

台印關係：日益密切

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Indian lawmaker Sujeet Kumar's current 10-day visit to Taiwan is a landmark development in the relationship between two vibrant democracies.

India has sulked about sending an official parliamentary delegation to Taiwan owing to its "one China" policy, which is now being questioned the world over, including in India's political spectrum.

Although Kumar is visiting Taiwan in a personal capacity, the visit carries huge political traction. Kumar does not belong to the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP); he belongs to regional political party Biju Janata Dal (BJD). Although BJD is an opposition party, it has always extended constructive issue-based support to the government.

Kumar is a very vocal and articulate member of the upper house of India's bicameral parliament and a member of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs. He has studied at Harvard University and has worked in corporate sectors abroad. He is also the founder and member of the Formosa Club, and a participant in the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China.

The voice of Kumar is certainly not a lone voice in the Indian political spectrum. Over the years, particularly since Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to power in 2014, there has been some political contact between the two sides, albeit symbolic.

When the People's Republic of China was established, India was only the second country outside the socialist bloc to recognize the communist regime in Beijing. The decision by then-Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru for a democratic country like India to recognize the communist regime and argue for its membership in the UN was not taken favorably by some Indian lawmakers belonging to precursors of the BJP.

Former Indian foreign secretary Vijay Gokhale, in his book *The Long Game: How the Chinese negotiate with India*, has called out the Nehru government for its benign neglect of India's legitimate strategic interests, including Tibet and Taiwan.

Some sections of Indian academia and intelligentsia believe that Nehru wanted to be

on the right side of history and project himself internationally without securing India's interests.

I have noted this criticism among Indian lawmakers in my study of the debates in the Indian parliament after the Sino-Indian war of 1962.

During a debate on India-China relations on Aug. 3, 1950, Nehru reiterated his plea for China's admission to the UN, saying: "As a result of China not being admitted into the UN, and the representative of old Kuomintang [Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT)] being there, the house knows that the USSR [Soviet Union] and some of their friendly countries, more or less walked out of various organs of the United Nations, more essentially from Security Council."

Some right-wing members of political parties questioned India's wisdom in having pressed for China's admission to the UN at such an early stage. Even veteran Indian National Congress members were critical of China's wanton invasions of Tibet and Vietnam, and its attempted invasion of Taiwan.

In the past few years, Indian lawmakers' attitudes toward China have hardened, cutting across party lines.

In December 2018, a report by the external affairs committee, headed by Indian lawmaker Sashi Tharoor, said: "It comes as a matter of concern to the committee that even when India is overtly cautious about China's sensitivity while dealing with Taiwan and Tibet, China does not exhibit the same deference while dealing with India's sovereignty concerns... The committee strongly feels that the government should contemplate using all options including relations with Taiwan as a part of such an approach."

Considering that committee reports of the Indian parliament are traditionally nuanced, the observation in the report was bold and radical.

In yet another instance of political outreach to Taiwan, two senior members of parliament belonging to the BJP participated in President Tsai Ing-wen's (蔡英文) virtual inauguration in May 2020.

It augurs well that at a time when the so-called "one China" principle of Beijing is being increasingly questioned the world over, as is evident from increased

parliamentary outreach to Taiwan, Kumar's visit can usher in a new political innings in the bilateral relationship between two robust democracies.

Beijing should understand that parliamentary outreach is independent of executive or state-to-state relations. Kumar's visit opens a political bridge between India and Taiwan that needs to be carried forward with the exchange of parliamentary delegations between the two countries' legislatures.

In a boisterous democracy such as India, whose constitution guarantees freedom of expression within and outside parliament, Beijing should not expect the Indian government to curb the constitutional rights of members of parliament.