



# Why Taiwan Matters to Europe

Edited by

**Niklas Swanström**

**Agust Börjesson**

**Yi-Chieh Chen**

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Institute for Security &  
Development Policy



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# Abbreviations

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CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
DPP	Democratic Progressive Party
EU	European Union
KMT	Kuomintang
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PRC	People's Republic of China
ROC	Republic of China
TSMC	Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company
UN	United Nations

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professor at the Jagiellonian University and a research fellow of the Central European Institute of Asian Studies in Bratislava. A former Taiwan fellow of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Luszczkiewicz served as a visiting scholar at Academia Sinica, National Chengchi University, and Tamkang University in Taipei. She is the author of over 150 books and book chapters, journal articles, and conference papers on China-India-U.S. relations, Poland-Taiwan relations, and the Cold War history. She is currently a non-resident fellow of the Taiwan Center for Security Studies at the National Chengchi University in Taipei. Dr. Luszczkiewicz was educated and gained her research experience at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Xi'an Jiaotong University in China, and the University of Cambridge.

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# Introduction

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## **Niklas Swanström, Agust Börjesson, and Yi-Chieh Chen**

The Republic of China (ROC), commonly known as Taiwan, is located far away from Europe. This can make its issues and challenges seem equally distant to European decision-makers. In recent years, this notion was brought to the forefront of debate amidst a European divide on how to manage relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC). When French President Emmanuel Macron returned from a visit to Beijing in 2023, he expressed the sentiment that Europe should best steer clear of a conflict over Taiwan. The ensuing debate about Europe's stake in a potential conflict in the Taiwan Strait has prompted a simple question: Why does Taiwan matter to Europe?

Europe is divided on how to manage relations with China, resulting in similarly divided opinions on how to relate to Taiwan. The Taiwan issue is known to be sensitive for Beijing, one of its so-called core interests. Taiwan has no diplomatic recognition among European Union member-states but informal relations and cooperation between Taiwan and Europe are nevertheless extensive in many areas. The position that Europe should steer clear of a conflict over Taiwan presupposes that it does not have a clear stake in maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. European interests are, however, far more intertwined with Taiwan and its security than what its lack of geographical proximity would initially suggest.

Understanding Taiwan's significance to Europe is increasingly important in order to understand the foundations on which current relations rest and what Europe's stake in the Taiwan Strait is. To examine and expound on why Taiwan matters to Europe, the Institute for Security and Development Policy (ISDP) has brought together four contributions from distinguished experts for a Special Paper. From different perspectives, these contributions expound on Taiwan's significance to Europe. They offer insights in several areas including, how economically important Taiwan is to Europe, what a potential conflict in the Taiwan Strait would cost Europe and what role Taiwan's democracy plays in its region and the international space. In addition, this volume offers valuable policy-oriented advice for its European audience going forward.

In the first article of this volume titled "*Taiwan's Growing Importance for Europe*", Dr. Simona Grano examines the overarching framework of Sino-European relations through which informal engagement with Taiwan has been conducted. She argues that despite the lack of formal

diplomatic relations between Taiwan and European states, an increasingly suspicious view of China has led to more exchanges with Taiwan. She highlights the COVID-19 pandemic, Taiwan's emergence as a reliable partner in supply chains and Russia's invasion of Ukraine as factors in this process. Dr. Grano concludes that relations between Europe and Taiwan are stalling. Although European and Taiwanese parliamentarians have been a force for sturdier ties between Europe and Taiwan, the European Union remains cautious towards China, in order to not cause a trade backlash or a diplomatic rupture.

The second article in this volume, "*Why Taiwan is important to Europe*" by Dr. San-Yi Yang starts by outlining Taiwan's significant position in the so-called first island chain. Dr. Yang argues that Taiwan plays the role of a connector in the Indo-Pacific and expounds on the extensive costs for the global economy that would follow a potential conflict or a blockade in the Taiwan Strait. He also expounds on the important role that Taiwan's democracy plays in the Chinese speaking world and Taiwan's position as a vital trading partner of the EU, producing the world's most sophisticated semiconductors. Dr. Yang concludes that the EU should adopt a more cohesive foreign policy stance in matters related to Russia and China and ensure future economic cooperation with Taiwan through a trade agreement as it would benefit the EU's economic security.

In the third article, "*Elevating EU-Taiwan Relations with more Clarity, Coherence and Creativity*" by Dr. Zsuzsa Anna Ferenczy, argues that the EU and Taiwan are bound by a common interest in boosting resilience in the face of authoritarian threats. She expounds on the shared values between Europe and Taiwan and their mutual interest in reinforcing economic and democratic resilience. Dr. Ferenczy writes that the European bloc has shown little resistance to Beijing's demands that Taiwan should be treated as China's internal affairs, neglecting its own trade interests in the process. She concludes that the EU should seize on its emerging clarity on Taiwan in official discourse and expand existing cooperation into a series of strategic consultations at the highest level.

In the fourth and final article in this volume, "*In Search of Political Clarity: The Evolving European Union's 'Muddling Through'- Policy Towards Taiwan*", Dr. Antonina Luszczkiewicz and Dr. Patrick Mendis expound on the difference between the EU's one China policy and Beijing's one China principle. The authors make the case that the EU's one China policy has not been clearly defined, leaving Europe to muddle through in relations with Taiwan resulting in an ambiguous stance. The authors outline Taiwan's economic importance to Europe, its significance as a democracy and draw a parallel between the situation with Ukraine in Europe and Taiwan in Asia. The authors maintain that Europe can assist Taiwan in expanding its international space and support its participation in international organizations, concluding that it is in Europe's interest to support Taiwan and Ukraine alike.

This Special Paper was undertaken as part of ISDP's Taiwan Studies Project and serves as one of the first publications of its Stockholm Taiwan Center. We extend our sincere gratitude to the authors who contributed to this important and timely project. ISDP also extends its gratitude to the Taipei Mission in Sweden, whose support allowed for this project to be realized.

# Special Remarks

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Taiwan is a reliable, open and constructive partner for the world

The joint statements of G7, NATO, and EU-US summits have mentioned many times that peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait is key to regional and global security and prosperity. From a GDP point of view, Taiwan's GDP in 2022 was \$850 billion, which would be ranked sixth in the EU.

Taking the global supply chain into regard, Taiwan is producing over 90 percent of the world's most advanced semiconductors. From a strategic geopolitical perspective, 50 percent of the global commercial container traffic goes through the Taiwan Strait, and 40 percent of the EU's annual trade volume goes through the Taiwan Strait.

Last but not least, Taiwan remains top in Asia and 10th globally among the 167 countries and territories ranked in the Democracy Index 2023 by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU). Taiwan plays a crucial role in ensuring the world's peace, stability and prosperity.

## **Dr. Klement Gu**

Taiwan's Representative in Sweden

# Taiwan's Growing Importance for Europe

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**Simona A. Grano**

## Introduction

Europe has grown increasingly suspicious of Beijing in the past few years. Debates about Chinese influence, espionage, and security threats—amplified by Beijing's aggressive behavior in the Asia-Pacific region and in the Taiwan Strait have negatively impacted what was previously mere business relations, void of geopolitical tension.

This has led to a warming up of diplomatic and economic exchanges with Taiwan in the past three years, especially since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, as European politicians have sought to improve the balancing of economic and security interests, by increasing their engagement with the island. However, the EU strategically aligns its bilateral interactions with Taiwan within a broader framework of Sino-European relations. Whenever Sino-European relations are strong, Europe's relations with Taiwan usually suffer and vice versa.

## The History of Europe-Taiwan Relations

Although the EU follows a “One China” policy and recognizes the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) as the only legal representative of China, the EU has established solid relations and close cooperation with Taiwan in a wide range of fields. Viewed comprehensively, the history of Europe-Taiwan relations has been marked by a series of ups and downs and has not developed along a linear path. Instead, it has been influenced by how the EU's relationship with China was proceeding at the time. For over three decades, while China was transforming into the workshop of the world and becoming a lucrative market for European industries, relations with Taiwan amounted to little more than consular activities and cultural exchanges. In the past few years, however, three issues have prompted different positioning towards Taiwan, in Europe and the Western world.

First, the COVID-19 pandemic, when distrust vis-à-vis China intensified and numerous countries slowly came to see Taiwan as a more reliable partner in resilient supply chains, semiconductor manufacturing, and data protection, both in terms of economic and political

cooperation. At the same time, due to the extended disruptions of PRC supply chains (because of COVID-19 lockdowns), the PRC's economic clout across Europe has weakened with China's current economic recession reinforcing the trend.<sup>1</sup> For such reasons, the EU has come to hope that Taiwan could assist in reorienting Europe away from economic overreliance on the PRC, whilst fortifying its economic and security positions. Second, this initial shift in perceptions regarding Taiwan has led to a secondary reaction to Taiwan's increasing diplomatic and economic marginalization by China in the international realm. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a pushback from Taipei and other countries was created with requests for Taiwan to be better integrated in global and regional economic networks. Third, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has disrupted Europe's security architecture and created a backlash against authoritarian regimes, especially in light of China taking a pro-Russian stance in the conflict.

Despite EU countries having become more outspoken about Taiwan and more concerned about a conflict with global repercussions since 2020, European states remain deeply divided over the EU's Taiwan policy. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, this is a divide that China has sought to take advantage of to repair its relations with Europe and break transatlantic unity. More importantly, although rhetorical and commercial commitments towards Taiwan in Europe are stronger than in the past, most EU member-states still grapple with how to navigate the ambiguities of their respective "One-China policies", in a manner that allows them to improve their relations with Taiwan, while being mindful of pre-existing dependencies and tight commercial interests vis-à-vis China.

In its official position and statements, the EU supports the status quo and a peaceful resolution of differences across the Taiwan Strait, rejecting the use or threat of force. Europe has a strong stake in maintaining stability and peace across the strait. In fact, in the past few years it has become clear that a Taiwan-conflict would not merely be a distant war for Europeans but that it would instead cause long-lasting and deep reverberations with the potential to severely impact the global economy. A report by the Rhodium Group released in December 2022 estimates that a Chinese blockade of Taiwan would spark \$2.5 trillion in annual economic losses, impacting trade and investment on a global scale, leaving few countries untouched.<sup>2</sup>

For these reasons, and in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the European Union has sped up the process of securing its supply of critical resources, much of which had previously been imported from China.<sup>3</sup> Taiwan's role in the procurement of semiconductors has become even more relevant, given that the EU so far lacks major production plants of such critical components and that the island is the main producer of microchips on a global scale.<sup>4</sup>

A few concrete steps to improve relations with Taiwan have indeed already taken place. In December 2023, the European Parliament approved a key resolution in support of the island; the "European Parliament resolution of 13 December 2023 on EU-Taiwan trade and investment relations" calls for greater economic and political engagement with Taipei.<sup>5</sup> On February 28, 2024, the European Parliament passed two more resolutions concerning the EU's 2023 Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). The annual 2023 CFSP and CSDP reports include passages stating that

neither Taiwan nor China are subordinate to each other and that it is only the democratically elected government in Taiwan that has the right to represent the Taiwanese population on the international stage. Both resolutions strongly condemn China's attempts to unilaterally change the status quo and alter the peace and stability of the Taiwan Strait.<sup>6</sup>

It has to be noted that while the EU Parliament is in favor of sturdier ties with Taiwan, the resolutions that have been passed so far are non-binding and the official position of the European Union is much more cautious. According to EU officials, a formal trade deal between the two parties (something that has long been talked about and would be much welcomed by the Taiwanese side) is not necessary because the existing commercial conditions are considered stable enough to guarantee that Taiwan and European countries can manage their relations in a satisfactory manner.<sup>7</sup> Clearly, this more cautious stance is meant to avoid a potential trade backlash from China. It is reasonable to assume that the EU and EU countries will continue to carefully balance their engagement with Taiwan against their relationships with China in the next few years. Possibilities for greater engagement with Taiwan remains more likely for nations whose trade dependency on China is smaller (and thus have less to lose if the relationship worsens, like Lithuania) and less likely for nations with a heavier trade reliance on China.

## Conclusion

In recent years, Europe and Taiwan have seen a noticeable intensification of bilateral contacts with a special focus on crisis management (since the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine) along with institutional and economic cooperation.

Despite an increased normative and rhetorical engagement with Taiwan, in the beginning of 2024, most EU states are still carefully trying to avoid a trade backlash from China. European relations with Taiwan are stalling. On one hand, both Taiwanese and European parliamentarians push consistently to boost relations. On the other hand, the position of the EU has not changed significantly from what it has been in the past, maintaining a pragmatic posture to keep the relationship with Taiwan going without causing a fully-fledged diplomatic rupture with Beijing.

Taiwan's new President William Lai will be keen on further pursuing the goal of a trade deal with Europe, but the concrete possibility of this happening is low, not just because of Europe's hesitancy but also because Lai will not have a parliamentary majority.<sup>8</sup> The Kuomintang and the Taiwan People's Party will have substantial weight in the new parliament, able to hinder any agreement or deal that they perceive as going against their respective approaches on foreign policy.

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# Why Taiwan is Important to Europe

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**San-Yi Yang**

## Introduction

Taiwan is a small island located in East Asia, with a population of approximately 23 million and a land area of around 36,000 square kilometers. It is located more than 9,000 kilometers away from Europe. Since Taiwan began implementing a series of reforms in 1987, it has undergone significant transitions in political democratization and economic liberalization. These have positioned Taiwan as a successful country in East Asia and made it a prominent case in the third wave of democratization.<sup>1</sup> However, alongside the processes of political democratization and economic liberalization, Taiwan has also faced security concerns. The increasingly intense geopolitical competition in East Asia has made this small island a focal point of attention. Situated in East Asia, stretching from Japan and Korea in the north to the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Australia, New Zealand, and other countries in the south, Taiwan has become the centerpiece of the first island chain, where the competition for power between the United States and China predominates. Taiwan, centrally located within this island chain, has thus become part of one of the most fiercely contested regions in the U.S.-China rivalry.<sup>2</sup>

The European Union has had a long tradition of linking its policies towards Taiwan with its policies towards China, considering them as paired policy subjects. This linkage resulted in the Taiwan policy being heavily dependent on the China policy and has made policy innovation exceedingly difficult. The EU's policy towards Taiwan sends a message to China that Taiwan is subordinate to a China-centric policy framework. This approach appears increasingly out of place in a rapidly changing international environment. Since the European Union's member-states possess distinct national interests and foreign policies, the EU needs to further integrate these divergent national positions to more effectively advance its Indo-Pacific strategy within the rapidly changing international environment.<sup>3</sup>

## Why is Taiwan Important?

Firstly, over the past few decades, the Indo-Pacific region has experienced significant development. Taiwan, situated in the middle of this island chain, plays a crucial connecting role. The Taiwan Strait is one of the busiest sea routes globally, serving as a vital maritime passage between the East China Sea and the South China Sea, linking major ports such as Shanghai, Hong Kong, Tokyo, and Manila. Its strategic geographical location is paramount, as it is a transit point for cargo ships departing from China, Japan, and South Korea. Approximately 50 percent of global container ships traverse the Taiwan Strait, with around 90 percent of the world's largest container ships passing through it. If this route were to be blocked, maritime transportation would suffer severe disruptions, as ships would be forced to circumnavigate Taiwan, significantly impacting shipping capacity.<sup>4</sup>

Secondly, Taiwan's experience with democratization holds significant political implications. Among all Chinese-speaking regions, Taiwan stands as the most advanced in terms of democracy. The universal values and human rights principles espoused by Taiwan are comparable to those of Europe and the United States.<sup>5</sup> In May 2019, Taiwan became the first country in Asia to legalize same-sex marriage, marking a significant milestone where gender is no longer a constraint on marital relationships. Taiwan has also seen frequent party rotations in various levels of elections, with the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) often alternating in power. Although the system of plebiscite was only introduced in 2004, expressions of public will through plebiscite frequently accompany elections in Taiwan. If the EU's foreign policy aims to promote democracy, rule of law, and universal values, then Taiwan should be at the core of the EU's foreign policy in the Asian region.<sup>6</sup>

Thirdly, in 2022, Taiwan ranked as the 12th largest trading partner of the EU and the 5th largest trading partner in Asia, following China, Japan, South Korea, and India. Apart from its economic scale, Taiwan also manufactures over 60 percent of the world's semiconductors and approximately 90 percent of the most advanced semiconductors. These chips are utilized in various products that are essential for modern life, ranging from smartphones and automobiles to industrial machinery. The reliance on Taiwanese chips underscores the potential of a global industrial disruption in the event of armed conflict in the Taiwan Strait, a scenario that is difficult to comprehend.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the complexity of semiconductor manufacturing is extremely high. Despite Taiwan's leading semiconductor manufacturer, Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC), deciding to invest in regions such as Europe, the United States, and Japan, and initiating various technological collaborations with countries like Germany and Lithuania, Taiwan remains a crucial base for semiconductor supply in the short term. Whether it be completing the construction of hardware manufacturing facilities or assembling production clusters across the semiconductor supply chain, Taiwan will continue to be integral to global semiconductor supply in the near future.<sup>8</sup>

Geopolitical competition has increasingly brought Taiwan into the international spotlight. In recent years, the power competition in the global system instigated by Russia and China, aiming to alter the existing international power structure has prompted both the European

Union and the United States to confront the challenges posed by these two countries.<sup>9</sup> From the perspective of competition between land and sea powers, both Ukraine and Taiwan serve as targets and symbols of power competition between major powers. They also represent the rise and fall of such competition. Should Ukraine and Taiwan fall into the hands of adversaries, the power dynamics of this competition would undergo significant changes.<sup>10</sup>

## **Conclusion: What Can be Done?**

Firstly, the European Union should clearly convey a message to potential aggressors, warning them that the cost of initiating war would be exceedingly high. Secondly, the EU needs to consolidate its foreign policies towards Russia and China. The EU and its member-states should adopt a more cohesive stance. Enhanced integration of EU foreign policies would facilitate a more unified approach towards Russia and China, preventing the disruption of EU unity due to individual member-states' foreign policies or economic interests. Thirdly, the EU should promptly sign bilateral economic and trade agreements with Taiwan, ensuring the continuation of close economic cooperation between the two. Deepening bilateral relations would also greatly benefit the economic security of the EU. Lastly, given that Taiwan serves as an international model for democratic development, economic freedom, and human rights protection, it should not be treated as an international political orphan. As one of the most important actors in the international arena, the EU should consider its policy towards Taiwan as a significant part of its foreign policy.

## Endnotes

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# Elevating EU-Taiwan Relations with more Clarity, Coherence and Creativity

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**Zsuzsa Anna Ferenczy**

## **A New Reality**

In recent years, the contours of a new reality in EU-Taiwan relations have gradually taken shape. A new chapter has opened in bilateral cooperation, defined by heightened mutual awareness and greater willingness to engage each other. The two share a commitment to democracy, rule of law, and fundamental freedoms. They are also bound by a common apprehension regarding a changing China and its influence on global governance, undermining the liberal rules-based order.

Taiwan and the EU are bound by a shared interest to boost resilience in the face of authoritarian threats. In order to effectively reinforce each other, both sides will need to do more and better. EU institutions and member-states need to be more assertive about their right to engage Taiwan and move beyond just pushing back against China's false claims over the island. Taiwan needs to rethink its overreliance on China and invest more in its partnership with Europe.

EU institutions and member-states should consider two priorities: Cement the emerging clarity on Taiwan in official EU discourse by being coherent whenever they engage China and expand existing cooperation with Taiwan into a series of strategic consultations at the highest level. A focus on maritime security and democratic resilience should enjoy priority, these being among the issues that matter most to both.

Taiwan and the EU are also connected through the common interest of reinforcing economic and democratic resilience in the face of authoritarian threats. The EU has engaged in new thinking on how to push back against such threats and better defend its interests both at home and in the Indo-Pacific, a region crucial to the trade-intensive European economy.<sup>1</sup> Taiwan has started to rethink its overreliance on China and invest more in its partnerships with like-minded countries in the region and beyond.

Taiwan and the EU are burdened by a different set of challenges and different complexities

in their relations with China. They are both yet to get a better grasp of each other's complexities. In order to continue the positive trend in their relations, both sides will need to move from celebrating each other's like-mindedness to establishing regular strategic consultations on issues that matter most to both: democracy and trade. This will require more clarity in discourse, coherence in engagement, and creativity in action, and it will not require moving beyond existing boundaries.

## More Clarity in Discourse

Under its one China principle, Beijing claims that there is one China and Taiwan is part of China.<sup>2</sup> For Beijing, Taiwan is an internal affair. Though China has been unilaterally threatening the island on a daily basis through a mix of economic, cyber and military means and even vowed to take Taiwan “by force if necessary”, the Chinese government oddly declared that “national reunification is the only way to avoid the risk of Taiwan being invaded and occupied again by foreign countries”.<sup>3</sup>

Taiwan rejects Beijing's sovereignty claims as false, upholding that the PRC never ruled the island. Taipei's political leadership under the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) maintains that Taiwan is already independent as the Republic of China (Taiwan), whose jurisdiction covers Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen, Matsu and other outlying islands.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, both Taiwan's former President Tsai Ing-wen and new President Lai Ching-te maintain that there is no need to declare independence.

The EU does not take a position on Taiwan's sovereignty but continues to abide by its own one China policy, in light of which it recognizes the PRC as the sole legal government of China and maintains cooperation with Taiwan without diplomatic recognition.<sup>5</sup> As trade with China has grown over the decades and the two declared bilateral relations as “strategic”, the bloc has shown little resistance to Beijing's demands to treat Taiwan as a matter of internal affairs. This has implicitly meant excluding any discussion on Taiwan Strait-related issues from EU-China talks.

In practice, for Europe this has really meant agreeing to neglect its own trade interests; hard to believe in today's geo-economic context, but true. The Taiwan Strait is the primary shipping lane for European ships headed for Japan, the Republic of Korea and China, and over one-third of Europe's exports go to the region. In fact, being a critical waterway for global supply chains, in 2022 half of the global container fleet passed through the Strait.<sup>6</sup> The Taiwan Strait is a strategically vital area for Europe, the security of which Europe has oddly, up until recently largely ignored.

To be clear: The EU never subscribed to Beijing's one China principle. By not pushing back against Beijing's false claim that the EU has violated its one China principle, it is China that has interfered in the bloc's sovereign policy space and continues to undermine the EU's and EU member-states' right to engage Taiwan.

It is positive that some EU leaders and member-states are pushing back, reshaping the EU's overall approach to Taiwan and China, a shift that seems increasingly irreversible in light

of China's diplomatic support to Russia's ongoing aggression against Ukraine.<sup>7</sup> In 2022, in a European Parliament debate, EU High Representative Josep Borrell explicitly said that “the One China Policy does not prevent us – the European Union – from persisting and intensifying our cooperation with Taiwan”.<sup>8</sup>

The European Parliament has driven the shift towards more clarity through numerous resolutions and delegation visits to Taiwan. Yet, what is needed to secure the emerging clarity in Europe's discourse on China and Taiwan is coherence in practice, across EU institutions and member-states. What is also needed is creativity that allows expanding cooperation within existing boundaries, rather than bypassing them. This requires both Europe's and Taiwan's efforts.

## More Coherence and Creativity in Practice

EU institutions and member-states need to be more assertive about their right to engage Taiwan through cooperation and move beyond just pushing back against Chinese false claims over the island. The EU has two major interconnected interests in the Indo-Pacific. The first is the protection of its trade and the preservation of the rules-based international order. The Taiwan Strait constitutes international waters and does not belong to China; it is home to the busiest shipping lanes in the world and contains a corridor of international waters and airspace within which all states and their vessels enjoy freedom of navigation and overflight. Yet, Beijing has claimed that anything that happens in these waters concerns China alone.

The EU's second interest in the Indo-Pacific is to protect Taiwan's democracy. Taiwan is a frontline democracy; it is a testing ground for Beijing's hybrid threat tactics, which once tested in Taiwan may eventually be used internationally.<sup>9</sup> Following China's crackdown on Hong Kong and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a consensus has emerged in Taiwan: They do not want to become the next Hong Kong or suffer the same fate as the people of Ukraine. Europe has vowed to stand with Ukraine “as long as it takes”.<sup>10</sup> Standing up against Russia's and China's hybrid warfare together is as important for Ukraine's democratic future as it is for Taiwan's – and Europe's.

## The Way Forward

There are two priorities, therefore, that EU institutions and member-states should consider in order to protect their interests and at the same time protect Taiwan while upholding the rules-based international order. One, cement the emerging clarity on Taiwan in official EU-discourse by being coherent whenever they engage China. Two, expand existing cooperation with Taiwan into a series of strategic consultations at the highest level. A focus on maritime security and democratic resilience should enjoy priority.

Elevating ongoing cooperation would help Europe's internal coherence, as it would support institutions and member-states in embracing a common discourse. It would also help both Europe and Taiwan to be more creative and deepen bilateral cooperation without the need to go beyond existing boundaries.

The EU has the weight, expertise, and tools in place to be clear, coherent, and creative. What it needs is political will to deliver on all three. The EU now sees Taiwan as a like-minded partner, on its own merit, as a robust democracy and technologically advanced economy. Taiwan has in turn elevated Europe on its agenda, by engaging member-states bilaterally and strengthening ties with the EU as a whole, particularly the European Parliament. Now is the time for the two to invest more effort into shaping their partnership and future path forward together.



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# In Search of Political Clarity: The Evolving European Union's “Muddling Through” Policy Towards Taiwan

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**Antonina Luszczkiewicz and Patrick Mendis**

## Introduction

In unprecedented support for Taiwan, the European Parliament took a strong policy decision earlier this year. With its resolution of February 28, 2024 on the implementation of the common foreign and security policy, the Parliament concluded that “only Taiwan’s democratically elected government can represent the Taiwanese people on the international stage.”<sup>1</sup>

In essence, the European Union’s (EU) foreign and security policy has challenged China’s narrative asserting that the Taiwanese people are represented internationally by Beijing. In its global disinformation campaign, China has been misusing the United Nations Resolution 2758, passed in 1971, which excluded Taiwan from the UN—even though it did not define the status of Taiwan.

The landmark resolution that was adopted in February 2024 allowed the European Parliament to strongly signal its clear support for Taiwan’s international presence and membership in global institutions. The resolution serves as a very strong EU voice, particularly in light of the community’s history of having a rather cautious and balancing stance on the matter of Taiwan.

## Evolution of the EU’s Policy on Taiwan

The EU has been following the one China *policy*—which is founded on the recognition of only one Chinese state without defining the status of Taiwan. The one China policy is much more ambiguous than the one China *principle*, promoted by Beijing, which states that “there is but one China in the world, Taiwan is an inalienable part of China’s territory, and the

Government of the People’s Republic of China [PRC] is the sole legal government representing the whole of China.”<sup>2</sup>

Importantly, the EU’s one China policy has never been officially defined, leaving the member-states with space for maneuverability in their individual relations with Taiwan.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, the EU gave assurance to China in 1975 that none of the EU member-states recognized the Republic of China (Taiwan); instead, they all kept diplomatic relations with Beijing.<sup>4</sup> As a result, the EU has for decades been “muddling through,” keeping an ambiguous stance on Taiwan and avoiding explicitly political relations with Taipei<sup>5</sup>—to avoid angry retaliations from China.<sup>6</sup>

This has, however, recently changed. In 2022, a recommendation of the European Parliament urged Europe to “work closely with the Member States to intensify EU-Taiwan *political* relations and to pursue a comprehensive and enhanced partnership under the guidance of the EU’s *One China Policy*”<sup>7</sup> (italics added).

Following the clear-cut statement of February 2024 on the democratically elected government of Taiwan, the EU’s direction is slowly but surely becoming clearer, and its collective will for developing political relations with Taiwan is more pronounced than ever before.

## Why Does Taiwan Matter to the EU?

Taiwan has for long been an important trading partner for the EU. As the biggest producer of semiconductors in the world, Taiwan has been recognized as a hub for electronics and high-tech industries. As a rising Asian Tiger in the late 1980s, Taiwan has also transformed from an autocratic governing system to the most shining example of democracy in Asia. According to the Democracy Index 2023, Taiwan has now been classified as being among the top 10 strongest democracies in the world.<sup>8</sup> In the time of a global decline of democracy, the Taiwanese people’s adherence to democratic values, human rights, and the rule of law is even more praiseworthy.

With the “no-limit” friendship pact between Russia and China, signed just a couple of weeks before President Vladimir Putin’s “72-hour special military operation” in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, many observers started to wonder whether Taiwan would become the next prey for an authoritarian regime—in line with the slogan “Ukraine Today, Taiwan Tomorrow.”<sup>9</sup> Recognizing this existential threat to democratic ideals, Taiwan has been very actively engaged in sending aid to Ukraine, even though it is located far away from the European drama.<sup>10</sup>

Russia under Putin with his authoritarian mindset now poses the biggest threat to Europe—recognized not only by Central and Eastern Europe but also by Finland and Sweden, as they have recently joined NATO. However, it is important to also note that China is standing behind Putin’s war machine—serving as a lifeline for his regime by importing Russia’s natural resources and allowing Moscow to continue its onslaught despite a wide range of sanctions from the democratic world.

Failing to defend Ukraine from Russian aggression would be a disaster for the liberal world order. It would give the green light to other authoritarian regimes to unilaterally change national borders. Without any doubt, losing democratic Taiwan to autocratic China would have a similar and enduring effect on freedom and democratic values.

## What Can the EU Do?

First, the EU can help Taiwan to expand its international space and global recognition. China has relentlessly been working on winning over Taiwan's diplomatic allies and friends—as it did with Nauru less than 48 hours after Taiwan's presidential elections in January 2024. Challenging this tendency, the EU can, in line with its 2024 resolution, support Taiwan in regaining meaningful participation in—and contribution to—international organizations such as the World Health Organization, the International Civil Aviation Organization, and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.<sup>11</sup> This would help counterbalance China's growing influence in international bodies and prevent Beijing from reshaping world order from within international organizations.<sup>12</sup>

Second, the EU should strengthen economic, investment, and trade relations with Taiwan to enhance the island-nation's commercial links with the world. At the same time, the EU should use its economy and market to deter China. Of course, nobody should be naive enough to suggest that the EU should cut economic ties with China; however, the EU—with its highly developed market—can take a much tougher and more effective stance against Beijing.

Overall, the EU should make it clear to Beijing where its red line lies. Any attempt by China to change the *status quo* in the Taiwan Strait unilaterally or by force, should elicit a response from the EU with crippling economic sanctions and restricting China's access to the European market.

## Conclusion

In times of waning democracy, it is in the EU's best interest to support and protect both Ukraine and the island-nation of Taiwan. Indeed, Taiwan is geographically distant from the EU, but it is close in shared values whilst exhibiting economic vibrancy and a democratic example to the world. Russia under Putin might not stop invading neighboring territories after conquering Ukraine; likewise, President Xi Jinping's "national rejuvenation" may not be limited to the so-called "reunification" with Taiwan.

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