries in the Indo-Pacific region. Most scholars have primarily addressed this policy from a state-centric perspective, focusing on the impact of the policy on bilateral interstate relations. Contrary to the existing approach, this article employs a transnational perspective by looking at the practice and success of the policy from both state and non-state level analysis. The use of this approach gives a comprehensive understanding of the nature of the NSP and offers an alternative view on the study of foreign policy by focusing on the transnational level of interactions. Drawing on the case study of the talent exchange program between Indonesia and Taiwan, this article argues that while the NSP has improved the number of student, worker and academic exchanges between Taiwan and Indonesia, the policy has not achieved its aim of extending ‘genuine two-way’ exchanges, resulting in asymmetrical relations that present challenges to the overall achievement of the NSP.

Keywords: *New Southbound Policy, transnational politics, foreign policy, Taiwan, Indonesia.*

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1. Introduction

Nearly eight years after the implementation of Taiwan's New Southbound Policy (NSP) in 2016, this policy has sparked various debates around its effectiveness in promoting Taiwan's external engagement with countries in the Indo-Pacific region. Most scholars have assessed the success of the policy from a state-centric approach, focusing excessively on the impact of the policy on bilateral interstate relations.

Realists view this policy as an instrument of Taiwan's strategic survival. Ping-Kuei Chen (2020), for example, claimed that the NSP effectively advanced Taiwan and the United States (US) relations by signalling Taiwan's commitment to a self-restraint strategy favoured by the US. In a similar vein, other scholars highlighted that in the face of the deterioration of cross-strait relations, the implementation of the NSP has actually strengthened Taiwan's ties with Japan (Black, 2019) and paved the way for fruitful relations with India (Hashmi, 2023). Further, the evaluation of the NSP in Southeast Asia also placed significant emphasis on the role of the 'China factor' (Jamil, 2023: 3) in exerting economic pressure and reinforcing the one-China policy commitment in the region, posing challenges to the effective implementation of the NSP.

Neoliberal scholars, on the other hand, view the NSP as Taiwan's soft power diplomacy (Lee, 2023; Rasool & Ruggiero, 2022) to promote cooperation with countries in the region in the fields of education (Effendi, 2023) and migrant workforce (Maksum, 2023). Yang and Hsiao elaborate on Taiwan's soft power practice and introduce the concept of 'warm power' (Yang & Hsiao, 2023: 344), which refers to the ability of the state to send and share 'warmth' via the state's experiences and share resources with partner countries listed under the NSP. The Neoliberals have pointed out the importance of attraction or intangible power for Taiwan to facilitate

cooperation with the NSP target countries despite the absence of formal diplomatic relations.

State-centric approaches have offered compelling arguments in evaluating the impact of the NSP from the perspective of survival and cooperation. By primarily evaluating the NSP from a state-centric view, the aforementioned approaches neglect the core value of the NSP that focuses primarily on the 'people-centred' elements, as outlined by Tsai Ing-wen in her remark at the 2016 Forum on Opportunities for New Southbound Policy.

And most importantly, we have come to realize that 'people-to-people ties' are of the utmost importance if the New Southbound Policy is to be implemented and gain serious momentum. [...] we will make a concerted effort to gradually forge among the New Southbound countries 'a sense of economic community'—a feeling that arises from connectedness and mutual understanding that facilitate exchanges and linkages between people (Office of the President Republic of China, 2016b).

The focus on a people-centred approach becomes significant when evaluating the implementation of Taiwan's NSP in Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia, due to extensive people-to-people interactions between the two. As argued by Yang (2018), it is imperative to look at the NSP from the perspective of transnational actors, looking beyond the dominant discourse of a state-centric approach, especially in regard to the making of regional society in Southeast Asia.

Contrary to the state-centric perspective, this article emphasises the importance of the people as non-state agents in assessing the effectiveness of the NSP. By shifting the locus of analysis from state to non-state actors, this article offers a comprehensive understanding of the reality of the NSP and the impact of the policy on both state and non-state actors. This article highlights the agency of non-state actors in influencing Taiwan's external relations from the lens of cross-border interactions facilitated under the platform of the NSP. It investigates the transnational dimension of Taiwan's foreign policy, characterised by continuous and regular interaction where 'at least one actor is a non-state agent' (Risse-Kappen, 1995: 3).

It further examines the practice of Taiwan's people-centred foreign policy by focusing on Indonesia — a country where Taiwan engages in

significant interactions with non-state actors in promoting its foreign policy agenda. This article primarily focuses on assessing the talent exchange programs initiated by the Taiwanese government to promote cooperation in the field of education and workforce with Indonesia. These two sectors are at the heart of Taiwan's NSP as it focuses on people – students, workers, and academic communities — as the main target of the policy. The findings suggest that while the NSP has improved the number of student, worker, and academic exchanges between Indonesia and Taiwan, the policy has not achieved its aim of extending 'genuine two-way' exchanges, resulting in asymmetrical relations that present challenges to the overall achievement of the NSP.

The article is developed as follows. The first section reviews Taiwan's people-centred foreign policy in Southeast Asia, highlighting the pattern of continuities and changes in its practice. The second section discusses the origin of the NSP and the talent exchange programs. The third and fourth sections evaluate the implementation of the NSP talent exchange programs in promoting education and knowledge exchanges and workforce cooperation between Indonesia and Taiwan. The fifth section analyses the impact of those people-to-people exchanges on the bilateral interstate relations between both sides. The last section is the conclusion.

2. Taiwan's People-Centred Foreign Policy: Continuity and Change

The NSP is characterised by both continuity and change in addressing Taiwan's long-standing interactions with non-state actors in Southeast Asia. The continuity is evident from the utilisation of non-state actors from the Chiang to Tsai administrations, while the transformation is highlighted by the formalisation and institutionalisation of foreign policy that substantially aims to promote 'genuine two-way' exchanges by utilising students, academic communities, and workers on both sides. The NSP provides a boost to the number of people-to-people exchanges, serving as a toolkit for the Taiwanese government in improving its ties with countries in Southeast Asia, including Indonesia. This section briefly reviews the engagement between the state and non-state actors in Taiwan's foreign policy in Southeast Asia.

Under the two Chiang administrations (1949-1988), the Kuomintang (KMT) aimed to promote the international status of the Republic of China (ROC) as a legitimate representative of the entire Chinese nation. Domestically, it forced Taiwanese, who shared different languages and

cultures from the mainlanders, to study China, to speak Mandarin, and to praise Chinese nationalism (Kagan, 2014). Efforts to foster Chinese nationalist identity extended into foreign policy practice by utilising overseas Chinese students (*qiaosheng*), particularly in Southeast Asia. The primary goal of recruiting these overseas Chinese was to cultivate support and embrace Chinese national identity formation abroad (Damm, 2012). Taiwan recruited ethnic Chinese students from Southeast Asia to study at Taiwan's prestigious universities. The two Chiang regimes took a top-down approach in utilising overseas Chinese (*huaqiao*) communities under its ethnic mobilisation policy (*qiaowu*). Supporting the education of overseas Chinese was the main tool used by the ROC to cultivate interest and support Chinese national identity formation abroad.

The appointment of the Taiwan-born president Lee Teng-hui to succeed the deceased mainlander Chiang Ching-kuo as the ROC president in 1988 signalled the start of a transition in Taiwan's domestic structures. First, the political structure of the state was shifted, incrementally, from authoritarian to democratic. Second, the societal structure became fragmented and polarised, especially with the fostering of a separate Taiwanese identity (Hughes, 1997; Jacobs, 2012). While Taiwanisation emphasised 'identification with Taiwan, consciousness of Taiwan and even a Taiwan nationalism' (Jacobs, 2012: 6), democratisation stressed the development of political reforms in Taiwan that transformed a single-party authoritarian state into a democracy with its values of civil liberties, free elections, and rights and ability to facilitate peaceful transitions of power through regular elections (Jacobs, 2012). Democratisation in Taiwan was launched by Taiwanese opposed to the authoritarian rule of the KMT from the mainland. Thus, the success of democratisation, meaning the achievement of majority rule, entailed the progress of Taiwanisation. Democratisation and Taiwanisation went hand in hand.

These two conditions interlinked with the growing international isolation when Taipei lost its major diplomatic allies against the People's Republic of China (PRC) during the 1970s. Facing increased international isolation, President Lee reformulated Taiwan's foreign policy and promoted pragmatic diplomacy seeking 'international recognition of the ROC as a political entity separate from Mainland China' (J. Chen, 2002: 5). The building of Taiwanese identity at home paved the way for Taipei to redefine its position in the international arena and underpinned the practice of

pragmatic diplomacy. While the campaign for diplomatic recognition had been largely lost, the Taiwanese government sought acknowledgement from other countries regarding their existence as a sovereign state separate from China. Taiwan's early phase of democratisation, at the same time, opened up new window for discourse on Taiwanese national identity (Maehara, 2018).

The emergence of a distinct Taiwanese identity set the stage for President Lee to redefine Taiwan's mobilisation policy from cultivating interest from overseas Chinese to overseas Taiwanese. He shifted *qiaowu*'s traditional bloodline principle to one based on citizenship or allegiance to Taiwan. With its reformulation, Taiwan opened up new channels for new non-state actors to get involved in the practice of transnational politics in Southeast Asia. In this case, Taiwanese businesspeople emerged as important non-state agents and enjoyed various privileges following the reclassification of *qiaowu*. Their investment in Southeast Asia, for example, was further supported by the government via the Southward Policy in 1994 (see Ku, 1995).

While encouraging Taiwanese businesspeople to expand their business activities in Southeast Asia, Taiwan also began importing Southeast Asian migrant workers to enhance its economic development. Migrant workers from Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines were among the first cohort to enter Taiwan's labour market in the 1990s, which was then followed by Vietnam. The policy to import labour from these countries was at the discretion of Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) based on various calculations, including Taiwan's wish to reduce its dependence on China. Continuing to rely on workers from China would have been the most practical option, but President Lee decided otherwise.

The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) administration under Chen Shui-bian was also eager to encourage a separate Taiwanese identity, especially given that by 2000, more than 40 per cent of Taiwan's population identified as Taiwanese (National Chengchi University Election Study Center, 2020). The maturation of democracy coupled with an emphasis on a separate Taiwanese identity facilitated the strong emergence of non-state actors to engage in Taiwan's foreign policy. In an important departure from past practice, Chen set up the Department of Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) International Affairs under the Taiwan Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The people diplomacy (*minjian* diplomacy) opened up a new avenue for political parties, parliament, and NGOs to get involved in

the promotion of Taiwan's interests in the region (J. Chen, 2002, 2005). Under the leadership of the DPP, Taiwan also began to introduce various government scholarships to support international students, especially from Southeast Asia to study in Taiwan. The Taiwanese government aimed at diversifying the composition of international students and facilitating national identity consolidation by promoting a 'new democratic Taiwan' to international students. Rather than support exchanges with the mainland — which only strengthened the hand of proponents of unification — the Chen administration limited people-to-people ties with Beijing.

Taiwan's attempts to cultivate a separate identity from China and to attain recognition of such status experienced a significant reversal under Ma Ying-jeou's KMT administration. Unlike his predecessors, President Ma sought to boost Taiwan's relations with the PRC and embrace a Chinese identity in Taiwan. One major move was the improvement of people-to-people exchanges between the two. Ma's administration, for example, established direct flights between Taiwan and Beijing, allowing the national carriers of both countries to operate daily. Additionally, Taipei took steps to enhance exchanges with Beijing by permitting Mainland Chinese students to enrol in Taiwan's universities for the first time in 2010 (Chao & Wang, 2010). This marked a reversal from the active efforts by Presidents Lee and Chen to wind back educational cooperation with China. So far as Southeast Asia was concerned, there was no new foreign policy initiative or 'Go South' specific policy to engage with Southeast Asia compared to the two previous presidents.

Despite Taiwan's continuous efforts to incorporate interpersonal elements in its foreign policy, the previous four administrations never formally acknowledged the pivotal role of people-to-people ties between Taiwan and Southeast Asia. Even though Chen Shui-bian set the tone to institutionalise NGO diplomacy into foreign policy platforms, the outreach was limited to countries where the participation of civil society in the decision-making process was well established. This was not the case in Southeast Asia. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member countries began to facilitate civil society participation on a wide scale only after the adoption of the ASEAN Charter in 2007 (see Gerard, 2015). Previous interactions were initiated unilaterally, involving only Taiwanese public sector institutions or government-led agencies. Lee Teng-hui's Southward Policy, for instance, was aimed at facilitating investment by

KMT-owned corporations in Southeast Asia (Ku, 1995; Kung, 2001).

Only after Tsai Ing-wen took power in 2016 was there an integrated foreign policy platform to facilitate the increasing engagements and exchanges brought by non-state actors between Taiwan and Southeast Asia. Two structural conditions help explain this foreign policy initiative. First, Taiwan's increasing international isolation under Tsai Ing-wen has made these actors essential for any state in the region that intends to develop or keep substantive relations with Taiwan. The presence of hundreds of thousands of Southeast Asian migrant workers in Taiwan gives Southeast Asian governments a direct stake in protecting their citizens, underscoring the importance and visibility of Taiwan, especially in Jakarta, Manila and Hanoi. The transnational relations brought by these non-state actors facilitates cooperation between Taiwan and countries in the region despite the absence diplomatic relations.

Second, Taiwan's aspiration of cultivating a distinct national identity offers incentives for the state to utilise non-state agents, such as students, academics, and migrant workers, to promote Taiwan's values into the practice of the state's foreign policy. Promoting a national identity entails the dissemination and propagation of specific values, both domestically and internationally. On the domestic front, the Taiwanese government has proposed several policies to promote Taiwan's distinctive identity through the Taiwanisation movement. Internationally, the people-centred NSP serves the purpose of promoting Taiwan's unique identity, with non-state actors acting as agents for the state in disseminating and propagating these values abroad. The Taiwanese government recruits and utilises students, workers, academics to instil its values to these groups. Once these students, workers, and academics return to their home countries, these values are then socialised in their respective societies. In other words, Taiwan's people-centred foreign policy is a response to these two structural conditions that provide access for non-state actors to engage in cross-border interactions with the state.

3. The Origin of the NSP and the Talent Exchange Program

Shortly after assuming office in May 2016, the Tsai administration introduced the NSP Promotion Plan, which encompassed four key tasks aimed at enhancing ties between Taiwan and the NSP target countries in South Asia, Southeast Asia and Oceania. These tasks include attempts to promote economic collaboration, conduct talent exchanges, encourage

resource sharing, and forge regional links (Executive Yuan, 2016). Even though the NSP continued the previous engagement carried out by Presidents Lee and Chen, Tsai administration made some adjustments to the policy program, adapting to the region's strategic environment (Glaser et al., 2018). The main feature of this change was the expansion of cooperation from economic and trade exchanges to people-to-people connections (P. K. Chen, 2020; Glaser et al., 2018; Hsiao & Yang, 2018; Ngeow, 2017; Yang & Chiang, 2019). With this expansion, the NSP was expected to achieve short and long-term objectives. In the short term, the Taiwanese government aimed to spur and extend 'two-way exchanges' in various areas, including trade, investment, culture, tourism, and talent (Office of Trade Negotiations Executive Yuan, 2017). In the long run, the NSP aims to strengthen the overall bilateral and interpersonal links between Taiwan and the target countries and set up a dialogue mechanism with NSP target countries to foster mutual trust and address differences (Glaser et al., 2018).

Among the four key tasks outlined under the NSP, the talent exchange program is at the core of Taiwan's efforts in institutionalising people-to-people ties and has become the flagship program of the NSP. This is the main area where people and the state can develop cross-border interactions and for the people to accrue values and knowledge embedded in state and societal institutions. At the same time, these people, coming from different countries, also bring their own values and promote them to the communities they live in via social interactions, creating mutual understanding among them. The presence of these foreign citizens in Taiwan also influences the bilateral relations between Taiwan and the government from the sending countries as they have moral and political obligations to protect the safety and well-being of their citizens abroad. The people-centred foreign policy, therefore, has proved effective at generating impact on two levels: the bilateral relations between governments and the transnational ties between the state and non-state actors.

Education has been central to the Taiwanese government's agenda in promoting its interest with countries in Southeast Asia. Under the NSP, the Taiwanese government aims to bolster the number of inbound students from Southeast Asia to study in Taiwan and the number of outbound students to the Southeast Asia region, foster the study of Southeast Asian cultures and languages, encourage collaboration between academia and industry, and to assist workers and professionals for employment access in Taiwan.

The Tsai government developed several strategies to achieve this goal. First, increasing the budget and expanding government funding of Taiwan Fellowships and Scholarships (TAFS) for the NSP target countries. Second, Taiwan customised its degree and non-degree programs for international students, offering various short-term courses, summer schools, intensive programs, joint degree programs, and vocational training. The government also proposed a new initiative called the Industry-Academia Collaboration Program for international students, which provides opportunities for students to combine study and vocational training or internships within two, four, or five-year bachelor or associate degree programs. Third, Taiwan set up a number of education centres and connections in several NSP target countries to promote its higher education cooperation.

In the labour sector, the Taiwanese government seeks to enhance its workforce by implementing a point-based system that enables eligible foreign professionals and technical workers to extend their residency in Taiwan, simplifying the processes for foreign workers entering Taiwan and attracting foreign talent from the NSP target countries. Workforce cooperation represents another key domain where cross-border interactions between the state and people occur, facilitating a sense of shared interests. Exchanges in this sector could have far-reaching impacts, encompassing not only the people or workers employed but also their families and societies in the sending countries in the form of economic (see Lan, 2006; Mas'udah, 2020; Spitzer, 2016; Tsay, 2016), and social-political remittances (see Kessler & Rother, 2016; Levitt, 1998; Piper, 2009; Piper & Rother, 2020). Further, their presence in Taiwan has formed an enclave society, creating a new landscape for cross-border interactions between the state and these workers. The next three sections will further elaborate on the impact of the NSP on the bilateral relations between Indonesia and Taiwan at both the state and transnational levels.

4. Education and Knowledge Exchanges

One of the main goals of the talent exchange program is to encourage and expand 'two-way' education and knowledge exchanges between Indonesia and Taiwan, promoting understanding among the two countries. With this new initiative, Taiwan has been able to boost the number of university students from Indonesia. According to the statistics of the Taiwan Ministry of Education (MOE) (2022a), Indonesian student enrolment increased three-

fold from 3,130 in 2016 to 9,657 in 2022. This placed Indonesia among the top three contributors of international students in Taiwan, following Vietnam and Malaysia. The majority of Indonesian students pursued degree programs in business and management, engineering, medical health, hospitality and tourism.

The increasing number of students from Indonesia has benefitted Taiwan in various ways, mainly in promoting Taiwan's image as a multicultural country that embraces diversity. The Taiwanese government, for example, utilised these students to promote Taiwan's higher education diplomacy among Muslim countries. The government recruited a number of students from Indonesia to promote Taiwan's halal and Muslim-friendly environment using video recordings. The MOE and the Foundation for International Cooperation in Higher Education (FICHET) set up a website called 'Study in Taiwan' as a one-stop educational promotion platform for prospective international students to get information about studying in Taiwan (Study in Taiwan, 2020b). Using this website as a platform for assessing Taiwan's higher educational promotion, I found eighteen recorded videos posted between 2012 and 2022 displaying testimonies from Indonesian students about their studies and life experiences in Taiwan. Among these videos, there were six videos from Indonesian Muslim students promoting Taiwan as a country friendly to the Muslim community.

Each of these videos showed students' religious activities in Taiwan, such as going to the mosque with friends or family or worshipping at the university's prayer room. These students also conveyed a message that Taiwan and its society are respectful towards their beliefs as Muslims and that made them content choosing Taiwan as a country for study. The government also effectively recruited students studying in Taipei and Kaohsiung to showcase the equality of access for students in carrying out their religious activities on each campus. One student studying at Cheng-Shiu University in Kaohsiung, for example, mentioned that: "For Muslims, we have our own prayer room. Taiwan people are very kind, even if you are Muslim, they respect you.... For the Muslim, the mosque is very near to our campus" (Study in Taiwan, 2020c). Another student from Kaohsiung Medical University (KMU) testified that, "KMU is a respectful campus for Muslim students like me. We have been provided with a convenient prayer room, even though there are only two of us" (Study in Taiwan, 2020a).

It is clear that these students are useful to the Taiwanese government in two ways. First, they were utilised by the government to promote a multicultural Taiwan that embraces the value of diversity. Second, these students are recruited as ‘informal ambassadors’ for Taipei’s higher education diplomacy, especially among Muslim countries. By utilising these students, Taipei achieves three goals. First, the messages conveyed by these students are attractive to potential students who wish to continue their study in Taiwan. In this way, the promotional strategy carried out by these students encourages prospective students from Indonesia to choose Taiwan, creating a stable business and market for Taiwan’s higher education diplomacy. Second, the testimonials from those students help cascade and socialise Taiwan’s norms and values to a larger audience. Taipei implicitly presents itself as a better friend to the Muslim community than China. This is an important message that Taipei wanted to convey to Indonesia, knowing that Muslim communities in Indonesia often express their concerns and participate in demonstrations against China’s treatment of its Uyghur Muslims. Third, the campaign also helped Taiwan legitimise itself as a country that complies with fundamental human rights and values religious freedom. This claim to adhere to universal values is crucial to integrating Taiwan into international standards and norms, especially with its exclusion from most international organisations and fora.

Despite this achievement, the NSP still faces various challenges, especially in improving reciprocal educational exchanges between Taiwan and Indonesia. It can be seen from the small number of students from Taiwan studying in Indonesia. According to data collected by the Taiwan MOE, during the period from 2016 to 2022, there were fewer than 500 Taiwanese students enrolled in Indonesian universities (The Ministry of Education ROC, 2022b). The majority of young people in Taiwan tend to have their focus on the US, Australia, and Japan when it comes to study abroad. In 2022, there were more than 20,000 Taiwanese students pursuing degrees and various educational programs in the US (The Ministry of Education ROC, 2022b).

Taiwan’s limitations in facilitating study exchange initiatives with Indonesia are particularly evident when compared to Australia’s efforts. Through its New Colombo Plan, Australia successfully dispatched 3,561 undergraduate students to take study abroad programs in Asian and Pacific countries. Indonesia is the favourite destination, with 1,252 students in

2023 (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2023). Enabling Taiwanese students to partake in one or two semesters of study in Indonesia could provide them with the opportunity to learn the local languages, immerse themselves in diverse cultures, and interact with local communities. This has the potential to foster a positive rapport and understanding between Taiwan and Indonesia. One significant obstacle is the popular perception of Southeast Asian nations in Taiwan. As argued by Chong (2018), Taiwanese often perceive countries like Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand as little more than a source of low-cost migrant labour.

Another shortcoming is also apparent in advancing the study of Taiwan in Southeast Asia. While the Taiwanese government has actively supported the growth of Southeast Asian Studies programmes and centres in Taiwan universities, there is minimal reciprocity in establishing programmes, research centres, and a regional association dedicated to Taiwan Studies in Southeast Asia. This situation contrasts with Taiwan's achievements in Europe and North America, where numerous centres and programmes focused on Taiwan Studies have been established since the late 1990s (Fell & Hsiao, 2019). Some of these centres and programmes are located in world-class universities. In the United Kingdom (UK), for instance, Taiwan Studies Programmes are located at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) University of London, the London School of Economics and Political Science and the University of Nottingham (European Association of Taiwan Studies, 2023b). In the US, meanwhile, Taiwan-related courses are taught in many of the highest-ranked universities and liberal arts colleges, including at the University of Texas Austin, the University of Washington and the University of California Irvine (Hsieh & Liu, 2020). In Germany, the European Research Center on Contemporary Taiwan (ERCCT) at Tübingen University established itself as a research institution dedicated to fostering the development of future scholars in the field of Taiwan Studies.

Further, regional Taiwan Studies' associations have been set up in Europe and America, namely the European Association for Taiwan Studies (EATS) which has been established since 2004, and the North American Studies Association (NATSA) since 1994. Their primary responsibilities are organising a premier annual Taiwan Studies conference, inviting academics and junior scholars from around the world to present their research findings on Taiwan. Both associations have also arranged additional

academic initiatives, including research and publication grants, research and scholarly awards, workshop grants and Taiwan syllabus projects, thanks to funding agencies and sponsors like the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange, the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy, and the MOE Taiwan (European Association of Taiwan Studies, 2023a). EATS and NATSA also co-sponsor the *International Journal of Taiwan Studies*, a leading internationally peer-reviewed academic research journal in English on Taiwan studies.

In Southeast Asia, meanwhile, the Taiwanese government is more interested in setting up centres that focus on disseminating information about study in Taiwan, including scholarships, university degrees, student exchange and Chinese language programs. In Indonesia, for instance, the Taiwanese government has successfully supported the establishment of Taiwan education centres in Jakarta, Yogyakarta, Surabaya, and Solo, collaborating with both public and private universities. Taiwan Centres in Solo and Yogyakarta have expanded their functions by facilitating university-to-university cooperation, joint research and lecture series between Indonesia and Taiwan (Adji, 2021). While the presence of such centres would eventually boost the number of student enrolments and educational exchanges between Taiwan and Indonesia, there is little understanding of how these centres could contribute to the institutionalisation of Taiwan Studies into research and teaching in Indonesia and more broadly, in Southeast Asia.

As Taiwan has undergone various domestic and international structural changes, the cultivation of support for Taiwan Studies as a distinct field becomes imperative, offering an understanding of Taiwan's unique identity, values, history and trajectory in the region. As argued by Chun-bin Chen (2023), there is a need to build global Taiwan Studies for the sake of protecting Taiwan's national security against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP's) hybrid warfare in academic research. There have been efforts to organise Taiwan-themed lecture series and academic conferences carried out by the University of Indonesia, one of the top public universities in Indonesia. However, these programs primarily serve for short-term outreach instead of long-term institutionalisation of Taiwan studies into university teaching, syllabus, academic research and publication and professional association. Thus, the establishment of Taiwan centres in Indonesia appears to be mainly geared to fill the 'empty seats' in Taiwan's universities caused

by a decrease in local student enrolment due to declining birth rates in Taiwan (Green, 2020) and to offset the impact of the Mainland Chinese students who came to universities in Taiwan in tens of thousands, thanks to the legacy of the Ma administration's efforts to expand cross-strait exchanges.

Under the NSP, the Taiwanese government has primarily constructed Southeast Asia as a hub for Taiwan's higher education business and market instead of a region for the establishment of knowledge-based experts on Taiwan Studies. Indonesia has the potential to set up a centre on Taiwan Studies, especially with the growing number of Taiwan alumni graduating with master's and doctoral degrees in the Social Sciences and Humanities. Some of them are academics working in leading universities in Indonesia, such as the University of Indonesia and the University of Airlangga, and some are affiliated with government and independent research centres. The knowledge, value and experience that these alumni accrued during their studies in Taiwan is a long-term valuable asset in developing Taiwan Studies in the region.

In a broader context, the absence of Taiwan studies associations, research centres and programmes in the Southeast Asia region indicates that epistemic communities in the region still do not pay sufficient attention to Taiwan. This is astonishing, given the dense business and labour relations, not to mention the significance of Taiwan Strait security for ASEAN. This gap cannot be solely attributed to a lack of funding. Several factors are at play. First, Southeast Asian countries, whether new democracies or still authoritarian, lack the robust civil society that includes independent research centres and think tanks found in Western states. Consequently, epistemic communities in Southeast Asia are more susceptible to self-censorship under their governments' one-China policies compared to the highly independent epistemic communities in the West. Second, Southeast Asia's proximity to China leads to apprehension about establishing research centres or associations exclusively focused on Taiwan. This fear also extends to hosting regular and large conferences on Taiwan. This is an issue that epistemic communities in the two regions must address. They would both benefit from scholarly collaborations and the establishments of reciprocal area studies' institutions.

5. Workforce and Industry Talents

Foreign workers in Taiwan are generally divided into two groups, white-collar foreign professionals or high to mid-skilled workers, and blue-collar foreign workers, often called migrant workers or low-skilled labourers. While the former mainly consists of workers from the Global North countries, the majority of blue-collar workers in Taiwan come from Southeast Asia. Taiwan hosted 742,394 workers from Southeast Asia, with Indonesia making the largest contribution, providing a workforce of 261,779 people at the end of July 2023 (The Ministry of Labor Republic of China, 2023). Taiwan officially opened its borders to the flow of blue-collar workers from Southeast Asia in 1992 with the enactment of the Employment Service Act (ESA). Low-paid employment opportunities were offered in construction, labour-intensive manufacturing, and domestic sectors that included helpers and caregivers (Lan, 2007; Loveband, 2004; Tierney, 2007). In addition to these sectors, Taiwan also suffered from a labour shortage in the fishing industry (H. T. Chen, 2009). There are two categories of fishermen working in this sector, coastal fishing and distant water fishing. The majority of Indonesian migrant workers work as domestic helpers and caregivers, comprising nearly 80 per cent of the migrant workforce in social welfare industries, while the rest 20 per cent work in productive industries, including manufacturing, construction, agriculture, forestry, fishing, and animal husbandry (The Ministry of Labor Republic of China, 2023).

A key feature of Taiwan's foreign labour policy is allowing the importation of foreign workers but preventing them from permanent residency. This guest worker system has been implemented for over three decades since the importation of migrant workers began in 1992. However, starting in 2022, the Taiwanese government introduced a new system that allows migrant labourers to upgrade their 'status' from low-skilled to intermediate-skilled workers after working in Taiwan for at least six years and meeting the salary threshold and skill requirements (Executive Yuan, 2022). They can then apply for permanent residency after being employed as intermediate-skilled workers for at least five years and fulfilling other conditions established by the Immigration Act (Executive Yuan, 2022). With this new system, the Taiwanese government seeks to retain 80,000 migrant workers by 2030 (Taipei Times, 2022).

While this initiative is a progressive move under the NSP, it has raised criticism, especially with regard to the excessively high salary

threshold. In order to qualify as intermediate-skilled workers, labourers in productive industries must have a monthly income of NTD 33,000 while those employed in caregiver institutions and as domestic workers and private caregivers should earn NTD 29,000 and NTD 24,000, respectively (Taipei Times, 2022). Taiwan's minimum monthly wage is NTD 24,000, but this rate only applies to workers in productive industries and caregiver institutions. Those employed as domestic workers and private caregivers earn an average monthly salary of NTD 17,000, which is significantly below the minimum standard. Thus, in order to qualify for an upgrade, these workers have to work extensive overtime, exceeding eight to ten hours per day and possibly working seven days a week without a day off. Working such long hours, often without a day off for months, is known to result in burnout and potentially depression. A study conducted on over 1,000 Indonesian migrant workers in Taiwan revealed that approximately 15 per cent of them exhibited depressive symptoms, especially those working overtime (Asri & Chuang, 2023).

Another challenge in implementing the new system is the public attitude of Taiwanese towards migrant workers from Southeast Asia. A survey carried out in 2019 of 1,000 Taiwanese showed that 76 per cent of respondents supported skilled immigration in general. However, when it comes to skilled immigration from Southeast Asia, the number dropped to 44.6 per cent or lower, 21.4 per cent from the baseline (Rich, 2019). Another study conducted with 1,966 Taiwanese respondents revealed that 77.16 per cent of respondents supported foreign professionals becoming citizens of Taiwan while only 47.45 per cent agreed that the Taiwanese government should allow migrant labourers to become citizens (Tsai et al., 2019). These two surveys suggest that social prejudice against Southeast Asian countries and migrant workers from the region, remains prevalent in Taiwan despite the significant contributions these workers have made to critical sectors in Taiwan's economy for more than three decades.

The favouritism towards foreign professionals from Global North countries is also evident in the practice of granting a Taiwan Gold Card — a scheme that combines an open work permit, residence permit and visa for skilled professionals. While this program was introduced in 2017 as part of the NSP initiative to attract foreign skilled talent, the majority of recipients were workers from Western countries, with the exception of Hong Kong. Between 2018 and 2020, the Taiwanese government issued 1,945 cards, with

694 going to skilled workers from the US, followed by Hong Kong (279 cards), the UK (130 cards), Canada (91 cards), and Germany (74 cards), while Southeast Asian countries accounted for only 139 cards, with recipients from Malaysia (73 cards) and Singapore (66 cards) (Taiwan Employment Gold Card Office, 2020). It is unclear how many Gold Cards were awarded to professionals from Indonesia as the Gold Card's website did not disclose the nationality of the other recipients. To bridge the gap between recipients from Western countries and the NSP target countries, the Taiwanese government may consider lowering the NTD 160,000 per month salary threshold for Gold Card eligibility (Cheung, 2023). This change should help reduce workforce stratification among the ranks of foreign workers.

Unlike foreign professionals, migrant workers face a complex and lengthy process to update their work status and become eligible for permanent residency. The Gold Card scheme, for instance, requires foreign professionals to work for a minimum of three years before applying for permanent residency, which is significantly shorter than the eleven-year waiting period imposed on migrant workers. Further, the outcome of migrant workers' skill upgrade and salary improvement is contingent upon employers' approval, exacerbating the asymmetric power relationships between employers and labourers, particularly for migrant domestic workers who reside in their employer's home. While the new talent retention scheme represents a significant step toward improving Taiwan's labour system, the government must also address fundamental issues within its existing guest worker system to maximise the impact of the NSP for people from the targeted countries.

6. The NSP and the Bilateral Ties between Indonesia and Taiwan

For a sending government like Indonesia, the presence of Indonesian students and migrant workers in Taiwan generates political and moral obligations for the state to enhance the protection of its citizens abroad. This paved the way for the Indonesian government to extend the role of the Indonesian Economic and Trade Office (IETO), which serves as the *de facto* embassy of Indonesia in Taiwan. In 2011, for example, the Indonesian government expanded the function of IETO by setting up a new labour department to manage workforce cooperation and maximise the state's protection of these workers. In 2015, the Indonesian MOFA sent its diplomats to Taipei and established the Indonesian Citizens Protection

Division to further improve the protection of Indonesian citizens. This is perhaps the most significant step taken by the Indonesian government to respond to the growing trend of interpersonal links between Indonesia and Taiwan, despite Jakarta's detached approach in engaging Taipei.

Under the administration of President Joko Widodo, citizen protection diplomacy is one of the four main objectives of the Indonesian MOFA strategic plan (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2020). This has led to countries with a large number of Indonesian citizens living, studying, and working becoming a priority for the government's diplomacy, including Taiwan. This new priority has posed a challenge to the NSP as Taiwan's treatment of students and migrant workers has often raised concerns, especially regarding the protection of labour and human rights. As highlighted in reports by international NGOs such as the Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF), human rights abuses in the Taiwanese fishing fleet involving migrant workers are still rampant (Environmental Justice Foundation, 2020). Allegations of forced labour against Indonesian students under the NSP's new scheme of industry-academia collaboration have added another long list of concerns regarding how the NSP should incorporate protection elements into its policy. As a result of these allegations, the Indonesian government temporarily suspended the scheme in 2019 (Crace, 2019).

The violations of human and labour rights have exacerbated the existing asymmetrical relations between the two governments. In the absence of diplomatic relations, the IETO and the Taipei Economic and Trade Office (TETO) serve as the frontline in addressing any issues between Taiwan and Indonesia. While the TETO in Indonesia operates under the control of Taiwan's MOFA, the IETO in Taipei falls under the authority of the Indonesian Ministry of Trade. This unequal institutional arrangement poses challenges in promoting the protection of Indonesian citizens in Taiwan. The Indonesian government, for instance, remains reluctant to establish an education department at the IETO, despite the growing number of Indonesian students and increasing educational cooperation with Taiwan. This reluctance has resulted in a lack of institutional support for ensuring the safety of Indonesian students in Taiwan, impacting coordination and communication with their Taiwanese counterparts.

The cases of human and labour rights violations have further questioned the role of democracy as a catalyst in improving human and labour rights

conditions in Taiwan. Taiwan often utilised the value of democracy to invite people from the NSP target countries to come to Taiwan to study or work. In its education promotion plan, for example, Taipei listed one of its comparative advantages as having a ‘modern, free, democratic society whose people are hardworking, fun-loving and friendly’ (Study in Taiwan, 2020d). These values raise Taiwan's status among its global education competitors, including Beijing. It also differentiates Taiwan from Beijing by advocating the narrative that there is a democratic country adjacent to China where people also speak Mandarin but offer a democratic, friendly environment for students and workers to enjoy free speech without fear of persecution or censorship. This promotional strategy is in line with Tsai Ing-wen’s inaugural remarks that depicted democracy in Taiwan as a way of life (Office of the President Republic of China, 2016a).

It would appear to be in Taiwan’s best interest to recognise that Indonesia’s primary objective in engaging with Taiwan is to ensure the safety and well-being of their citizens and to focus on establishing a positive relationship with Indonesian citizens by prioritising their rights and protection. The implementation of the NSP gave impetus to the increasing interpersonal exchanges between Indonesia and Taiwan. As the most populous country in Southeast Asia, Indonesia offers opportunities for Taiwan to promote higher education and fill its employment sectors. According to Indonesia’s Ministry of National Development Planning (2019), Indonesia is also eager to enhance its human development through higher education and skilled training to realise its vision of *Indonesia Emas 2045*, aiming to emerge as the fifth-largest economic power in the next twenty years. In this sense, Taiwan’s people-centred foreign policy aligns well with Indonesia’s ambitious human development agenda.

Given this opportunity, both countries could take several actions to ensure seamless cooperation under the NSP. First, the Indonesian government may consider upgrading the function and status of the IETO by establishing an education department and placing the authority of the IETO under the Indonesian MOFA. This initiative should be undertaken with the goal of promoting Indonesia’s strategic interests and improving the safety and protection of Indonesians in Taiwan. Second, the Taiwanese government should evaluate industry-academia collaboration, particularly in the practice of using third-party agents for placing student internships in the industry. Third, both sides could conduct regular labour and education

forums or dialogues to monitor the implementation of education and workforce cooperation and address any related issues. These forums could invite governments in their private capacity, as well as academics, making them akin to Track II dialogues on education and workforce cooperation.

7. Conclusion

The state-centric approach regards foreign policy as the exclusive business of the state and focuses its analysis on the impact of policies at the interstate level. This article offers an alternative perspective on the study of foreign policy by focusing on the transnational level of interactions. This approach has helped unpack the reality of the NSP and evaluate the impact of the policy on both state and non-state actors. Findings presented in this article demonstrate that the NSP has increased the number of student, worker and academic exchanges between Indonesia and Taiwan. The talent exchange program has played a crucial role in achieving this goal. These enhanced ties have also influenced the Indonesian government's approach to engaging with Taiwan, even in the absence of diplomatic relations. This has bolstered the Taiwanese government's confidence in continuing to promote people-to-people ties in its foreign engagement with Indonesia. Further, the implementation of the NSP has supported Taiwan's aspiration of nurturing a distinct identity and status separate from China.

While the policy has been effective in boosting the number of interactions, it has also encountered several challenges. First, achieving full reciprocity in exchanges, especially with regard to the small number of Taiwanese students in Indonesia, has been elusive. Second, the absence of research and teaching-based centres focusing on Taiwan Studies has further contributed to the asymmetrical nature of educational and knowledge exchanges between Indonesia and Taiwan. Third, discrimination against Indonesian migrant workers and foreign talent remains prevalent. The promotion of a distinct and democratic Taiwan identity should start from home by tackling the issue of human and labour rights violations endured by migrant workers. Fourth, the policy has not adequately accommodated the priority that the Indonesian government places on protecting the welfare and rights of its citizens working and studying abroad. It shows a lack of understanding from the Taiwanese government in articulating Jakarta's interest in engaging Taipei.

Looking ahead, the continuity of the NSP will heavily depend on the parties that assume leadership after the 2024 Taiwan presidential election. The pattern of continuity and change of engaging non-state actors outlined in this paper has suggested that the increased international isolation and the aspiration to cultivate a Taiwanese identity paved the way for the state to actively engage with non-state actors in pursuit of international recognition from a larger audience, with these actors helping facilitate such aspirations. On the other hand, if the focus shifts toward promoting Chinese nationalism instead of nurturing a distinct Taiwanese identity, the survival of the NSP becomes less likely. Nevertheless, the continuity of engaging non-state actors may still prevail, considering Taiwan's international isolation. This transnational diplomacy also offers opportunities for the improvement of Taiwan's bilateral ties with Indonesia and other countries in the region.

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