

TAIWAN IN THE EUROPEAN DISCOURSE: TOWARD POLITICAL CONSENSUS?

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The EU's Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific recognizes that the display of force in the Taiwan Strait may have a direct impact on European security and prosperity. In this context, and in response to the military belligerence of the People's Republic of China and its gray zone activities, Brussels has elevated Taiwan into its political discourse. Yet, consensus on the role member-states want the EU to play in the Taiwan Strait remains work in progress. In light of Beijing's diplomatic support to Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the EU has grown more aware of its own vulnerabilities. This issue brief discusses how Brussels must now start seeing Taiwan through the lens of security and work toward a credible EU-level strategy that contributes to preserving the status quo in the Taiwan Strait, deters PRC aggression, and protects the EU's own interests.

Introduction

In 2021, Brussels elevated Taiwan into its approach to the Indo-Pacific as a partner on its own merit. The European Union's Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific recognizes that the display of force in the Taiwan Strait "may have a direct impact on European security and prosperity".¹ It is in this context, and in response to the continued military belligerence of the People's Republic of China

(PRC) and its gray zone activities that Europeans' awareness of Taiwan has increased.

Brussels has included Taiwan into ongoing reflections on how to strengthen its economic resilience in the face of Beijing's economic coercion and a process of upgrade in bilateral cooperation is underway. There is also consensus on the need to rebalance the EU's ties with China. Yet there is

no shared understanding of the EU's relationship with China and therefore no agreement on the way forward. While member-states have not embraced a common approach to Taiwan, the EU's boundaries are clear: cooperation with Taiwan takes place within the framework of the EU's One China policy.

In light of Beijing's political and diplomatic support to Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the EU has grown more aware of its vulnerabilities in the face of authoritarian threats. Yet, member-states' consensus on the role they want the EU to play in the Taiwan Strait remains work in progress. The EU must start seeing Taiwan through the lens of security and work toward a credible EU-level strategy that meaningfully contributes to preserving the status quo in the Taiwan Strait and deters PRC aggression, and protects the EU's own interests in the region. The EU must be clear on the role it is both *ready* and *able* to assume in the Indo-Pacific. Most importantly, Brussels should work on its approach to Taiwan together *with* Taiwan.

Growing Tension in the Taiwan Strait

Taiwan is at the center of the strategic rivalry between Beijing and Washington. The two see each other as revisionist powers in the Indo-Pacific, a region that Beijing claims as its natural sphere of influence, hence its efforts to push Washington out. Over the past years, Beijing has sought to alter the

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status quo in the region in its favor via gray zone tactics, or coercive geopolitical, economic, military and cyber and information operation activities that go beyond regular diplomatic and economic activities but stay below the use of kinetic military force.² Yet, Beijing's aggression has backfired and Taiwan's profile has seen an unprecedented level of international support.

As a technologically advanced economy and robust democracy with a freely elected government acknowledged by an increasing number of democracies across the world, Taiwan represents an ideological and geopolitical challenge to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) of China. Obsessed with legitimacy and driven by the ambition of global leadership and technological supremacy, Xi Jinping fears a democratic and internationally embraced Taiwan, and sees it as an existential threat to its domestic legitimacy. For Beijing, Taiwan is non-negotiable and it is, at its core, a legitimacy issue.³

As its heavy-handed response to the visit of U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taipei in August indicated, Beijing wants the world to know that it will not compromise on Taiwan.⁴ Reacting to the visit, Beijing set a new precedent in its military threats, coordinating air and naval movements across the median line which crosses the Taiwan Strait, de facto altering the status quo, in line with its promises of "resolute and strong measures".⁵ Xi's aim remains to test Taiwan's capacity to respond, mindful that a takeover by force without the guarantee of full victory would be a direct blow to his legitimacy and authority.

In reality, Taiwan itself has been living under an existential threat from the PRC for decades, with Beijing seeking to undermine its capacity to decide its future.⁶ Beijing has used a mix of gray zone activities, including economic coercion, cyber and information operations, and an escalation in its military provocations to deter Taiwanese independence and impose itself on Taiwan and the region without triggering backlash of conflict. Gray

zone tactics have played an increasingly significant role in supporting the CCP's efforts to advance its overarching domestic, economic, foreign policy and security goals, tactics which Beijing views as a natural extension of how countries exercise power.

As such, for years the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has sent aircraft and military drones into Taiwan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ), conducted military drills and by now its planes regularly cross the median line. In 2021, Taiwan recorded 969 incursions by Chinese warplanes into its ADIZ, which is more than double the 380 carried out in 2020.⁷ Earlier in August, Taiwan's soldiers stationed on Kinmen Island shot down a Chinese civilian-operated drone after days of drones flying over its military posts. This came days after Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen instructed the Armed Forces to take "strong countermeasures" when necessary to protect Taiwan's airspace.⁸

Furthermore, Beijing has for decades used economic statecraft in its ties with Taiwan, by first cultivating deeper economic ties, then seeking to exploit these for its strategic objective of "peaceful reunification", hoping to coerce Taiwan into making political concessions.⁹ Yet, closer trade did not lay the foundation for closer political ties, it instead backfired, just like its "cognitive warfare" did, which pushed Taiwan to invest more in its own resilience and media literacy in the face of an attack on its democratic freedoms and institutions.

According to a PLA Daily article, this new type of warfare is to "influence and lead the cognition, emotion, and consciousness of the public and national elites, and ultimately influence a country's values, national spirit, ideology, cultural traditions, and historical beliefs [...] to achieve the goal of winning without war".¹⁰ With government-sponsored efforts, Beijing has used disinformation to mobilize negative sentiment in Taiwan, spreading false reports through its content farms on key social issues with the aim to divide Taiwanese society, disturb social order, discredit the government and

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interfere in its elections. The PRC's disinformation campaign against Taiwan is a form of cognitive warfare that represents a national security threat for its ability to sow discontent, mistrust and fear.¹¹

Xi Jinping made "reunification" with Taiwan a core pillar of China's "national rejuvenation". This claim lies at the core of the disinformation the CCP has built through its "One China Principle", which falsely maintains that Taiwan is part of China and therefore it must be "reunified", while in fact the PRC never ruled over Taiwan. It is this false "reunification" narrative that Beijing continues to use to decide how countries around the world should approach Taiwan. In fact, Beijing officially released the White Paper on Taiwan in August "to reiterate the fact that Taiwan is part of China", stating that never before has the CCP been "so close to, confident in, and capable of achieving the goal of national rejuvenation". It also accused Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party, in power since 2016, of endangering peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.¹² This shows that Beijing's toolkit to take Taiwan, by force if necessary, is vast, with the military element gaining increasing weight along with economic coercion.

Perceptions of China on the Downhill

Beijing's threats have not only backfired inside Taiwan, but also supported interest and willingness across the EU to pay more attention to Taiwan. The more Beijing has sought to undermine it and

shrink its international space, the more Taiwan's international profile has increased, while hurting China's own global standing and deteriorating perceptions of the PRC. There is a strengthening belief shared among democracies that with its digital authoritarianism, which is the use of technology to surveil, repress and manipulate populations, the PRC poses an existential threat to democracy.¹³

Recent studies show that across Europe people hold negative views of China, in particular concerning its impact on the global environment and on democracy, but also concerning Chinese investment.¹⁴ In addition, China's "rock solid" support for Russia throughout its invasion of Ukraine has further soured sentiments vis-à-vis Beijing in Europe.¹⁵ Beijing's crackdown on Hong Kong and its treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, which a United Nations report released in late August warned could be possible "crimes against humanity" has added to skepticism felt in Europe concerning China as a trustworthy partner.¹⁶ In fact, overall, China enjoys little trust in Europe. Not only has Beijing's hostility led to a decline in perceptions of China, it has also been ineffective in deterring European outreach to Taiwan.

The fact that the EU elevated Taiwan into its Indo-Pacific Strategy as a partner to cooperate with in building resilient and diversified value chains, to

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pursue deep trade and investment relationship with, to improve fisheries compliance with, as well as to work together with to ensure safe and free data flows within the region and beyond, is indicative of Brussels' growing awareness of Taiwan's relevance to its approach to the Indo-Pacific.¹⁷ At the same time and in sharp contrast, the EU still considers China a "systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance".¹⁸ Tensions between Brussels and Beijing deepened further over Beijing's refusal to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Beijing has claimed this was a way to give peace a chance, signaling it was not ready to sacrifice its friendship without limits with Russia.¹⁹ Such rhetoric did not go down well in Europe. In fact, EU leaders made it clear to Beijing that as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, it had a special responsibility in the face of unjustified aggression and that it should, if not support, at least not interfere with EU sanctions.²⁰

Sino-European political relations are tense, and the annual human rights dialogue remains suspended following the tit-for-tat sanctions over the treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang.²¹ In terms of economic exchange, while the ninth round of trade and economic dialogue took place, Brussels didn't reassure Beijing that the kind of business-as-usual way that Beijing prefers would be maintained, i.e. unhindered access for Chinese companies to European markets without the need to reciprocate.²² The EU seeks a rebalancing of ties, and remains interested in working with China as a reliable partner that is ready to liberalize trade and investment and open up its financial sector in line with its international commitments. The prospect of establishing such a rapport rooted in trust is, however, getting gloomier by the day.

Coercion 'with Chinese characteristics'

In 2021, Beijing went after Lithuania with disproportionate sanctions as punishment for allowing Taiwan to open a "Taiwan Representative Office" in Vilnius, rather than "Taipei".²³ Soon

after, Beijing imposed informal secondary sanctions which affected intra-European trade, setting a new precedent in EU-China relations and hitting an already sensitive nerve in the EU. Again, Beijing has miscalculated. Its use of economic coercion hasn't furthered its long-term strategic interests. It has not deterred Lithuania from its turn toward Taiwan but had instead the opposite effect and led to more, not less, support for Taiwan. The European Commission initiated a WTO case against Beijing over its arbitrary trade restrictions and approved a €130 million support package for firms affected by China's coercion.²⁴

While the tension unfolded, orders of Lithuanian products that Beijing cancelled, such as rum, beer and chocolate, found a new home in Taiwan, bringing Lithuania closer, exactly what Beijing wanted to avoid.²⁵ Most importantly, in solidarity with Taiwan, European leaders stressed that “the EU and its member-states have an interest in, and a right to, further develop relations and cooperation with Taiwan”.²⁶ This also set a new precedent in Brussels' articulating its readiness to confront China and urge member-states to strengthen internal coherence and resilience. With Lithuania planning to open its trade office in Taiwan this year, it is clear that Beijing's use of coercion inside Europe has worked against its own interest.²⁷

In fact, while Beijing aimed to undermine Taiwan's legitimacy, it instead handed a strategic opportunity for Taipei to consolidate its dominance in the semiconductor market. Initiatives to incentivize joint ventures between Lithuanian laser firms and Taiwanese chips firms is the result of Beijing's economic coercion backfiring. As such, early September the visit of a Lithuanian delegation of laser and biotechnology company representatives marked the fourth such visit this year from the Baltic state to Taiwan, led by a deputy minister-level official, suggesting that two-cooperation is gradually growing.²⁸

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The European Response

Following Lithuania's example, in August Latvia and Estonia both announced they would no longer participate in the Central Eastern Europe (CEE) and China cooperation format, that used to be known as the “17+1” before Lithuania left in 2021. The two Baltic states stressed the need to focus on cooperation “based on mutual benefit, respect for international law, human rights and the international rules-based order”.²⁹ Beijing's failure to condemn Moscow's war against Ukraine has played a role in taking this decision, according to Estonia's Foreign Minister, Urmas Reinsalu.

Whether in seeking to expand cooperation with Latvia and Estonia, Taiwan will find inspiration in its bilateral experience with their Baltic neighbor, remains to be seen. With Lithuania, in addition to the several exchanges of high-level visits Taiwan has by now launched a €1-billion credit line and a USD 200-million fund to help bilateral business cooperation.³⁰ The two however are still in a learning process, in which they started seeing each other as reliable partners. Other member-states, including the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland have all, in their own ways, built on the momentum they experienced through the virtuous cycle of mask and vaccine diplomacy with Taiwan. It is noteworthy however that the domestic political and economic

landscape varies across the bloc, as do the capacities, strengths and weaknesses, as well as ambitions of all 27 member-states.³¹

Over the years parliamentary diplomacy has been part of EU-Taiwan relations, which has enabled the Europeans to, at the same time, exchange with Taiwanese counterparts in the absence of government-to-government contact, and conduct trade relations with the PRC. These two approaches are not exclusive; it is only Beijing that claims they are. China's objection to such visits is not new. What is new is an increasing willingness of Europeans to assert their right to cooperate with Taiwan in the face of Chinese pressure.

The Way Forward

Taiwan sits at the core of Beijing's strategic interests on all levels, politically, militarily, and ideologically. In a post-pandemic context, in the eyes of much of the EU, Taiwan has become everything that the PRC is not, counter to Beijing's calculations. Under its "Taiwan Can Help" initiative, Taiwan's humanitarian assistance to Central Eastern European countries' efforts to host Ukrainian refugees after Russia's invasion came in stark contrast with Xi's refusal to condemn Putin's aggression.³² Taiwan's generosity

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has helped to further consolidate its image as a reliable partner for Europe and has contributed to further normalizing bilateral exchange, while the lack of solidarity from Beijing only accelerated a negative trend in Sino-European ties.

Unlike Taiwan, the Chinese leadership has applied a top-down, opaque approach to the pandemic, and continues to pursue a zero-COVID policy which has proven to be self-destructive, undermining innovation and economic growth, but also crippling European business operations in the country, as the EU's Chamber of Commerce in China recently warned. Beijing's policy and its "massive uncertainty" has had a "negative impact" on 75 percent of the chamber's members' operations, the report found.³³ In the words of chamber president Jörg Wuttke, "ideology trumps the economy".³⁴

No country in the EU can be passive and indifferent to Taiwan's future. A crisis in the Taiwan Strait will have geopolitical, economic and ideological repercussions affecting them all. With 15 EU member-states already operating trade offices in Taiwan, the EU is by far the largest investor in Taiwan, accounting for around one quarter of all incoming foreign direct investment. Taiwan is the EU's 14th largest trading partner, whilst the EU is its fourth largest partner worldwide.³⁵ This is solid foundation to encourage further growth in economic exchange, and strong reason for the EU

and its member-states to adopt a clear position that protects their own interests in Taiwan. With tension in the Taiwan Strait escalating, endangering freedom of navigation and the safety of maritime trade routes, the EU has legitimate concerns that it has so far failed to adequately address.

An EU-level Approach to Taiwan?

The EU must start seeing Taiwan through the lens of security, in addition to engaging it through the lens of democracy and trade that lie at the core of bilateral ties. In other words, member-states need to move from seeing Taiwan as a like-minded partner to seeing it as a vital partner for Europe. This will facilitate starting a ‘Taiwan military contingency’ discussion in Brussels and allow Europeans to see clearly how they can contribute to maintaining peace and stability in the region, which is closely linked to their own security. In this regard, the EU has placed securing resilient supply chains at the heart of its Indo-Pacific Strategy, which requires ensuring the resilience of the region’s transport systems. Closer cooperation with other partners, such as Japan, Australia, or India, will be essential in

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At the same time, Taiwanese and European counterparts should improve and increase their exchanges to identify what Taiwan can do *for* and *with* Europe. Both Taiwan and the EU are interested in strengthening their resilience in the face of China’s abusive practices and authoritarian advance, including economic coercion and disinformation. Concerning the former, the two sides should focus on supporting each other in their deterrence and defense capacities in the face of Beijing’s economic coercion. Taiwan has been victim of China’s coercive measures for years, as have others in the region, such as Korea or Australia.

Yet, there is still a great deal that democracies need to understand about the nature and deterrent effect that Chinese economic coercion may have on third countries, and on the relationship between power and vulnerability. It is certain that there is a lot the EU can learn from Taiwan’s experience in this regard. It is equally clear that Europe can learn from Taiwan in its fight against disinformation, after decades of being exposed to the PRC’s hybrid warfare. It will be crucial that Brussels invests more in helping Europeans to both understand China better, and to become more aware of Taiwan. A shared understanding across member-states is indispensable to forging convergence. At the same

time, the EU must learn to use its own economic weight more strategically in its ties with Beijing and increase its leverage with a strengthened defensive toolbox. After all, Beijing needs access to European markets and is not ready to risk these ties any further.

Going forward, it is encouraging that the Commission “modernized” its trade and investment dialogue with Taiwan in June this year. Previously held at the deputy director and vice-ministerial level, the talks will be led by the EU’s director for trade and the Taiwanese minister for economic affairs.³⁶ With Taiwan’s expertise in critical technologies, and an effort on both sides to diversify away from China in the long-term, the next step should be to start a dialogue on resilient supply chains. This is an initiative that has resonated in the European Parliament (EP) in Brussels. In fact, at the August exchange of views on Taiwan of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the EP, German Member Reinhard Bütikofer stressed the need to look at ways to work with Taiwan on resilience in the framework of a bilateral Resilient Supply Chains Agreement.

Such sectoral agreements in the field of trade can lead to tangible progress, should both sides make them a priority. Taiwan should in fact pursue such steps as a priority, considering that the European Commission has thus far delayed any discussion on a Bilateral Investment Agreement (BIA) with Taiwan, with no sign of interest in revisiting its

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stance anytime soon. The strategic value of a sectoral agreement cannot be overestimated as it would help avoid that long-drawn-out wait for BIA negotiations expanding bilateral trade cooperation.

Toward Internal Unity that Lasts

Brussels will have to learn to better manage its limitations. Its fragmentation is inherent but it can be managed, as experience has shown. Brussels must be inclusive, and work harder to bring all member-states and their people to the same table, mindful of their diverse experiences, ambitions and interests. Following the 2008 global financial crisis and eurozone crisis, unity was vital to enable a more integrated approach, bringing member-states together to support EU-level mechanisms aimed at preserving financial stability in the bloc. The EU’s post-pandemic stimulus package, including its NextGenerationEU (NGEU) instrument to boost the EU’s recovery was the largest ever package financed in the EU, possible with collective solidarity at the European level.³⁷ The level of unity in forging a coherent response to Russia’s unprovoked and unjustified military aggression against Ukraine was also unprecedented, with the mobilization of the EU budget to provide emergency assistance and support in Ukraine and in EU member-states. Maintaining internal unity and coherence while nourishing a sense of interstate solidarity has required immense work and remains a significant challenge going forward. This will be indispensable to carving out a clear, credible and sustainable EU strategy on Taiwan that reflects convergence and collective choices.

The extent of EU-Taiwan cooperation at present is testament to the fact that the EU and Taiwan have already achieved a lot despite the EU’s boundaries, i.e. its One China policy, and in spite of Beijing’s efforts to shrink Taiwan’s international space. Yet, it is crucial for all sides to understand that as far as the EU is concerned, the future of EU-Taiwan relations hangs both on the political will and on the capacity of *all 27* EU member-states. Brussels

will need to ensure that all member-states feel included in the process. A European strategy that recognizes Taiwan's relevance to Europe's prosperity and security will be possible only with the support of all.

In this process, Brussels must improve its communication on its own One China policy, in the framework of which it recognizes the PRC as the sole legitimate government of China and maintains its right to cooperate with Taiwan. In contrast, Beijing continues to falsely claim that the EU has adopted its One China principle, which maintains that there is only one China and Taiwan is part of it. As such, following the recent rapprochement between Lithuania and Taiwan, Beijing said the EU should "urge Lithuania to return to the right track of the one-China principle as soon as possible."³⁸

Brussels must do better in controlling the narrative and leave no room for Beijing's disinformation. This should include articulating its geopolitical agenda in no uncertain terms as one that seeks to strengthen its own resilience with a "pro-Europe", and not an "anti-China" objective, which is how Beijing describes any initiative that strengthens cooperation and coordination between democracies, in particular if this involves the Indo-Pacific. Finally, Taiwan will also need to invest more in its own communication and strategic thinking on Europe and work harder to increase its profile across the bloc by seeking partnerships, using parliamentary diplomacy, city diplomacy, and academic exchange, while building on people-to-people contacts and contributing to Europeans' understanding of Taiwan. This process has started, but most of the heavy lifting is still ahead. Managing expectations will be vital to further build on the momentum.

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