

# TAIWAN SECURITY BRIEF 2020

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Taiwan and Cross-  
Strait Relations

East Asia  
Program

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## Preface

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I am pleased to present the second volume of the *Taiwan Security Brief* from the Stimson Center's East Asia Program. When we began planning the project at the beginning of 2020, we had no conception how much life would change throughout this year. The pandemic has shaped the policy analysis in the three briefs that follow. The security challenges explored in this volume demonstrate how traditional and nontraditional security issues are deeply entwined in Taiwan's policy decisions, from striking the right balance between U.S.-Taiwan relations and cross-Strait relations in a time of U.S.-China tension, to combatting COVID-19 with an array of lessons learned from previous epidemics. Written by emerging experts to examine the critical policy choices Taiwan has faced in 2020, the policy briefs offer recommendations for the Taiwan and U.S. governments to consider in the coming year.

I am grateful to the three authors of this volume for joining the project. I am particularly grateful for Pam Kennedy, Research Analyst with the East Asia Program, for orchestrating the entire publication process in addition to contributing her own brief. Additional thanks go to Research Assistant Jason Li and Research Intern Thomas Santos for ably assisting Pam with the publication process. My sincere thanks goes to the Taiwan Economic and Cultural Representative Office for supporting the East Asia Program's Taiwan project. I look forward to continuing to expand the discourse on Taiwan's security policies with the next generation of scholars.

Yuki Tatsumi  
Co-Director, East Asia Program  
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## Abbreviations

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<b>CDC</b>	Taiwan Centers for Disease Control; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (U.S.)
<b>CECC</b>	Central Epidemic Command Center
<b>COVID-19</b>	Coronavirus disease 2019
<b>ECFA</b>	Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement
<b>E.U.</b>	European Union
<b>GCTF</b>	Global Cooperation and Training Framework
<b>H1N1</b>	Influenza A virus subtype H1N1
<b>ICAO</b>	International Civil Aviation Organization
<b>KMT</b>	Kuomintang
<b>MOFA</b>	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
<b>NSC</b>	National Security Council
<b>PRC</b>	People's Republic of China
<b>SARS</b>	Severe acute respiratory syndrome
<b>TRA</b>	Taiwan Relations Act
<b>U.N.</b>	United Nations
<b>U.S.</b>	United States
<b>WHA</b>	World Health Assembly
<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organization

## Introduction

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JASON LI

Taiwan began 2020 turning a page in its history, holding presidential elections and witnessing the start of President Tsai Ing-wen's second term. By the time of Tsai's inauguration in May, Taiwan—and the entire world—had entered an unprecedented, frightening, and challenging chapter of history as the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the globe. During her inauguration speech, Tsai acknowledged the “challenges and opportunities” that the pandemic presented to Taiwan.<sup>1</sup> The opportunities have been relatively evident: Taiwan's success in containing COVID-19's spread at home has enabled a visible campaign of international outreach, including aid packages and information-sharing, leading to unprecedented calls for Taiwan's participation in international space. On the other hand, the challenges the pandemic has created for Taiwan have remained deeply woven in—and potentially exacerbated by—the traditional dynamics constraining Taiwan, an understanding that ushers debate of the long-term impacts of this year's events on Taiwan.

The developments in 2020 have demonstrated the overlap of traditional and nontraditional security issues, both within the nature of the challenges and the policy responses promulgated by Taipei. Within its relationship with the United States, Taipei has confronted this year's challenges by leaning into the Trump administration's trademark moves to deepen relations across not only traditional security issues like defensive arms sales but also nontraditional security issues like high-level exchanges discussing disease prevention. The already chilly cross-Strait relationship has been marred this year by tensions ranging from air incursions to competing bids for world health leadership and representation. And, in the immediate context of the pandemic, Taipei's early identification of COVID-19 as a national security threat and subsequent success at containment hinted at the benefit of blurring the line between these two spheres of security.

In examining the challenges and opportunities presented to Taiwan in 2020, the three essays that follow dive into this crucial overlap of nontraditional and traditional security across three areas: the progress of the U.S.-Taiwan relationship during the Trump administration, the cross-Strait relationship during the pandemic, and Taiwan's domestic policy response to the outbreak of COVID-19. The three authors have taken a snapshot of Taiwan at an extraordinary moment in time when Taiwan faces new and ongoing threats to its security but is also effectively drawing upon the strength of its society and its international partnerships.

The first essay, “Rapprochement Between Taipei and Washington: Challenges and Opportunities,” by Eleanor M. Albert, a Ph.D.-in-Residence at the

International Security and Conflict Studies Center at the George Washington University's Elliott School, examines the diversification of U.S.-Taiwan ties during the Trump administration, from expanding the traditional security conception of the U.S.'s commitment to Taiwan's defense, to an emphasis on diplomatic and economic exchange as a means of strengthening the relationship. Recognizing the delicate balancing act vis-à-vis Beijing of which Washington and Taipei are constantly cognizant, Albert assesses the steps taken by the Trump administration to develop U.S.-Taiwan relations alongside U.S. relations with mainland China. Albert's recommendations reflect on the opportunities for deepening ties while also acknowledging the need for careful management of the cross-Strait relationship.

In the second essay, "When the Wind Blows: How the COVID-19 Pandemic Could Reshape Taiwan's Cross-Strait Posture," Emily S. Chen, a Ph.D. candidate in the Graduate School of Interdisciplinary Information Studies at the University of Tokyo, analyzes the confluence of increased tensions between China and the West and Taiwan's international outreach during the pandemic. Observing how Taiwan has been "riding the wind" of the situation to gain the support and sympathy of liberal democracies for Taiwan's restricted ability to participate in international organizations, particularly the World Health Organization, Chen examines Taipei's interactions with Beijing during the pandemic and the complicated calculus that Taiwan's policy options comprise for expanding its international partnerships. Chen makes recommendations for Taiwan to take advantage of the swell of international support by engaging countries on diverse issues of mutual concern, from healthcare to human rights.

The third essay, "Taiwan's Domestic Policy Response to COVID-19: Balancing Security and Democracy," by Pamela Kennedy, a Research Analyst with the Stimson Center's East Asia Program, details Taiwan's process of securitizing COVID-19 as a security threat, the lessons Taiwan learned from previous epidemics, especially the 2003 SARS outbreak, and how Taiwan balances its strong policy measures with maintaining the public's confidence in a democratic society. Evaluating the factors that contributed to Taiwan's success in combatting COVID-19, Kennedy assesses Taiwan's policymaking process from the start of securitization to the public's cooperation during policy implementation, as well as how Taipei responded to concerns that some of the policies encroached on democratic rights. Kennedy provides recommendations for Taiwan to consider how it will eventually phase out its COVID-19 policies and to expand its outreach to countries that are struggling to control the spread of the virus.

The common thread throughout these distinct aspects of Taiwan's foreign and domestic policies during 2020 is the recognition of Taiwan's efforts to leverage its international partnerships and share with the world its capabilities and

expertise. The three authors call for shining a brighter light on Taiwan's creation of opportunity in the face of unique challenges. There is certainly no absence of effort for such creation on Taiwan's part, or on the part of its existing partners. And Taiwan must still navigate choppy waters in cross-Strait tensions and new stresses posed by 2020. But the momentum of Taiwan's successes this year could very well continue and create a bigger space for Taiwan to inhabit in the future.

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## ENDNOTES

1. "Full text of President Tsai Ing-wen's second-term inaugural address," *Focus Taiwan*, 20 May 2020, <https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202005200003>.



## Rapprochement Between Taipei and Washington: Challenges and Opportunities

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ELEANOR M. ALBERT

### Background

In recent years, U.S.-Taiwan ties appear to have reached their closest despite the absence of formal diplomatic relations. The United States severed relations with Taiwan (which formally refers to itself as the Republic of China) in 1979 and forged new diplomatic ties with the Chinese mainland, the People's Republic of China (PRC). A set of documents from the 1970s and early 1980s delineates the terms under which Washington and Beijing formalized their relations, while simultaneously creating space for Washington and Taipei to foster an independent set of ties.

This diplomatic shift laid the foundation for the U.S.'s "One China" policy.<sup>1</sup> The language articulated in a trio of communiqués emphasizes that the United States acknowledged the position that "there is but one China" and recognized the PRC as "the sole legal Government of China," while not taking a position over the sovereignty of the island of Taiwan and advocating for a peaceful resolution of differences.<sup>2</sup> Separately, the provisions in the U.S.'s Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) characterize the maintenance of commercial, cultural, and other relations with the people of Taiwan as intended "to help maintain peace, security, and stability in the Western Pacific" and to promote U.S. foreign policy.<sup>3</sup> While normalization charged ahead between Washington and Beijing, the U.S. paired the move with six assurances to Taiwan, including commitments to not set a termination date for arms sales to Taiwan, not consult with the mainland in advance of arms sales to Taiwan, not mediate between Taipei and Beijing, and neither revise its position on Taiwan's sovereignty nor pressure Taiwan to negotiate with the mainland.<sup>4</sup>

More than forty years later, ties remain coordinated through the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in the United States and the American Institute in Taiwan, which operate as *de facto* embassies. The existing U.S.-Taiwan relationship is traditionally viewed through a security-dominant lens, consistent with Washington's commitment to Taiwan's defense. Prior to 1979, a Cold War treaty largely governed the United States and Taiwan's defense relationship.<sup>5</sup> And yet, in addition to reaffirming the U.S.'s "One China" policy, the Trump administration has also adjusted its approach, shining a more public light on links between Taipei and Washington than its predecessors. Concurrently, mainland China continues to double down on "national rejuvenation," a goal that China's Xi Jinping repeats with not-so-subtle nods to reunification with Taiwan.

This essay will review the context of U.S.-Taiwan relations and steps undertaken by the Trump administration and the U.S. Congress to diversify these ties. It will also highlight the ways in which mainland China looms large, often factoring prominently in the calculus of both Taipei and Washington. It will conclude with several recommendations, highlighting opportunities and challenges for the road ahead.

## Impact on Taiwan

U.S.-Taiwan relations are significant at two distinct levels of analysis for the island. First, striking a delicate balance between Washington, Taipei, and Beijing can generate immediate consequences for the island's security and its defense policy. Second, the dynamics and scope of the two-way relationship are equally symbolic for the conduct of Taiwan's relations with other state actors around the world. The U.S.'s relationship with Taiwan helps shape the island's relations with other like-minded and Western states. This is especially true when Washington engages in coalition building with peers to advocate for exchanges with the island and Taiwan observer status in multilateral organizations. However, the souring of cross-Strait ties has made Taiwan's external ties far more difficult for countries with which China holds outsized influence. This latter point is especially true in light of the developments of the past several years, as Beijing and Taipei are in competition for diplomatic partners.

Despite an informal "diplomatic truce" struck between leaders in Beijing and Taipei under the Ma Ying-jeou administration, the 2016 election of Tsai Ing-wen ushered in a far more contentious dynamic. Since Xi's rise to power and Tsai's first election, seven countries have cut ties with Taipei and switched allegiances to Beijing.<sup>6</sup> Today, only fifteen partners maintain diplomatic ties with Taiwan, mostly small, developing states in Latin America, the Caribbean, and the South Pacific.<sup>7</sup> As Beijing seeks to lure away Taipei's remaining partners, it has also exerted pressure within broader multilateral global governance institutions to exclude the island from participation.<sup>8</sup> For example, although Taiwan seeks "meaningful participation" in organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO), its participation with observer status from 2009 to 2016 was contingent on cross-Strait rapprochement under Ma Ying-jeou.

The mainland's economic transformation has seen the country ascend from an underdeveloped, planned economy to the world's second largest. Along with newfound economic resources, Beijing has embarked on sweeping military modernization, intended to leverage its stronger capabilities to intimidate and dissuade Taiwan's leaders from pushing the bounds of their autonomy. These tactics include sending bombers, fighters, or surveillance aircraft to patrol over and near Taiwan and complex amphibious landing and naval exercises. Less overt pressure

has come in the form of influence campaigns designed to sway Taiwanese public opinion.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Beijing's tough response in the face of Hong Kong's mass protest movement and the introduction of national security legislation indirectly paint an ominous future for what "one country, two systems" can mean in practice.<sup>10</sup>

And yet, Taiwan's push for closer ties to the United States is driven not only by insecurities fueled by Beijing's blustery rhetoric but also by economic and domestic political factors. In the more than four decades since the United States severed its ties with the island in favor of the mainland, power dynamics across the Taiwan Strait have shifted. While the island witnessed sizeable economic growth rates from the 1960s to 1990s, its economic weight has steadily shrunk as the mainland's own development has taken off. Still, after the mainland implemented reform and opening up in the late 1970s, Taiwanese investment played an integral role in kickstarting the market forces in the mainland economy.

Mainland economic liberalization may have cultivated more cross-Strait exchanges and temporarily dampened tensions, but they have come at a cost. In recent years, Taiwan's economic growth has markedly slowed, dropping to 0.81 percent in 2015 and notching up to 2.63 percent in 2018, due in some part to China's own abating growth.<sup>11</sup> Still, even as the island's macro indicators may tell a story of an adapting economy, there are signs of internal domestic issues, such as financial insecurity and inequality, that disproportionately affect Taiwan's younger generations. For example, although overall unemployment dropped to 3.7 percent in 2018, an 18-year low, youth unemployment was significantly higher at nearly 12 percent in the same year.<sup>12</sup>

The combination of the economic fallout from the coronavirus pandemic has raised questions about the existing supply chains, heightening concerns about overreliance on a single trade partner. This concern resonates acutely in Taiwan, where the bulk of its economic activity stems from international trade, with nearly a quarter of its trade activity with the mainland, seconded by the United States, which accounted for just shy of 12 percent of the island's total trade.<sup>13</sup> (Japan, the European Union, and Hong Kong rank third, fourth, and fifth as the island's top trading partners, respectively.) Deepened cross-Strait economic linkages on their own may run the risk of being used as leverage over the island. For example, the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA), a preferential trade deal struck between Beijing and Taipei in 2010 to reduce tariffs and commercial barriers for ten years, had provisions for a further expansion of ties to Beijing. However, domestic concerns among young Taiwanese and speculation that Beijing could unilaterally scrap the framework have fueled skepticism of ECFA's promise.<sup>14</sup> In a bid to diversify supply chains and develop other economic partnerships, Taiwan's New Southbound Policy has sought to foster deeper ties with more than a dozen countries in South and Southeast Asia and Oceania.<sup>15</sup>

Separately, a distinctly Taiwanese identity is increasingly shared by younger generations, further shaping the island's political environment and its preferences for interactions with external actors. This sentiment has grown stronger the longer Taiwan self-governs in accordance with democratic values and as China increases its threats vis-à-vis Taiwan. Sentiments of distinctly Taiwanese identity peaked in 2020 at 67 percent, up from 45 percent twelve years earlier, according to a survey conducted by National Chengchi University.<sup>16</sup>

A growing sense of skepticism and distrust of Beijing has also correlated with positive attitudes toward the United States in Taiwan and support of closer economic and political ties between the island and Washington compared to boosting cross-Strait ties. This trend is especially acute among the island's 18–29-year-olds, among whom more than 80 percent support closer ties with the U.S. over the mainland.<sup>17</sup> This combination of public positions, along with the souring of cross-Strait dynamics, has pushed Taipei to capitalize on opportunities within its existing relationships. As structural and domestic factors reinvigorate Taiwan's approach to its external affairs, U.S. policy toward Taiwan since 2016 has steadily adjusted in kind.

## The Evolution of U.S. Policy Toward Taiwan Under Trump

Although U.S.-Taiwan relations have typically been sustained in a more behind-closed-doors fashion, in part to shield against retaliatory actions from mainland China, Trump taking office shook traditional U.S. foreign policy. Ahead of his inauguration, then president-elect Trump accepted a call from Tsai Ing-wen, marking the first such high-level contact since 1979. Under his administration, the U.S.'s Taiwan policy has evolved along three broad tracks: the island's security, diplomatic exchanges, and economic ties.

### *Prioritizing Security*

Arms sales experienced an uptick. While the initial packages were on the smaller side and encompassed advanced missiles, torpedoes, and technical support for a radar system, later deals included the sale of F-16 fighters and tanks. The move to provide the fighter jets is the first since 1992, as previous administrations sought to avoid antagonizing Beijing.

Taiwan featured prominently in the Pentagon's 2019 Indo-Pacific Strategy Report as a "reliable, capable, and natural partner." The Department of Defense characterized the defense partnership's objective as to "ensure that Taiwan remains secure, confident, free from coercion, and able to peacefully and productively engage the mainland on its own terms."<sup>18</sup> To that end, the U.S. Navy has upped its passages through the Taiwan Strait and its officers continue to conduct

training programs. In the first half of 2020, U.S. naval vessels transited through the Strait seven times; the U.S. conducted two more Strait passages in August 2020.<sup>19</sup> These transits themselves are not new, but they are more frequent, with five in 2017, three in 2018, and nine in 2019.<sup>20</sup> Separately, U.S. legislators have pushed proposals to assess the feasibility and advisability of the U.S. Navy making port calls to the island, a notion that may yet gain traction after mainland China barred U.S. military port calls to Hong Kong in late 2019.<sup>21</sup> No such stops have been made to date in Taiwan in an official military capacity, but in the fall of 2018 a U.S. naval research vessel docked in Kaohsiung.<sup>22</sup>

The U.S.'s ties to the island appear to be expanding beyond traditional concepts of material security, as well as beyond the realm of the executive branch. The TAIPEI Act of 2019 (Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative Act) became law this spring, and aims to strengthen Taiwan's relationships and partnerships around the world, including with other countries and as a participant in international organizations.<sup>23</sup> The bill also requires an annual report to Congress from the State Department on its steps to achieve this goal. While Beijing condemned the legislation, it had a warm reception in Taipei, with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs saying that the act "paves the way for expanded bilateral exchanges while preserving the country's international space in the face of authoritarian China's campaign of coercion."<sup>24</sup> This U.S. legislative move emphasizes that the U.S. commitment to the island's defense lies not only in the means to defend itself but also in securing political space for Taipei to withstand Beijing's ramped up pressure.

### **Amplifying Exchanges**

The Trump administration also oversaw the opening of a new \$256 million complex in Taipei to house the U.S.'s *de facto* embassy.<sup>25</sup> While the new site brings greater visibility to the U.S.'s diplomatic presence on the island, it is the exchanges and visits between each party that instill an inherent sense of reciprocated legitimacy. Diplomatic exchanges, whether bilateral or within multilateral contexts, are invaluable for the transfer and construction of knowledge about actors and shared challenges they may face. Whether wittingly or not, the Trump administration has seen an uptick in U.S.-Taiwan exchanges, likely influenced in part by the souring of U.S.-China ties. The Taiwan Travel Act, signed into law in 2018, paved a legal path to expand exchanges between U.S. and Taiwan officials at all levels.<sup>26</sup> The same year, a number of Congressional delegations traveled to Taiwan, with meetings with President Tsai Ing-wen.

Legislative representatives are not the only ones to take advantage of the new law. U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar led a delegation to Taiwan in August 2020, making him the first of his position to make the journey,

the first cabinet member to visit the island in six years, and the highest ranking since 1979.<sup>27</sup> Since first taking office in May 2016, President Tsai has made more than a handful of overseas trips, including visits to the U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration's (NASA) Johnson Space Center in Texas in 2018 and stops in Denver, Colorado, and New York City in 2019. Tsai is not alone in making high profile trips to the United States. Lai Ching-te, who was sworn in as Taiwan's vice president in May 2020, traveled to the United States in February. Hsiao Bi-khim, the newly appointed Taiwan envoy to the United States, has more than professional ties to the U.S., with an American mother and having lived in the United States for her high school, undergraduate, and graduate studies. Given her unique background, Hsiao is expected to inject fresh energy into her role.<sup>28</sup> Such diplomatic exchanges provide more regularity and inject a greater degree of mutual trust to ground the relationship.

### ***Reinvigorating Trade and Economics***

Economic exchanges between Taiwan and the United States have shown the most promise in the second half of Trump's first term. "Taiwan's economy now stands at a historical turning point," said Tsai in August 2020 as she eased restrictions on imports of U.S. pork and beef, long seen as a major stumbling block to concluding a U.S.-Taiwan trade agreement.<sup>29</sup> Separately, Taiwan leaders have continued to voice interest in joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), now led by Japan after the Trump administration withdrew the United States from multilateral negotiations.<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile, talks of a bilateral trade agreement between Taipei and Washington have long surfaced in policy circles. More than 150 members of Congress signed a letter to U.S. Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer pushing for a bilateral trade agreement on the grounds that Taiwan is a like-minded and loyal partner and that a deal would expand markets for U.S. goods and set a high bar and standards for future agreements.<sup>31</sup> From Taiwan's perspective, a trade deal would reap economic rewards as well as carry broader strategic implications. For example, Tsai has argued that such a deal would not only strengthen overall U.S.-Taiwan engagement, but would also forge a "precedent for a rules-based trade order in the Indo-Pacific region."<sup>32</sup>

Other moves have also progressed the two-way economic ties. The Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company, the world's largest contracted manufacturer of silicon chips, announced plans to build a \$12 billion chip factory in Phoenix, Arizona in May.<sup>33</sup> U.S. firms have reciprocated investments, such as Apple and Google increasing operations in Taiwan. Officials in the U.S. and Taiwan are also set to launch a new annual economic and commercial dialogue to address an array of topics from 5G to supply chain restructuring.<sup>34</sup>

### **Symbolism or Substance?**

And yet, policy developments under Trump have not always had their intended effect. The publicity surrounding the passage of U.S. vessels through the Taiwan Strait and U.S. arms sales to the island may well have pushed Beijing to respond with shows of force in kind, including its conduct of live-fire amphibious military exercises. As such, policies designed to bolster security can unintentionally fan the flames of cross-Strait tensions with the potential to stoke an arms race. Some analysts have also raised concerns about whether some of the U.S. arms sales are best suited for Taiwan's defense. Furthermore, as the Brookings Institution's Richard Bush has noted, some of the policies vis-à-vis the island have diverged in their objectives, to some extent because of problems stemming from the Trump administration's policy formulation and implementation process.<sup>35</sup>

Insight into President Trump's calculus from former national security officials have added to concerns about the authenticity of the U.S. turn to Taiwan. First, Trump appears to prefer a transactional approach to foreign policy. Second, he has cast doubt on whether the U.S. would come to the aid of any of its allies and partners when under threat, undermining the reliability of U.S. commitments. While the United States is not treaty-bound to Taiwan's defense — though committed to selling arms for its defense — Trump's position vis-à-vis allies raises concerns about whether U.S. commitments to its unofficial partners stand on even shakier ground. Finally, Trump has allegedly questioned the utility and logic of U.S. security policy in Asia. In Bob Woodward's book *Fear: Trump in the White House*, Trump is said to have asked his national security team "what do we get from protecting Taiwan?"<sup>36</sup> Such revelations may undercut short-term, as well as long-term, efforts made in good faith to solidify U.S.-Taiwan relations.

Scholars and analysts alike also caution against narrowly approaching the U.S.-Taiwan relationship in a prism of Sino-U.S. relations. As Davidson College's Shelley Rigger told the *New York Times*, "There's a certain sense of conflation or confusion of what it means to be helpful to or supportive of or affirming Taiwan versus taking a position that is more challenging to the P.R.C."<sup>37</sup> Trump's Taiwan policies have garnered mixed results at least in part because the administration has not been able to fully disaggregate how to build ties with Taiwan from the motivation to irritate China.

### **Recommendations**

There are no policy choices without consequences when it comes to United States and Taiwan. The specter of Beijing's hostility has been, and remains, very real. Regardless of the outcome of the 2020 election, U.S. officials should approach Washington's relationship with Taipei on its own grounds, and not merely as a

residual component to the complexity of Sino-U.S. relations. The following are suggested measures to develop balanced, multifaceted ties.

- ***Boost advocacy for Taiwan's participation in international fora:*** The fallout of the coronavirus highlighted obstacles that Taiwan's exclusion can pose for orchestrating a coordinated response to a global challenge, be it public health or otherwise. In spite of the apparent dominance of sovereign equality within the international system's global governance institutions, statehood is not universally mandated for participation. The United States should advocate more proactively for international organizations and its other partners to engage with Taiwan. The United States should continue to build coalitions pushing for Taiwan to participate as observers in institutions, even if these efforts do not succeed. Such coalition building will also require the U.S. to revitalize its disposition toward multilateralism.
- ***Expand exchanges:*** U.S. and Taiwan officials should continue routine visits with relevant counterparts. Moreover, the U.S. should also build off the success of the Global Cooperation and Training Framework programs, a platform co-hosted by the United States for Taiwan to share its expertise in areas such as public health, law enforcement, disaster relief, energy cooperation, women's empowerment, digital economy and cyber security, and media literacy, among others.<sup>38</sup> Joint partnership in sharing expertise elevates the contributions Taiwan has to offer the international community.
- ***Commit to negotiating a trade agreement:*** The United States and Taiwan both stand to gain from a trade agreement, not only in growing their trade volume but in a bid to reduce vulnerabilities in existing global supply chains that could be subject to political consequences under pressure from Beijing.
- ***Encourage the improvement of cross-Strait dialogue:*** The comprehensive deterioration of U.S.-China relations, framed purely as competition that precludes the possibility of cooperation, undermines the ability for effective communication to minimize misperceptions. For a more robust relationship between Washington and Taipei, the regression of U.S.-China relations must first abate. Although there are fears in Taipei that too close of a relationship between Beijing and Washington may damage the island's interests, the current declining state of U.S.-China dynamics ensures that any outreach with the island is viewed by Beijing as a move to spite them. Washington and Beijing need not be on rosy terms for U.S.-Taiwan policy to develop, yet increased risk of conflict with China risks foiling any



progress. Second, U.S. officials should actively support the restoration of dialogue and communication channels across the Taiwan Strait. Although U.S. officials may not be well poised to promote such dialogue, track-2 engagement through nongovernmental channels may provide viable alternative avenues for communication.

- ***Sustain defense cooperation:*** The U.S. and Taiwan should engage in a full range of security cooperation, from training to arms sales. Although some argue that Washington should revise its position of strategic ambiguity and explicitly state that the U.S. would respond to the mainland's use of any force against Taiwan, caution is warranted. Military tensions in the Taiwan Strait run high and the potential for a combustible misunderstanding should prompt U.S. officials to be shrewd and selective when weighing a high-profile or more private track. Overly public defense cooperation between the United States and Taiwan can be a double-edged sword, benefiting the island in an immediate sense, while also worsening cross-Strait relations and exacerbating military tensions. Sustained defense cooperation will be best served to bring security to the Taiwan Strait when coordinated with little fanfare.

The Trump administration's steps have thus far muddied the line between substance and symbolism. For the United States to build out its partnership with Taiwan, policymakers would be well served to shed the misconception that better ties with Taiwan come exclusively at the expense of those between the U.S. and the mainland or that they are an instrument to be manipulated as part of a strategy vis-à-vis China. Stability in the region can be enhanced with careful and principled management of U.S. relations with parties on both sides of the Taiwan Strait.

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## ENDNOTES

1. For more on the “One China” policy, see Bonnie Glaser and Michael J. Green, “What Is the U.S. ‘One China’ Policy, and Why Does it Matter?” CSIS, 13 January 2017, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/what-us-one-china-policy-and-why-does-it-matter>.
2. The Three Communiqués that set the stage for the normalization of relations between the United States and the People’s Republic of China include the Shanghai Communiqué of 1972, the Joint Communiqué of 1979, and the Joint Communiqué on Arms Sales to Taiwan in 1982. The Six Assurances provided clarity for continuity of U.S. support for Taiwan despite cutting formal ties.
3. American Institute in Taiwan, “Taiwan Relations Act,” 1 January 1979, Public Law 96-8, 22 U.S.C. 3301 et seq., <https://www.ait.org.tw/our-relationship/policy-history/key-u-s-foreign-policy-documents-region/taiwan-relations-act/>; Nike Ching, “US Adjusts Taiwan Policy, Declassifies Cables,” *Voice of America*, 1 September 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/voa-news-china/us-adjusts-taiwan-policy-declassifies-cables>.
4. See the text of the Six Assurances at: Taiwan Documents Portal, <http://www.taiwandocuments.org/assurances.htm>.
5. Negotiations over the Sino-American Mutual Defense Treaty between the U.S. and the island of Taiwan were concluded in tandem with other similar treaties in East Asia. The Mutual Defense Treaty Between the United States and the Republic of Korea came into force in 1954 and the treaty between the United States and Japan in 1960.
6. Eleanor Albert, “PRC v. ROC: The Diplomatic Standoff,” *The Diplomat*, October 2019, <https://magazine.thediplomat.com/#/issues/Lpi2ngM1aiuo0oFRLdv>.
7. Taiwan maintains formal diplomatic relations with Belize, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Paraguay, Nicaragua, St. Kitts & Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent & the Grenadines, the Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, Tuvalu, Eswatini (Swaziland), and the Holy See.
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## When the Wind Blows: How the COVID-19 Pandemic Could Reshape Taiwan's Cross-Strait Posture

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EMILY S. CHEN

### Background

Over the past three years, cross-Strait relations have been marred by growing mistrust and tensions. From Taipei's perspective, Beijing, driven by its refusal to "relinquish its desire to dominate Taiwan," is to blame for the turbulence across the Taiwan Strait.<sup>1</sup> For Taipei, Beijing's attempt to meddle in Taiwan's internal affairs through disinformation and influence operations have undermined Taiwan's democracy and freedom. The People's Liberation Army's frequent military drills and presence around the island pose a threat to Taiwan's security and cause anxiety in the region. Beijing's poaching of seven diplomatic allies and blocking of Taipei's meaningful participation in international organizations were nothing but a provocation. Facing Beijing's pressure from all sides, Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen considers her posture toward Beijing "rather mild" and "reasonable."<sup>2</sup> Despite her refusal to "bow to pressure" from Beijing,<sup>3</sup> Tsai has adopted a policy of "non-provocation" and "maintaining the status quo," hoping to engage with Beijing based on the four principles of "peace, parity, democracy, and dialogue."<sup>4</sup> Moving into her second term as president, Tsai has realized that no matter how moderate or consistent her posture towards Beijing may be intended, the pressure from Beijing will only intensify.<sup>5</sup> For Tsai, whether and how Taiwan can look beyond China to develop itself and break out of its restricted international space continue to be urgent issues in need of solutions.

While Taipei struggles with its constrained international space, a wind has begun to stir in its favor: a growing group of liberal democracies has taken a stance against Beijing's internal policies and attempts at expanding its international sphere of influence. From the United States to the European Union (E.U.), and from Japan to India to Australia, there is growing alarm and condemnation of China for, among other things, allegedly conducting espionage and influence operations overseas, tightening its grip on Hong Kong's freedom, oppressing the Uighur Muslim minority, and increasing its military activities in the South and the East China Seas and along the Indian border. According to a Pew Research Center survey published in December 2019, a negative view of China predominates in Western democracies and most of China's neighbors in the Asia Pacific.<sup>6</sup>

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 global health crisis, the winds against China have not abated. Within months, criticisms emerged from liberal

democracies over Beijing's handling of the initial outbreak and subsequent coronavirus spread. A July Pew Research Center survey showed that 78 percent of Americans place "a great deal or a fair amount" of the blame for the pandemic on Beijing's early handling of the virus outbreak in Wuhan.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, opinion polls conducted in the United Kingdom and Germany also found that most people believe that China is responsible for the spread of the coronavirus.<sup>8</sup> China is also under fire for its efforts to control the global narrative and restore its reputation by reportedly spreading disinformation and by sending aid packages worldwide under the banner of the "Health Silk Road" (健康絲綢之路).<sup>9</sup> In a statement in March, E.U. High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell warned that China's recent move is a "struggle for influence through spinning and the 'politics of generosity.'"<sup>10</sup> By sending massive medical and food aid worldwide, China is "aggressively pushing the message that, unlike the U.S., it is a responsible and reliable partner."<sup>11</sup> To counter China's global ambitions, U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo in July called for the free world to form "a new alliance of democracies" to confront China's "new tyranny."<sup>12</sup>

Today, as the pandemic continues to grow — and so too the winds against China — it may open up breathing space for Taiwan in the international community. In fact, when the wind has blown in its favor, Taipei appears to have ridden along. As Taiwan's Vice President Chen Chien-jen said in an April interview with *The New York Times*, "[this pandemic] is a good opportunity to let people know that Taiwan is a good global citizen. [...] And we are doing that now."<sup>13</sup> What has Taipei attempted to do to make the most of this favorable political environment to advance its international standing vis-à-vis China? How has Beijing responded? Could the current Western wind against China successfully shake the foundation of the wall that Beijing has built to deny Taipei access to international space and recognition? Moving forward, if the U.S.-led confrontation with China becomes a new normal, would Taipei be willing to shift its current stance of "non-provocation" toward Beijing as a display of solidarity from a faithful partner?

## **Current Approach: How Taipei Is Gaining Capital from the Pandemic**

### ***An Opportunity to Expand Its International Space***

As early as January 22, when Tsai convened the first high-level national security meeting on disease prevention, she presented an international angle to Taiwan's reaction to the novel coronavirus outbreak. In a statement following the meeting, Tsai said that Taiwan, as "a responsible member of the international community," should proactively engage with the World Health Organization (WHO) and

other international bodies to “assist with joint disease control efforts.”<sup>14</sup> Over the subsequent months, an emphasis on global outreach became a recurring theme in Taiwan’s response to the pandemic. It is not unusual for any country to call for international cooperation amidst a global health emergency. But for Taipei, such an appeal entails more than a goal to contain and mitigate the pandemic: it is a golden opportunity for Taiwan to expand its limited international space.

There are three characteristics in Taipei’s maneuver to seek broader international space amidst the pandemic. First, Taipei is raising the stakes in a new pandemic-struck international community by highlighting the mutual risks of excluding Taiwan in international organizations for both itself and other countries. While pleading with the idea of “mutual risks” is nothing new in Taipei’s pursuit of broader international space in the field of humanitarian assistance/disaster relief, the global health emergency has made Taipei’s appeal today seem more urgent and persuasive. On one hand, Taipei emphasizes the humanitarian benefit Taiwan would gain from inclusion in the WHO’s public health network. According to Taipei, without the opportunity to participate in the WHO, Taiwan’s population has been denied the right to health and has become a “global health orphan.”<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, Taipei also points out that the international community cannot afford to exclude Taiwan in efforts to combat the global pandemic. In Taipei’s view, rejecting Taiwan’s comprehensive participation in the WHO not only creates “a potential gap in the global public health and disease prevention network” but also weakens Taiwan’s potential contribution.<sup>16</sup> For the WHO itself, excluding Taiwan’s participation is also a betrayal of its own mission, expressed in its motto as “health for all” and “leaving no one behind.”<sup>17</sup>

Second, to expand its international recognition, Taiwan is painting itself as an altruistic, responsible member of the international community in this time of crisis. Throughout the pandemic, Tsai’s message to the world is that despite being “unfairly excluded from the WHO,”<sup>18</sup> Taiwan nevertheless has the will, the capacity, and the duty to work with the international community to combat the pandemic and “cannot stand by while countries are in dire need of assistance.”<sup>19</sup> Under the campaign of “Taiwan Can Help,” Taipei has promised to donate medical, pharmaceutical, and technological supplies to affected countries and share Taiwan’s experience in combating the pandemic. With the successful delivery of aid packages to more than 80 countries, as well as ongoing collaboration with other countries in the development of vaccines, rapid diagnostic tests, and antivirals, the slogan of “Taiwan Can Help” has been joined by the proud banner of “Taiwan Is Helping” to reflect Taipei’s achievement.<sup>20</sup>

Third, to garner support from like-minded countries, Taipei is presenting itself as an alternative, law-based democratic model to the Chinese model of authoritarian centralized control in combating COVID-19. On many occasions,

Taipei has touted that “transparency” is a “critical element of the Taiwan Model,” which “can only happen in a democratic society where the government is held accountable and must respond to people’s demands.”<sup>21</sup> To draw a contrast with the Chinese model, Taipei often criticizes Beijing’s response to COVID-19. In his March interview with the Hugh Hewitt Show, Taiwan’s Foreign Minister Joseph Wu condemned China’s “authoritarian” measures as “in gross violation of human rights” and expressed that democracies can find a “more humane” way of managing the situation.<sup>22</sup> In another statement in April, Wu attacked Beijing’s lack of transparency and honesty during the pandemic, saying that the Chinese political system is “institutionally incapable of telling the truth” as opposed to the democratic government in Taiwan, which “cannot afford to conceal or to lie.”<sup>23</sup> So far, Taipei seems to have scored a bull’s eye, winning the support of like-minded countries with its emphasis on the democratic features of its approach to combating the coronavirus. While they have heaped criticisms on Beijing’s handling of the virus and its pandemic diplomacy, Western liberal democracies have applauded democratic Taiwan’s virus response and welcomed its aid campaign. In his August visit to Taiwan, U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar, the most senior U.S. official to visit Taiwan in four decades, attributed Taiwan’s success in containing the coronavirus to the model of “democracy and transparency,” which “stands in stark contrast to the country where the virus began.”<sup>24</sup>

### ***A Convenient Ride for Gaining Leverage over China?***

Besides offering a golden opportunity for Taipei to broaden its restricted international space, the global health crisis can also provide convenient circumstances for Taipei to gain leverage over Beijing. Indeed, there are signs that Taipei is building on the budding global skepticism of China’s ambitions to stoke “the world against China” fervor amidst the pandemic. For one, Taipei is painting Beijing as an opportunist which prioritizes its political agenda over global public health. In Foreign Minister Wu’s words, when “everybody is getting very busy in dealing with the pandemic,” Beijing is taking advantage of the situation to “expand” and “take actions in many places around the world,” including Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the South and the East China Seas.<sup>25</sup> Beijing’s obstruction of Taiwan’s participation in the WHO is also placing politics above the right to health of Taiwan’s population. For another, Taipei is trying to cultivate sympathy from other countries that are newly smarting from the effects of China’s expansionist ambitions. Commenting on Beijing’s use of large-scale disinformation campaigns to undermine the reputation of the United States and improve its own, Wu presumed that the United States now must feel “a small dose of what we have encountered in Taiwan for some time.”<sup>26</sup>



While Taipei appears to have jumped at the chance to gain the upper hand over Beijing, there is still reason to believe that Taipei intends to maintain a non-provocative stance. When the disease broke out in Taiwan in January, Taipei joined many countries in calling the novel coronavirus the “Wuhan coronavirus” (武漢肺炎) to indicate the Chinese city from which the virus allegedly originated. Unsurprisingly, Beijing was not pleased about the moniker, because it could stigmatize people living in that city, bring discrimination against Chinese people, and harm China’s reputation. With the WHO’s declaration in February of an official name for the disease — COVID-19 — Taipei has gradually adjusted its official vocabulary to reflect that change, thereby avoiding provoking Beijing. Between March and May, references to the virus in official remarks by the Taiwan president and vice president to foreign audiences were replaced with “COVID-19” in the English version but remained “Wuhan virus” in the Chinese version. However, since President Tsai’s speech at the Copenhagen Democracy Summit on June 19, references to the virus as COVID-19 in official remarks to foreign audiences seem to have become a standard practice in the Office of the President of Taiwan.<sup>27</sup> In addition to the adjustment to the virus name, evidence has also suggested that intentional or not, Taipei is not making a concerted effort to criticize Beijing even when the current political climate offers Taipei the potential to do so. This can be seen in Taipei’s absence of a coordinated attempt across government agencies to find fault with China during the pandemic. For instance, while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ (MOFA) statements have tended to be more assertive towards China, those from the President’s Office appear to be more restrained. From January to July, almost every public statement targeted at foreign audiences by Foreign Minister Wu contains criticisms of Beijing — or simply references to China — whereas remarks with similar features targeted at foreign audiences by Tsai only account for less than one-third of the total number of remarks.<sup>28</sup>

## The Inevitable Challenge

To no one’s surprise, Beijing cannot sit back and watch Taipei attempt to make the most out of the current political environment. The pandemic is creating more friction in an already soured cross-Strait relationship. Both Taipei and Beijing accuse each other of taking advantage of the pandemic for political gain. While Taipei has criticized Beijing for expanding its global ambitions despite the pandemic, Beijing has attacked Taipei for “exploiting the pandemic to seek independence” (以疫謀獨). At the core of Beijing’s frustration is Taipei’s furious campaign to seek inclusion in the WHO system and network. Beijing has continued to insist on a long-held “one China principle” to deal with Taiwan’s international participation — that there is but one China, of which Taiwan is a part, under the sole legal government of the People’s Republic of China. Under this principle, Taiwan has no right to

diplomatic representation in international organizations whose membership requires widespread international recognition. Indeed, Beijing refutes Taipei's claim of being a "gap in the global disease prevention network" (國際防疫缺口) due to China's blocking of its comprehensive participation in the WHO by asserting that it has constantly kept Taipei updated about the latest pandemic information and had even arranged for an expert team from Taiwan to go to Wuhan in January for an on-site investigation.<sup>29</sup> By intentionally downplaying Beijing's goodwill gestures, Beijing argues, Taipei is "deceiving the public" (欺騙輿論), "maneuvering public opinion" (愚弄民心), and "seeking pity" (打悲情牌) from the international community to achieve its political aims.<sup>30</sup>

Still, countries have become increasingly vocal these days in support of Taiwan's appeal for WHO participation. In particular, seeing Taiwan's success in combating the disease on the home front,<sup>31</sup> like-minded democratic countries — such as the United States, Canada, Japan, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Australia, and New Zealand — have strongly called for the WHO to allow Taiwan to participate in the global health system. But could the rising international support help Taiwan obtain a role in the WHO's decision-making body, the World Health Assembly (WHA), and eventually gain admission to the WHO? So far, the current level of international backing of Taiwan does little to pressure the WHO to grant Taiwan a place in its international forum. This is evident in Taiwan's failed attempt to join the WHA meetings as an observer in May. Within the WHO, two opposing forces were at play, the growing international campaign that called for restoring Taiwan's status as an observer at the WHA and China's stronger diplomatic counterattack that urged the WHO not to address the "so-called Taiwan's participation issue" at all to "prevent the Assembly from being disrupted."<sup>32</sup> To Beijing, the crux of Taiwan's inability to participate in the WHO system and network lies in Taipei's "pushing for independence."<sup>33</sup> To Beijing, without gaining its trust first, Taipei cannot induce Beijing to accommodate its international aspirations— and Taipei knows it. One month before the WHA meetings in May, Bob Chen (陳龍錦), MOFA's Director-General of the Department of International Organizations, considered the possibility for Taiwan's participation in the meetings to be "minimal."<sup>34</sup>

Despite the failure to attend the WHA meetings in May, Taipei does not deny the value of growing international recognition and friendliness in Taipei's "professional, pragmatic, and constructive approach" in promoting its WHO bid. Attributing the failed attempt in May to the shortened meeting agenda, MOFA reaffirmed that it would continue to gather international support to jointly call on the WHO to allow Taipei to participate in subsequent WHA meetings as an observer.<sup>35</sup> In addition to the specific support for Taiwan's WHA bid, a significant level of international backing may have a practical function in Taiwan's WHO

participation. For example, having encountered difficulty accessing WHO technical, working-level meetings over the years, Taipei thanked “the strong and active advocacy” from like-minded countries and diplomatic allies for the recent reach-out by the WHO to exchange information about COVID-19 via teleconferencing.<sup>36</sup>

### ***Parsing Taipei’s Policy Options***

With these Western winds blowing against China’s ambitions, Taipei appears to have ridden along, gaining political leverage over Beijing and expanding its international space. What is the next phase of cross-Straits relations? Facing Beijing’s persistent pressure, should Taipei continue to resist Beijing by relying on the current political climate, or engage it to improve the embittered relationship and gain more significant international space?

Today, with the increased tension between the West and China, a comprehensive engagement policy with China seems to have dropped off the table. Certainly, Taipei would not wish to stand directly against the United States if the ongoing U.S.-China confrontation were to become the new normal. Taipei is also coming out of the pandemic more assured of itself on the international stage. Signs have shown that a “Taiwan pride” is starting to take shape. As Vice President Chen said in an interview with France 24 in May, “Everybody knows that this time, Taiwan has done a very good job of containing COVID-19.”<sup>37</sup> A similar message was conveyed by President Tsai in the same month when she proudly stated that “the whole world is well aware of Taiwan’s performance in the fight against COVID-19.”<sup>38</sup> People in Taiwan also share the sense of “Taiwan pride” with the government. A survey by the Taiwanese Public Opinion Foundation released in May found that about 78 percent of people surveyed in Taiwan agreed with the statement, “I am honored and proud to be Taiwanese, not Chinese” (我以身為台灣人，不是中國人，而感到光榮和驕傲).<sup>39</sup> Even the opposition party Kuomintang (KMT), whose stance on China was once portrayed as pro-engagement, has stepped back from its regular exchanges with China. One recent example is the KMT’s announcement in September that it had cancelled an official delegation representing the political party to attend the 12<sup>th</sup> Cross-Straits Forum this year, considering the cross-Straits atmosphere “unfavorable for bilateral exchange and dialogue.”<sup>40</sup> The KMT’s cancellation decision came after a China Central Television program described the planned visit, which would have been led by Taiwan’s former legislative speaker Wang Jin-pyng (王金平), as a trip to “beg for peace” (求和).<sup>41</sup> Last but not least, Taiwan’s domestic political environment prevents Taipei from fully embracing China. The latest series of polling results published by Taiwan’s Mainland Affairs Council have shown an increase in the percentage of people who see China as “unfriendly” (不友善) towards both the Taiwan government and its people over the past 11 months.<sup>42</sup>

Trying to resist Beijing's pressure by solely relying on the current political environment against China can also be risky. To be fair, as a liberal democracy situated strategically to the east of authoritarian China, Taiwan has every reason to align with countries that share its values and the concerns about the manner of China's rise. However, despite a growing resistance among the liberal democracies against China's ambition, today it is still unclear how much tangible support its democratic partners could offer to help create more breathing space for Taiwan in the international organizations. What is certain is that partnerships with liberal democratic countries will inevitably embolden Beijing and harden its resolve to continue to block Taiwan's access to international space. Recently, some voices have started to question the effectiveness of the current level of support by democratic countries for Taiwan's international participation. In a May interpellation session at the Legislative Yuan with Foreign Minister Wu, KMT's Chairman Johnny Chiang asked why the United States, along with many democratic countries, despite its express support for Taiwan's WHA bid, refused to join Taiwan's diplomatic allies to submit a proposal to the WHO in May for the inclusion of a supplementary agenda item to invite Taiwan to participate in the WHA as an observer.<sup>43</sup> In the context of the ongoing U.S.-China tensions, people in Taiwan have also expressed reservations about taking the side of its traditional ally. In a survey conducted by Taiwan Indicators Survey Research in September, while 61.1 percent of respondents said they feel an affinity (有好感) for the United States, when it comes to the question asking them to choose sides between the United States or China, only 24 percent favor closer ties with the United States. 72.1 percent prefer staying neutral.<sup>44</sup> In this regard, despite the wind against China, Taipei's current stance of "maintaining the status quo" and "non-provocation" vis-à-vis Beijing is expected to continue to earn the support of its people.

## Recommendations

Facing China's resolve to deny Taiwan access to international space and a rising wave of international support whose sustainability and impact remain to be seen, Taiwan — and its desire for broader international participation — will be best served if it can prove its worth in the international community. The COVID-19 pandemic has shone a light on Taiwan's marginalized international presence. While it is not new for Taiwan to seek recognition and presence in the broader international space by emphasizing its practical contributions to the world, the global health crisis has made Taiwan's contribution today more visible and valued. With Taiwan's growing confidence and a favorable international political climate, Taipei should build on its current success by making tangible contributions to the international community. In the second term of Tsai's presidency, potential roles that Taiwan can actively play in the international community include:

- ***Advocate for global healthcare:*** One timely area of contribution that Taiwan can highlight in the immediate post-pandemic world is digital universal healthcare, a vision of achieving universal health coverage with the support of digital tools and technologies. Taiwan’s now 25-year-old national health insurance system, which has been acclaimed for its easy accessibility, low cost, comprehensive medical coverage, and digitalized health information management, has been credited for its role in combating COVID-19. While countries in the post-pandemic recovery can benefit from Taiwan’s digital universal healthcare experience, Taiwan can also reap potential strategic benefits for advancing the cause. Particularly in Africa and in other parts of the developing world, Taiwan’s benevolent image of an international healthcare advocate may stand as a stark contrast to China’s worsening image of what critics call “debt trap diplomacy.”
- ***Advocate for freedom and human rights:*** Over the years, Taiwan has joined the United States and other democratic countries’ attempts to criticize human rights violations and advance freedom worldwide. Taiwan can take more leading roles among other democratic partners to advocate for the cause. For instance, inspired by the inaugural Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom hosted by U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo in July 2018, Taipei hosted the inaugural Regional Religious Freedom Forum in March 2019. The initiative, co-hosted by Taiwan and the United States, was the first of its kind in the Indo-Pacific region and brought together over 200 local and international guests from governments and civil societies.<sup>45</sup> Moving forward, as Taiwan has continued to perform well in U.N.’s Gender Inequality Index and ranked number one in Asia in 2020, Taiwan’s leading role in improving gender equality can also be valuable to international society.<sup>46</sup>
- ***Advocate for global concerns:*** Other areas of contribution that Taiwan can potentially emphasize include causes of global concern and problems that Taiwan struggled with at home but is now leading the world in solving. In 2015, the United States and Taiwan launched the joint Global Cooperation and Training Framework (GCTF) programs to give Taiwan a platform to share its expertise in various fields. In the post-pandemic era, the GCTF programs, which are currently co-administered by the United States, Taiwan, and Japan, can be further developed into a regional and global network and information exchange center. The initiative’s future success is in the number of countries that participate in workshops and the expansion of cohosts. For future GCTF workshops, recycling, among others, can be a valuable topic. Over the past 25 years, Taiwan has transformed from a “garbage island,” with two-thirds of its landfills at full or near full capacity, to one of the world’s leaders in recycling.<sup>47</sup>

As the pandemic has gradually forced the world to transition to a virtual engagement model, Taiwan's future attempts to contribute to the global community can be realized through more accessible and affordable online platforms, thereby reaching more audiences and potential partners. In the Western wind of resistance against Beijing's global ambition, Taipei's attempts to ride along and tout its democratic model of combating COVID-19 have won more democratic partners willing to rally behind its pursuit of broader international space. Taipei's move has nevertheless hardened Beijing's already hardline cross-strait policy. To resist Beijing's increased pressure, strengthening Taipei's cooperation with old and new allies has never been more necessary and urgent. But Taipei will also need to help itself by carrying further its current success gained from the favorable political climate to prove itself as a relevant and indispensable member in the international community.

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28. Here, the remarks targeted at foreign audiences by Foreign Minister Wu are statements listed under the category of “Key Public Statements and Policies” (重要言論及重大外交政策) on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; the remarks targeted at foreign audiences by President Tsai are statements listed under the category of “Steadfast Diplomacy” (外交) in the “Spotlight Issues” (焦點議題) on the website of the Office of the President. One possible explanation behind the contrast between the rhetoric of the President’s Office and MOFA about China may lie in fundamental personality differences between the heads: President Tsai is seen as more cautious compared with Foreign Minister Wu’s outspoken personality.
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## Taiwan's Domestic Policy Response to COVID-19: Balancing Security and Democracy

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PAMELA KENNEDY

As the COVID-19 pandemic has infected nearly 43 million people worldwide and caused over 1.1 million deaths, Taiwan's performance has been recognized internationally for its effectiveness in keeping its case count extremely low: as of October 26, Taiwan has had 550 confirmed cases and only seven deaths, out of a population of 23.78 million people. Taiwan identified COVID-19 as a security threat in January and used this securitization of the disease to accelerate the implementation process of its policy response, including swift travel restrictions, quarantines, and innovative use of technologies. Taiwan's success owes itself to harsh lessons learned from previous epidemics, especially the SARS outbreak in the early 2000s, and to a strong collaboration between government, civil society, and individuals. As the pandemic wears on, Taiwan must maintain a balance between protecting itself from COVID-19 and protecting the rights of its democratic society.

### Background

Taiwan, enjoying a subtropical climate and being highly integrated into the regional and global economies, is no stranger to epidemics. As one large island and several much smaller islands, Taiwan has some natural advantages in fighting infectious disease, such as shutting its water-bounded borders. But most of the time, Taiwan is open to frequent travel for tourism and business, which is a conduit for diseases to travel as well. In 2019, nearly 12 million travelers entered Taiwan, and residents of the island themselves took over 17 million outbound trips.<sup>1</sup> In addition, domestic influenza and dengue fever epidemics occur with regularity. Over the past twenty years, the larger epidemics Taiwan has contended with include outbreaks of SARS (2002-2004, 346 confirmed cases, 73 direct or related deaths<sup>2</sup>), H1N1 (2009-2010, 3,159 cases, 43 deaths<sup>3</sup>), and dengue fever (2015, 43,784 cases, 224 deaths<sup>4</sup>). Of these, SARS and H1N1 were originally imported to Taiwan by travelers from Hong Kong and Guangdong, respectively, while the 2015 dengue fever outbreak was mostly indigenous.

Due to the regular occurrences of infectious disease, Taiwan has developed ready policy responses to the spread of epidemics and pandemics. The SARS outbreak in particular was the main source of Taiwan's lessons learned that led to the establishment of institutions and policies that characterize Taiwan's comprehensive response to COVID-19 today. The government identified SARS as a security threat and took many of the same measures Taiwan is using against

COVID-19, such as quarantines and border control, but missteps in public communication and government policies, sensationalist media coverage, insufficient preparation for the medical system, and a general lack of preparedness in society resulted in an atmosphere of panic as the disease spread rapidly across Taiwan.<sup>5</sup> A face mask shortage ensued, for example, and the public was unaware at first of necessary hygiene measures.<sup>6</sup> The ineptitude of the government response was encapsulated by the Taipei City Government's sudden announcement of a mass quarantine of more than 1,000 staff and patients inside Hoping Hospital, where an outbreak of SARS occurred mere days after Taiwan had declared victory over the disease. The lack of guidance and resources for the hospital's quarantine and the overwhelming number of suspected cases caused panic and fear to spread, giving the impression that the hospital's occupants were being sacrificed to prevent the spread of the disease.<sup>7</sup> The government's policy of quarantining suspected cases — in addition to Hoping Hospital, about 157,000 people were quarantined during SARS — led to the Supreme Court examining the constitutionality of the laws governing quarantine. While the Supreme Court found quarantine constitutional, as long as a maximum time period was specified in law, the fear and distrust of government overreach in the name of infection control solidified after SARS, unsurprising given that Taiwan had ended martial law only 15 years before the start of the epidemic.

Taiwan's response was also hobbled by its institutional structure, which it revised during the epidemic. With a relatively new Centers for Disease Control (CDC, established in 1999) that did not have centralized authority to manage the policy approach, the government accepted and adopted recommendations from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United States' CDC.<sup>8</sup> Crucially, Taiwan struggled to get information and support from the WHO early during the SARS outbreak, which made Taiwan's domestic policy overhaul even more critical.<sup>9</sup> The tools that Taiwan used to ultimately contain and eradicate SARS are familiar parts of the COVID-19 regimen today — securitization of the disease to lay the foundation for swift policy responses, quarantines, public awareness campaigns, and special budgets. To ensure that Taiwan was ready to handle future disease outbreaks, the more robust National Health Command Center, which includes the Central Epidemic Command Center (CECC) and is the central point of contact for all communications between Taiwan's authorities, was established in 2004.<sup>10</sup> The lack of preparedness in the healthcare system, including numerous incidences of in-hospital transmission of SARS, lack of appropriate isolation of SARS patients, and slow identification of cases, was addressed with practice drills, audits, and hospital accreditations for epidemic surge capacity every four years.<sup>11</sup> Above all, the public learned to “voluntarily put on face masks, wash hands properly, and practice social distancing,” as well as assist authorities with contact tracing and other measures.<sup>12</sup>

## Current Policy Approach

The lessons learned from the chaotic SARS response resulted in a relatively smooth and organized campaign against COVID-19. In securitizing the new coronavirus, the government moved quickly to assess the situation in Wuhan, recognize the potential impact on Taiwan, and implement policies to prevent a similar outbreak in Taiwan.

### *Taiwan Identifies COVID-19 as a Security Threat*

In the Copenhagen School framework for the securitization of an issue, securitizing actors who speak with authority in a society frame an issue as an existential threat to a referent object, such as the state, the region, or individual people. This discourse is the foundation for implementing exceptional measures in response to the threat. If the audience of the discourse — civil society and individuals — largely accepts and follows the measures, the issue has been successfully securitized.

Taiwan's response to COVID-19 is a textbook-worthy example of successful securitization of an infectious disease. President Tsai Ing-wen and former Vice President Chen Chien-jen repeatedly discussed the coronavirus as a threat, beginning in a public news release on January 22 of a high-level National Security Council (NSC) meeting on the virus in which Tsai outlined government policies to screen travelers and upcoming communication with citizens.<sup>13</sup> On January 30, after a second NSC meeting on the virus, Tsai and Chen held a briefing with media in which Tsai identified the potential threat to the health of Taiwan's people and its economy, saying, "Our government views preventing the spread of the coronavirus with the same gravity as a battle."<sup>14</sup> After a third NSC meeting on March 12, Tsai announced a relief package of NT\$60 billion (about US\$2 billion) to fund disease prevention and economic stimulus.<sup>15</sup> In another press briefing session on March 19, she acknowledged "that observers are concerned about the legal basis of the emergency measures we are taking to address the pandemic" and cited "the Communicable Disease Control Act as amended in the wake of the SARS epidemic" as the legal basis. Tsai cautioned that her government "will take further action as necessary" depending on how the pandemic progressed, stressing that COVID-19 threatened not only Taiwan but the world and the global economy.<sup>16</sup> Through these high-level NSC meetings and press briefings, Tsai identified COVID-19 as a threat to Taiwan's people and economy, discussed specific policy measures, and explained the rationale for the government's response. This discourse presented COVID-19 as a security issue, not only a medical problem or another flu making the annual rounds.

### **Taiwan's Policy Responses to COVID-19**

The exceptional measures Taiwan took in response to COVID-19 include social and economic policies. The first measures were primarily disease monitoring, with little impact on Taiwan's society. Management of entry to Taiwan began on December 31, with screening of passengers on direct flights from Wuhan and follow-ups to monitor travelers' health, and on January 2 reporting began on suspected cases in Taiwan's healthcare system.<sup>17</sup> The first travel alert for Wuhan, a Level 1 alert, was released on January 7.<sup>18</sup>

The swift escalation of policy responses occurred in mid-January, as the securitization process began: classification of COVID-19 as a "Class 5 Infectious Disease" (January 15), activation of the CECC to coordinate government efforts against the disease (January 20), contact tracing after discovering the first case in Taiwan (January 21), and increase travel alerts for Wuhan to Level 2 (January 20) and Level 3 (January 21).<sup>19</sup> By Tsai's January 30 press briefing, policy measures also included 14-day home quarantine for travelers with history of travel to Hubei Province, the use of technology to monitor and enforce quarantines, government control of facemask supply and demand, CECC guidelines for the public, and preventative economic measures in anticipation of a slowdown in industries impacted by the travel policies, such as tourism.<sup>20</sup> The Special Act for Prevention, Relief and Revitalization Measures for Severe Pneumonia with Novel Pathogens was enacted by presidential order on February 25, with an implementation period of January 15, 2020 to June 30, 2021, to provide a legal basis for further exceptional measures.<sup>21</sup> This action was particularly important given the concerns during SARS about the constitutionality of measures restricting movement; despite this, questions have arisen regarding individuals' right to privacy due to the monitoring technology, discussed below.

Additional policy measures in February and March were adjustments to account for the worsening situation abroad, including prohibiting People's Republic of China nationals from entering Taiwan (February 6), as well as people from Hong Kong and Macau (February 11) and then people from all countries (March 19), and finally a Level 3 travel alert for all countries (March 21).<sup>22</sup> The Legislative Yuan's special budget was enacted February 25, shortly after enhanced testing on inbound travelers (February 17) and an additional two weeks of school closures after the Lunar New Year holiday (through February 25).<sup>23</sup> Social distancing measures (April 1) and plans to develop rapid diagnosis test kits (April announcement ahead of anticipated July production) followed.<sup>24</sup>

The implementation of the exceptional measures required coordination and cooperation between the central government, local governments, civil society, and individuals in Taiwan. The Executive Yuan held liaison meetings with local

disease control officials, for example, to get buy-in for the government's policies.<sup>25</sup> Multiple methods of communication were used to disseminate information on both the disease and the government's response to the public, including through the media and social media platforms. Officials and experts gave interviews on the policy measures in various media — including English-language media, which was aimed at informing the outside world about Taiwan's efforts — and emphasized the importance of broad cooperation to effectively control the outbreak in Taiwan.<sup>26</sup> Notably, in comparison to the frenzy of misinformation that spread during the SARS outbreak, messages to the public from the government provided updates on the production and rationing of facemasks, to prevent panic-buying and subsequent shortages. Efforts to combat misinformation and disinformation on COVID-19 have come from both the central government as well as civil society.<sup>27</sup> The government also addressed an area of concern from the SARS quarantines, passing an order on March 10 that entitled anyone who takes leave from work to stay in quarantine or care for family members in quarantine to a daily compensation of NT\$1,000 (about US\$34).<sup>28</sup> The frequent communication and quick response to mitigate concerns about restrictions on individual rights seem to have helped to cultivate trust in the government's approach to the pandemic.

The government has paired repeated requests for the public's cooperation with fines and possible prison sentences for price gouging of necessary supplies, breaking quarantine, or spreading misinformation. News reports show fines have been imposed on people who have left quarantine early, as high as NT\$1 million (about US\$33,000), and one man was detained for refusing to pay the fine.<sup>29</sup> Enabling the enforcement of quarantine is the use of personal cell phone surveillance to allow the police to track the whereabouts of people in quarantine and respond quickly if a person does not reply to daily check-ins or appears to have left quarantine.<sup>30</sup> The rate of violations of quarantine is low, at about 0.33 percent of nearly 270,000 people placed in quarantine.<sup>31</sup> It appears from this that the fines, close monitoring, compensatory measures, and transparent communication from the government have helped to gain public cooperation.

The important question, of course, is whether the public is cooperating with the government's policy approach through being convinced that the approach is correct and proportional to the threat, or whether individuals simply balk at paying a hefty fine or being detained for breaking quarantine. Surveys taken over the course of the pandemic indicate that the majority of the public agrees with the government's policies and considers them an appropriate response to the pandemic.<sup>32</sup> The Democracy Perception Index 2020, surveyed between April 20 and June 3, found that while 87 percent of Taiwanese thought the government was responding well, 28 percent also thought that the government had "done too much to limit people's freedoms" during the pandemic.<sup>33</sup> While the majority of the public still supported

the exceptional measures in June, and the low level of cases shows that most people in Taiwan have been complying with the policies to reduce the spread of COVID-19, the decline in support reflected the increasing uncertainty about the necessity of the full array of policies as the pandemic wore on.

## Impact on Taiwan

While the pandemic is still in progress, and future COVID-19 outbreaks are certainly possible, so far Taiwan's policy approach has been effective. With a relatively low level of cases and deaths, the policies have managed to contain the outbreak to the point that daily life has been able to continue for most students and workers, with comprehensive policies in place to manage suspected cases in the future and prevent the need for mass lockdowns.<sup>34</sup> The swift and comprehensive response to the virus demonstrates how Taiwan was able to successfully securitize and mitigate the pandemic in its borders. The success of managing COVID-19 so far is a victory lap for Taiwan's systems and processes for infectious disease response, many of which were implemented during and following SARS and which have not been tested on the scale of the COVID-19 pandemic before. Taiwan has shifted from seeking out and implementing recommendations from the WHO and the U.S. CDC to providing a model of effective pandemic response for the rest of the world, which Taiwan officials have touted in publications and talks as valuable "lessons learned" for other places still grappling with severe outbreaks.

How long Taiwan will need its exceptional measures is still unknown, and the impact that the policies have on Taiwan's democracy, and the public's confidence in Taiwan's government, will be important to watch after the pandemic. The broad quarantine and surveillance measures have allowed Taiwan to trace contacts of COVID-19 cases, which means that mass testing is not necessary in Taiwan for an accurate assessment of the disease's spread. This has helped Taiwan contain the virus within its borders. However, the policies have received some criticism in Taiwan as too invasive for a democracy, particularly as the pandemic has dragged on without an end in sight, and specifically the use of data collection and monitoring, quarantine and travel restrictions, and the open-ended nature of the CDC Act.

The use of technology has unquestionably provided valuable tools for enabling Taiwan's policy responses. The National Health Insurance Administration's PharmaCloud system allows pharmacies to ration masks (which are no longer rationed individually but sold by the box) by scanning customers' National Health Insurance cards. Programmers and engineers working individually created apps that people could use to find pharmacies with available masks under the rationing system.<sup>35</sup> This approach combines government data and civil society's ingenuity to prevent mask shortages and panic, but, as the Taiwan Association



for Human Rights pointed out, also provides ample opportunities for the government to gather data on people's purchasing habits.<sup>36</sup>

Under closer scrutiny is the Digital Fence Intelligent Monitoring System, which is the cell tower triangulation system used to track the location of mobile phones of individual under quarantine, requiring telecom companies to share information on phone locations with the police, and the integration of the National Health Insurance and the immigration/customs databases on January 27, which allows hospitals and clinics to receive alerts if people have symptoms and a travel history to an area of concern.<sup>37</sup> These tools have been effective in contact tracing and reducing spread, but they are criticized as intrusive. Though the government has stated that the practices will be discontinued after the pandemic, critics ask when that might occur and how the public can know for certain, fearing instead that Taiwan will “institutionalize exceptionalism” in the name of crisis.<sup>38</sup>

In addition to the concern about data privacy, restrictions on freedom of movement have also had pushback. For example, in February, the CECC had to make multiple amendments to an overseas travel ban on certain professions, including medical workers, after criticism that the ban might not be legal.<sup>39</sup> Another CECC decision to publish the names of people who made unnecessary travel abroad or broke their quarantine was criticized as creating stigma around the disease, a SARS-era mistake that the government had been trying to avoid.<sup>40</sup>

As the government, civil society, and individuals continue to discuss the necessity and legality of the policy measures in response to COVID-19, the discussion itself indicates that Taiwan's democracy has vigilant defenders and participants and is in no imminent danger of backsliding into authoritarianism. Taiwan's efforts over the past few decades to deal with the lingering effects and memory of the martial law period have inspired the public to demand government accountability and transparency, and the public's confidence thus far in the pandemic response suggests that people are confident they can hold the government to its specific policy parameters on monitoring and surveillance. The collaboration between civil society and government on technology tools that give the public accurate information on the pandemic and Taiwan's policy response is also a sign of trust-building between the people and the government. Observers note that Tsai is relying on the Special Act to combat COVID-19, rather than declaring an emergency per Article 43 of the Constitution, a sign that she is sensitive to the concerns about a reemergence of authoritarian policy.<sup>41</sup> The Special Act is only valid through the end of the pandemic. But with most of the world still struggling to get the disease under control and posing a threat to Taiwan, especially as international travel resumes, Taiwan's domestic policy success at present is not assured for the future. The reality is that the pandemic, and the use of the Special Act, might continue for many months. Continued containment of COVID-19 in

Taiwan will depend on transparent, flexible, and constantly justified policies that retain the cooperation of the public, a feat that will become more difficult as the pandemic wears on.

## Recommendations

- ***Reinforce public confidence in the policy response:*** To provide more reassurance on when the exceptional measures can be relaxed, determine the necessary conditions for ending the policies, in cooperation with civil society groups. An exit strategy that defines how Taiwan can transition out of this period of pandemic response may help boost confidence in the ongoing use of the measures.
- ***Respond to concerns about the collection of data:*** When data monitoring is determined to be no longer needed, have an independent third party, such as an international nongovernmental organization, verify that the monitoring is no longer occurring and surveillance data collected during the pandemic has been deleted. Prior announcement of plans to delete collected data may help to reassure the public as the pandemic, and the need for the quarantine policy, continues.
- ***Continue to share Taiwan's expertise with pandemic response:*** Taiwan's pandemic policy successes are already providing partners around the globe with useful information and policy ideas. Taiwan has already expanded its outreach through the Global Cooperation and Training Framework, with a workshop in April on countering disinformation during the pandemic and another in June on preparing for subsequent waves of COVID-19. Given the breadth of Taiwan's policies, including the significant preparation after SARS that ensured readiness for the current pandemic, additional workshops on effective healthcare system preparation, gaining the trust and cooperation of civil society and the public, and determining when to securitize an emerging public health issue, among other topics, would be helpful for the United States and numerous other partners.

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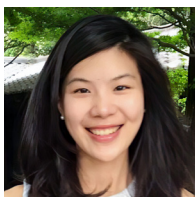
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## About the Experts

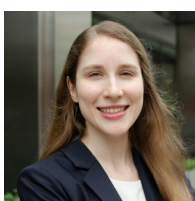
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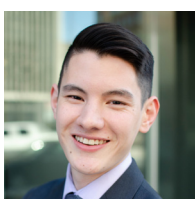
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