

Digital Taiwan Lecture Series

Building Bridges Through Sports: Opportunities for Sweden – Taiwan Collaboration

Webinar Report

December 9, 2025



Institute for Security & Development Policy

Stockholm Taiwan Center

ABOUT ISDP

The Institute for Security and Development Policy is a Stockholm-based independent and non-profit research and policy institute. The Institute is dedicated to expanding understanding of international affairs, particularly the interrelationship between the issue areas of conflict, security and development. The Institute's primary areas of geographic focus are Asia and Europe's neighborhood.

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LIST OF SPEAKERS



Helena Reitberger (任荷雅) currently serves as the Swedish Representative to Taiwan at the Swedish Trade & Invest Council in Taipei. She has more than two decades of diplomatic experience, with postings in Beijing, London, Singapore, and Taipei, as well as senior roles within the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, including work on security policy, NATO affairs, and human resources. Her career has also included service with the Swedish Armed Forces and the Swedish Parliament. In addition, she had been involved in two Olympic Games during her postings in Beijing and London.



Mathias Tegnér is a Member of Riksdag (Swedish Parliament), representing the Social Democratic Party since 2014. He currently serves on the Committees on Taxation and EU Affairs, and has previously served on the Committees on Industry and Trade and Social Insurance. He is also a Deputy Member of the General Council of the Swedish Central Bank (Riksbanken). In addition to his parliamentary work, Tegnér is actively engaged in sports administration. He is the President of the Stockholm Ice Hockey Federation and a member of the board of the Swedish Ice Hockey Federation. He has been involved in ice hockey for over three decades, both as a referee and in various leadership positions within the sport.



Dr. Chien Chi Lin (林倩綺) is a Member of the Legislative Yuan of the Republic of China (Taiwan), affiliated with the Kuomintang and of Amis indigenous heritage. Although not elected through an indigenous constituency, she has long regarded Indigenous affairs and cultural equity as central to my public service. Before her election in 2024, she held senior positions overseeing cultural and indigenous affairs in both Kaohsiung County and New Taipei City, with a sustained commitment to policy integration and cultural governance. In parallel with her political career, she is also an amateur athlete aspiring toward professional-level performance, having earned a gold medal in women's sailing at the 2025 World Masters Games.

Moderator

Yi-Chieh-Chen, Project Manager and Junior Research Fellow at the Stockholm Taiwan Center, Institute for Security and Development Policy.

CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

The Stockholm Taiwan Center of the Institute for Security and Development Policy held a webinar for the Digital Taiwan Lecture Series on December 9, 2025, to discuss opportunities and challenges in strengthening bilateral ties between Sweden and Taiwan through sports. The speakers have backgrounds in government and foreign affairs, as well as long-standing engagement in sports.

The webinar was recorded and made available on [YouTube](#).

This report summarizes the main takeaways from the webinar, ranging from the understanding that sports transcend the physical dimension and can therefore unite territories through the shared democratic values embedded in sports activities, to the obstacles and challenges Sweden and Taiwan might face in building closer relations through sports.

STATE OF THE ART

Although Sweden and Taiwan are geographically distant and Sweden does not officially recognize Taiwan as an independent state, their relationship has steadily expanded in practice. Cooperation through education, cultural exchange, and trade has grown over time, and political engagement has evolved, particularly as the Taiwan Friendship Group has

expanded its scope in the Riksdag (Swedish Parliament). The voices to raise awareness of Taiwan's importance have gradually shifted from being primarily a right-wing issue to one echoed across the whole parliament, signaling Sweden's growing recognition of Taiwan's significance.

Nevertheless, official cooperation continues to face structural constraints due to pressure from Beijing. These limitations have encouraged Taiwan to pursue alternative avenues of international engagement beyond traditional diplomacy. Sports diplomacy has gradually emerged under the current Lai administration to enhance Taiwan's visibility and global engagement.

The establishment of a new Ministry of Sports in September 2025 signaled an important milestone for advancing its sports development and global presence. The new institutional framework creates opportunities to develop partnerships with like-minded countries. Sweden has a long-standing and deeply rooted sports culture: according to the Swedish Sports Confederation (Riksidrottsförbundet), the country is home to around 18000 sports clubs with more than 3.1 million members – nearly one-third of its population.

Strengthening sports-based cooperation between Sweden and Taiwan could therefore build on existing ties in trade, education, and culture, while fostering mutual understanding through sustained people-to-people interactions. Sports offer

an inclusive and dynamic platform for engagement, allowing Taiwan to connect more directly with Swedish civil society and increase public awareness of its identity and values. This potential raises essential questions about how to leverage sports to foster deeper connections between nations.

KEY TAKEAWAY 1:

SPORTS ARE GROUNDED IN SHARED DEMOCRATIC VALUES

One basic yet promising concept permeated the entire discussion: sports bring people together and enable like-minded partners that may be far apart on the map to build bridges and enhance relations. Cooperation through sports does not just yield results and medals – it also fosters understanding and trust between societies.

Mathias Tegnér called attention to the values embedded in sports, not limited it simply to a movement of physical activity, but to a value-based movement founded on ideas like freedom, democracy, transparency, and human rights. While sports are frequently instrumentalized for political purposes, it is essential to recognize that the essence of sport is shaped not by politics but by ideas.

This provides a strong foundation for cooperation between Sweden and Taiwan, as their shared values naturally facilitate closer engagement through sports.

The Swedish Sports Federation (RF) holds that international cooperation should be based on the values of joy and togetherness, democracy and participation, everyone's right to take part in the activity, and fair play. Its guiding framework under the United Nations (UN) Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities underscores how deeply value-driven Swedish sports culture is.

Helena Reitberger and Chien Chi Lin gave an overview of the Taiwanese environment instead. The potential for collaboration can be pursued, primarily through exchanges of athletes and students, building bridges through their shared experiences. Moreover, enhancing international visibility by participating in global sports organizations and hosting competitions would not only amplify Taiwan's position abroad but also create fertile ground for meaningful, sustained collaboration. In discussing potential Sweden–Taiwan cooperation in elite sports, the speakers specifically mentioned water sports, athletics, and outdoor activities as possible areas of collaboration. In this context, they suggested that Taiwan could benefit from cooperation with

Sweden through exposure to different training environments and practices, while emphasizing that any such initiative should be designed as a reciprocal, two-way exchange.

Like-minded democracies that share commitments to openness, fairness, and the rule of law can use sports as a vehicle to strengthen partnerships. These shared principles are also the most substantial incentive for building relations between Sweden and Taiwan.

KEY TAKEAWAY 2:

THE ROLE OF THE NEW MINISTRY OF SPORTS IN TAIWAN

On September 9, 2025, National Sports Day, Taiwan officially established its new Ministry of Sports (MOS). The establishment of the MOS marks a significant institutional milestone. The Executive Yuan has approved a budget of NT\$20 billion (\approx US\$655 million) for the new ministry, and the reform has produced several key enhancements.

The new head of the Ministry is the two-time Olympic gold medalist and retired badminton athlete Lee Yang. It is expected that he has broad ambitions for the development of sports culture in Taiwan, not confining it to competitions

and medal counts, but promoting it as a social and community-building activity.

The Taiwanese strategy when it comes to sports diplomacy has recently evolved, encompassing all these newly emerged trends. Taipei has outlined a clear national strategy integrating elite performance, grassroots participation, industrial development, and international outreach. The new Ministry is intended as a more visible and authoritative platform for sports diplomacy, engaging with international counterparts as an equal political representative. This not only serves a symbolic purpose but also represents a vital channel for the promotion of soft power, values-based engagement, and international cooperation.

This new trajectory recognizes the need for an ecosystem that fosters broader social engagement, and sports provide a uniquely nonpolitical yet profound human platform for cooperation, allowing athletes, coaches, students, and communities to build relationships beyond geographic boundaries. In this context, leveraging sports as a vehicle to advance democracy, gender equality, greater visibility for indigenous cultures, and youth empowerment is strategically essential.

KEY TAKEAWAY 3:

CHALLENGES AND OBSTACLES TO STRENGTHENING BILATERAL RELATIONS THROUGH SPORTS

As previously mentioned, the Swedish sports movement is value-driven, and given Taiwan's well-functioning democracy in Asia, sports cooperation is supported by strong alignment of principles. The speakers, however, have identified several challenges that hinder broader collaboration.

First, the sports movement is organized differently in Sweden and Taiwan. The sports culture in Sweden is club-based and community-oriented, while sports in Taiwan are closely connected to schools and universities. Promoting cooperation among different institutions would hence represent an obstacle, as it would require bridging distinct organizational structures, practices, and administrative frameworks that do not naturally align. Second, geopolitical tensions and possible repercussions cannot be ignored. Many recent examples in the international arena have shown that pressure from the People's Republic of China (PRC) often prevents Taiwanese athletes from participating in competitions that display the Taiwanese

flag or from self-identifying as Taiwanese nationals. Foreign nations usually choose to comply with the PRC's demands to avoid geopolitical escalation. Third, the geographic distance between Sweden and Taiwan can constitute an obstacle to finding resources for cooperation, as they would require much greater investments on both sides in terms of time, logistical coordination, and funding. This difficulty is compounded by geographic and institutional barriers, as well as by fundamental differences in how sports are structured and managed in Taiwan and Sweden.

Despite the potential for sports exchanges between Sweden and Taiwan, these obstacles continue to pose significant challenges to their advancement. Yet strategic policy recommendations to address these issues emerged during the discussion.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Advancing sports diplomacy engagement between Sweden and Taiwan remains a strategic avenue to be further explored and pursued to strengthen bilateral ties and build trust. The webinar highlighted different strategic measures to address the aforementioned obstacles to its implementation.

1. Invest in possible areas of collaboration

To achieve collaboration in sports, Taiwan and Sweden should cooperate through their respective national sports associations. Taiwan's sports associations in badminton, baseball, taekwondo, archery, and the increasingly active swimming associations play essential roles in establishing technical standards, building international networks, and creating pathways for athletic and community development.

While several sports are already well established in Taiwan, others are still emerging and present strong potential for structural collaboration with Swedish associations, which are renowned for professionalism, governance, integrity, and sports science expertise.

In addition, aquatic and water-based sports represent a promising avenue for collaboration, even though these areas currently highlight a striking contrast between the two societies. In Sweden, water-based recreation is deeply embedded in daily life, supported by widespread water safety awareness. In Taiwan, abundant natural resources and outdoor traditions exist, but historical and structural factors have shaped a more cautious relationship with water. Today, however, Taiwan is actively seeking to change this trajectory. Interest in surfing, open-water swimming, paddling, and diving continues to grow. Currently,

Taiwan has around 16 government-supported aquatic sports development sites. Yet, only one is in the eastern region near the Pacific coast, highlighting both progress and the substantial room for improvement, particularly in addressing regional imbalances. Sweden's mature aquatic sports ecosystem, including public infrastructure, club systems, safety frameworks, and community engagement, provides an excellent reference point. For these reasons, aquatic sports may represent a promising avenue for collaboration between Taiwan and Sweden.

2. Prioritize sports culture untied from political imperatives

For sports diplomacy to reach its full potential, collaboration between Taiwan and Sweden should emphasize the intrinsic values of sport rather than political objectives. While sports-related issues are sometimes leveraged to serve national or political agendas, the essence of sports lies in promoting ideas such as fairness, inclusion, teamwork, and mutual respect. Both Sweden and Taiwan share a commitment to these values, making them a natural foundation for cooperative initiatives.

By focusing on people-to-people engagement, grassroots participation, and educational exchanges, both partners can build trust and foster long-term relationships that extend beyond political

considerations. This approach ensures that athletes, coaches, and students can connect through shared experiences, while communities benefit from inclusive participation and strengthened social cohesion. Prioritizing a depoliticized sports culture also allows for sustainable collaboration that is resilient to external pressures and changes in the geopolitical landscape, reinforcing the broader objective of deepening bilateral ties.


3. Strengthen grassroots infrastructure and community sports in Taiwan by drawing on Swedish experience

A key challenge for Taiwan in advancing sports diplomacy is the unequal distribution of sports facilities and infrastructure across the country. Urban areas tend to have better access to sports resources, while rural and indigenous

communities often face shortages in facilities, coaching, and support. To address these disparities, Taiwan is actively investing in water-based activities and expanding local sports infrastructure.

Building on the Swedish model, which emphasizes community accessibility and the development of local clubs, Taiwan should continue to invest in creating strong grassroots networks. Strengthening clubs and community-based sports programs not only enhances technical development but also fosters social cohesion and a culture of active participation.

By prioritizing people-to-people engagement and inclusive community sports, Taiwan can reduce regional disparities, cultivate a more equitable sports culture, and create sustainable foundations for future international collaboration.



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