

# Taiwan's Strategic Narrative: The Frontline Defender of Democracy Against Authoritarianism

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## ABSTRACT

*This article discusses how Taiwan strategically crafts a narrative portraying Taiwan as the frontline defender of democratic and freedom values in the confrontation between liberal order and authoritarianism in the current debate of the international system. In facing a direct threat from the authoritarian regime, China, Taiwan has utilized this issue as a card to enhance global visibility, by compelling stories indicating Taiwan is the "beacon of democracy" together with the United States and calling for a like-minded partner. This article applies strategic narrative framework on three levels namely issue, identity, and international system. This article argues that by portraying Taiwan as the core actor in safeguarding democracy, Taiwan intends to secure its international sphere through strategically enhancing its appeal by emphasizing Taiwan as the core actor in current geopolitical changing and acting as the norm-guardian to protect the established liberal order, advocate, and convince the global community of the importance of democratic and freedom values in facing authoritarianism.*

**Keywords:** Cross-Strait Relations, International Recognition, Soft Power, United States-Taiwan-China Relations

Artikel ini membahas tentang bagaimana Taiwan secara strategis membentuk sebuah narasi yang menggambarkan Taiwan sebagai pembela demokrasi dan nilai-nilai kebebasan terdepan di tengah konfrontasi antara tatanan liberal dan otoriter, yang mana menjadi perdebatan hangat dalam sistem internasional. Dalam menghadapi tantangan langsung dari rezim otoriter, yakni Tiongkok, Taiwan telah memanfaatkan isu ini sebagai kartu utama untuk meningkatkan visibilitasnya di tingkat global. Taiwan membentuk narasi yang meyakinkan sebagai "mercusuar demokrasi" bersama dengan Amerika Serikat, sekaligus mengajak terbentuknya kemitraan dengan negara-negara yang sehaluan. Artikel ini mengaplikasikan kerangka analisis narasi strategis pada tiga tingkat yakni isu, identitas, dan sistem internasional. Artikel ini berargumentasi bahwa dengan menggambarkan Taiwan sebagai aktor utama dan terdepan dalam menjaga demokrasi, Taiwan berupaya untuk memperkuat posisinya di ranah internasional melalui peningkatan citra positif. Upaya tersebut dilakukan dengan menekankan peran Taiwan sebagai penjaga norma yang melindungi tatanan internasional liberal, serta mengadvokasi dan meyakinkan komunitas global akan pentingnya mempertahankan nilai-nilai kebebasan dan demokrasi dalam menghadapi bangkitnya otoritarianisme.

**Kata-kata Kunci:** Hubungan Lintas-Selat, Pengakuan Internasional, Soft Power, Hubungan Amerika Serikat-Taiwan-Tiongkok

Significant shifts and challenges mark the international system after the end of the Cold War. The liberal international order rose to hegemon the world along with the liberal institutions (Kapoor 2015). The prevailing global order is characterized by key elements such as liberal democracy, industrial capitalism, secular nationalism, and open trade. This dominant narrative shapes the international system by establishing core principles such as state sovereignty and non-interference. It underscores the significance of cooperation and negotiation within established international organizations and promotes a peaceful world order (Chang 2021). Liberal internationalism envisions a world where nations collaborate based on shared values and collective progress, prioritizing diplomacy, multilateralism, and adherence to the rule of law (Ikenberry 2014).

On the other hand, as China's economy increased, it appears to be an alternative way which challenges the established order in the international system. Xi has introduced the "China Dream", an ambition to make China as the constructor of the international system. As China's media, Xinhua released an article "Chinese Dream is a Dream for All" to link China and the world (Xinhua 2016). Hence, the liberal order faces significant challenges from the rise of authoritarian states, notably China, which presents an alternative governance model. China's ascent on the world stage has introduced a competing narrative emphasizing sovereignty, national development, and a different conception of human rights and freedoms (Weiss and Wallace 2021). China's challenge to fundamental international law principles raises concerns for the established global order (Jorgensen 2020; Larson 2024). A clear example is when China has used its position in the Economic and Social Council's Non-Governmental Organizations Committee to block civil society organizations from getting United Nations (UN) accreditation and to blacklist human rights activists and cut funding for the UN's rights officers. This has led to a complex dynamic where the established liberal order must contend with the principles and practices of a rising power that does not fully subscribe to its norms (Liu and Yang 2023). Accordingly, the world now is facing a new ideology debate, a liberal system with democratic values versus authoritarianism, with China as the lead actor.

In this debate, Taiwan which is in a direct confrontation with China due to the unfinished cross-strait conflict stands on the liberal order and testifies how dangerous China is, not only to Taiwan but for global peaceful life, as China has threatened Taiwan's democratic and freedom values. On December 10<sup>th</sup> 2020, President Tsai Ing-wen reiterated that history tends to repeat itself and the world faced a fundamental question of freedom or authoritarianism (Hudson Institute 2020). She gave some examples where China's authoritarianism has shown its power such as Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and the South China Sea. Taiwan also watches with alarm the increasing provocation from across the Taiwan Strait. In facing this, Tsai stated that Taiwan chose democracy and the future of a free world (Hudson Institute 2020). Taiwan takes the responsibility of protecting the democratic way of life that Taiwan brings to the region and the world.

Therefore, this article focuses on how Taiwan enhances its international visibility and gains legitimacy as an actor in global community through narrative in the debate between democracy versus authoritarianism. Focusing on the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) era under President Tsai Ing-wen and Lai Ching-te, this period marked a more assertive democratic identity in Taiwan's foreign policy strategy to gain international visibility. While Taiwan's transition from authoritarian rule to a vibrant democracy has shaped its political identity over decades, the deliberate use of democracy as narrative has varied. In Lee Teng-hui's period, it was about domestic transformation and state identity building. Continuously, prior DPP president, Chen Shui-bian frequently invoked democracy, his "One Country on Each Side" rhetoric emphasized "de jure" sovereignty and democracy was a supporting justification (Sullivan and Lowe 2010). Not to mention Ma Ying-jeou from KMT, focused on peaceful integration with China (Thornton 2021). In contrast, the Tsai administration marks a shift toward strategic use of the democratic values as a narrative of moral contrast with China's authoritarianism. These is continued by Lai, making democracy as a key foreign policy narrative under these two presidents. The article aims to analyze Taiwan's strategic efforts in promoting its democratic values on the global stage and how these efforts are significant to its international recognition and international existence. It examines

how Taiwan, despite its limited formal diplomatic recognition, strategically constructs its identity to cultivate international community supports and legitimacy without relying on “de jure” actions.

Moreover, this article relies on publicly available primary resources such as official speeches, government websites (e.g., Office of the President ROC, Taiwan), and social media platforms (e.g., Twitter/X accounts of Tsai Ing-wen and Lai Ching-te). This selection is justified by the prominence and consistency of these voices in Taiwan’s diplomatic messaging and international outreach. In addition to state-level sources, this research also considers the projection of Taiwan’s strategic narrative through semi-official and non-state such as in Yushan Forum organized by Taiwan-Asia Exchange Foundation (TAEF), Taiwan Foundation for Democracy (TFD), Taiwan Digital Diplomacy Association (TDDA), DoubleThink Lab, and Taiwan+ media. These non-state actors are selected for their alignment with government narratives and active role in projecting Taiwan’s message abroad. Hence, they contribute to amplifying Taiwan’s strategic narrative, particularly in the context of its limited formal diplomatic spaces, making them one of the vital instruments in Taiwan’s international engagement. While their contribution is acknowledged as part of the broader ecosystem of narrative projection, a detailed analysis of the organizational roles and strategies falls outside the scope of this study and warrants further research.

### **Strategic Narrative**

Strategic narrative (Miskimmon et al. 2014) explains how narrative, storytelling, and communication are used strategically to shape international relations. It is tools that political actors employ to promote their interests, values, and aspirations for the international order by managing expectations and altering the discursive environment (Miskimmon et al. 2017).

**Table 1.**  
**Strategic Narrative Matrix**

| Stages of Strategic Narrative<br>Level of Narrative | Formation Phase   | Projection Phase   | Reception Phase  |
|---|---|--|--|
| Policy/Issue Narrative                              | Framing issues or policy objective  | Projecting the specific issues or policy to influence the public's favor                         | Audience interpret and/or resist the narrative of specific issue/policy, shaping the policy outcomes |
| Identity Narrative                                  | Defining the identity and constructing self-perception and image  | Projecting the crafted identity  | Audience perceived, negotiate, or challenge the projected identity                                   |
| International System Narrative                      | Constructing narrative of states' understanding of international order and situating their role within global power dynamic | Disseminating the preferred vision of global order and the state's place in international system | Reception by other states or international actors influence the relations with the state.            |

*Source: Processed by author based on Miskimmon et al. (2017)*

There are three levels of strategic narrative, such as policy/issue narrative, identity narrative, and international system narrative, which in constructing those narratives involve three stages, formation, projection, and reception. The table above (Table 1) outlines how each type of narrative functions across the three stages. Firstly, policy/issue narrative is about promoting specific policies, agendas, or courses of action. These narratives aim to persuade audiences, both domestically and internationally, by framing issues, presenting justifications, and creating a persuasive narrative around a particular policy objective. Next, identity

narratives focus on projecting and defining the identity of a state, organization, or group in the global arena. Lastly, international system narrative is about how a political actor conceives their understanding of international order, how the world is structured, who the players are, and how the system works. Accordingly, it is important to employ and manage all three types of strategic narratives (policy/issue, identity, and systemic narratives) for effective communication and influence in the global arena (Miskimmon et al. 2017).

In addition, forging strategic narratives involves formation, projection, and reception. Formation is the initial stage that addresses how narratives are formulated. Formation of strategic narratives involves the understanding of the goals and types of communication. In the formation stage, analyzing the policy goals, the role of domestic politics, constraints on historical narratives, events, and conception of order are fundamental (Miskimmon et al. 2014).

Next, projection focuses on how that narrative is communicated and disseminated as well as contested in the new media ecology. It aims to strategically present, promote, and communicate the narrative to shape perceptions, influence opinions, and garner support or understanding from targeted audiences. The chosen type of communication plays important role in tailoring the message, particularly adapting the narrative to fit communication medium in the new media ecology (Miskimmon et al. 2014).

Lastly, reception within the new media ecology. It addresses how narratives are received. It refers to the way audiences perceive, interpret, and respond to the communicated narrative. (Miskimmon et al. 2014). The reception stage is essential for evaluating the effectiveness of the strategic narrative.

### **Taiwan's Strategic Narratives: Issue, Identity and International System Narrative**

In the era of internet connectivity, information is not only easily accessible but also plays a crucial role in constructing and influencing a country's behavior on the global stage. As Joseph Nye (2009) stated success is not merely the result of whose army wins but also of whose story wins. It is emphasizing the importance of narrative in an actor's geostrategy. For Taiwan, whose participation in the international arena is limited due to China's isolation tactics, it is essential to craft a compelling narrative to maintain its position and story on the global stage.

Although Taiwan operates as a de facto sovereign state with numerous unofficial international ties, it remains largely marginalized in the formal global order. Goldstein (2016) captured this isolation by referring to Taiwan as "Asia's Orphan," a metaphor that highlights the country's exclusion and abandonment in the international system. Due to its political constraints and the inability to engage in official diplomatic relations with most countries, Taiwan must rely on a strong narrative to assert its presence on the global stage. This narrative becomes a source of soft power, enhancing Taiwan's appeal and legitimacy. By consistently framing itself as a legitimate actor, Taiwan advocates for democracy and a liberal international order in combating authoritarianism. This narrative construction is evident in Taiwan's consistent messaging around key issues, its distinct identity, and its place within the international system. Through these efforts, Taiwan reinforces its role as a defender of democratic values and underscores its commitment to global norms.

The three levels of narrative-issue, identity, and international system narratives are systematically analyzed. Furthermore, the phases of strategic narrative, namely formation, projection, and reception are explained in the next session. The matrix below (Table 2) summarizes Taiwan's strategic narrative based on this framework.

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**Table 2.**  
**Taiwan's Strategic Narrative Matrix**

| Stages of Strategic Narrative<br>Level of Narrative | Formation Phase  | Projection Phase   | Reception Phase  |
|---|--|--|--|
| Policy/Issue Narrative                              | Taiwan frames “defending democracy against authoritarian” is main issue  | Communicated through official speeches and digital media postings                                    | Public or elites support for Taiwan’s stance on democracy and counter authoritarianism     |
| Identity Narrative                                  | Constructs identity as “frontline defender of democracy”   | Disseminates through state channels and non-state actors.  | Expression solidarity support (e.g Milk Tea Alliance, media framing “Beacon of Democracy”) |
| International System Narrative                      | Frames world as a battle between liberal democracy and rising authoritarianism, with Taiwan aligned with the liberal order | Projects the “like-minded” partnerships through platforms like Yushan Forum and Summit for Democracy | Alignment with Taiwan’s liberal order (Lithuania-Taiwan relation in defending democracy)   |

*Source: Processed by author*

Firstly, in the issue/policy narrative, Taiwan promotes its stand on democracy and freedom values, while sounding the narrative of defending liberal order against authoritarianism is not only Taiwan’s issue but the world’s. Taiwan attempts to convince the international community that democracy outperforms authoritarianism. In the inauguration speech of Taiwan’s current president 2024, President Lai Ching-te narrated his commitment to bringing democracy to the world, mentioning:

“My administration will continue using Taiwan’s democratic vitality as a force for good, to promote national development and deepen international



cooperation.....We will work together to combat disinformation, strengthen democratic resilience, address challenges, and allow Taiwan to become the MVP of the democratic world.” (Office of the President Republic of China (Taiwan) 2024a)

Taiwan’s efforts to promote democracy as the best alternative to authoritarianism gained momentum during the presidency of Tsai Ing-wen. She has been a vocal advocate for democracy and freedom on the global stage. In a November 2021 article for Foreign Affairs titled “Taiwan and the Fight for Democracy: A Force for Good in the Changing International Order,” she emphasized that Taiwan’s firm commitment to democratic values is prompting other nations to reconsider its significance, especially in the context of the global ideological struggle between liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes (Tsai 2021).

The narrative of defending democracy is not only in Taiwan’s interest but also a common problem for all actors in the international order becomes the prominent issue narrative. As Tsai narrated during the 2024 Copenhagen Democracy, she reiterated:

“In the face of such unprecedented challenges, we remained united. And we continue to be united in our shared values of democracy, respect for human rights, and freedom... We are also actively sharing our experience on countering authoritarian influence and our story of democratic resilience with our friends from the international community... We are now confronted with stronger and more serious attempts to erode democracy. While we in Taiwan deal with the threats from China with resilience and courage, it is the partnerships we have with like-minded countries that will be the most effective defense of all.” (Office of the Republic of China (Taiwan) 2024b)

At the same event, President Lai Ching-te emphasized that his administration will stand firmly in defending democracy. He persuaded other countries to strengthen democracy and be cautious of authoritarian expansion. President Lai stated:

“We must not repeat the failures of the past that led to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. We cannot take lightly the threats of the authoritarian states. Nor can we bow down to their expansion. Instead, we

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should strengthen our freedom and democracy; our own economies and resilience; and our mutual cooperation for the benefit of our people. Now is the time for the free world to unite and build the kind of world we want our children to inherit – a democratic world where we can all live in peace, freedom, and prosperity.” (Office of the Republic of China (Taiwan) 2024b).

Taiwan highlights its unique position as a frontline defender of democracy, particularly due to its confrontation with China. This issue narrative is closely tied to Taiwan’s broader efforts to construct its identity as a “Beacon of Democracy,” a concept that is integral to its identity narrative. Through this, Taiwan seeks to solidify its role as a champion of democratic values in the global arena.

In the type of identity narrative, Taiwan constructs itself as the “Beacon of Democracy”. These narratives define who Taiwan is, what characters it has, and what intentions it has. Taiwan is portrayed as the protagonist in the storyline with the character of “Beacon of Democracy”. The protagonist “Beacon of Democracy” faces severe threats from the authoritarian regime, especially China, which seeks allies in its quest to maintain autonomy and democratic values (Office of the President of Republic of China (Taiwan) 2020). Similarly, on December 10<sup>th</sup> 2020, President Tsai reiterated that history tends to repeat itself and the world faced a fundamental question of freedom or authoritarianism. She gave some examples where China’s authoritarianism has shown its power such as Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and the South China Sea. Taiwan also watches with alarm the increasing provocation from across the Taiwan Strait. In facing this, Taiwan chose democracy and the future of a free world (Tsai 2020). Equally important, Tsai Ing-wen’s successor, President Lai Ching-te, affirmed Taiwan’s role as a “Beacon of Democracy”. In his inauguration speech, President Lai signalled his intent to uphold Taiwan’s democratic values, reflecting a continuity in leadership focused on promoting freedom, resisting authoritarianism, and maintaining Taiwan’s status as a model for democracy in the region and maintaining Taiwan’s status as a “Beacon of Democracy”. This stance reinforces Taiwan’s identity as a key player in the global struggle between democracy and authoritarianism (Adam 2024).

Additionally, these issues and identity narratives are addressed in the international system by referring to the order debate between liberal world order versus authoritarianism. Taiwan perceives that the current geopolitical shifts have intensified threats to the liberal international order, particularly as authoritarian regimes like China and Russia strengthen their influence through strategic cooperation. As Taiwan Foreign Affairs Minister, Joseph Wu stated in an interview with the Associated Press on May 17<sup>th</sup> 2024, this alliance between two major authoritarian powers poses a significant challenge to global democratic norms and values, which Taiwan identifies as a threat not only to its sovereignty but to the broader international community. Wu explicitly mentioned that the expansionism of authoritarianism is everywhere in the Indo-Pacific and countries should be cautious of authoritarian influence (Mistreanu and Bodeen 2024). In response, Taiwan has actively positioned itself as a pivotal actor in the global ideological struggle, framing itself under the narrative of being “The Beacon of Democracy”. This self-portrayal emphasizes Taiwan’s role in upholding democratic governance, especially in the face of external pressures from authoritarian regimes. President Lai emphasized the importance of democratic unity in the face of growing authoritarian threats. He highlighted Taiwan’s role as a key defender of democracy, positioning the island as a “Beacon of Democracy” amid China’s ongoing military and diplomatic pressure. Despite Beijing’s efforts to undermine Taiwan’s international presence and its attempts to dissuade foreign lawmakers from engaging with Taiwan, he reaffirmed the island’s commitment to collaborate with other democracies to resist authoritarian expansion. The speech also underscored Taiwan’s reliance on partnerships with democratic allies, especially the U.S., to strengthen its defense and safeguard its sovereignty (Kang 2024).

Moreover, Taiwan’s collaboration with the U.S., one of its key democratic allies, further reinforces this narrative. Through joint efforts with the U.S., Taiwan seeks to maintain the global liberal order by advocating for democracy, freedom, and human rights. Taiwan and the United States are deepening their collaboration through initiatives such as the Summit for Democracy (Taiwan Today 2024a). As mentioned in an official released by the U.S.

representative office in Taiwan, the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT), The U.S. and Taiwan are united by their commitment to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, which are fundamental to their security, political, and economic ties, as well as their strong people-to-people connections (American Institute in Taiwan 2022). At this pivotal moment, it is crucial for both nations to expand these ties further to strengthen their values-based partnership and reinforce trust in their shared commitment as like-minded democratic allies (Wang 2023).

### **Formation and Projection of Strategic Narrative: Taiwan as the Core Actor in Defending Democracy in the International Sphere**

The formation stage of Taiwan's strategic narrative as the "Beacon of Democracy" can be analyzed by looking at how Taiwan has crafted and communicated this identity to align with its long-term goals in the international arena. This narrative is a product of Taiwan's strategic positioning in the global ideological conflict between democracy and authoritarianism, especially in its ongoing tensions with China. Taiwan's historical relationship with China and its struggle for international recognition significantly shape its narrative formation, but Taiwan has adeptly turned these constraints into an advantage. By positioning itself as a frontline defender of democracy against authoritarianism, Taiwan highlights the ideological conflict with China, emphasizing its democratic values and portraying itself as a state under existential threat. Taiwan committed to it by enhancing democracy, maintaining regional stability, and increasing Taiwan's global engagement, fostering international prosperity and development, Chinese efforts to undermine Taiwan's alliances will not diminish the country's role as a beacon of freedom and stronghold of democracy (Taiwan Today 2024b).

The aim of constructing the narrative of the core defender of democracy is for legitimation and enhancing international visibility. Taiwan seeks to legitimize its sovereignty and international standing by aligning with global democratic norms, thereby distinguishing itself from China's authoritarianism. This helps

Taiwan resist Chinese attempts to delegitimize its independence. Taiwan has stressed that the true “crime” lies in China’s autocracy, not in democracy, which asserting it is not a crime at all. China has no right to punish the people of Taiwan for their political stance. China needs to acknowledge the existence of the Republic of China and engage in dialogue with Taiwan’s democratically elected and legitimate government (Blanchard 2024). Therefore, in the debate of democracy versus autocracy, Taiwan positioned itself as the core defender to earn legitimation in the international arena which is facing the serious threat from China autocracy.

In addition, by positioning itself as a leader in the defense of democracy, Taiwan shifts international attention toward the ideological conflict between democratic and authoritarian regimes. This allows Taiwan to gain support from like-minded democratic nations while enhancing its appeal to the global community, particularly among other democracies. This narrative strengthens its soft power, attracting international sympathy and support. The strategic narratives act as the source of soft power (Roselle et al. 2014). The “Beacon of Democracy” narrative aligns with broader concepts like the liberal world order, freedom, and democracy, making it more persuasive and increasing Taiwan’s appeal. By constructing a favorable image that resonates with other democratic nations and the international community, Taiwan positions itself as an innocent isle and a collaborative partner. This narrative showcases Taiwan’s rich soft power resources, enhancing its global visibility and attracting international support and cooperation. This strategy allows Taiwan to extend its influence on the world stage without altering the status quo.

The next stage of the strategic narrative is projection. In the projection stage of Taiwan’s strategic narrative as the core defender of democracy, Taiwan focuses on effectively communicating its message to shape perceptions and influence opinions globally. This stage is particularly crucial in the digital age, where new media ecology plays a significant role in how narratives are disseminated, adapted, and contested. Taiwan’s approach to projecting its narrative involves leveraging various media technologies, timing its communications strategically, and utilizing a wide range of dissemination networks to reach audiences. In Taiwan’s case, the

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digital era and new media ecology have significantly enhanced its ability to project its narrative and counter China's efforts to limit its international presence. While Taiwan is often restricted from participating in official global forums, social media and digital platforms allow it to reach a broad international audience. Leaders such as President Tsai Ing-wen (@iingwen), President Lai Ching-te (@ChingteLai), and MOFA Taiwan (@MOFA\_Taiwan) frequently use Twitter and Facebook to showcase Taiwan's democratic achievements, affirm its commitment to regional stability, and garner international support. The official website of the Office of the President of the Republic of China (Taiwan) has also actively disseminated Taiwan's commitment on defending democracy.

The timing of Taiwan's communication is crucial to the effective projection of its strategic narrative. Taiwan strategically aligns its messages with major political events, international forums, and moments of global focus on democracy to maximize impact. The government often amplifies its democratic narrative in response to actions by China, such as military drills, diplomatic pressure, or disinformation campaigns, emphasizing its role as a defender of democracy against authoritarianism. During periods of heightened tension with China, Taiwan reiterates its commitment to democratic governance, positioning itself as the frontline in the global struggle between democracy and authoritarianism. For example, when tensions peaked during Nancy Pelosi's visit, President Tsai reaffirmed the Taiwan-U.S. partnership in defending democracy, stating, "Taiwan and the U.S. will continue to support each other, and be steadfast partners in our joint efforts to make democracy shine brighter." (Office of the President of Republic of China (Taiwan) 2022). Similarly, in response to the ongoing Ukraine-Russia conflict, Taiwan has used slogans like "Ukraine Today, Taiwan Tomorrow" and "Protect Democracy and Freedom" to protest authoritarianism and underscore the importance of safeguarding democracy (Köckritz 2023).

**Table 3.**  
**Non-State Actors in Projecting Taiwan's Strategic Narrative**

| Actors                                      | Type                   | Role  | Contribution to Taiwan's Strategic Narrative  |
|---|------------------------|---|---|
| Yushan Forum/ TAEF                          | Semi-official platform | Platform for Taiwan to engage with the regional community   | Showcasing Taiwan as an active contributor in safeguarding democracy and regional stability           |
| Taiwan+                                     | State-funded media     | Media broadcast   | Disseminating Taiwan's democratic identity.   |
| Taiwan Foundation for Democracy (TFD)       | State-funded NGO       | Democracy promotion   | Projecting Taiwan as a role model for democratic transition and global democratic cooperation         |
| Taiwan Digital Diplomacy Association (TDDA) | NGO                    | International community engagement (Public diplomacy actor) | Using creative campaign through digital platform  |
| DoubleThink Lab                             | NGO                    | Advocacy on disinformation and promoting democracy          | Reinforcing Taiwan's role as a defender of democracy and leader in resisting digital authoritarianism |

*Source: Processed by author*

In sounding Taiwan as a resilient democracy and a committed defender of liberal values to reach broader audiences, a set of semi-official and non-state actors play a critical role, particularly in facing constrained formal international spaces (Table 3). For instance, the Yushan Forum is organized by the Taiwan-Asia Exchange Foundation (TAEF). This platform serves as a semi-official meeting between scholars and political leaders to advance Taiwan's New Southbound Policy, where Taiwan projects its democratic partnership, regional resilience, and showcases itself as an active contributor in the region (Yushan Forum 2025). Similarly, the state-funded international media outlet that was established during the Tsai Ing-wen period, Taiwan+, becomes a soft power tool to disseminate Taiwan's democratic identity to global audiences, underlining the "highlight freedom- values that define Taiwan and the world in which we all want to live" (Taiwanplus n.d.). By extension, the Taiwan Foundation for



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Democracy offers funds to civil society worldwide and hosts democracy promotion projects. It aims to project Taiwan as a model of success in democratic transition.

Beyond the semi-official efforts, Taiwan's strategic narrative of defender of democracy is also projected through grassroots and civil society initiatives that engage international audience in more informal and people-cantered ways. Two notable examples are the Taiwan Digital Diplomacy Association (TDDA) and DoubleThink Lab, which contribute to extending Taiwan's democratic narrative through digital campaigns and advocacy. The TDDA engages with the international community through creative campaigns on digital platforms to enhance Taiwan's visibility, including promoting its democratic values and international goodwill (Ermylina 2023; Nanda 2023). Likewise, DoubleThink Lab, a Taiwan-based NGO, focuses on countering disinformation and promoting democratic resilience. It reinforces Taiwan's role as a defender of democracy and a leader in resisting digital authoritarianism, especially in the face of influence operations from authoritarian regime like China (Ferenczy 2024).

Accordingly, Taiwan utilizes its strategic narratives to enhance its international visibility and recognition as a legitimate actor in the global arena, thereby positioning itself as a norm entrepreneur. As a norm entrepreneur, Taiwan actively seeks to shape global norms and values, particularly around democracy, human rights, and governance, using these narratives to exert influence and soft power on the international stage. By elevating democratic values as the core of Taiwan's international identity, it becomes a narrative of a moral contrast with authoritarian China, which positions Taiwan as a responsible global actor and protector of the liberal international order. This approach allows Taiwan to build a global image that resonates with liberal democracies, countering China's attempts to isolate it diplomatically and politically. Through narratives that emphasize its democratic achievements and commitment to global stability, Taiwan aims to influence foreign public opinion and gain recognition from other nations as a like-minded partner, even if these countries do not formally recognize Taiwan in diplomatic relations.



## **Reception of Strategic Narrative: Public Perception on Taiwan**

The reception stage is critical to understanding the effectiveness of strategic narrative. According to Miskimmon et al. (2017), the audiences play an active role in interpreting and reshaping the narrative, recognizing that audiences are not passive recipients. In the new media ecology, the connectivity enables the public to be shaped and shape international interactions. Since the audience are not in vacuum circumstances and consume news, they are not a blank slate for narrative. Thus, it is essential to analyze the attitude and behavior of the audience pre-after the narrative reaches them. It requires a thorough understanding of the media ecology those audiences inhabit, such as cultural and political context. However, due to limitations such as the lack of direct access to audience data or sentiment analysis, this article does not yet provide empirical insight into how Taiwan's narrative is received by foreign publics.

While premier sentiment data on Taiwan's narrative reception is not yet provided, global opinion surveys from Pew Research Center and ASEAN Survey provide a perspective on how public perception on Taiwan. Globally, public sentiment toward Taiwan is largely favorable. A 2023 Pew Research Survey across 24 countries found that a median of 48% of respondent view Taiwan favorably. Favorability was especially high in Japan (82%), South Korea (74%), and the US (65%). In contrast, many respondents in parts of Africa and Southeast Asia were unsure or expressed no opinion, reflecting lower awareness (Huang and Clancy 2023). In the US, support for Taiwan has grown notably, according to a 2024 survey by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, Americans hold positive views of Taiwan (Kafura 2024). Similarly, a Focus Taiwan article noted that American public support for Taiwan remain high, driven by shared democratic values (Thompson and Tzu-ying 2025).

Moreover, in Southeast Asia, according to the ISEA-Yusof Ishak Institute's 2024 State of Southeast Asia Survey (Seah 2024), public perception of Taiwan is shaped by the broader context of cross-strait tensions and regional geopolitical dynamics. Although Taiwan is not a focal point in the survey, the findings suggest that ASEAN publics may view Taiwan's democratic values and peaceful

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engagement positively, in contrast to China's aggressive posture. The Milk Tea Alliance in Thailand, Myanmar, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, highlighting Taiwan's role as "Beacon of Democracy" in Asia has contributed to the development of democratic solidarity in Southeast Asia (Warasiriphong 2024).

Another notable example of Taiwan's success story in resonating democracy is Lithuania and Taiwan closer relation. Lithuania's decision to establish a "Taiwan Representative Office" in 2021 illustrates how Taiwan's strategic narrative of democratic solidarity can be accepted and embraced by international partners (Švedkauskas 2024). Rather than portraying the move as a geopolitical provocation, Lithuania framed it as a values-based action in line with its commitment to democracy (Pinelytė 2025). Despite facing backlash from China over the name "Taiwan," Lithuania stood its ground and received support from the European Union. This demonstrates how Taiwan's narrative, centered on defending democracy and resisting authoritarian coercion, leads to meaningful partnerships and concrete results, especially with smaller democracies that share its values.

Although these examples do not constitute an in-depth or comprehensive reception analysis, they do suggest that Taiwan's strategic narrative is gaining traction among key segments of international audiences. The alignment seen in diplomatic actions and public discourse of like-minded partners reflects a degree of acceptance of a significant narrative. However, a systematic examination of how this narrative is received by the broader international public is needed for further research. This includes public opinion surveys, sentiment analysis across digital platforms, and media monitoring. Such an approach would provide a more robust understanding of how Taiwan's messages are interpreted, supported, or opposed in different socio-political contexts, offering deeper insights into the effectiveness and limitations of its narrative strategy.

## **Conclusion**

Taiwan has strategically crafted the narrative of being the “Beacon of Democracy” to construct its identity as a key defender of democratic values in the international system. This narrative seeks to enhance Taiwan’s global visibility and assert its legitimacy, despite the lack of formal diplomatic recognition. By aligning itself with liberal democracies, Taiwan leverages shared values to gain international support and influence. Its democratic identity thus becomes a powerful tool in countering China’s effort to marginalize its presence on the world stage. This article highlights how strategic narrative function as instruments of soft power, illustrating Taiwan’s utilize of narrative to secure its position as a legitimate international actor. Without relying on “de jure” recognition, Taiwan demonstrates how discourse can be used in geopolitical communication to shape perception, legitimize statehood, and extend influence in global arena.

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## **About the Author**

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