



TAIWAN'S INDIGENOUS DIPLOMACY: THE UNWIELDED SWORD IN THE PACIFIC

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In the turbulent geopolitical cauldron that is the Indo-Pacific, Taiwan finds itself locked in a struggle for recognition, its every diplomatic maneuver shadowed by Beijing's glare. Yet, amid this struggle lies an overlooked instrument of influence: the [indigenous communities of Taiwan](#). Here lies an argument not for economic posturing nor militaristic bluster, but for an assertion of Taiwan's indigenous diplomacy, a strategy that would inject fresh vitality into Taiwan's Pacific diplomacy and supply an antidote to China's drumbeat of infrastructure and investment.

The unsung potential of indigenous soft power

Taiwan's indigenous peoples, from the [Amis](#) to the [Atayal](#) and [Paiwan](#), comprise a mosaic of cultures, histories, and traditions stretching back into antiquity. For example, the [Amis Harvest Festival](#)—a significant cultural event—symbolizes the community's strong connection to their land and traditions, which could resonate with other indigenous populations across the Pacific. Similarly, the [Atayal people's weaving traditions](#) serve as an emblem of cultural preservation in the face of modernization—skills resonating deeply with other indigenous communities striving to maintain their heritage.

Having borne the brunt of colonization and survived the homogenizing hand of modernity, these communities now stand poised to become Taiwan's most unlikely ambassadors. Unlike China's Han-centric cultural monolithism, Taiwan's indigenous peoples exemplify diversity, endurance, and a determination to preserve what others would erase. Taiwan has made significant strides to empower its indigenous populations, showing a commitment that can be directly translated into its diplomacy. For instance, the [Council of Indigenous Peoples](#) (CIP) was established in 1996 to advocate for indigenous rights, preserving their languages, culture, and traditions. Moreover, the [inclusion of indigenous representatives](#) in the Legislative Yuan, and the 2005 [Indigenous Peoples Basic Law](#) provide formal mechanisms to ensure that indigenous voices are heard, not just domestically, but on international stages.

Indigenous soft power is a narrative of resilience, survival, and self-assertion that echoes across the Pacific and Southeast Asia, where indigenous peoples, too, have been trampled by history's heavy boot.

China may bring roads, railways, and bridges, but it cannot build identity. In the ideological chessboard of the Pacific, Taiwan's indigenous diplomacy is a counterweight to China's infrastructural blandishments, appealing to hearts rather than wallets. Taiwan stands as a living rebuttal to China's cultural homogenization, celebrating plurality over conformity, and the rights of the few over the tyranny of the many.

Building bridges, not barges

For Taiwan, the Pacific Islands—with their significant indigenous populations—create ideal conditions for a renewed form of diplomatic interaction. Nations like Palau and the Marshall Islands, which already recognize Taiwan diplomatically, are ripe for a meaningful, culturally infused diplomacy.

For instance, [Palau's traditional knowledge systems](#), grounded in environmental sustainability, align perfectly with Taiwan's indigenous wisdom about conservation. Taiwan's indigenous peoples have centuries-old knowledge of sustainable practices,

such as the [traditional Amis agricultural system](#), which has long emphasized balance with the environment. This knowledge is germane to Pacific Island nations [grappling with climate change](#) and rising sea levels.

Imagine, if you will, the impact of Taiwan's indigenous environmental wisdom on island nations confronting similar ecological challenges. Taiwan has actively fostered cultural and language revitalization programs that aim to preserve this indigenous wisdom, such as the [Indigenous Television Channel](#), which promotes indigenous languages and culture. Programs like these position Taiwan's indigenous diplomacy as not just a symbolic gesture but a powerful tool for creating cultural and environmental alliances with Pacific Island nations.

While Beijing pours its resources into grand infrastructure projects, Taiwan can present something more rewarding: knowledge, solidarity, and a sustainable future embedded in indigenous understanding.

Fostering indigenous exchanges—in art, language, traditional practices—Taiwan can cultivate bonds transcending geopolitics. For instance, cultural exchange programs such as between [Taiwan and Palau](#), focusing on traditional crafts, dance, and language, offer a personal and profound connection. Cultural exchanges, unlike China's transactional diplomacy, breed a loyalty that cannot be bought. As I have argued [regarding UK-Taiwan educational diplomacy](#), such soft power initiatives go beyond state-to-state relations and foster enduring partnerships through shared cultural heritage and academic collaboration. Once Taiwan's indigenous diplomacy flourishes in the hearts of Pacific Islanders, no amount of checkbook diplomacy can dislodge it.

Cultural resonance as a weapon

China's ambitions in the Pacific, framed as economic outreach, are transparent to anyone willing to look. Investments and infrastructure projects, as grand as they may appear, frequently leave a bitter aftertaste—debt-laden populations and cultural erasure.

Herein lies Taiwan's opportunity: China's inability to resonate culturally. Taiwan's indigenous diplomacy provides a model of cooperation built on mutual respect, shared heritage, and cultural preservation. Taiwan's advocacy for indigenous rights, solidified through domestic policies and Taiwan's participation in forums like the [United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues](#), aligns it with global movements for indigenous recognition. For example, Icyang Parod, the incumbent [minister of the CIP](#), has been an outspoken advocate for indigenous issues internationally, showing that Taiwan is not just protecting these rights at home but exporting such values to the world. Indigenous empowerment is a cause China is ill-positioned to counter, given the treatment of its [own ethnic minorities](#) such as the Uyghurs and Tibetans. Indigenous diplomacy, for Taiwan, delivers not purely trade and aid, but dignity and recognition.

A blueprint for action

But all the potential in the world amounts to little without strategy, and for Taiwan to turn this latent soft power into diplomatic clout, it must act decisively. First, indigenous-led diplomatic missions should be dispatched to Pacific and Southeast Asian nations, prioritizing cultural diplomacy and environmental knowledge-sharing. Taiwan must place indigenous diplomacy at the heart of its foreign policy, advancing it from cultural gesture to core component of its international strategy.

Second, government-sponsored educational and cultural exchange programs must be launched, enabling Taiwan's indigenous communities to connect with their overseas counterparts. The [Taiwan Indigenous Education and Cultural Exchange Initiative](#) has begun laying this groundwork, but these efforts need to be expanded to create sustainable connections. Taiwan's indigenous peoples, with their centuries-old wisdom, can offer much in areas like conservation and sustainable development, both of which resonate strongly in the Pacific Islands.

Third, Taiwan must assert itself in international forums on indigenous rights, establishing itself as a global champion and trailblazer for these causes.

Taiwan's participation in forums like the [World Conference on Indigenous Peoples](#) will undeniably bolster its soft power, differentiating itself from China's rigid authoritarian approach.

Of course, such a strategy is not without its pitfalls. Taiwan's indigenous communities are not monolithic, and the political sensitivities surrounding them must be navigated with care. Indigenous diplomacy must be led by indigenous voices—anything less risks patronizing the very communities Taiwan aspires to elevate.

And then, inevitably, comes China. The red dragon will not take kindly to Taiwan's foray into indigenous diplomacy, likely viewing it as a direct affront to its "one China" mantra. Yet, with the right framing—cultural exchange, not political provocation—Taiwan can weather this storm and come out stronger.

Conclusion: A new frontier in Taiwan's diplomacy

Taiwan's indigenous diplomacy is a sharpened sword waiting to be wielded. It presents the island with a rare chance to redefine its standing globally, setting itself apart from the crass, transactional dominance China exercises through economic coercion.

Employed with precision, indigenous diplomacy has the potential to shift the axis of influence in the Pacific, crafting alliances rooted not in hollow trade deals or infrastructural bribery, but through a connection of shared heritage and genuine mutual respect. In doing so, Taiwan can rewrite the region's balance of power.

Taiwan must embrace this strategy fully, allowing its indigenous peoples to take their rightful place at the helm of a diplomatic revolution. It is time for Taiwan to be bold, to speak not only to governments but to people. In a world suffocated by the brute force of economic might, Taiwan's indigenous diplomacy offers a breath of fresh air—a reminder that cultural connections, once forged, are more enduring than any contract signed in ink.

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