

# Unpacking Beijing's Narrative on Taiwan

Edited by  
Zsuzsa Anna Ferenczy

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## Abbreviations

DPP	Democratic Progressive Party
EEAS	European External Action Service
EU	European Union
EP	European Parliament
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
GCTF	Global Cooperation and Training Framework
KMT	Kuomintang
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China
NBA	National Basketball Association
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PRC	People's Republic of China
PLA	People's Liberation Army
ROC	Republic of China, Taiwan
SOTU	State of the Union
SVR	Russian Foreign Intelligence Service
UN	United Nations
WHO	World Health Organization

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## Executive Summary

- Shaping economic rules, technology standards, and political institutions have been the core pillars of Chinese leader Xi Jinping's efforts to advance his authoritarian model and weaken democratic processes and governance. Beijing's priority remains to shape the international discourse to its advantage and promote "democracy that works". A "battle of narratives" has emerged whereby China continues to challenge and undermine democracy, the rule of law, and human rights, values that Taiwan has committed to pursuing in its own development.
- In its relations with third countries, Beijing has imposed its One China principle, falsely asserting that the world had signed up to the claim that there is only "One China" and Taiwan is part of it. Recently Beijing has also ramped up political and military pressure on Taiwan, seeking to further shrink its international space.
- The EU has its own One China policy, in light of which member-states recognize the PRC as the sole legal government of China and maintain economic and cultural ties with Taiwan. The recent rhetorical alignment between Beijing and Moscow in light of Putin's war of aggression against Ukraine has increased the sense of urgency in the EU to strengthen its resilience in close cooperation with like-minded partners.
- Maintaining peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific is in the interest of the EU, Taiwan, and the PRC. Yet, convergence that benefits all stakeholders looks highly unlikely. At the same time, the complexity in these ties will likely increase rather than decrease, further challenging the work of policy-makers who follow developments in the region.

- Beijing's intimidation, pressure, and coercive measures have wider implications beyond Taiwan; they challenge democratic governance as a political system. For an effective EU response, understanding these complexities is more urgent than ever.
- The EU, and democracies in general, must enhance public awareness of the complex reality of Taiwan's relations with the PRC, including Beijing's instrumentalization of its One China principle to undermine democracies' sovereign right to cooperate with Taiwan.
- The EU remains reactive in countering Beijing's discourse; it must better explain its One China policy and help to counter the false narrative that distorts its own stance on Taiwan.
- The EU's approach to Taiwan has to adapt to the changing reality. It must be proactive and avoid adopting Beijing's language, especially concerning the One China principle.
- Taiwan must address the China challenge with a whole-of-society approach involving the government, civil society organizations, and social media platforms. The EU and Taiwan must work closely together to address common challenges.

# Introduction

Under the rule of Chinese leader Xi Jinping, the pursuit of China's global expansion has raised concerns in democracies across the globe that Beijing would undermine the regional balance of power and challenge the international rules-based order. Using a mix of inducement and coercion and displaying increasing assertiveness, Xi's government has continued to project influence in its neighborhood and beyond. These efforts have so far had mixed results. Nonetheless, Xi has sought to weaken democratic governance and bolster China's authoritarian model by shaping economic rules, technology standards and political institutions. Most importantly, Beijing's priority remains to shape the international discourse to its advantage.

A "battle of narratives" has thus emerged whereby China has imposed its authoritarian model and challenged democracy, the rule of law, and human rights, values that Taiwan has fully embraced and committed to further pursue in its own development. To support its ambitions, Beijing has stepped up efforts to block all criticism of the People's Republic of China (PRC). During the pandemic, the Chinese leadership focused on defending its response to the virus, highlighting its success in containing the pandemic and stressing that its success was due to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and China's governance model, while portraying Western failure as a weakness of democracy.

Using disinformation and cognitive warfare, Beijing has also sought to undermine Taiwan's successful pandemic management which remains rooted in transparency, trust, and technology. These efforts must be seen in the larger context of Beijing's goal to isolate Taiwan and deny it status in the United Nations, with the ultimate goal of annexing it. Although the PRC never ruled Taiwan, Beijing claims it as part of its territory, never

renouncing the use of force to “unify” it with the mainland. Ramping up political and military pressure on Taiwan and in the region, in its relations with third countries Beijing has imposed its One China principle, asserting, albeit falsely, that the world had signed up to the claim that there is only “One China” and Taiwan is part of it. The European Union (EU) has its own One China policy, in light of which member-states recognize the PRC as the sole legal government of China and maintain economic and cultural ties with Taiwan.

With a large share of its trade relying on Asia-Pacific markets, the EU has its interests to protect in the region. While tension in EU-China cooperation has increased to an unprecedented level, the EU and its member-states have continued to abide by their One China policy. The EU’s 2021 Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific recognizes that the display of force in the Taiwan Strait may have a direct impact on European security and prosperity. In the context of Beijing’s growing hostility affecting the region, for the EU Taiwan’s geostrategic relevance has increased. Moreover, the recent rhetorical alignment between Beijing and Moscow in light of Putin’s war of aggression against Ukraine has increased the sense of urgency in the EU to address its vulnerabilities and strengthen its resilience in cooperation with like-minded partners.

Mindful of the emerging dynamics in the EU’s relations with China, maintaining peace and stability in the region is in the interest of the EU, Taiwan, but also the PRC. Yet, with an increasingly assertive China, convergence and constructive cooperation that benefit all stakeholders look highly unlikely in the foreseeable future. At the same time, the complexity in these ties – based on interdependence, asymmetric trade relations, and divergence in political values – will also likely increase rather than decrease, further challenging the work of policy-makers and of those following developments in the Indo-Pacific.

This publication helps to unpack Beijing’s efforts to shape the international narrative on Taiwan in line with its own political agenda. It argues that

Beijing's pressure on Taiwan has wider implications beyond Taiwan itself; it challenges democratic governance as a political system on the global stage and undermines the rule of law, transparency, and the rules-based international order. For the EU, in order to adequately address this challenge, better understanding the complexities is more urgent than ever. The publication brings together European and Taiwanese experts who provide policy recommendations to contribute to a better response to the challenges that China presents to democratic governance.

In Chapter 1, Dr. Wei-Feng Tzeng of the Institute of International Relations at the National Chengchi University in Taiwan assesses Beijing's efforts to shape the international narrative on Taiwan by imposing its One China principle built on false claims. These are not short-term efforts, but part of a long-term strategy to take Taiwan and carve itself a larger role on the global stage. China has sought to rally global support for its legitimacy claims over Taiwan by exploiting the lack of understanding across the democratic world regarding Taiwan's international status. To effectively address this challenge, democracies must enhance public awareness of the complex reality of Taiwan's relations with the PRC, including Beijing's instrumentalization of its One China principle, Dr. Tzeng argues.

In Chapter 2, Justyna Szczudlik of the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM) in Warsaw helps unpack Beijing's narrative on Taiwan by looking at EU-China cooperation and their "battle of narratives". While Taiwan's geostrategic relevance has recently increased within the EU-China framework, the EU remains reactive in countering Beijing's discourse and projecting its own narrative. The EU is therefore the weaker player in the "battle of narratives", Szczudlik argues. As EU member-states are in the process of better defining their One China policies, going forward, the EU must better explain its One China policy, and make a clear distinction between "principle" and "policy". This will help to counter the false narrative about the EU's own stance on Taiwan.

In Chapter 3, Gudrun Wacker of the German Institute for International Security Affairs (SWP) in Berlin, explores Taiwan's "upgrade" in the EU. The fundamentals on the EU side when it comes to Taiwan have not changed, namely that member-states continue to abide by the EU's One China policy. However, for the past decade China's development under Xi Jinping has led to a more critical assessment of the PRC's trajectory across the EU, which is shaping the EU's approach to Taiwan. European policy vis-à-vis Taiwan therefore has to adapt to the changing reality. This requires a proactive approach that avoids the adoption of Beijing's language, especially concerning the "One China principle", Wacker argues.

Finally, in Chapter 4, Poyu Tseng, Deputy CEO of Doublethink Lab in Taipei, provides further analysis on the "battle of narratives" between Taiwan and China. With the rise of digital communication, in its cognitive warfare China has been using conspiracy theories whether related to elections in Taiwan, the COVID-19 pandemic, or Russia's war against Ukraine. Chinese official media often repeat Moscow's narrative and selectively amplify the discourse most favorable to Beijing's own geopolitical agenda. The most dangerous aspect of information warfare is that malicious actors can use false information to create distrust and undermine democratic values, Tseng argues. Going forward, Taiwan must address the China challenge with a whole-of-society approach involving the government, civil society organizations, and social media platforms. The EU and Taiwan must work closely together to address common challenges.

# 1. China's Comprehensive Approach to Shaping the Narrative on Taiwan

*Wei-Feng Tzeng*

## **Introduction**

Taiwan's internationalization in recent years has created a dilemma for the leadership of the People's Republic of China (PRC). On the one hand, Beijing has sought to convince the world of its sovereign right over Taiwan, a false claim it has imposed increasingly aggressively. On the other hand, in order to prevent it from becoming further internationalized, it has had to play down Taiwan's global importance and relevance. This dilemma has prompted Beijing to fabricate and impose its own narrative on Taiwan.

The key element of this narrative is the PRC's "One China principle," which alleges that there is only one China, and Taiwan is part of China. In reality, however, the PRC never ruled Taiwan. Using its growing economic weight, Beijing has sought to both cajole and bully the international community, to intimidate, punish, coerce and disinform countries and peoples across the world and demand that they embrace its narrative. Beijing has also sought to shape international public opinion on Taiwan by manipulating the media in other countries and by extending its rhetoric beyond the economic realm. These efforts are not short-term activities, but the core of a long-term strategy. To effectively address this challenge, democracies must enhance public awareness of the complex reality of Taiwan's relations with the PRC, including Beijing's instrumentalization of its One China principle. This is indispensable to counter disinformation and to support Taiwan's further internationalization.

## **Background: One China principle vs. One China policy**

Whether there is only one China is a decades-long debate. For Beijing, the People's Republic of China represents the only China. Beijing has sought to legitimize its claim over Taiwan and has insisted on its right to use force to take the island, if necessary.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, Taiwan, the Republic of China (ROC), its official name, remains committed to be an active member in international relations by circumventing the diplomatic isolation imposed by Beijing. Internationally, this divergence has created ample room for ambiguity in interpreting "China." The Taiwan issue has become globally salient as tension between the PRC and Taiwan has increased, in particular following the "pro-independence" Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) coming to power in 2016.

For the Chinese government, the "Taiwan question", as they like to frame it, is exclusively a domestic issue. Through its One China principle, China claims sovereignty over Taiwan even though the PRC never ruled Taiwan. According to the Chinese government's statement in the latest Taiwan Question White Paper of 2022, Taiwan belonged to China 2,000 years ago.<sup>2</sup>

The PRC government has insisted on the legal sovereignty by citing the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2758, claiming that this resolution confirms that there is no such thing as "Two Chinas" or "One China, One Taiwan." Beijing believes that the One China principle was included in the 1992 Consensus, the result of a semiofficial meeting between the PRC and Taiwan. In this meeting, it was agreed that each side is free to interpret "One China." Their interpretations have then become the political basis for their respective positions on the matter. However, Beijing insists that the 1992 Consensus should follow the One China principle, by which Beijing proposed that the "One Country, Two System" concept, as applied to Hong Kong and Macau, can be a solution to the Taiwan issue. For the PRC today, the term "One China" only stands for the People's Republic of China. That said, Taiwan has never agreed to Beijing's definition of "One China", neither does it accept the proposal of "One Country, Two Systems."



There is a significant difference between the international community's One China policy and Beijing's One China principle. The U.S. government, which has urged that neither side of the Strait should unilaterally change the status quo, has put forward its own "One China policy", according to which it "acknowledges" that there is only one Chinese position but does not take a stance on Taiwan's sovereignty. Washington has committed to help Taiwan's self-defense by providing Taiwan "with arms of a defensive character," as stipulated in the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979.

European countries such as Germany, France, or the United Kingdom also have their own One China policy that does not converge with China's principle. While Beijing asserts its principle is a universal consensus among 181 countries that have diplomatic relations with China, in reality, only 51 countries maintain positions on "One China" that replicate the PRC's One China principle.<sup>3</sup>

## **China's diplomacy regarding "One China"**

China has sought to rally global support for its legitimacy claims over Taiwan by exploiting the lack of clear understanding across the democratic world regarding Taiwan's international status, distorting the reality with disinformation, confusing and misleading the world by imposing its principle rooted in false claims over countries' own policy on Taiwan. When, for example, in 2023 China and the Philippines issued a joint statement on the pursuit of peaceful resolution for the disputes involving the South China Sea, they also included a section stating that the Philippines "reaffirmed its adherence to the One China policy." Also, in a joint statement issued by China and Cambodia in 2022, Cambodia not only reaffirmed the "One China policy," but also added that it was opposed "to any actions or remarks undermining China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and any form of separatist activities seeking Taiwanese independence".<sup>4</sup> Following former U.S. House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Hua claimed that more than 30 political

leaders in countries across the world expressed their support to the “One China principle.”<sup>5</sup> In its White Paper titled “The Taiwan Question and China’s Reunification in the New Era” released following the visit, Beijing cited worldwide support for the document, most of which maintain close ties with China, including the former Croatian President Ivo Josipovic .<sup>6</sup>

As part of its agenda on Taiwan, China has sought to shape public opinion by manipulating the media in other countries. For example, in 2019, the PRC Embassy in India asked the local media not to list China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong in a report, but to use expressions like, China (including Taiwan and Hong Kong).<sup>7</sup> When Indian newspapers in October 2020 included advertisements for Taiwan’s national day, calling Taiwan a country, the Chinese embassy in New Delhi immediately sent a letter to “remind” the Indian media of the One China policy and asked them in a threatening tone to “properly” report the Taiwanese event.<sup>8</sup>

International organizations have been under pressure to deny Taiwan the right of joining them and the right to access information that may benefit the world. The World Health Organization (WHO) has declined Taiwan’s request to participate in its annual health meeting since 2016. During the COVID pandemic, the WHO remained silent about any discussions involving Taiwan. In an online TV interview with the WHO assistant director-general, when Hong Kong-based journalist Yvonne Tong asked a question about Taiwan’s membership in the WHO, the WHO official refused to address it.<sup>9</sup> This shows how the Taiwan issue has become an off-limits political question for the staff of international organizations under pressure from the Chinese government.

After the COVID-19 outbreak in China, Taiwan was one of the very first countries to be aware of the disease. This helped the Taiwanese government to react quickly by closing its borders with China and to foreign tourists, establishing a system to trace people, test the virus, and enforce quarantine measures, which helped to effectively contain the virus. However, due to China’s pressure, Taiwan was excluded from the global community.

## **The economic approach to force international acceptance of the One China principle**

China's significant economic weight has enabled it to exert pressure over global businesses to abide by its One China principle. Beijing has aimed to set a unifying standard to treat Taiwan as a province of China through pressure and intimidation. In 2018, China's Civil Aviation Administration asked international airlines to refer to Taiwan as "China Taiwan." It also instructed these airlines to revise the website identifications of Taiwan and asked them to indicate Taiwan on maps as Chinese territory.<sup>10</sup> Major airlines, such as American Airlines, British Airways, Qantas, Lufthansa, and Air France had to change their systems to comply with China's requests for maintaining their businesses with China. If companies "violate" the One China policy, they risk being "punished" by the Chinese government. Public shaming is one strategy China has used to force multinational corporations to adhere to this policy. For instance, in 2018 Qantas, Delta Air Lines, Zara, and Marriott publicly apologized to China for listing Taiwan as a country on their websites.<sup>11</sup>

Beijing has sought to extend its rhetoric beyond the economic realm. For instance, it forced international sports organizations to stop Taiwan from using the "Republic of China" instead of "Chinese Taipei" when participating in international sports events. It has also attempted to silence athletes on issues that involved China's sovereignty. As such, in 2019, Daryl Morey, a team manager of the Houston Rockets basketball team of the U.S.' National Basketball Association (NBA), posted a comment on social media supporting the Hong Kong protests. The comment went viral and escalated into a political issue. Immediately after the post, the Chinese state broadcaster CCTV and streaming platform Tencent announced that they would no longer broadcast Rockets' games, as Beijing considered Morey's comment an obvious affront of the Chinese nation.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, when an NBA player, Enes Kanter, posted content against China's human rights abuses in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong, Tencent instantly responded by cutting the live broadcast of the NBA game between

the New York Knicks and the Celtics, in which Kanter was playing at the time.<sup>13</sup> By taking such measures, China has sought to publicly dominate the narrative. Since 2018, a Chinese think tank has even published annual reports on tracing the situation whether international business and other organizations violated the one China principle.<sup>14</sup> Efforts to shape international public opinion is not a short-term activity but part of a long-term strategy.

China has also applied economic pressure on state actors. Countries that express willingness to strengthen their relations with Taiwan have faced diplomatic protest from Beijing and faced harsh economic sanctions. In 2021, Lithuania allowed Taiwan to open a representative office using the name “Taiwan” instead of “Taipei.” The decision infuriated the Chinese government. Beijing downgraded its diplomatic relations with Lithuania, demanding that it withdraw its ambassador from Beijing. Economically, Beijing also banned trade with the Baltic country, blocking imports of beef, dairy products, beer, and any products labeled “Made in Lithuania”.<sup>15</sup>

## **Challenges ahead**

The PRC has adopted a hybrid and comprehensive way to impose its claim over Taiwan, especially as tension between Taiwan and China has intensified and Sino-U.S. competition has deepened. Over the years, as China has become a global economic and political power, it has amassed more diplomatic and financial resources to shape the international narrative in its favor and project its influence in the world. In some cases, Beijing has tried to persuade or buy off international support, while in others, it has pursued power politics to coerce countries to back down. The tactics can be soft or harsh, but the objective is clear – to eliminate all disapproval of the One China principle.

As China’s global influence continues to grow, resisting China’s bullying behavior has become increasingly difficult. Many countries, international organizations, or opinion leaders worldwide have gradually chosen to self-

sensor when talking about Taiwan. Yet, compliance will only encourage China to further tighten its grip over the narrative.

To a certain degree, Beijing's strategy has been effective in shaping the global narrative on Taiwan. Democratic governments that cherish freedom of expression must now increase their efforts to educate the population about their One China policies and expose Beijing's attempts to shape the narrative. This should include adding discussions about Taiwan to their civic education in the framework of East Asia, in order to enhance public awareness of the fact that the PRC has never governed Taiwan and the situation in the Taiwan Strait is far more complex than Beijing's narrative claims.

China, as the second-largest economy in the world, will not hesitate to utilize its economic power to impose its One China principle, at the expense of the sovereignty of other countries, a complex challenge to address in the era of hyper-globalization. Careful reexamination of economic cooperation with China is necessary to evaluate the risks. Trade diversification is a way to reduce the risk of overreliance on China's economy.

In the future, China's efforts to dominate the Taiwan narrative will likely increase. China has never renounced the use of force to take Taiwan and with its growing economic and military strength, it will be more confident of its capabilities to annex Taiwan. Although under constant military threat from the PRC, Taiwan remains a self-governing political entity with a vibrant democracy and a strong economy. The international community must be better prepared to address the mounting pressure.

## Endnotes

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## 2. The EU-China Battle of Narratives on Taiwan

*Justyna Szczudlik*

### **Introduction**

Taiwan's higher profile in the European Union's (EU) discourse is related to its shifting perception of China. For years, while the EU as a whole and its member-states considered China as a huge economic opportunity, they barely mentioned Taiwan. As perceptions of China have hardened across Europe, Taiwan has become more present in EU-level discourse. Nonetheless, Brussels is still largely reactive to China's attempts to impose its narrative on Taiwan at the expense of its own. The EU's narrative tends to be restrained and incoherent, as differences between institutions and member-states are apparent.

Beijing's narrative on Taiwan is not specifically tailored to the European audience. China replicates its global discourse on the so-called Taiwan issue (台湾问题). Nevertheless, what is specific in the European context are allusions to the EU's role in Washington's political agenda concerning the People's Republic of China (PRC). Beijing portrays the EU and its member-states as victims of the U.S. and Taiwan's "plot" to undermine China's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Therefore, China's aim in imposing its narrative is to convince Europe to change its course – to distance itself from the U.S. and Taiwan in order to avoid serious political and economic losses.

The intensity of China raising the Taiwan issue with EU representatives, the tone, and the content reflect the status of cross-Strait, U.S.-China and EU-PRC relations as well as Taiwan's international standing. In addition, Beijing has recently widened the scope of its "One China principle".

## **China's narrative on Taiwan addressed to the EU**

The most authoritative Chinese narrative on Taiwan that is addressed to the EU, is embedded in three policy papers on the European Union published subsequently in 2003, 2014, and 2018.<sup>1</sup> The cornerstone is the "One-China principle" (一个中国原则) as a political fundamental (组成部分/政治基础) of China-EU relations. Taiwan is defined as China's 'core interest' (台湾问题事关中国核心利益) – a notion often used by the PRC to highlight its non-negotiable issues. Beijing "appreciates the EU's adherence to the "one China principle"" – creating a false impression that the EU adheres to "principle", not "policy".

According to the policy papers, Taiwan is part of China. This means that Beijing asserts its sovereignty over Taiwan. Therefore, any discourse about "two Chinas" (两个中国), "one China, one Taiwan" (一中一台), or "independent Taiwan" (台湾独立) is forbidden. The One China principle entails that Taiwan's political leaders are not allowed to visit the EU and its member-states. Any official contact between Taiwan and the EU and signing agreements are not allowed either. China demands that Taiwan's participation in international organizations with sovereign member-countries should not be supported. Further, it is not allowed to provide Taiwan with military equipment or anything that could be used for military purposes. Adherence to the One China principle is tantamount to the respect of China's territorial integrity and support for Beijing's goal of peaceful unification (和平统一). The scope of the One China principle is narrow, especially when compared with the most recent Chinese redefinition of the concept.

The same could be said about joint communiqués issued following EU-China summits. Taiwan is barely mentioned in most of the statements. Beijing's narrative is limited to remarks about "China's principled position on the Taiwan question", which means "peaceful reunification and one country, two systems". An interesting case, however, is the 10th EU-China summit in November 2007. When Taiwan was preparing for a referendum on its application for UN membership (eventually two



referendums – one led by DPP and one by KMT – were held on March 22, 2008), China exerted pressure on the EU to express its opposition. A day before the summit, Chinese MFA spokesperson Qin Gang said that Taiwan was stepping up separatist efforts for independence, including a “referendum on joining the UN”. He claimed that Beijing hoped the EU, as China’s comprehensive strategic partner, could take an unambiguous position against “Taiwan independence”.

An important element of China’s narrative is Beijing’s reactions to EU documents and statements containing references to Taiwan. Since 2020, the EU has mentioned Taiwan more frequently. This has occurred as the PRC stepped up efforts to expand the scope of its One China principle. Following the adoption (on September 1, 2021) by the Foreign Affairs Committee of the European Parliament of its first ever report about Taiwan,<sup>2</sup> China’s MFA stated that the “One China principle is a widely recognized norm of international relations and a consensus of the international community”. Beijing also falsely claimed that the EU has reiterated the One China principle in its various documents, in an attempt to persuade it to recognize the One China principle as an international norm. The PRC authorities also claimed that their anger represented the sentiment of Chinese society as a whole, stating that “the EU should not underestimate Chinese people’s strong determination and ability to defend national sovereignty and territorial integrity”.

More Chinese threats were voiced in response to the European Parliament resolution “The situation in the Strait of Taiwan” in September 2022.<sup>3</sup> Beijing claimed the resolution was a result of the EU’s succumbing to U.S. provocations (Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan in August 2022) and Taiwanese separatists (DPP was explicitly mentioned) seeking Taiwan’s independence. Beijing also warned the EU that this was “a typical double standard and has fully exposed its hypocrisy”. It added, “If the European Parliament cares about peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, it should first condemn the U.S. and the ‘Taiwan independence’ forces for provocations of ‘playing with fire’”.

Beijing raised a new argument to extend the scope of the One China principle in the European context as its response to a letter signed by several Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) (May 2020) to allow Taiwan to attend the World Health Assembly. The PRC evoked UN 2758 resolution (passed in 1971 to grant the PRC, instead of the Republic of China, a seat in the UN General Assembly and Security Council) claiming that the One China principle was recognized by the UN and that status of Taiwan as a part of China was determined by this vote in UNGA.<sup>4</sup>

Part of China's expanding narrative on Taiwan is Beijing's response to EU member-states' activities related to Taiwan. Following the visit of a Czech delegation to Taiwan led by Senate President Miloš Vystrčil from August 30-September 4, 2020, China accused Czechia of anti-Chinese sentiments that threaten the 1.4 billion Chinese people. Beijing warned that both the Chinese government and the people "will never sit idly by the open provocation of the Czech Senate President, and must make him pay a heavy price for his short-sighted behavior". Beijing presented Vystrčil's visit as a result of pressure from Taiwan and [external] anti-China forces. Therefore, China attempted to create the impression that Prague had fallen into the trap of the U.S. and Taiwan which led to a violation of "the One China principle that is an element of Czechia's foreign policy". Beijing also warned the Czech Republic that it risked global disgrace due to serious violations of international law.

Similarly, Lithuania's decision to establish the Taiwanese (instead of "Taipei") Representative Office in Vilnius drew China's ire. Beijing argued that the so-called Taiwanese office "sets a bad precedent" (开创了恶劣先例), creating the impression of the existence of China and Taiwan. Therefore, China would take all necessary measures (采取一切必要措施) to safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Similar to Czechia, Beijing portrayed Lithuania as a victim of external forces: "We are telling the Taiwan authorities that trying to coerce foreigners to seek 'independence' is a miscalculation, and they are doomed to fail". China

also claimed that “Lithuania’s progress to where it is today was instigated by some great powers but at the expense of Lithuania’s interests”.

## **The EU’s discourse on Taiwan**

Until 2020, the EU hardly ever mentioned Taiwan. The first time the EU mentioned the “One China policy” in an official document was in a Commission Policy Paper “A maturing partnership - shared interests and challenges in EU-China relations” in 2003.<sup>5</sup> Taiwan was included in the section on priorities for China-EU bilateral cooperation. The document stated that “the EU interest in closer links with Taiwan in non-political fields, including in multilateral contexts” are in line with the EU’s “One-China’ policy”. A similar document adopted by the EU in 2006 titled “EU–China: Closer partners, growing responsibilities” also mentioned the One China policy and Taiwan, but focused mostly on peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait and the continuation of strong economic links with Taiwan.<sup>6</sup>

In the joint communiqué following the EU-China summits, the EU used its standard phrase: “EU reaffirms that it continues to adhere to the One China policy and expresses its hope for a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan question through constructive dialogue”. An interesting exception was the joint statement after the 2007 summit. The EU expressed its concern about the planned referendum on UN membership in the name of Taiwan as this “could lead to the change of status quo in the Taiwan Strait”. The EU openly stated that it was opposed to the referendum idea. A day before the summit, the Chinese MFA requested the EU to do so.

The first official signal of Taiwan’s rising salience in the EU discourse was the “Elements for a new EU strategy on China” adopted in June 2016.<sup>7</sup> Reaffirming (twice) the EU’s One China policy, the EU focused on several topics, including to support the shared values underpinning Taiwan’s system of governance, and to explore launching negotiations on investment with Taiwan building on provisions under negotiation with China. However, the language was rather vague, signaling the

EU's caution about China. The EU did not clarify the meaning of the One China policy (for example, to emphasize publicly and officially that 'policy' and 'principle' are not the same) and was very cautious in explicitly endorsing Taiwan's participation in international organizations and praising Taiwan's democratic system, which makes it a like-minded partner.

Nevertheless, in the last two years, a significant change in the EU's discourse on Taiwan has become apparent both in EU-level discourse and at the level of member-states. However, this does not mean that the EU is an active player in the 'narrative battle' with China, especially given Beijing's increasingly aggressive language. There is a noticeable difference in the narrative between various EU institutions. The EU's decision-making bodies like the Council and the executives like the Commission and the EEAS use softer and vague language, in contrast to the European Parliament, whose role in foreign and security policy is consultative and whose opinions are not legally binding.

A good example is the EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, widely perceived as the EU's attempt to balance China.<sup>8</sup> Although the strategy mentions Taiwan three times, these references are in the section that discusses areas of cooperation such as value chains, digital governance, and trade, and not in a chapter that lists partners. Taiwan is absent in State of the Union Address (SOTU) which was especially striking in the previous two speeches in 2022 and 2021 – years of more frequent Taiwan-related issues discussed within the EU. The President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, and President of the European Council, Charles Michel have not given flagship speeches and remarks about Taiwan.

The European Parliament has displayed the most clear-cut narrative on Taiwan. In its first-ever report about Taiwan (April 2021), it called on the Commission to upgrade EU-Taiwan political relations – including to

increase official exchanges, to start preparations for negotiations of an investment agreement and to change the name of the European Economic and Trade Office in Taiwan to European Union Office in Taipei.<sup>9</sup> A similar discourse was tangible in its resolution of June 7, 2022 on the EU and the security challenges in the Indo-Pacific. The European Parliament named Taiwan the EU's key partner and democratic ally in the Indo-Pacific, supported closer cooperation between relevant European and Taiwanese agencies and reiterated its support for the participation of Taiwan as an observer in international organizations, including the WHO.

In its resolution "The situation in the Strait of Taiwan", the European Parliament accused China of attempts to erode the status quo in the Taiwan Strait and strongly condemned PRC military exercises after Nancy Pelosi's visit.<sup>10</sup> It called on the EU to prepare a contingency planning facing China's provocative actions against Taiwan. It underlined that Taiwan is a democratic island and that it is up to the people of Taiwan to decide how they want to live.

In the past two-three years, Taiwan has also been higher on member-states' agenda. Good examples are two coalition agreements – Lithuania (2020) and Germany (2021) – whereby Taiwan was explicitly mentioned. In Germany, the coalition "supports the participation of democratic Taiwan in international organizations".<sup>11</sup> The Lithuanian government assures that "it will defend those fighting for freedom around the world, from Belarus to Taiwan".<sup>12</sup>

By raising Taiwan and China-related issues, EU-level and national decision-makers have tried to explain the cornerstones of their policy towards Taiwan, albeit not always effectively. As such, during his visit to Taiwan in mid-2020, M. Vystrčil said: "Every country has the right to interpret the One China principle in their own way" – misusing "principle" and "policy". The same confusion happened to the Czech president-elect, Petr Pavel. In his interviews to the Czech media he talked about the "One China principle" as well as the "one country, two systems" formula.

Nevertheless, Czech foreign minister Jan Lipavsky used the correct wording : “We have our own “One China” policy. Nothing has changed. ... Our assessment is that we are not breaching our “One China” policy”.<sup>13</sup>

## **Conclusion and recommendations**

The narrative on Taiwan within the EU-China framework is a good indicator of the condition of EU-China ties and Taiwan’s international standing. As long as the EU perceived China as a great economic opportunity and was reluctant to criticize it, discursive space for Taiwan remained narrow. Recently however, Taiwan has become an issue frequently raised within the EU-China framework. Nonetheless, the EU is still more reactive than proactive in imposing its own narrative and in countering China’s discourse. Therefore, the EU is the weaker player in the “battle of narratives”. The lack of clarity of its Taiwan policy has undermined the EU’s position.

One of the reasons is the fact that the EU has never defined its One China policy. The common denominator has been that the EU and member-states recognize the PRC as the sole legal representative of China, without recognition of Taiwan as a part of China. In other words, the EU and member-states only take note that Beijing claims its sovereignty over Taiwan. The One China policy does not allow the establishment of official relations with Taiwan. Therefore, everything that is within those boundaries is up to the member-states.

Notwithstanding, it should not be underestimated that the EU has a more Taiwan-friendly discourse, and that member-states are in the process of better defining their One China policies. In order to enhance the EU’s discourse power, it is worth considering the following recommendations:

- First, the EU should not misuse the One China “principle” and “policy” as well as the “one country, two systems” as a formula that underpins the bloc’s policy towards Taiwan. Beijing can use any case

of Chinese-led language about Taiwan to distort the EU's position and then utilize it in its own disinformation campaigns.

- It is important for the EU to explain in official communications its "One China policy", highlighting that "policy" is not aligned with "principle". This will help to counter the Chinese false narrative about the EU's stance on Taiwan. As China has continued to expand the scope of its One China principle, the EU should not only reiterate that it pursues its own "One China policy" but counter Beijing's narrative.
- It is indispensable for the EU to underscore that this notion is flexible and each member-state has a right to format it in its own way. The only common denominator – and this should be stressed frequently – is the fact that it recognizes the PRC as the sole representative of China. This does not mean however that the One China policy entails recognition of Taiwan as a part of China. In other words, the One China policy does not refer to the status of Taiwan.
- As Beijing is using disinformation more boldly, it is worth considering placing the Chinese narrative on Taiwan as a topic for research of the EastStratCom Task Force and EuvsDisinfo.<sup>14</sup>

## Notes

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- 6 European Commission, “EU – China: Closer partners, growing responsibilities,” October 24, 2006, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52006DC0631&from=EN>.
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- 11 “*Mehr Fortschritt wagen*,” November 2021, [https://www.spd.de/fileadmin/Dokumente/Koalitionsvertrag/Koalitionsvertrag\\_2021-2025.pdf](https://www.spd.de/fileadmin/Dokumente/Koalitionsvertrag/Koalitionsvertrag_2021-2025.pdf).
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### 3. Taiwan's 'Upgrade' in the European Union

*Guhrun Wacker*

#### **Introduction**

The European Union (EU) and its member-states have for decades adhered to a One China *policy*. In light of this shared position across the bloc, EU member-states have maintained diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC) and not sought to establish official relations with the Republic of China (ROC, Taiwan's official name). At the same time, they have consistently urged that no unilateral change of the status quo in the Taiwan Strait should take place against the will of the other side. European governments have not signed up to the PRC's One China *principle*, which claims that there is but one China in the world solely represented by the PRC and that Taiwan is an inalienable part of its territory.

These fundamentals on the European side have not changed. However, for the past decade China's domestic political development under Xi Jinping, its economic policy, the human rights violations in Xinjiang and Tibet, the crackdown in Hong Kong, the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the coercive measures against Taiwan have led to a more critical assessment across the EU of the PRC's trajectory.

With the balance of power shifting in favor of the PRC (economically, militarily, and in terms of political influence) and with Beijing's pressure on Taiwan (and third countries) increasing, it is no longer sufficient that Europeans just repeat the same message. European policy vis-à-vis Taiwan has to adapt to the changing reality. This requires a proactive European approach that avoids the adoption of Beijing's language, especially concerning the "One China principle". This approach must also fight back against Beijing's attempts to impose its own narratives – on Taiwan,

but also beyond, as the PRC strives to shape the international discourse on well-established international norms and standards that it signed up to itself in the past. Moreover, Europeans must acquire a thorough understanding of Taiwan's domestic politics and the island's complex relationship with the PRC, and they have to prepare for contingencies.

## **Why has Taiwan moved into the spotlight?**

The island of Taiwan has only in recent years attracted more attention in European media and political circles. Over the last three decades, the EU and its member-states, while being aware of Taiwan's gradual transformation from a military dictatorship to a liberal democracy and its contested international position, by and large just hoped that the controversy about the island's status would somehow dissipate or at least not lead to open conflict.

During the two terms of Ma Ying-jeou's presidency (from 2008 to 2016), when the Kuomintang, the "mainland party" that ruled the ROC from 1949 to the year 2000, held the majority of the Legislative Yuan (Taiwan's parliament), European governments welcomed the establishment of direct links and negotiations between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait. This period of rapprochement and the growing economic integration between mainland China and the island seemed to reduce the likelihood that Beijing would resort to military means to achieve its ultimate goal of unification.

However, more recently the prevailing belief – some would call it wishful thinking – that peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait would be maintained and both sides would find a sustainable *modus operandi* has been replaced by growing concerns due to Beijing's coercive measures against Taiwan. Hence, the island with a population of 23.5 million, which has become a model democracy in Asia, started to play a bigger role on the European political agenda. While this has not fundamentally changed the long-held positions in Europe concerning the Taiwan issue and its

One China policy, the EU and some (albeit not all) member-states have become not only more outspoken in support of the island, but also started intensifying their exchanges with Taiwan.

Several factors played a role in bringing about the heightened attention and concerns about Taiwan's security across Europe:

Firstly, since Tsai Ing-wen and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) won the presidential election and the majority in the Legislative Yuan (the parliament) in 2016 and then again in 2020, Beijing has considerably stepped up its pressure and efforts to reduce Taiwan's international space. As the DPP is perceived as the pro-independence party in Taiwan, the PRC does not trust it, and therefore responded to Tsai Ing-wen's election with punitive actions. The number of countries officially recognizing the Republic of China shrank again after the eight years of "diplomatic truce" between both sides during the two terms of Ma Ying-jeou's presidency. For decades Beijing has insisted that the island is an inalienable part of China's territory, that everything concerning Taiwan is the PRC's internal affair and that unification is one of its core interests.

China's leader Xi Jinping, who in the fall of 2022 secured himself a third term in office, has declared that the goal of "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation", his vision for 2049, cannot be achieved without unification with Taiwan.<sup>1</sup> Beijing has been systematically criticizing governments, parliaments, companies and societal groups of third countries whenever they did something or used language that in the eyes of the PRC challenged its claim of sovereignty over the island. The PRC has also considerably intensified direct pressure on Taiwan, using a whole arsenal of measures, ranging from constant demonstrations of military might and cyberattacks to disinformation campaigns and economic boycotts (e.g. tourism to Taiwan, import ban on pineapples).

Secondly, Taiwan plays a central role in the unfolding strategic rivalry between the United States and the PRC. Due to Beijing's claim of

sovereignty over the island and Washington's obligation to help Taiwan defend itself, an effort of the PRC to take Taiwan by force or even an incident stemming from the PLA's frequent "exercises" could escalate into a war involving the United States and most likely also its allies in the region.<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, the scenario of a military attack on Taiwan by the PRC armed forces (People's Liberation Army, PLA) has been discussed especially in the United States. In a cover story in May 2021, *The Economist* called Taiwan "the most dangerous place on earth".<sup>3</sup> A military contingency has assumed new urgency after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with the EU also showing more interest in discussing a European response in the case of a military conflict. High-ranking military officers of the United States have predicted that an attack by the PLA is no longer a question of *if*, but of *when*.

Thirdly, the global pandemic has demonstrated how dependent economies have become on reliable and uninterrupted supply chains, and Taiwan holds a unique position as the global leader in producing the most advanced semiconductors. A military conflict or blockade of the island would, therefore, have devastating economic implications for European countries as well.

Last but not least, the perception – mainly in Western countries – that autocratic countries and authoritarian leaders challenge (liberal) democracy and the rules-based international order, and that the world finds itself (again) in a battle between two governance systems, has put Taiwan in the spotlight as a democracy that also conducts itself as a model global citizen.

### **Continuity and change in the EU's and member-states' relations with Taiwan**

The PRC insists that the One China principle "represents the universal consensus of the international community".<sup>4</sup> It defines this principle as follows: "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 is the sole legal government representing the whole of China."<sup>5</sup>

In contrast, the fundamental position shared within the EU remains a One China policy, which basically accepts not to seek or establish official relations with the ROC/Taiwan, but insists that no unilateral change of the status quo should take place against the will of the other side. European countries have also adhered to an unwritten consensus, namely that the five highest political representatives of Taiwan (the "big 5") will not be met by their counterparts in Europe.<sup>6</sup> However, economic and cultural contacts and exchanges of the EU and member-states with Taiwan are quite substantive. In fact, the EU is the largest investor in Taiwan. Bilateral ties have been maintained mainly through unofficial institutions that represent their respective country in Taiwan and through parliamentary diplomacy – in most European parliaments a friendship group with the island has existed for a long time. While there is no rule that exchanges at the level of ministers that do not belong to the "big 5" should not take place, there have been very few high-level visits, and certainly not in the last two decades.

As of now, these fundamentals on the European side have not changed. However, Beijing's domestic political development and assertive external behavior under Xi Jinping (as outlined in the introduction) have led to a more critical assessment of the PRC's trajectory, including vis-à-vis Taiwan. For the first time, the G7 Joint Communiqué in 2021 included concerns about the growing tensions in the Taiwan Strait:

"We reiterate the importance of maintaining a free and open Indo Pacific, which is inclusive and based on the rule of law. We underscore the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait, and encourage the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues. We remain seriously concerned about the situation in the East and South China Seas and strongly oppose any unilateral attempts to change the status quo and increase tensions."<sup>7</sup>

While Germany's "Policy Guidelines on the Indo-Pacific region" published in September 2020 did not mention Taiwan, the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy in September of the following year made several mentions of Taiwan as a partner of Europe in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>8</sup> Germany's newly elected government also included a passage on Taiwan in its coalition treaty in November 2021.<sup>9</sup>

Some of the Central Eastern EU member-states took steps which surprised and annoyed Beijing even more than these expressions of support for Taiwan which just repeated well-known positions in a clearer and more coordinated way. Lithuania was not only the first state to withdraw from the "16+1"-format, but also allowed Taiwan to open a representative office under the name "Taiwanese office". Beijing saw this deviation from the usual term "Taipei office" as a violation of the agreed practice to which it responded by withdrawing its ambassador and imposing economic coercion. However, Lithuania's decision in no way meant abandoning the One China policy. The sanctions on Lithuanian exports to the PRC also affected the trade of other European countries. Although not every member-state might have welcomed Lithuania's original decision, the EU demonstrated solidarity and unity. Since the anti-coercion instrument of the EU had not yet been finalized at that point, the European Commission raised the case at the WTO.<sup>10</sup>

The President-elect of the Czech Republic Petr Pavel took things even further in January 2023 by accepting a phone call from Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen after she had sent him a congratulatory message.<sup>11</sup> This was not the first gesture angering Beijing, since in 2019 Prague had entered a city partnership with Taipei after refusing to sign a One China clause in a similar agreement with Beijing. Moreover, China's then foreign minister Wang Yi threatened the Czech Republic with grave consequences in 2020 after the president of the Czech senate announced a visit to Taiwan with a delegation. What concrete steps the PRC will take in response to Petr Pavel's phone conversation with Tsai remains to be seen.

While the visits of European delegations have increased in number and statements of support for Taiwan's democracy and its "meaningful" or "functional" participation in international organizations like the World Health Organization have become louder, so far this has not borne any substantive or tangible results for the island.<sup>12</sup> The willingness of going forward with a Bilateral Investment Treaty between the EU and Taiwan, as repeatedly urged by the European Parliament and envisaged in the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy, seems to have weakened soon after the strategy's publication. Nor has any European government considered arms exports to the island.

Nevertheless, the demonstrated symbolic support is important, and so are clear messages to the PRC that any attempt to take Taiwan by force will come at a high price.

## **Outlook and recommendations**

For several decades, the EU and many of its member-states have stated that they are interested in maintaining the status quo in the Taiwan Strait, since this means stability and peace. However, the status quo is not static; it has changed quite substantially over the last three decades. The balance of power has shifted in favor of the PRC and Beijing's pressure and intimidation campaign have strengthened, especially following the election of Tsai Ing-wen in 2016. Therefore, it is time to adapt to the new reality.

It is important that European politicians, parliamentarians, journalists, and scholars are consistent and precise in the language they use when it comes to the status of Taiwan and their own position on relations with the island. This is crucial because Beijing has been actively pushing the official PRC formulations and strives to reinterpret international documents and UN General Assembly Resolution 2578. Beijing's language – especially the "One China principle" or the formula "one country, two systems" as a solution for Taiwan – should not be adopted.

The main criterion for everything that the EU and Europeans do to upgrade relations with Taiwan should be whether it contributes to Taiwan's security and to the stability in cross-strait relations. Discussions about giving up the One China policy and recognizing Taiwan are not helpful in this respect. With very limited military options in the Indo-Pacific, the EU and its member-states have to find alternative ways to contribute to deter Beijing from making the decision to incorporate the island by force into the territory of the PRC.

The EU and European countries can and should be more creative and proactive in using the low-hanging fruit: A first step could be full partnership in the Global Cooperation and Training Framework (GCTF) initiated by the United States and Taiwan in 2015, where several member-states and the EU already participate in workshops. A scoping exercise for the envisaged EU investment agreement with Taiwan would be helpful, as the European Parliament has recommended. And even if the unwritten rule on the "big 5" remains in place, there should be room for contacts at the ministerial level such as in the area of health, science or education. At the same time, European governments have to prepare for contingencies, e.g. in scenario workshops, and discuss possible responses (mainly economic sanctions). Otherwise the chances of a fast, unified and coordinated European response to a military conflict in the Taiwan Strait will be slim.



## Notes

- 1 “Resolving the Taiwan question and realizing China’s complete reunification is, for the Party, a historic mission and an unshakable commitment. It is also a shared aspiration of all the sons and daughters of the Chinese nation and a natural requirement for realizing the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” See Xi Jinping’s Report to the 20<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party: “Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive in Unity to Build a Modern Socialist Country in All Respects”, October 16, 2022, p. 52, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx\\_662805/202210/t20221025\\_10791908.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202210/t20221025_10791908.html).
- 2 This obligation was included in the “Taiwan Relations Act” passed by the U.S. Congress when the United States officially recognized the PRC to ensure normal exchanges with Taiwan. The full text can be found here: <https://www.congress.gov/96/statute/STATUTE-93/STATUTE-93-Pg14.pdf>.
- 3 Roger McShane, “Will Taiwan be the Ukraine of Asia?” *The Economist*. May 1, 2021, <https://www.economist.com/the-world-ahead/2022/11/18/will-taiwan-be-the-ukraine-of-asia>.
- 4 Huaxia, “Full Text: The Taiwan Question and China’s Reunification in the New Era,” *Xinhua*, August 10, 2022, <https://english.news.cn/20220810/df9d3b8702154b34bbf1d451b99bf64a/c.html>.
- 5 See “Statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China,” August 2, 2022, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx\\_662805/202208/t20220802\\_10732293.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202208/t20220802_10732293.html). For earlier formulations and explanations of the PRC’s position, see “The One-China Principle and the Taiwan Issue,” February 21, 2000, [http://eu.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/zywj/bps/200403/t20040309\\_8301612.htm](http://eu.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/zywj/bps/200403/t20040309_8301612.htm).
- 6 The “big 5” are: president, vice-president, prime minister, minister of foreign affairs and minister of defence. In Germany, the list was expanded to seven and includes the president of the Legislative Yuan and the highest judge.
- 7 The White House, “Carbis Bay G7 Joint Communiqué,” June 17, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/13/carbis-bay-g7-summit-communicue/>. France and Germany are members of the G7. The EU was represented by the President of the European Council Jean Michel and by the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen.
- 8 The Federal Government, “Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific, Germany-Europe-Asia: Shaping the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Together,” September 1, 2020, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2380514/f9784f7e3b3fa1bd7c5446d274a4169e/200901-indo-pazifik-leitlinien--1--data.pdf>; European Commission, “Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council. The EU strategy for the Indo-Pacific,” September 16, 2021, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/joint-communication-indo-pacific\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/joint-communication-indo-pacific_en).

- 9 *“Mehr Fortschritt wagen,”* November 2021, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/974430/1990812/1f422c60505b6a88f8f3b3b5b8720bd4/2021-12-10-koav2021-data.pdf?download=1>.
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- 11 See, for example, Stuart Lau, *“China warns new Czech president after Taiwan call,”* *Politico*, January 31, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/china-warn-czech-republic-president-petr-pavel-taiwan-call/>.
- 12 See for a list of visits, Veronika Blablová and Filip Šebok, *“Tracking EU visits to Taiwan,”* China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe (CHOICE), September 15, 2022, <https://chinaobservers.eu/tracking-eu-visits-to-taiwan/>; Sven Biscop has aptly called this *“political tourism”* in a short piece called *“Visit Taiwan!”* January 17, 2023, <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/visit-taiwan/>.

## 4. Taiwan-China and the 'Battle of Narratives'

*Poyu Tseng*

China's political propaganda and information manipulation tactics seek to undermine Western liberal values and institutions, portraying them as chaotic, ineffective, and hypocritical. This approach is a form of cognitive warfare, which uses information and communication technologies to manipulate public opinion, sow discord, and destabilize democratic societies. China's information operation is a constant battle of authoritarianism vs. democracy. Beijing attempts to establish its model as a viable alternative to Western-style democracy. This battle of narratives is a critical component of cognitive warfare, whereby China seeks to assert its authoritarian values and challenge democracy and human rights.

China's narrative is based on an authoritarian approach that emphasizes blood ties, totalitarianism, and rule by man. This narrative seeks to replace the values of democracy, pluralism, and human rights with a Chinese thought emphasizing loyalty to the state and the political party and the idea that the individual should be subordinate to the collective. By stressing the importance of blood ties, Beijing seeks to create a sense of identity among its supporters and establish a global community based on shared ancestry and culture. This narrative is promoted through various channels, including social media and disinformation campaigns, as part of China's cognitive warfare strategy to achieve its strategic objectives.

In its cognitive warfare China has been using conspiracy theories extensively, whether related to elections in Taiwan, the global COVID-19 pandemic, or the war in Ukraine Russia unleashed in 2022. The creation and dissemination of these conspiracy theories are not limited to specific events but are established during regular times. Even if they do not lead to much discussion or lack impact at the time, when specific events occur they

can be amplified by news agencies or through propaganda, achieving the purpose of cognitive warfare. Most of these conspiracy theories' narratives are consistent with China's political strategic objectives, mainly revolving around undermining Western political norms and systems, denigrating democratic values, or justifying China's "development model".

According to the Freedom House report "Beijing's Global Media Influence 2022 - Authoritarian Expansion and the Power of Democratic Resilience", China is working on expanding its influence on the international media and Taiwan is the country most heavily influenced by China. Doublethink Lab's "China Index" released the same year, found that Taiwan ranks first in the world among 82 countries regarding the degree of Chinese influence in the media and society. These data indicate that China is exerting pressure on Taiwan's media environment in order to guide public opinion and influence Taiwan's political views and international relations.

In recent years, China's information warfare against Taiwan has received increasing international attention. In 2020, China exported a large number of conspiracy theories related to the pandemic. Following its brutal aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, Russia too manipulated information concerning the war through media channels and social media, and China helped to amplify the disinformation, making the world pay more attention to its related attacks on Taiwan. The most dangerous aspect of information warfare is that malicious actors can use false information to create distrust and division in society and undermine democratic values in the process.

## **Information manipulation during the pandemic**

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2019, China has continuously engaged in political propaganda and conspiracy attacks related to the pandemic worldwide. The main target has been Taiwan, facing not only countless disinformation attacks but also becoming a key node for China to spread malicious information about the virus to Southeast Asia.<sup>1</sup>

In the early stages of the outbreak, China attempted to use fabricated articles and falsified documents to accuse the Taiwanese government of concealing the epidemic and attempting to cause social panic and reduce public trust in the government. For example, on February 24, 2020, many articles suddenly appeared on Facebook claiming to be from friends and family members of politicians or medical personnel who had obtained special access to information revealing that the epidemic in Taiwan was already out of control.<sup>2</sup>

These articles had similar structures and sensational content and were spread across different platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, and Weibo. Many articles on Facebook claimed that the city would soon be locked down or that critical Taiwanese politicians had died. These articles used forged documents or government announcements, causing public panic.<sup>3</sup>

According to a report by the Center for European Policy Analysis, starting in 2021, China has been spreading misinformation with more destructive conspiracy theories targeting the origin of the pandemic and the effectiveness of vaccines. These tactics included leaving many negative comments about vaccines using internet robots and spreading false information through fake social media accounts.<sup>4</sup> *The Washington Post* also pointed out that China's official media and diplomatic system increase the exposure and credibility of Chinese-made vaccines by questioning the effectiveness and safety of non-Chinese vaccines.<sup>5</sup>

Such conspiracy theories have also had a significant impact on Taiwanese society. According to a survey of Taiwanese voters in 2023, regardless of political leaning, respondents generally believed that the origin of the virus "was not natural but was developed in a laboratory" and tended to agree with narratives such as "there are secret organizations behind the scenes that influence most political decisions regarding vaccines" and "politicians often lie to the public based on their motives".<sup>6</sup> Some of these narratives align with those of the Chinese official media.

The related conspiracy theories about the “origin of the pandemic” have also continued into the information manipulation during the Ukraine-Russia conflict in 2022.

## **Information manipulation during Russia’s war against Ukraine**

Before Putin announced the “special military operation” against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the information war had already begun. On the same day the war started, The Expose, a British media outlet, reported that a Twitter account named WarClandestine claimed that the United States had a biological laboratory in Ukraine for researching biological weapons. The French medical website Health Feedback immediately fact-checked and found the report was false. The Expose is also a website that many fact-checking organizations have confirmed as a long-term disseminator of vaccine misinformation. However, this report, which should have been verified as fake news, was soon cited by the Russian Strategic Cultural Foundation, a Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) subsidiary. Related conspiracy theories began to spread rapidly around the world.

Although China has so far been reluctant to take a firm stance against Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Chinese official media often repeat the narrative of Russian official media and amplify narratives that are favorable to them. On the same day that Russia began spreading conspiracy theories related to the biochemical laboratory, Chinese social media platforms such as Weibo and WeChat published multiple related articles, which were even reposted by official media such as *Global Times* and Huanqiu.com, claiming that “Russia is destroying secret biochemical weapons laboratories in Ukraine” and “the United States is setting up biological laboratories around the world to develop biological weapons and dangerous viruses”. The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson even raised this conspiracy theory to the official level at a routine press conference on March 8, publicly calling on the United States to respond. These conspiracy theories even combined with those about the origin of

the COVID-19 pandemic, claiming that the United States was developing “pathogens such as bacteria and viruses that can be transmitted from bats to humans” in the Ukrainian biological laboratory, implying that the United States manufactured the COVID-19 virus.

Doublethink Lab’s investigation found unmistakable traces of artificial manipulation in the Chinese Facebook environment regarding these conspiracy theories. The method is suspected to be automated, sharing similar messages in a short time, repeatedly, to discussion groups about Hong Kong issues or pro-China groups. The timing of the shares also has a specific regularity, and the accounts themselves have characteristics of fake accounts.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to conspiracy theories related to Ukrainian biochemical laboratories, the Chinese government also engages in political propaganda with Russia regarding the “Enlargement of NATO”. In addition to emphasizing narratives that lend legitimacy to war, such as “Russia must fight because of NATO’s eastward expansion”, China also amplifies certain narratives and underlines that Russia’s invasion is due to “NATO, European Union and United States violating agreements with Moscow”, implying that “NATO deceived Ukraine” and “European Union and United States caused the Ukraine-Russia war for their interests”.

These actions make it clear that China is supporting Russia’s efforts to legitimize the war through political propaganda on a global scale. China is trying to use anti-US sentiment, denigrate Western political norms and systems globally while legitimizing China’s “development model”. It also indirectly legitimizes human rights violations and sovereignty issues in Taiwan and Hong Kong while downgrading democracy. China selects parts of the narrative that fit its overall propaganda and spreads them widely, including narratives that the origin of COVID-19 is not in China and that NATO is manipulating the war for its interests.

## **Manipulation of information during elections**

From the 2020 presidential election to the 2022 local elections in Taiwan, the Doublethink Lab observed many false messages spread by China or through local agents across Taiwan. Summarizing the false messages regarding the 2020 presidential election, research shows that narratives about “democracy failing” dominated, including discussions on Taiwan’s governance incompetence, the ruling party’s credibility, as well as narratives like “the U.S. using Taiwan as a tool to counter China’s rise” and “the Democratic Progressive Party is the U.S.’ agent in Taiwan”. Additionally, conspiracies related to “China’s model being better than Western democracy” were observed.

The central theme of information manipulation leading up to the 2022 local elections was the “U.S. hollowed out TSMC” theory. Many narratives attacking the ruling party’s credibility, such as “the U.S. only cares about its interests and sees Taiwan as a tool” and “the Democratic Progressive Party panders to the U.S. for its benefit”, were also spread. Even though the events and issues discussed in the two elections were different, the dominant narrative of information manipulation remained unchanged: With doubts about the U.S., failed democracy, and attacks on the credibility of the ruling party being the main narratives, which were manipulated through conspiracies that made them difficult to verify or refute.

## **The ‘battle of narratives’**

China creates a sense of identification by emphasizing that the EU and the U.S. are suppressing China out of fear of its rise. The destructive power of conspiracy theories that revolve around China’s political propaganda narrative is increasing, and not only are they widely disseminated in Taiwan but they are also being spread globally through Chinese diaspora communities, information warfare fake account organizations like Spamouflage, and can resonate during critical moments, making them more destructive. The spread of China’s conspiracy theories globally is particularly effective, with those involving Taiwan affecting people’s



understanding of the Taiwan Strait situation and increasing the expansion of Taiwan's security problems.

To resist the spread of China's conspiracy theories, Taiwan must strengthen its cooperation with the international community and actively promote Taiwan's democracy in order to establish an accurate understanding of the reality on the ground, and to actively counter the threat of cognitive warfare to Taiwan's security. Furthermore, the most dangerous aspect of information and cognitive warfare is not the truth or falsehood of the information but that attackers and malicious actors can use false or controversial information to create distrust and division in society. This is not limited to the public's distrust of the ruling party but extends to the general public's wariness of democracy.

China has been using its own narrative to advance its agenda. Beijing has attempted to turn the Chinese internet into a virtual territory for its grand unification thought, promoting the idea of a Greater China based on an old Chinese saying, "All this land under heaven belongs to the king, all the people are the king's servants (普天之下，莫非王土，率土之濱，莫非王臣)." This ideology lies behind the tragedy in East Turkestan and the increasing number of "Chinese police overseas service stations". These are police outposts that the Chinese government has established in foreign countries to assist Chinese citizens living or traveling abroad. However, these stations have raised concerns among human rights activists who fear that they may be used to monitor and intimidate Chinese citizens living overseas, as well as to silence political dissidents and suppress free speech. Additionally, there are concerns that the presence of Chinese police in foreign countries may undermine the authority and independence of local law enforcement agencies. The battle of narratives has become more aggressive, as fear and anger as used by authoritarian governments have proven to be practical tools to shape public opinion.

To win the narrative battle against China and its authoritarian values, countering its information operation requires a whole-of-society approach

involving the government, civil society organizations, and social media platforms. Strategic communication must be prioritized as a critical policy direction for the government. Taiwan has successfully dealt with this issue during the pandemic, including building trust in society, which is essential in fighting against information manipulation and cognitive warfare.

In addition to building trust, governments can take several legislative and administrative measures, such as pushing for the “Foreign Influence Transparency Act” to increase transparency in foreign political forces’ attempts to interfere in Taiwan’s information environment. Governments can also regularly release reports on information operations to help the public make objective judgments and establish a strategic unit to publish reports on information manipulation cases and techniques, deepening people’s understanding of false news and information manipulation.

Civil society organizations can also play a critical role in monitoring and reporting disinformation, forming cross-topic and cross-regional information monitoring communities to observe attempts to interfere with voting behavior during elections. They can organize events to promote communication and understanding between people with different opinions, contributing to the fight against disinformation and manipulation.

Finally, social media platforms can contribute to this effort by providing researchers with access to data and tools to combat the spread of false information, such as open APIs for short video content. By implementing policies and practices such as transparency, monitoring, and effective communication, a more informed and resilient society can be created, able to safeguard its values of democracy, translucency, and truth against the threats posed by information manipulation and cognitive warfare, winning the battle of narratives against China and its authoritarian values.

## Notes

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