

Green Diplomacy and International Engagement: Taiwan's Environmental Initiatives in The Pacific Region

Naveen Vashishta*

Associate Professor, Department of History, Government College for Women, Sonipat

*Corresponding Author Email: naveenvashishta@gmail.com

Abstract: Taiwan's environmental diplomacy in the Pacific has emerged as a critical component of its broader foreign policy, especially in light of its limited formal diplomatic recognition. Despite being excluded from major international organisations such as the United Nations (UN) and its affiliated environmental frameworks, Taiwan has strategically engaged with Pacific Island nations through bilateral and multilateral environmental cooperation initiatives. This study explores the nature, scope, and impact of Taiwan's environmental diplomacy, focusing on projects in Palau, Tuvalu, Nauru, and the Marshall Islands, arguing that it addresses ecological challenges while enhancing Taiwan's visibility, legitimacy, and soft power in the Indo-Pacific. Through programs led by the International Cooperation and Development Fund (ICDF) and partnerships with local governments, NGOs, and academic institutions, Taiwan has advanced renewable energy development, coastal protection, biodiversity conservation, and disaster preparedness. These efforts align with international climate goals, including the Paris Agreement and UN Sustainable Development Goals, despite Taiwan's formal exclusion from these frameworks. Case studies of renewable energy projects in the Marshall Islands and adaptation strategies in Tuvalu demonstrate both tangible infrastructure benefits and intangible gains in trust and legitimacy in the Pacific Islands. This paper argues that Taiwan's environmental diplomacy not only mitigates ecological risks but also enhances its international standing, counters Chinese influence, and illustrates how marginalised states can leverage sustainability to pursue foreign policy objectives.

Keywords: Taiwan, Environmental Diplomacy, Pacific Islands, Climate Change, Soft Power, Sustainable Development

INTRODUCTION

Environmental diplomacy is defined as the use of environmental cooperation, climate initiatives, and ecological governance as instruments of international relations. It is increasingly viewed as a form of "green soft power" that enables states to adopt foreign policy objectives while addressing trans-boundary ecological challenges. Today, environmental diplomacy has become an important dimension of international relations, particularly for small and marginalised states that seek to enhance their global relevance through cooperation on shared ecological concerns. The island of Taiwan was named *Ilha Formosa* ("The Beautiful") by the Portuguese (Fairbank, Reischauer, & Craig, 1998, p.216). Officially known as the Republic of China (ROC), Taiwan is a unique case in this regard. Excluded from the United Nations and most international environmental bodies due to its debatable political status, Taiwan has sought innovative avenues to assert its presence on the global stage. Among these, environmental diplomacy with Pacific Island countries has emerged as the main strategy. This study explores the scope, mechanisms, and impact of Taiwan's environmental diplomacy in the Pacific, highlighting how ecological cooperation has been used as a tool for both survival and soft power projection.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Before examining Taiwan's environmental diplomacy, it is important to understand the political context that shaped it. Taiwan, a volcanic island about 120 km off southeastern China, covers about 36,000 sq.km –larger than Belgium but smaller than Switzerland, and around 15% the size of Great Britain. It is mountainous, with peaks up to 4,000 meters, while most people live on the western plain and around Taipei in the north-west. The northeast coast has steep cliffs into the sea, and the southeastern plain is narrow and isolated. With confined habitable land, Taiwan is among the most densely populated regions in the world. Austronesian settlers arrived in Taiwan approximately 4,000 years ago, and their descendants, numbering around 589,000, comprise Taiwan's indigenous population. Since the 16th century, migrants from Fujian, China, settled mainly in the west, displacing or assimilating many indigenous groups. This was followed by European colonisation. The Dutch founded a colony in the southwest in 1623, and the Spanish established forts in the north. During the same period, Zheng Zhilong and later his son Zheng Chenggong, loyal to the fallen Ming dynasty, expelled the Dutch and resisted Qing rule until 1683, when the Qing finally conquered Taiwan (Rigger, 2010, pp.368-70).

The 20th century history of Taiwan mirrors earlier struggles of conquest and resistance. In 1945, the Republic of China (ROC) under Chiang Kai-shek took control of the island from Japan. Soon after, the People's Republic of

China was founded on the mainland, but Taiwan's leaders held fast to the ROC's rule. Unlike the 17th century, no modern figure has forced Taiwan under the mainland rule. Taiwan underwent a deep transformation during this period. Under Qing rule and later Japanese colonization (1895-1945), Chinese settlements grew. Japan modernised Taiwan. Although unsuccessful, Japanese influence endures in culture, cuisine, fashion, and institutions. After World War II, Taiwan was transferred to the ROC, led by Chiang and the Kuomintang (KMT). However, the civil war with Mao's communists and years of exhaustion shaped the KMT's harsh governance. Locals, long under Japanese rule, were treated more as conquered than liberated, fuelling resentment. This culminated in the incident on 28 February 1947 when protests escalated into mass violence. The ROC brutally suppressed the uprising, killing thousands and silencing Taiwan's political elite. For the next four decades, Taiwan was ruled by the KMT government, dominated by mainlanders who sidelined local voices. Politics were centred on one mission: reclaiming China from the Communist rule. Supported by United States aid and protection, Taiwan developed into a military and economic stronghold, envisioned as a future base for retaking the mainland. Between 1950 and 1980, the KMT regime was a blend of despotism, soaring economy, and popular mobilisation (Rigger, 2010, pp.370-71).

In 1975, after Chiang Kai-shek's death, his son Chiang Ching-kuo assumed power and began cautiously dismantling authoritarian rule to restore the KMT's legitimacy. He promoted more Taiwanese leaders within the party, allowed limited direct elections, and tolerated greater political dissent, although communism and independence remained off-limits. By the 1980s, opposition movements gained momentum. In 1984, Lee Teng-hui, a Taiwan-born politician, became vice president and later succeeded Chiang as the first native-born president in 1988. Although martial law still banned opposition parties, activists established the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in 1966. The following year, martial law ended, and national legislatures opened to free elections. Taiwan's first presidential elections were held in 1996, with Lee Teng-hui being elected. The DPP won the presidency in 2000, ending decades of KMT dominance. Taiwan has evolved into a vibrant liberal democracy characterised by civil liberties, competitive elections, and accountable governance. Celebrated as the "First Chinese Democracy", Taiwan proved that Confucian culture could coexist with democracy. Its democratic transformation not only reshaped domestic politics but also secured stronger international support, especially from the United States, against pressure from the PRC (Rigger, 2010, pp.372-3).

Today, Taiwan's political system, guided by the 1947 ROC Constitution, combines presidential and parliamentary features, with a directly elected president holding dominant power. The Prime Minister, appointed by the President, has limited authority and can be dismissed by a legislative no-confidence vote; however, the legislature cannot remove the President. Unlike the United States or France, Taiwan lacks mechanisms to resolve executive-legislative conflicts. Attempts at constitutional reform in the 2000s stalled, as Beijing viewed them as moves towards independence, making change politically risky (Rigger, 2010, pp.373-4). Though politics have evolved on both the mainland and the island, Taiwan continues to govern itself

independently, yet Beijing maintains its claim that the island is a province of the PRC (William A. Joseph, 2010, p.9).

TAIWAN'S DIPLOMATIC POSITION IN THE PACIFIC

The Pacific Islands Region (PIR) consists of 22 countries and territories spanning 48 million kilometres, with a population of approximately 10 million. All 14 independent states in the region are classified as developing or least-developed countries. Given the vast marine expanse, the ocean has always been central to Pacific Islanders' lives, providing food, transport, and a sense of pride and identity for the region's inhabitants, who are connected rather than separated by the world's largest body of water (Bozzato 2017).

For decades, Pacific island nations have viewed climate change as a direct security threat to their survival. In 1991, their leaders warned that global warming and rising sea levels endangered their cultural, economic and physical survival. Since then, they have acted collectively in UN climate negotiations, exerting significant influence on global rules and advocating for stronger multilateral action on emissions. These states have also consistently pressed for climate change to be acknowledged as a security issue (Morgan, Carter, & Manoa, 2024). Amid the tense geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific, Taiwan continues to struggle for international recognition, with each diplomatic effort closely scrutinised by Beijing. The Pacific Islands, with their strong indigenous presence, provide Taiwan with fertile ground for revitalising its diplomatic outreach. Countries such as Palau and the Marshall Islands, which maintain formal ties with Taiwan, present opportunities for deeper, culturally grounded engagement. Palau's traditional knowledge system, which is rooted in sustainability, resonates strongly with Taiwan's indigenous conservation practices. Communities such as the Amis have preserved centuries-old agricultural methods that stress harmony with nature—insights highly relevant to Pacific Island states confronting climate change and rising sea levels (Gallagher, 2024).

At the beginning of 2019, Taiwan and China each had diplomatic ties with six Pacific nations. By the end of that year, both the Solomon Islands and Kiribati switched their recognition to the PRC, just days apart. In 2024, Nauru severed ties with Taiwan to formally recognise China. Nauru had previously shifted between Taiwan and China, but its 2024 decision marked a significant setback for Taiwan and its remaining allies, as it not only endorsed the one-China principle but also opposed Taiwan's independence and supported China's unification efforts. This loss highlights China's capacity to attract Taiwan's diplomatic partners through economic incentives, even in countries with long-standing cultural and economic ties (Conn, 2025).

Of the 13 sovereign states that recognise Taiwan instead of the People's Republic of China (PRC), four are situated in the Pacific, making the region particularly significant for Taiwan's international diplomatic policy (The Australian National University, n.d.). The **One China Principle** forms the cornerstone of the Chinese government's policy on Taiwan, portraying the island as an inseparable part of the People's Republic of China (Joy, 2023, pp.40-63). Consequently, Taiwan has found it increasingly challenging to maintain diplomatic ties with other nations, a situation further intensified by the PRC's expanding global influence. Since the PRC took control of

China in 1949, Taiwan has experienced a steady decline in diplomatic recognition as nations have shifted to acknowledging the PRC as the legitimate government of China. After largely abandoning its military ambitions by the 1960s, the PRC concentrated on Taiwan's diplomatic isolation. This trend accelerated with the UN's 1971 decision to replace Taiwan with the PRC as China's representative, leading nearly half of Taiwan's allies to switch by 1973 (The Australian National University n.d.). The Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, and Tuvalu are Taiwan's diplomatic partners situated in the Pacific region. This region serves as an important arena for Taiwan to highlight its role in promoting global sustainability (Huang, 2025).

The Pacific offers Taiwan an opportunity to demonstrate leadership by helping vulnerable nations adapt to climate change through initiatives such as renewable energy, marine conservation, and resilience planning for rising seas. These efforts demonstrate Taiwan's status as a responsible and innovative actor and may encourage other countries to adopt similar policies, promoting more inclusive global climate governance. Taiwan's expertise in implementing blue carbon initiatives further strengthens its ability to work with Pacific nations to develop sustainable solutions (Huang, 2025).

TAIWAN'S ENVIRONMENTAL INITIATIVES

As the above-mentioned islands confront severe threats from rising sea levels as a result of climate change, Taiwan's support is both an expression of solidarity and a strategic move to reinforce alliances while demonstrating its global capability. For instance, in Palau, Taiwan has partnered on renewable energy and marine conservation projects, showcasing its technological strengths while building trust as a reliable ally of Pacific nations. At the 29th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 29) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, held in Baku, Azerbaijan, from 11 November to 22, 2024, Taiwan hosted side events at Palau's pavilion that emphasised climate resilience and youth participation, providing a platform for Pacific voices and reinforcing Taiwan's role as a connector between vulnerable states and the wider global community (Huang, 2025). Seven of Taiwan's diplomatic partners expressed their support for its participation in global climate governance. Although Taiwan is excluded from the United Nations, its cooperative approach extends across both developing and developed nations, encouraging regional collaboration in tackling and adapting to climate change. Through its climate finance programs, Taiwan illustrates how an advanced Asian economy can provide financial assistance to nations most vulnerable to climate impacts (Lu et al., 2024).

Acknowledging the critical role of finance in helping small island states adapt to climate change, Taiwan partnered with the Republic of Marshall Islands to create the 'Taiwan-RMI Adaptation and Contingency Fund for Climate Change', with an initial commitment of one million dollars for resilience projects (Lu et al., 2024). Taiwan's International Cooperation and Development Fund (ICDF) has extended loans to the Marshall Islands Development Bank and the Marshalls Energy Company to support the Enhancing Home Energy Efficiency and Promoting Renewable Energy Project. The initiative seeks to reduce carbon emissions by assisting households in adopting energy-efficient appliances and providing solar panels to residents who qualify under specified efficiency standards (Tai, 2024).

Taiwan also plans to establish a just transition fund for Pacific nations, although its climate finance efforts still require stronger ambition and greater transparency (Tsaiying Lu et al., 2024). In Palau, Taiwan has engaged in joint efforts for renewable energy development and marine conservation (Huang, 2025). It granted the US one million dollars to Palau to support a Climate Change Disaster Risk Reduction Project aimed at helping the nation achieve key objectives set out in its climate policy. Taiwan has collaborated with Tuvalu on its Coastal Adaptation Project, designed to provide infrastructure that reduces the risk to lives and property from sea-level rise and severe water-related weather events (Tai, 2024). Such initiatives demonstrate Taiwan's technological capabilities while reinforcing its image as a dependable partner for Pacific nations in times of need (Huang, 2025). In contrast to China's heavy investment in large-scale infrastructure, Taiwan offers a different kind of value: sharing indigenous wisdom, fostering solidarity, and promoting a sustainable future (Gallagher, 2024). Taiwan's climate diplomacy in the Pacific holds potential beyond its current allies and provides a platform for wider regional cooperation and international leadership. By partnering with key powers such as Japan, New Zealand, and Australia—states deeply engaged in Pacific stability—Taiwan can help build multilateral coalitions that advance both climate goals and its geopolitical standing. Such collaborations would also strengthen the Pacific's collective call for greater global action against urgent environmental threats (Huang, 2025).

Taiwan seeks to broaden its engagement in the Pacific by collaborating with nations that officially recognise China, such as Fiji and Papua New Guinea. Despite their ties to Beijing, these states share Taiwan's climate-related concerns and have cooperated on scientific and technical projects in the past. This shows the rise of 'climate diplomacy, where environmental challenges can bridge political divides (Huang, 2025).

Taiwan has pursued regional collaborations to strengthen disaster resilience and climate adaptation in the Asia Pacific. One example is its partnership with the Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical, and Astronomical Services Administration (PAGASA), which has improved weather monitoring systems. This advancement allows the Philippines to better track rainfall through radar observations, thereby enhancing the accuracy of forecasts and disaster preparedness. Taiwan has strengthened its cooperation with its diplomatic allies to address common challenges in disaster resilience and climate adaptation. A notable example is its agreement with Palau on disaster-risk management and technology sharing. Through such initiatives, Taiwan supports regional preparedness by contributing to drought response, medical and food aid, and critical infrastructure (Tsaiying Lu et al., 2024).

MOTIVES BEHIND TAIWAN'S ENVIRONMENTAL VOLUNTEERING

Environmental volunteering significantly contributes to environmental protection, safeguarding the planet, and fostering environmental awareness and education within communities. It has grown in popularity in Taiwan over the past four decades, particularly after the emergence of an environmental civil society after the lifting of martial law in 1985 (Wong, 2024). Although excluded from the official UN climate regime, Taiwan's voluntary alignment with international climate policies is driven by its pursuit of global support and international recognition.

This shows a form of climate band wagoning, in which Taiwan connects international climate politics to its broader political objective of enhancing legitimacy. By portraying itself as a responsible eco-citizen, Taiwan seeks to strengthen its global relationship. Since the Chen Shui-bian administration, successive governments have used climate governance and carbon trading initiatives in their call for UNFCCC inclusion. Given that seven of Taiwan's diplomatic allies are highly climate-vulnerable small island states, initiatives such as the Pacific Climate Change Forum and a proposed just transition fund indicate Taiwan's commitment to supporting countries such as the Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau and Tuvalu. Beyond state-level diplomacy, Taiwan employs a polycentric environmental governance strategy, engaging NGOs, city governments, and scholars through bilateral and multilateral channels to participate in global climate discussions (Frost 2024).

Taiwan's partnerships with the Marshall Islands, Palau, and Tuvalu highlight its ability to contribute to the Pacific economy. Acknowledging the urgency of climate change in the region, Taiwan has equipped its allies with advanced early warning systems and renewable energy infrastructure. Beyond this, it extends humanitarian aid and supports the growth of the tourism industry. While democratic values form part of the foundation of these ties, practical interests largely shape the international engagement. Through such initiatives, Taiwan demonstrates both its capacity to deliver meaningful economic support and its active role in shaping the regional framework of the Pacific. Although media coverage often frames Taiwan in militaristic terms or in relation to China, its bilateral ties with its Pacific allies illustrate a broader, more independent dimension of its diplomacy. Despite their small size, countries such as the Marshall Islands, Palau, and Tuvalu maintain relationships with Taiwan that are both substantive and strategically significant, sometimes reinforced by US assistance. These bonds position Taiwan as a reliable provider of aid, a credible partner, and a dependable ally in the region (Parlevliet, 2024).

CHALLENGES AND CONSTRAINTS

Taiwan's environmental diplomacy in the Pacific faces several structural and political constraints. Diplomatic isolation is its most fundamental challenge. Since Taiwan is excluded from the United Nations and UNFCCC, it is unable to formally participate in major international environmental agreements, including the Convention on Biological Diversity and the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (Mabon 2023). It is significantly limited by China's diplomatic pressure and poaching of its allies, facilitated by "dollar diplomacy" and development aid that Taiwan is unable to match. For example, states like the Solomon Islands, Kiribati, and Nauru have recently shifted their recognition from Taiwan to China due to financial or infrastructure aid from Beijing (Bock & Parilla, 2024). Taiwan's financial capability is limited compared to China's ability to fund massive infrastructure projects, which leads to competitive disadvantages in the Pacific. Domestic political and institutional constraints further restrict Taiwan's investment in climate diplomacy efforts. There are also concerns about the sustainability and transparency of its climate finance. For example, government-managed public funds have been criticised for lagging behind private institutions in reporting emission exposure and publicly disclosing financed emissions (Environmental Justice Foundation, 2024).

Nations aligned with Taiwan often encounter obstacles to their economic progress, and the PRC frequently takes advantage of these hardships to draw them away from supporting Taiwan's diplomatic efforts. Since 2016, Taiwan has repeatedly accused the PRC of offering substantial financial incentives to countries in return for their acceptance of the 'One-China Principle'. Taiwan has made it clear that it will not engage in financial competition with the PRC to win allies, acknowledging that China's capacity for providing aid is far greater. Before switching diplomatic recognition, Taiwan's former allies reportedly asked for large-scale financial aid, which went beyond what Taiwan's international assistance laws permitted (Bock & Parilla, 2024).

Another important limitation is the gap between rhetoric and implementation. While Taiwan emphasises values such as sustainability and climate justice in its external discourse, its limited follow-through risks framing these initiatives as symbolic rather than practical. According to scholars, this credibility gap undermines Taiwan's ability to use environmental diplomacy as a tool of soft power (Tseng, Kao, & Tseng, 2023).

IMPLICATIONS OF TAIWAN'S DIPLOMATIC RECOGNITION IN THE PACIFIC

Although Taiwan's ties with Pacific Island countries bring neither economic nor military advantages, their significance to Taiwan's diplomatic agenda is reflected in the considerable aid it directs to the region. Economically, these allies contribute minimally, accounting for less than 0.002 percent of Taiwan's trade in 2022. They also lack armed forces, offering no security benefits comparable to those of Taiwan's unofficial partnership with the United States. Despite this, Taiwan provided over 363 million US dollars in development assistance to Pacific Island states between 2009 and 2019, making it the tenth largest donor in the region. International observers often describe such efforts as "chequebook diplomacy", referring to aid given in exchange for diplomatic recognition. Regardless of the political intent, the scale of Taiwan's financial commitments underscores the strategic value it assigns to the Pacific within its foreign policy (Chan, 2023).

Taiwan's diplomacy in the Pacific plays a crucial role in both international and domestic affairs. While parts of the Taiwanese public often criticise aid to Pacific Island nations as wasteful, these partnerships are vital to Taiwan's strategy of sustaining its international legitimacy as a sovereign state. The rise of China's global influence has sharpened the struggle over diplomatic recognition, turning it into a "battle for Taiwan". Since 2016, nine countries have shifted their allegiance to the PRC, as China has lured partners with billions in aid. Pacific Island states remain especially significant, not only as some of Taiwan's few remaining allies but also as advocates for its participation in international organisations, such as the UN and the World Health Assembly, where Taiwan has been excluded because of Chinese pressure. Their symbolic but consistent support keeps Taiwan's status visible on the global stage and slows the erosion of its diplomatic space. Diplomatic recognition in the Pacific carries significant political weight in Taiwan, shaping national pride and election results. Support from Pacific allies reinforces Taiwan's legitimacy and domestic confidence, making it vital to its foreign policy and survival as a de facto state (Chan, 2023).

Amid the escalating rivalry between the United States and China, Taiwan has emerged as a critical flashpoint in the Indo-Pacific. The region is undergoing a rapid power transition marked by China's growing assertiveness and the strong pushback of the US with regional allies, without effective institutions to manage tensions. Taiwan has become central to this confrontation, symbolising both Beijing's ambition for reunification and Taipei's determination to safeguard its democratic system. President Tsai Ing-wen has framed Taiwan as the first line of defence for democracy in Asia, even as China intensifies military pressure through repeated incursions into Taiwan's air defence zone. While upholding the 'One-China' policy, the US continues to bolster Taiwan's security through arms sales and political assurances under the Taiwan Relations Act. Initiatives such as Quad and AUKUS reflect the broader Indo-Pacific strategy of the US to counterbalance China. Meanwhile, diplomatic engagement between the US and China remains strained, with leaders trading warnings while cautiously reaffirming commitments to stability. For China, Taiwan represents the pursuit of reunification and Xi Jinping's vision of national rejuvenation; for the US, it is a test of credibility and resolve in the Indo-Pacific after the setbacks in Afghanistan. For Taiwan, the struggle is existential: preserving its democratic values and way of life. Therefore, the evolving dynamics around Taiwan have serious implications not only for regional security but also for the future of the global order (Pant, 2021).

CONCLUSION

Taiwan's environmental diplomacy in the Pacific illustrates how small and diplomatically marginalised states can leverage ecological cooperation to advance both sustainable development and foreign policy objectives. Notwithstanding its exclusion from big international organisations such as the United Nations and other environmental frameworks, Taiwan has effectively engaged with Pacific Island countries through a range of bilateral and multilateral initiatives, demonstrating the capacity of "green soft power" to achieve tangible political and ecological outcomes in the region. This study highlights that Taiwan's environmental diplomacy operates at the intersection of climate action, international legitimacy and strategic geopolitical positioning.

In summary, Taiwan's environmental diplomacy in the Pacific offers a compelling case study of how small states can integrate ecological responsibility with strategic foreign policy. By addressing climate vulnerabilities in the region while reinforcing its international legitimacy, Taiwan not only mitigates environmental risks but also strengthens its geopolitical standing, counters rival influences, and exemplifies the potential of "green diplomacy" as a tool for global engagement. The Pacific experience demonstrates that environmental initiatives can transcend political barriers, foster regional cooperation, and promote a sustainable, inclusive, and diplomatically effective model for marginalised states in the 21st century.

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