

Can Taiwan Play a Leadership Role in the Asia Pacific?

Closing keynote by Vice President-elect Bi-khim Hsiao at CAPRI 2024 Annual Forum

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CAPRI chair Shirley Lin, Ambassador Gilmore, distinguished panelists, speakers, and participants at this 2024 CAPRI Annual Forum. It is my heartfelt pleasure to be here today. I know you've had a very productive and very intense morning of discussions. Please bear with me for the next 15–20 minutes. As we look to wrapping up not only today's session but also looking forward to building a role for Taiwan as a leader in the Asia Pacific.

I want to thank Shirley for inviting me to address this annual forum. And more importantly, I also want to express my admiration for her leadership in founding CAPRI, non-partisan, Taiwan-based international think tank. Since its founding, CAPRI has already established close and much-needed partnerships with renowned research institutions around the world to ensure that the voices and interests of Taiwan are not left out in critical international discussions.

I'm honored also to address this audience, along with Ambassador Gilmore, whose staunch and unwavering support for Ukraine and its defense against aggression is admirable. Two weeks ago, the supplemental appropriations bill for Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan were approved by Congress and immediately signed into law by President Biden.

I'm grateful to all who have advocated tirelessly for security assessment assistance. This bill demonstrates the US's continued commitment to supporting allies and partners in the face of geopolitical challenges. It is also a solid demonstration of the US's global leadership in the fight to defend democratic values and a rules-based international order. But beyond thanking our international friends for their support, it is important that as Taiwanese, we invest in building our own strengths first, through our own efforts in building a resilient Taiwan, we must have the confidence that Taiwan is worthy of galvanizing international support and that the success of Taiwan is also important to the world.

So, for today's event, I was asked to address the rhetorical question of whether Taiwan can play a leadership role in the Asia Pacific. Of course, I'd say yes. Taiwan

can lead. Not only can Taiwan help, but Taiwan can lead. But I must say that not only can Taiwan play a leadership role, but Taiwan's leadership is important to the world.

Why do I believe that Taiwan can play a leadership role? First of all, Taiwan is an island of resilience, a society that has overcome hardship. Second, by overcoming hardships and challenges, Taiwan has built unique characteristics and strengths that put Taiwan squarely in the limelight as a beacon of global progress. Third, by making such progress, Taiwan's success and prosperity are closely woven into global interests.

Taiwan has become an important contributor to the world in many ways and in multiple domains far beyond our borders. Now, let me elaborate on these points. In our 2022 10/10 address, President Tsai made a pledge to transform Taiwan into an island of resilience, and over the past two years, efforts across ministries and sectors have produced achievements in Taiwan's economic, social democratic, and defense resilience.

Last year, Premier Chen Chien-Jen came to this CAPRI Annual Forum, also addressing Taiwan's resilience. We highlight the word “resilience,” and I like to use that a lot because Taiwan's emergence is a journey against all odds. Taiwan is an island very much familiar with typhoons and earthquakes, mudslides, and droughts. We have not been endowed with the types of natural resources that have dominated the past century of global energy production, and the densely populated island has very little spare land for agriculture and industry.

Until recently, Taiwan's people had survived the world's longest one-party martial law system and centuries of governance by rulers transplanted from abroad. At this moment, Taiwan is bombarded with cyberattacks, disinformation, and political interference, in addition to near-daily military incursions into our vicinity, all aimed at coercing and crippling the public will to safeguard our free and democratic way of life.

Against all these odds and long overshadowed by our larger neighbors, Taiwan's remarkable story of perseverance and determination has propelled it onto the world stage. Despite facing numerous challenges, including diplomatic isolation, limited natural resources, and intense geopolitical pressures, and in addition to all the challenges that I just listed, Taiwan has forged a path to global leadership driven by its unwavering spirit and unrelenting pursuit of excellence.

Taiwan's against-all-odds journey is a testament to the power of human ingenuity, adaptability, and the spirit of collaboration. As we look closely at Taiwan's evolution, it becomes clear that this underdog story is not just a tale of survival, but a blueprint for success and leadership in an increasingly complex and interconnected world. I believe that Taiwan's leadership in the Asia Pacific can be highlighted in a number of areas, parallel to areas of resilience that the president ties.

The administration has promoted political, social, and economic leadership. Let me first talk about Taiwan's political leadership. And I'm not referencing politicians. I'm referencing Taiwan as a society. And the leadership role that we as a people can play in the region. Our democratic transition is broadly recognized. Many of you are familiar with the international statistics that put Taiwan at the very top in this region.

In terms of political freedoms, basic human rights, free speech, and media. And since 1996, the people of Taiwan have become masters of our destiny by choosing over and over again our own domestic political leadership through free and fair elections. And despite the fierce domestic political competition, the Taiwanese people have persisted in ensuring that the political process is mostly peaceful and inclusive, intending to play a broader leadership role in the region.

Taiwan has also made itself a home base for an increasing number of international NGOs, think tanks, and media organizations that require a free political environment to function. Taiwan has also taken the lead in sharing with other workshops and exchanging practices of building media literacy. As we strive to counter the evolving challenges of disinformation and political interference, the process of refining our own democracy and strengthening our institutions has not been easy, and we continue to build resilience on a path fraught with hurdles and dangers.

It's like one of those traditional Mario Brothers gaming roots. We've been navigating deadly traps and obstacles while at the same time withstanding punches and attacks from all sides with scars and wounds of frustration. Our democracy continues to move forward steadily recharged with energy from a population determined not to go back to authoritarianism and with hopes and expectations that we are not alone on this path.

Now, let me talk about Taiwan's social leadership. Our political transition historically has opened doors to social activism, and Taiwanese have also become

leaders in social progress, as our government has endorsed the spirit of dialog or diversity. Equity, inclusiveness, and accessibility—our society has also advanced to embrace social injustices that empower and make Taiwan a regional leader. Though far from reaching ideal standards, Taiwan's advances in universal health care, accessibility, gender equality, LGBTQ rights, and labor rights inspire others in this region.

And while we are so proud of Nymphia Wind winning a global drag queen competition, this is proof that Taiwan's societal progress provides the best nutrients for both communities and individuals to thrive and shine, no matter who they are in the realm of societal resilience. I also want to highlight Taiwan's abilities in disaster response. We just heard the last session.

With some discussions on this living among typhoons and earthquakes, we've been compelled to develop responses across the board in sheltering, search and rescue, water and power supplies, and recovery. We have built a model of public-private collaboration in preparedness units of our society, from volunteer firefighting and rescue organizations to religious charity groups have, together with different levels of government, formed an effective lattice network that is the foundation of stability and security in our society.

Every challenge and threat along the way compels us to be constantly on alert and consistently improving ourselves and beyond better securing our people's safety. The Taiwanese people also lead the region in being one of the most generous suppliers of humanitarian assistance and charity—from donating PPE around the world during the COVID-19 pandemic to providing hot meals to natural disaster-affected zones across the region.

Wherever there is a disaster or humanitarian need, there will be some form of Taiwanese help, either public or private, or both. Most often, despite the hard reality of our international isolation, Taiwan has managed to lead in our soft power as a force for good, extending the influence of kindness and humanity across the region. Now, let me talk about the third area of economic leadership.

Taiwan was once synonymous with low-cost, high-volume production, but we have reinvented ourselves as a hotbed of high-tech innovation, leveraging our strengths in research and development, and design engineering to create a thriving ecosystem of startups and entrepreneurs. This pivot has been instrumental in propelling the island to the forefront of the global economy, driving growth, creating jobs, and fostering a culture of innovation that is

increasingly being recognized on the global stage.

While international headlines tend to focus on the highly accomplished tech sector and the giants in our IC industries, I want to point out that Taiwan's strengths remain in our highly innovative and nimble small and medium-sized enterprises, which together form an ecosystem of growth. This growth is fueled by a combination of government initiatives, strategic investments, and deep-seated commitment to education and workforce development.

As a result, Taiwan has emerged as a magnet for international talent, not only attracting entrepreneurs but also attracting those who cherish the free and open environment in which innovation can take place. But the spirit of always striving to be better that is innate in many Taiwanese people's characters and compels us to identify and cope with existing challenges too, such as the equity of growth in other services and traditional sectors, addressing wage and income gaps, demographic challenges, affordable housing, and accessibility to new digital and AI tools.

On this front, Taiwan seeks to lead through innovation but also be open to learning from others. Let me conclude by saying that as the world grapples with the complexities of the 21st century, Taiwan's story of resilience and adaptability has fueled its self-confidence to lead by example, offering inspiration to other nations seeking to overcome their own hardships and challenges.

At its core, the Taiwan template is built on a foundation of resilience forged in the crucible of adversity and shaped by our precarious existence in the shadow of a giant neighbor. This resilience has enabled Taiwan to navigate the treacherous waters of global politics, to adapt to and be ahead of the shifting tides in the global economy, and to innovate in the face of uncertainty.

It is a template that emphasizes the importance of human capital, investing in education and skills to create a highly adaptable and entrepreneurial workforce, and it is a model that recognizes the value of social cohesion, promoting a sense of shared purpose and collective responsibility that has enabled Taiwan to build an inclusive and equitable society. Looking ahead, President Lai and I are committed to leveraging these assets as we work to forge stronger partnerships with like-minded societies around the world.

I thank you for your interest in our vision, and I thank you for your interest in molding a path forward for Taiwan as a leader in this region. I look forward to

continuing collaboration not only with CAPRI but with all the forces of our society who are present here today, as well as with our international partners. Thank you again.