

DOES SOFT POWER HAVE ANY VALUE FOR TAIWAN?

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As a diplomatic tool, soft power conveys the core values and ideology of a country and serves as its front window abroad to win sympathy for its beliefs, values, and institutions. The aim is to garner support for political agendas and determine the framework of debate and engagement in favor of the nation that is able to deploy soft power. In the case of Taiwan, there are limits to how soft power can be used due to the lack of international recognition of its sovereignty and the existential threat from China. Still, Taiwan's soft power has been deployed with increasing success over the years. Taiwan has won more and more recognition internationally, especially from like-minded countries. Taiwan's gain has been more legitimacy and support in relation to its claim to exist as an autonomous territory under the status quo arrangement, but not for its independence. This paper analyzes Taiwan's soft power resources and assesses their effectiveness by looking at Taiwan's gains.

Taiwan is a national unit that has the attributes of and functions and behaves like an independent state. Yet, it is hardly recognized as a sovereign state internationally and therefore has few diplomatic relations.

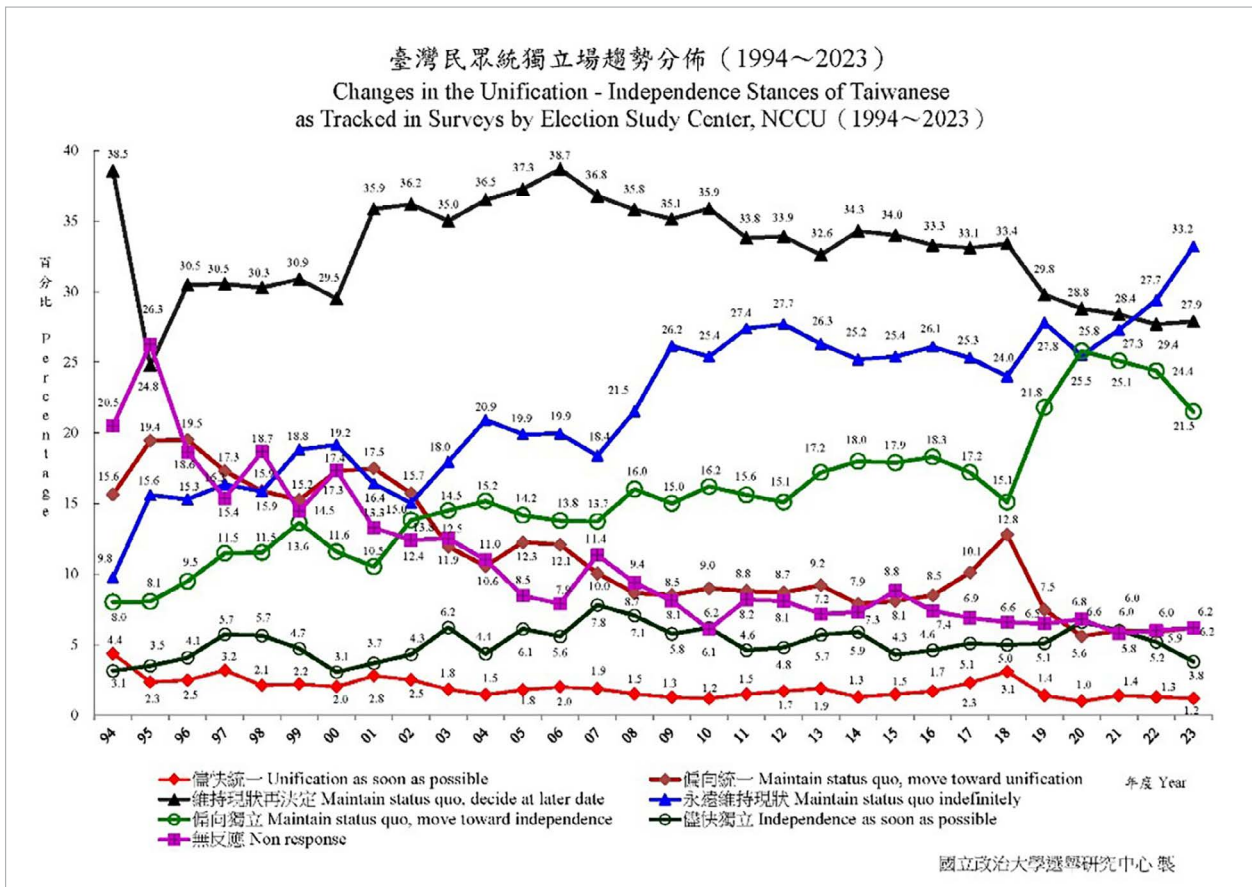
The current constitution of Taiwan defines Taiwan as the Republic of China and does not talk about a “unified China”.¹ Yet, the People's Republic of China (PRC) is the sole internationally recognized representative of China under its ‘one China principle’, as it is called, also in international political parlance—although there is a disputed distinction between a ‘one-China policy’ promoted by the U.S. and its allies and China's ‘one China principle’.² Taiwan's ‘statelessness’ internationally means that the island nation is not a member of the organizations

underpinning the current world system, e.g. the UN family of organizations and the Interpol.

Whereas China insists that it must inevitably reunite with Taiwan—preferably peacefully, there is no obvious appetite politically in Taiwan or amongst ordinary Taiwanese for such unification, and the Chinese re-unification formula, “one-country-two-systems”, has basically been discarded in Taiwan. In fact, Chinese and Taiwanese positions on the issue continue to move further away from each other.

Yet, the appetite for independence is not big amongst ordinary Taiwanese. A robust national survey with a long time-line shows that a third of all Taiwanese (33.2 percent in 2023) wish to maintain status quo indefinitely,

Figure 1: Taiwanese views on the status of Taiwan and relations to China



Source: Election Study Center, NCCU-Taiwan Independence vs. Unification with the Mainl

while 21.2 percent favor *status quo* while moving towards independence. The appetite for immediate unification with China is negligible (Figure 1).

Thus, *status quo* in the relationship between Taiwan and China is currently the preferred position in the public. The same is the case with Taiwan’s major political parties, although KMT is still pursuing a course of seeking friendlier relations with China.³

It is hard to know for how long this will be acceptable to the Chinese leadership, and effectively Taiwan is living under an existential threat from China. The threat has become even more acute under the current Chinese leader, Xi Jinping, who oftentimes threatens to use military force against Taiwan to ensure reunification, if need be.

China uses a variety of so-called ‘grey zone’ methods—which can be defined as “competitive interactions among

and within state and non-state actors that fall between the traditional war and peace duality”⁴—to impose itself on Taiwan to deter the island nation from seeking national independence and international support for independence. The ‘grey zone’ toolkit includes disinformation campaigns and larger influence operations that aim to spread discord within the Taiwan public and especially paint the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) as ill-equipped to govern. Other tactics include routine incursions into Taiwan’s Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) and targeted but limited import bans in certain sectors, e.g. agriculture. China has also been successful in persuading many of Taiwan’s diplomatic allies to shift their allegiance to China. In addition, China wants to keep Taiwan out of international organizations and forces these organizations to accept “Taiwan as a part of the People’s Republic of China”.⁵

This has all led to a certain measure of realism or pragmatism in the mode of thinking of Taiwanese citizens

as well as within the major political parties. In the current international environment, Taiwan has no chance of gaining international recognition for independence. Also, Taiwan seems to have little chance of winning a war with China on its own, and it is difficult to know to what extent the U.S. would join forces with Taiwan in a war against China.

This creates an uncertain environment, in which: (1) Taiwan struggles to maintain its *de facto* autonomy under the so-called *status quo* arrangement; (2) Taiwan must circumnavigate and possibly deter increased Chinese intimidation; and, (3) Taiwan must act smartly to gain and maintain international support for its status.

This is where soft power becomes important. Taiwan can use it to impress on its international supporters and constituencies that the *status quo* is currently the best option for Taiwan.

Whether international pressure on China can deter it from a military intervention is doubtful of course. A 2023 survey published by the 21st Century China Center at the

University of San Diego California mapped policy choices of individuals in China regarding unification with Taiwan. The overall conclusion of the study suggested that “at the aggregate level, only a slim majority of the respondents are explicitly supportive of waging a unification war”. The study also found that—by weighing responses—a majority of respondents were either ambivalent or pacifist. In fact, a third of the respondents were opposed to using force. Finally, the authors were surprised that about one-fifth of the respondents accepted the officially unacceptable option of allowing the two sides to go their separate ways, which would mean *de facto* independence for Taiwan.⁶

In this context, it is noteworthy that in March 2024 an Al Jazeera journalist managed to interview a few Chinese citizens in street interviews in China about their attitudes towards unification with Taiwan and found that they had more important things on their mind. Said one interviewee: “Ordinary Chinese people are not pushing the government to get unification....It is the government that pushes people to believe that there must be unification”.⁷

At the end of the day, Taiwan can only hope for a change of winds in China that could lead to a peaceful, negotiated outcome, which is presumably in the best interest of the two parties.

The question addressed in this paper is: What are the important soft power resources that Taiwan can mobilize and use to protect the *status quo* position and how do they affect the target audiences?

The question rests on a two-pronged proposition: On the one hand, soft power cannot be a decisive power resource when it comes to solving the conflict between China and Taiwan. Taiwan clearly needs hard power and especially support from the U.S. to be able to deter a possible Chinese invasion. On the other hand, Taiwan can use soft power to mobilize and co-opt regional and international support for the broader political defense of the *status quo*.

Soft power can be directed at audiences within and outside China, but international pressure is more likely to have an effect on the China-Taiwan relationship than internal pressure in China. However, soft power projection towards China may help build sympathy for Taiwan in China.

A personal anecdote may underpin this argument. At a

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time, when many Chinese tourists visited Taiwan, I went to Taiwan on a professional group visit in 2012. During the visit, one of our hosts told us that Taiwanese authorities had studied what kind of TV programs Chinese visitors viewed when relaxing in their hotel rooms in the evenings. Political debates proved to be the most popular programs since nothing similar could be watched on Chinese TV stations.

Approach to Soft Power Analysis

Soft power in international politics arises from factors such as dominant or empowering values, internal practices and policies, and the way in which international relations are conducted. Soft power can establish beliefs, values, and institutions that support political agendas and determine the framework of debate and engagement.⁸ More specifically, it is seen “as the capacity through appeal or attraction—rather than coercion or side-payment—to induce others to behave in ways that serve one’s own aims”.⁹

As a foreign policy instrument, the aim of soft power is thus to gain recognition in the international arena and to entice positively inclined states and polities to accept or even support an affirmative policy agenda of a state that has soft power. Soft power is mostly seen as a precursor or supplement to hard power that is at the core of theoretical ideas about hegemonic stability or bandwagoning patterns in international relations.¹⁰

Soft power is an intangible resource of a polity. It is not like hard power instruments such as guns, bombs, tanks, and missiles that can be measured and physically touched. Soft power cannot be turned on and off like a tap. Rather, it is a hardly noticeable long-term process that creates positive notions about a nation.¹¹

The effect of soft power resources depends not only on the way they are applied by a variety of stakeholders, but especially on the way they are received in other countries. Soft power shapes the environment for interaction and collaboration and the desired effects and outcomes often take long time to materialize.¹²

In the following, I will focus on Taiwan’s most important soft power resources as evidenced by Taiwan’s own promotion efforts and by international recognition and support, mostly with examples from the Nordic Region and the EU. There are some notable omissions from the

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analysis due to space limits, e.g. tourism, people-to-people exchange (such as the partnering of high schools in the Danish case), and Taiwan’s participation in and use of international sports. I will navigate around Taiwan’s special relations to the U.S. as they tend to blur the distinction between hard and soft power.

Taiwan’s Soft Power Resources

In the absence of international recognition of its sovereignty and facing an existential threat from China, Taiwan’s top politicians and leaders are acutely aware that soft power is an important foreign policy instrument. They consider and use strategic development and deployment of soft power tools to gain international support for Taiwan’s *de facto* autonomy by demonstrating that Taiwan has a strong capacity for self-governance and that Taiwan is an attractive collaborative partner.¹³

The new political order

Within the framework of the Republic of China, Taiwan has developed from dictatorial rule to becoming a well-functioning democracy that has been able to mobilize

resources and interests across Taiwanese society to define a vision and a strategy for the island nation's future. Taiwan has organized regular elections and secured orderly transitions of power between parties with significantly different political programs and visions, also in terms of China-Taiwan relations. Taiwan's democratic transition was gradual and largely peaceful despite many hiccups. It gained a high degree of national legitimacy demonstrated by regular elector turnout rates of more than 70 percent. Further, the new Taiwanese democracy is supported by a legal system informed by the rule of law.¹⁴ Taiwan scores high on democracy indices, e.g. V-Dem.¹⁵ On the Human Freedom Index 2023, Taiwan ranked no. 12 in the world based on 2021 figures.¹⁶ Taiwan has also improved its international standing on the Corruption Perceptions Index, moving from a score of 61 in 2012 to 67 in 2023. However, it is still well below New Zealand with the highest score in the region, 85. Both New Zealand's and Taiwan's scores fell somewhat in 2023 compared to the years before, reflecting a general phenomenon across the

region.¹⁷ This indicates a need for continued attention to combating corruption.

Taiwan's democratic transition has led to institutionalized legal protection of universal human rights, Taiwan was the first place in Asia to recognize same-sex marriage in 2019¹⁸, and the biggest pride event in Asia is the Taipei Gay Pride with about 200.000 participants in 2023.¹⁹

A Taiwanese deputy foreign minister said in an interview in 2017 that Taiwan could be a model for the Chinese-speaking world in terms of social values: “[D]emocracy, human rights, the rule of law, advanced social legislation like for the gay and lesbian rights... [T]he first place in Asia where Journalists Without Borders set their office was Taiwan”. The head of the international relations committee of the DPP said in another interview that “Taiwan's civil society should be celebrated and exposed as a basis for collaboration with other democratic countries using local governments as main actors”.²⁰

Throughout Taiwan's democratic evolution, there has been a wish to improve Taiwan's international status and expand its international participation.²¹ Taiwan has aligned with the ideas and values of other democratic countries which garnered considerable political support from democracies around the world. In this way, Taiwan's political development became its foremost strategic soft power asset.

The identity of the polity

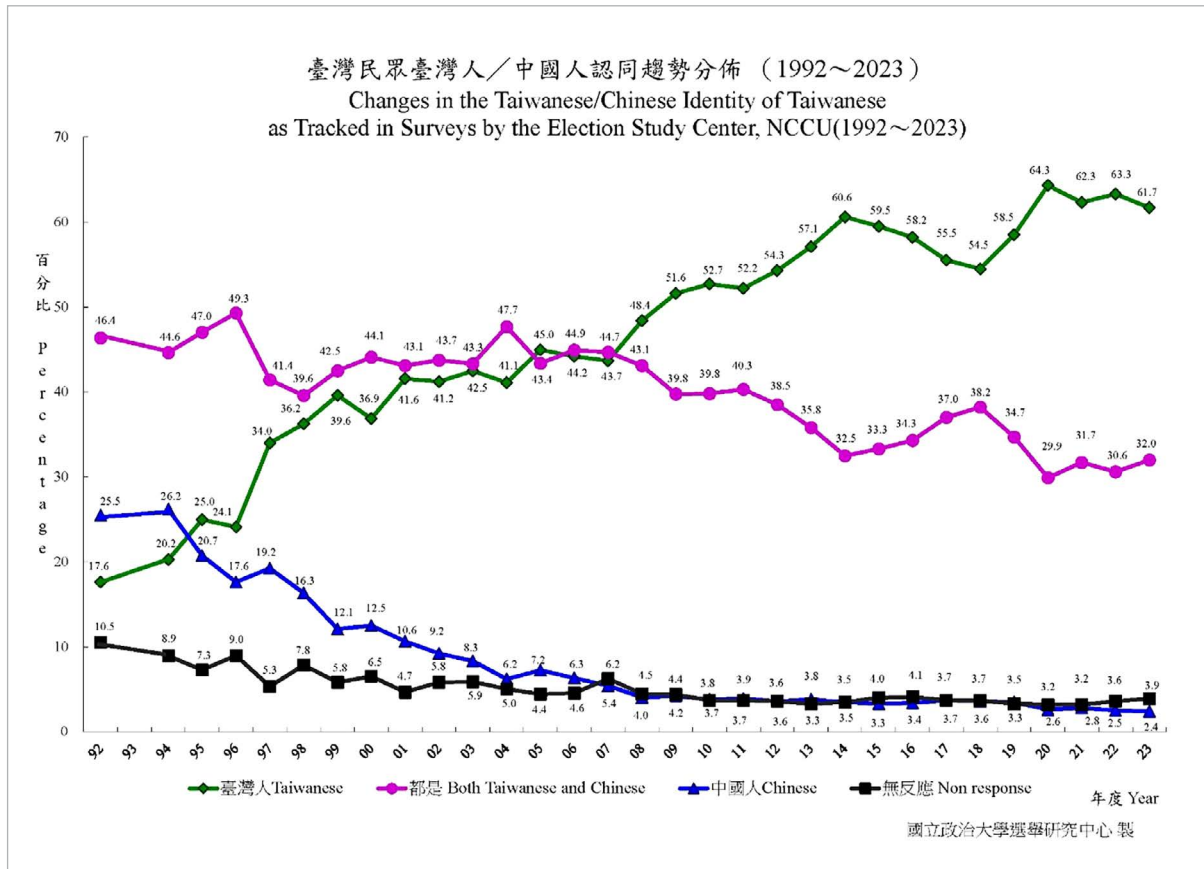
Taiwanese citizens are increasingly considering themselves Taiwanese rather than Chinese – despite their common historical and cultural roots. Yet, a significant share of the population, 32 percent in 2023, continue to see themselves as both Taiwanese and Chinese (Figure 2).

The growth of the number of Taiwanese that see themselves as Taiwanese indicates a collective hope for continued Taiwanese autonomy and possibly a will to both promote and defend it.

The Taiwanese self-identity has become an important soft power tool to promote the understanding of Taiwan as Taiwanese.²² It helps generate sympathy and support in many parts of the world. Many see a parallel to the Ukraine situation where a nation defends its right to existence

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Figure 2: Taiwanese and their identity



Source: Election Study Center, NCCU-Taiwanese / Chinese Identity

against the military incursion of a major power that claims its territory. Evidently, the Chinese leadership does not see it that way. It argues officially that the two situations are not comparable since Taiwan is already a constituent part of China and not a sovereign country. Therefore, the relationship between China and Taiwan is a national and not an international issue, argues Beijing.

Economic model

Since 1949, Taiwan has made a transition from being a poor agricultural economy into a developed industrial and service economy that is based on use of advanced technology. This development has largely been due to a combination of enlightened industrial and educational policies and a strong entrepreneurial tradition combined with a developmental state approach.²³

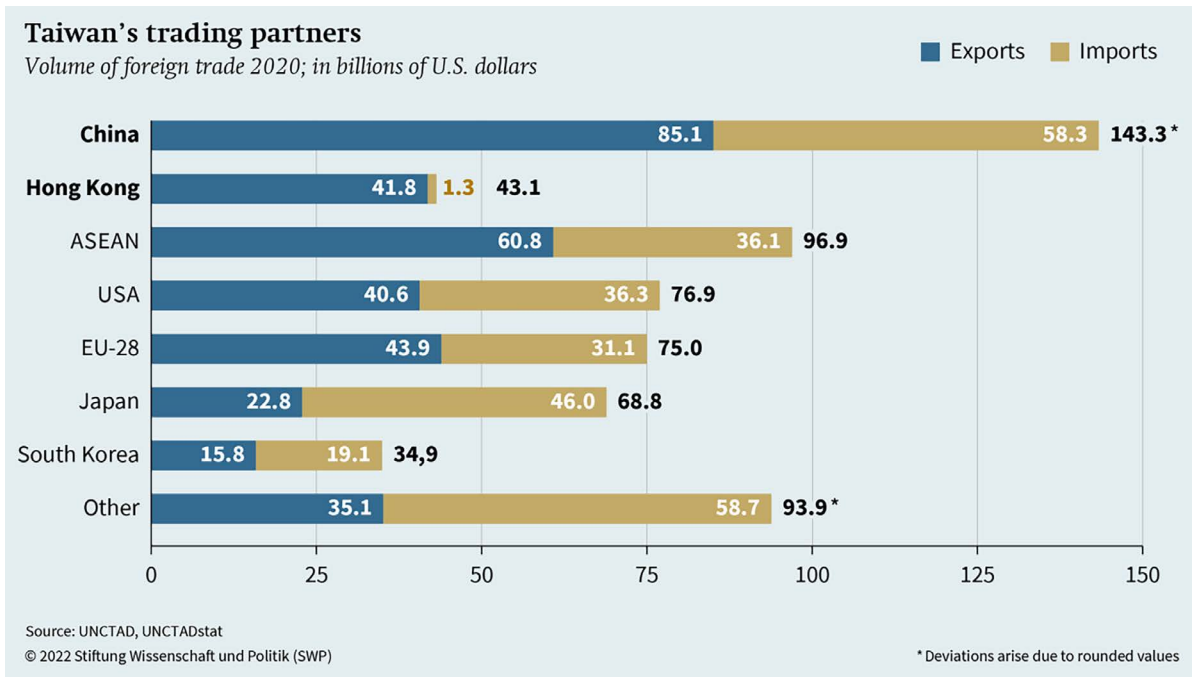
In 2020, Taiwan's GDP was US\$668.5 billion, which made it no. 21 among the world's economies and the sixth largest

economy in Asia after China, Japan, India, South Korea and Indonesia. With a per capita income of US\$28,306 in 2020, Taiwan was the fourth wealthiest country in Asia, after Singapore, Japan and South Korea.²⁴

During its economic development, Taiwan has positioned itself as an important player in some global manufacturing and value chains, primarily within electronics and microchip production. Taiwan is an open and competitive economy which ranked no. 6 in the world in 2022.²⁵

Over 60 percent of Taiwan's population now gets higher education, which puts Taiwan at 13th spot in tertiary enrollment in the 2018 Global Competitiveness Report compiled by the World Economic Forum (WEF).²⁶ At the same time, a demographic crisis has spurred Taiwan's government to intensify efforts to attract foreign students to work in Taiwan upon graduation (more below) to maintain Taiwan's status as one of the world's most advanced economies.

Figure 3: Taiwan's trading partners



Source: Hans Günther Hilpert, et al., 2022, 18.

In 2020 China was still Taiwan's largest trading partner, with the aggregate ASEAN countries trailing behind by about US\$50 billion (Figure 3).

China is also Taiwan's largest FDI destination, hosting more than 50 percent of all Taiwan's international FDI stock, and again with ASEAN in second position with only 11.5 percent of Taiwan's outgoing FDI stock (see Figure 4). Regarding incoming FDI, the EU has the largest FDI stock in Taiwan, i.e. 25.7 percent, ASEAN is well below that figure with 7.4 percent behind British Overseas Territories, the U.S., and Japan. China holds a miniscule 1.3 percent of total FDI stock in Taiwan due to Taiwanese restrictions on Chinese investments.

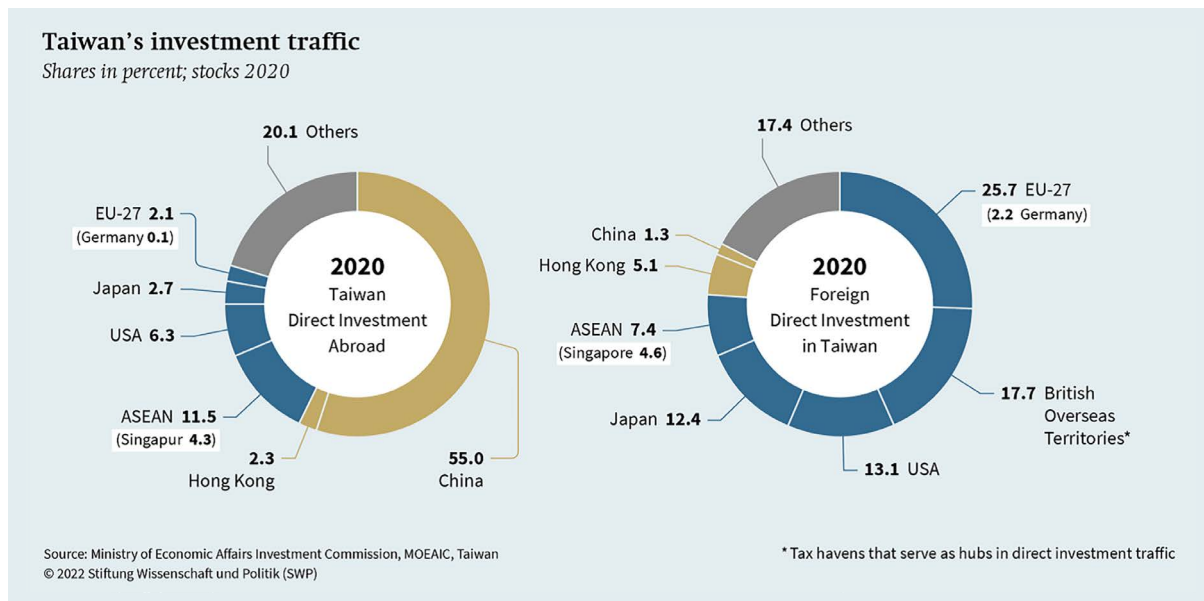
It is evident that Taiwan is critically dependent on China for trade and investments. While this may seem paradoxical in view of their territorial and political conflict, their economic interdependency rests on considerable economic complementarity and geographical-cultural proximity.²⁷

Still, a case could be made for a Taiwanese need to diversify away from China *in lieu* of the existential threat that China poses to Taiwan, and indeed Taiwan attempts to do that. As an example, since 2016 Taiwan promoted a so-called 'New

South-bound Policy' (NSP) as a targeted economic and foreign policy initiative which aimed to reduce Taiwan's economic dependence on China through enhancing Taiwan's diplomatic and economic ties with other nations in the region and beyond to promote economic growth and to extend its global influence. The NSP rests on four pillars: economic cooperation, the exchange of talent, the sharing of resources, and the encouragement of regional connections. More specifically, bilateral exchange and collaboration focuses on domains such as trade, investment, tourism, culture, and talent. Following this, Taiwan and 18 nations including ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) members and South Asian countries plus Australia, and New Zealand have established a framework to promote economic cooperation.²⁸

Taiwan's deep integration into the international division of labor, the prominent role of Taiwanese companies in specific regional and global value chains, and the island's openness to imports and direct investments illustrate that a foreign economic and trade initiative such as NSP is both meaningful and important.²⁹ Taiwan is a member of WTO since 1992, and at this stage, Taiwan has signed eight bilateral free trade agreements (FTA) with countries, mainly in the region. There are also several trade agreements

Figure 4: **Taiwan's investment traffic**



Source: Hans Günther Hilpert, et al., 2022, 19.

with China. Finally, Taiwan has launched an application to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), which came into force in 2018.³⁰

In view of Taiwan's contested sovereignty, Taiwan's trade policies must necessarily be defensive. Taiwan's government must avoid or at least limit discrimination of companies operating in or out of Taiwan stemming from Taiwan's inability to become party to trade liberalizations agreed in regional FTAs that Taiwan is not part of. Taiwan's own bilateral trade agreements must follow suit so that these companies can stay competitive. Such agreements can only be signed if China does not oppose them and puts pressure on countries with diplomatic relations with China not to sign.³¹

Taiwan is therefore treading a tightrope in trying to exert its economic diplomacy and autonomy while enhancing its international status through showcasing its economic model and expanding its economic collaboration and influence as a soft power resource.

Culture

Culture is considered a major soft power resource. In Taiwan, it could include aspects of traditional and

contemporary cultural life that may attract the interest and sympathy of outsiders, e.g. Taiwanese cuisine, fashion, fine arts, performing arts, media productions, and films.

But what is Taiwanese culture precisely and how can it be effective as a soft power tool at this point of time? At the general level, there are competing definitions in Taiwan of the roots of Taiwanese culture that breed some controversy. One argument is that Taiwanese culture is comparable to and rooted in traditional Chinese culture, whereas others claim that it is rooted in the history and traditions of the island nation itself as a multicultural bundle of elements and trends that originate in indigenous, Chinese, Japanese, Dutch and Spanish cultural traditions that are continuously under negotiation and intermingling with each other.³²

Taiwanese pop culture, i.e. its music, films, and entertainment, has captured audiences worldwide and thus functioned as a soft power instrument that could help shape a more positive relationship between Taiwan and other countries, not least China. However, pop culture may also become a source of tension in the cross-straits relationship due to political sensitivities and differing perspectives on identity.³³

These days, Taiwan's cultural soft power seems to trail behind that of South Korea due to the internal identity

schisms and competing political priorities within Taiwan itself. Specific policies to promote cultural exports have not been so successful in recent years. These days, Taiwan largely lacks global household names in entertainment and the arts and the turnover of key cultural industries is smaller than in the past. For example, South Korea's film market was estimated at \$2.2 billion in 2019, compared to Taiwan's \$261 million. South Korea's K-Pop industry has hit consecutive highs in album exports: \$220 million in 2021 and \$233 million in 2022. In contrast, Taiwan's music industry peaked at \$400 million in 1996, fell to under \$100 million in 2010 and has continued downwards since.³⁴

Taiwan's main market for cultural exports has been China. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Taiwanese music and pop culture, the specific Taiwanese marriage between media and pop culture was the mainstream on the Chinese mainland and throughout Asia. Now, Taiwanese pop no longer dominates the mainland's increasingly competitive music market.³⁵

Taiwan's soft power approach has moved from primarily competing with and pushing back against the soft and hard power of China to focusing more on reaching out to politicians (if not political leaders), as well as commercial and social actors in states sympathetic to Taiwan to gain support for Taiwan's claims to autonomy, the status quo, and better international influence and representation.

The cultural arena in its broadest sense offers room for expressing reflections on what it means to be Taiwanese. This is therefore an arena where more could be done to attract the interest of outsiders to explore the 'inner life' of Taiwan, both physically and online.

Women's status and gender equality

Women's status in Taiwan is another soft power 'selling point'. The island nation scores high on gender equality in comparative terms. Taiwan ranks no. 7 globally on the OECD Development Centre's Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) that captures the underlying drivers of gender inequality by measuring discrimination against women in social institutions across 179 countries by taking into account laws, social norms and practices that restrict women's and girls' rights and access to empowerment opportunities and resources, Taiwan's score is 9.2, the world score is 29.2, the OECD score 15.3, China score is 27.1, and Asia's score is 37.2.³⁶

In the recent election (January 2024), women won 47 out of 113 seats in the legislature, constituting 41.59 percent of the members. This compares well to a global average for women's representation in legislative bodies which stands at 26.7 percent and an Asian average of 21.3 percent. Taiwan's president during the last two terms has been a woman, Tsai Ing-wen, who unlike other female presidents/prime ministers in Asia does not come from a political dynasty.³⁷

Education and research

Taiwan is an internationally recognized study destination. In 2022, Taiwan attracted about 103,000 foreign students from across the world. The number was higher than in 2021, but still lower than the about 129,000 foreign students that enrolled in Taiwan's institutions of higher learning in 2019 before COVID.³⁸ Compared to the number of foreign students in China, Taiwan is doing proportionately better in attracting foreign students. In 2018, 492,185 international students enrolled in Chinese universities according to official statistics. Since then, the Chinese government has not published such statistics.³⁹

As Taiwan's population is declining, the island's authorities aim to recruit more new labor force from among foreign students than in the past. By 2030, the aim is to attract 320,000 international students, of whom 210,000 would

stay after graduation for employment, boosting the ratio to 70 percent from 40-50 percent now, according to the Ministry of Education.⁴⁰

A 2022-2023 survey showed that foreign students were primarily drawn to Taiwan by its “friendly and welcoming culture” (44.9 percent), “good academic quality and reputation” (42.7 percent), and “potential for working or settling in Taiwan” (35.8 percent). In contrast, 2020 survey results had shown a greater focus on economic considerations, such as “scholarship availability” and “cost of study”. When it comes to selecting specific universities, the most important factor was the “reputation and characteristics of the institution” (50.5 percent), followed by “courses that appeal to personal interests” (47.9 percent) and “friendly and internationalized campus” (33.2 percent). Overall, according to the Study in Taiwan website, the results demonstrated a shift in emphasis towards cultural and social factors over economic considerations, which contributed to showcase Taiwan’s reputation in academic excellence and its potential as a destination for long-term career development.⁴¹

A Taiwan International Cultural and Educational Exchange Association (AICEE) survey focusing on prospective international students also showed that Taiwan’s educational sector has soft power qualities. The respondents believed that studying in Taiwan holds three major advantages compared to other countries: high-quality education (24.75 percent), a safe living environment (15.4 percent), and the opportunity to learn Chinese (14.47 percent). Other advantages were affordable tuition fees (10.4 percent) and Taiwan’s convenient geographical location (4.49 percent).⁴²

Taiwan’s external Chinese language tuition has a long history and has attracted many foreign students for decades. In recent years, students of Chinese from Europe have gradually become attracted to go to Taiwan to study Chinese. The same phenomenon is observable in the Nordic countries. Traditionally, students have been sent to China rather than to Taiwan for basic language teaching. The tide is not turning, but more students wish to go to Taiwan now. Taiwan has many professional Chinese language tuition centers and courses, and the government has established a Taiwan Mandarin Educational Resources Center to integrate the resources, experiences, and results of Chinese language education in Taiwan to expand recruitment of foreign students to come and learn Chinese

Taiwan has demonstrated that an electoral democracy can work in what China perceives as a Chinese province. Although difficult to measure, Taiwan seems to have more international influence and sympathetic political support today than ever before. Taiwan also continues to be an attractive economic partner with a well-functioning market economy.

in Taiwan, and to lift the international profile of Taiwan’s Chinese language education.⁴³

At the China Studies program at the University of Copenhagen (UCPH), there has always been an option to study Taiwan, but students have generally been sent for basic language training programs in China as well as many have chosen to go for further training in China. After COVID, there has been a broader student interest to explore Taiwan as a study destination, both for language and other education. The numbers are small, but they have increased over time. However, students are still primarily going to Taiwan for advanced language instruction and other China Studies opportunities, including electives within social sciences and humanities.

To sense the atmosphere around being a China Studies student in Taiwan and to understand motivations and opportunities, I recently interviewed a Master student in China Studies at UCPH who went to Taiwan for half a year in 2023. She went to National Taiwan University and combined language training classes with subject matter/content classes. She experienced classes with a mix of foreign students as well as classes with mainly Taiwanese students. The teaching methods were similar to what she was used

to in Denmark. The students often did presentations and engaged in discussions in class. The content and language courses were all politically neutral, and there was no demand for rote learning like she had experienced in China. Teachers collated teaching materials, and there was hardly any use of standard textbooks. There were many spare time activities (including more than 200 student clubs/associations), social integration activities (e.g. visits to local families), and pair-matching with local students. She could choose and pick as much or as little as she wanted from these opportunities. Chinese language teaching was based on un-simplified characters (繁体字) which is an advantage to students who have studied classical Chinese. Not all students at UCPH do that, though. Again, teaching was based on collated texts, many of them from the news media. The students were expected to participate actively, and there were extensive discussions in Chinese with room for diverse positions, also on sensitive topics such as the death penalty and LGBTQ+ issues. Even at this level, there were regular dictation exercises which is normally only practiced in undergraduate studies. Simplified characters (简体字) were acceptable here. The student found that the general study atmosphere was quite free. She financed her program through scholarships from Taiwan and the EU.⁴⁴

Taiwan's language education competes with similar education in China. Enrolment in disciplinary education happens in a global market. Both types of programs are potential soft power resources for Taiwan, as they provide particular, yet recognizable educational programs and approaches situated in a Taiwanese social and cultural context that mainly uses standard Chinese language.

While area studies are generally under scrutiny and increasingly marginalized in many places, they remain extremely relevant and important for our understanding of regions around the world. In Europe, there is a European Association of Taiwan Studies (EATS) which has held 21 annual conferences. There are only few Taiwan Studies Centers, and only one dedicated Taiwan research center in the Nordic countries.⁴⁵

Development of Taiwan Studies at home and abroad could be an important priority for Taiwanese policymakers. Evidently, in the Nordic countries Taiwan studies could become much stronger due to Taiwan's pivotal role in East Asian regional politics and in the U.S.-China global rivalry. Taiwan is also an interesting comparative case when

it comes to understanding developments in China.

Taiwan Studies programs could be supported by teachers seconded from Taiwanese educational institutions and scholarships for students and scholars (for research collaboration). The Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation already plays a role in expanding Taiwan Studies overseas through funding of research projects and fellowships. Until now, the Foundation has also funded two Taiwan Studies centers in Europe (at Charles University in Prague and Eberhard Karls Universität in Tübingen), according to its website.⁴⁶

Green island

Taiwan's leadership has focused on accelerating the so-called 'green island's' green transition for many years. Taiwan is not a member of international environmental and climate change organizations, agreements, or regimes, though.

Taiwan's green policies follow mainstream tendencies internationally. As an example, from 2017, the government started implementing a green finance action plan focusing on introducing market-based mechanisms to speed up the use of green technologies. The plan has since been upgraded and now aims to: encourage financial institutions to finance and invest in areas of sustainable development; to study the scope of sustainable finance; to create a sustainability trading board; improve ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) disclosure content and quality; to establish and strengthen integration platforms for ESG information; and to strengthen financial institutions' management of climate change risks.⁴⁷

Two Danish companies, Ørsted and Copenhagen Infrastructure Partners, have become main partners in Taiwan's green financing schemes as major international offshore developers. According to *Energy Watch*, they are the main propellers behind European investments in Taiwan as their aggregate investments in Taiwan in 2022 amounted to DKK 24.3 billion (EUR 3.26 billion).⁴⁸

Taiwan passed a climate law in 2023 which stipulated that Taiwan should reach net-zero emissions in 2050. The law has become the basis of new legislation and administrative procedures that demarcates the pathways towards achieving the net-zero goal. In 2023, the Taiwanese government elevated its environmental administration to ministry status to enhance its political power. At the same time, the

government established a Climate Change Administration and a Resource Circulation Administration to integrate the handling of environmental issues, including climate change, resource circulation, chemical substance management, environmental quality management, and the strengthening of environmental technology research. The restructuring aimed to promote and implement policies related to the green transition and sustainable development more effectively. Internationally, Taiwan has negotiated with a variety of like-minded countries, including the U.S., EU, and Pacific Island states about alignment and collaboration in environmental and climate change policies, implementation tools, and schemes. Taiwan is also lobbying internationally to be given equal opportunity to participate in the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement, since climate change is not a national but an international issue.⁴⁹ So far, this effort has not been successful.

These developments demonstrate that the Taiwanese government is dedicated to improving the island nation's environment and promote its green transition. Initially, Taiwan's green thrust was exemplified by Taipei's iconic 101 skyscraper. It used to be the world's highest building from 2004-2009 and it has reinforced Taiwan's efforts at pursuing place branding. In 2011, the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED), a globally recognized green building ranking system of the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC), designated 101 as the world's tallest green building. The certification listed three records: the tallest green/energy conservation building in the world (508 meters); the largest green building (about 150,000 square meters); and the highest-use green building (90 tenants). A representative of the owner of the building noted at the award ceremony in 2011 that his company had spent NT\$60 million (US\$2.08 million) and over 10,000 man-hours over the preceding two years to acquire the LEED certification. He also informed that the building had achieved annual savings of 14.4 million kilowatt-hours of electricity, equivalent to NT\$36 million, or an 18 percent energy-saving, over three years.⁵⁰

By pursuing a green transition pathway, Taiwan is building a reputation as an attractive green investment destination and as a green collaborative partner. Given the global focus on the need to address climate change and despite Taiwan's exclusion from relevant international collaboration in the field, Taiwan can undoubtedly use its green transition focus as a soft power resource.

Competition with China for Soft Power

Whereas Taiwan is in an unequal, if not impossible, position in its international relations due to the claims, intimidation, and existential threat from China, the two nations have long been competing for international attention and recognition with their soft power resources and diplomatic tools.⁵¹ I have not intended to compare these resources systematically here. But it is well known that China has been quite successful for many years in garnering global political interest and support for its visions, values, political position, and market attractiveness through its political and economic diplomacy.⁵²

In recent years, however, relations between China and the world's leading democracies have soured. These countries have not withdrawn from their China relations or questioned the 'one-China policy' officially, but they have become more interested in and supportive of Taiwan's position than in the past.

Beijing's rhetorical emphasis on building a "harmonious world" (with its associated slogans) has diluted amid greater emphasis on protecting China's "core interests" (核心利益 *hexin liyi*), of which reunification with Taiwan is the top priority and a so-called bottom 'red line', i.e. where China will allow no external interference.

Taiwan's soft power approach—based on calculations of interest, including national security, great power rivalry and access to strategic resources—has moved from primarily competing with and pushing back against the soft and hard power of China to focusing more on reaching out to politicians (if not political leaders), as well as commercial and social actors in states sympathetic to Taiwan to gain support for Taiwan's claims to autonomy, the *status quo*, and better international influence and representation.⁵³

Even if Taiwan's diplomatic relations are dwindling and Taiwan has not won more seats as a full member or observer in international organizations, especially under the UN system, it would be wrong to discard the potential of Taiwan's soft power. It is particularly evident that Taiwan has been smart in using the island's democratic transition as an effective soft power tool to underpin its autonomous status and to attract support for the *status quo* position at a time when many countries are reassessing their relationship with China. Taiwan has demonstrated that an electoral

democracy can work in what China perceives as a Chinese province. Although difficult to measure, Taiwan seems to have more international influence and sympathetic political support today than ever before. Taiwan also continues to be an attractive economic partner with a well-functioning market economy. This is appreciated beyond democratic countries.

The other soft power resources listed here may be weaker, but they certainly supplement and support Taiwan's efforts to present and represent itself, not as an alternative to China, but rather as a national unit that deserves respect and support for its current position.

Taiwan's Gains

As it is difficult to measure the effects of soft power accurately, one could look at Taiwan's gains as an alternative. Here I will use the EU as an example.

The European Parliament (EP) has taken a very strong interest in Taiwan affairs and explicitly supports Taiwan's democratic political order. In 2021, the EP called Taiwan a "like-minded" EU partner "that share[s] common values of freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law". In 2023, the EP said that "Taiwan is a key EU partner and democratic ally in the Indo-Pacific region" and urged "the EU and its Member States to intensify cooperation and pursue a comprehensive enhanced partnership with Taiwan".⁵⁴ There have been several mutual visits, and most recently, Taiwan's Vice-President elect, Hsiao Bi-Khim (Xiao Meiqin), paid a visit to the EP and three EU countries as the first Taiwanese Vice-President elect ever. During her talks, she focused on Taiwan's four main pillars of maintaining regional stability: strengthening national defense, enhancing economic security, cooperating with democratic partners and safeguarding the cross-strait *status quo*.⁵⁵

Whereas many European politicians view Taiwan's political development over the last decades favorably and have become gradually more articulate in their support for Taiwan, the EU Commission has not changed its position on the 'one-China policy'. But Taiwan was acknowledged as a partner on its own merits in the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy in 2021, especially in relation to maintenance of security in the Taiwan Strait. Because of Russia's war against Ukraine, the EU has become more aware of its own vulnerabilities

in the face of China's global dominance in key productive sectors and value chains and its assertiveness in the region, not least in relation to Taiwan and the territorial conflicts in the South China Sea. It has, therefore, taken a fresh interest in Asia and the Pacific. Brussels now considers Taiwan important as a resource to strengthen the EU's economic resilience in relation to China given what the EU finds to be Chinese economic coercion.⁵⁶ At the same time, it is noted that bilateral collaboration within 'permitted' areas such as trade and investment, comprises extensive human rights dialogues, joint research and innovation programs under the Horizon Europe framework, institutionalized cultural exchange (e.g. film festivals), and a variety of (Erasmus-funded) student exchanges are being expanded and solidified.⁵⁷

Over the years, Taiwan has built better political relationships with many European countries despite pressure from China on these countries to refrain from doing so. The souring of relations between China and the EU and many of its member-countries over the last few years plays a role in this change of winds. As an example, China's use of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to build bridges to and networks in Europe so as to pave the way for Chinese investments and influence has been met with increasing skepticism and criticism. The BRI in Europe has not become the success that China hoped for and has ground to a halt in many European countries.⁵⁸

One illustrative example is the Czech Republic, which was originally viewed by China as a strategic bridgehead into Eastern Europe and the EU. China made golden promises of big investments during the initial honeymoon period between 2015 and 2017, when the two presidents, Milos Zeman and Xi Jinping, exchanged state visits. Ye Jianming, Chairman of the private company CEFC, was one of the key players in China's BRI campaign in the Czech Republic. CEFC had developed fast from being a small energy company in remote Fujian Province to becoming a national investment company with a broad portfolio, including energy, real estate, media, and sports. Ye Jianming was at the forefront of a business delegation accompanying Xi Jinping to the Czech Republic in 2016 and was a lead investor in the Czech BRI program until 2018, when he was detained in China on suspicion of corruption. He has not been heard of since. His company's assets in the Czech Republic were quickly divested to more reliable Chinese state companies.⁵⁹

Apart from investments, the BRI promotion campaign focused on deploying Chinese soft power in the Czech Republic and—in a wider perspective—in Eastern Europe, if not the entire EU. But there were fewer projects on the ground than expected, and Ye Jianming's arrest was a glaring loss of face to Xi Jinping and his Czech counterpart who had secretly hired Ye as an economic advisor, for which he was later criticized heavily in the Czech Republic.⁶⁰

While this happened, the Czech public debate about China and its politics in the Czech Republic became increasingly negative and China is now considered one of the most unpopular countries in the world in Czechia. Effectively, China did so poorly in its public diplomacy in the Czech Republic that its soft power mission collapsed.⁶¹

In the meantime, many Czech politicians warmed up to closer relations with Taiwan due to a sense of closer political affinity. Successive chairpersons of the Czech parliament have visited Taiwan with parliamentary delegations and the city council of Prague dropped its twin-cities relations with Beijing and set up a twin-cities relationship with Taipei instead. The Chinese side then cancelled a decision to lend a panda to Prague Zoo as originally planned, while Prague received a pangolin from Taiwan instead to replace the missing panda after Prague had signed its twin-cities agreement with Taipei.⁶²

These events were an unexpected and unqualified soft power success for Taiwan, one amongst many in relation to Europe in recent years.

Perspectives

As a diplomatic tool, soft power aims to convey the core values and ideology of a country and to serve as its front window abroad and thus also as a branding device. However, in the case of Taiwan, there are limits to how soft power can be used due to the lack of international recognition of its sovereignty.

Yet, Taiwan's soft power has been deployed with increasing success by a variety of state and non-state actors across different domains discussed here, such as political system and values, economic model, national identity, education, culture, and green transition. Through these, Taiwan has won recognition and political support internationally,

especially from like-minded countries. However, most countries are still wary of the reactions from the Chinese leadership in Beijing, where their diplomatic relations with China are nested.

Therefore, Taiwan's gain is more legitimacy and support in relation to its claim to exist as an autonomous territory under the *status quo* arrangement, but not for its independence. The increasing support from like-minded countries as well as from the U.S. as its prime strategic ally may help impress the need for a peaceful solution to the unification issue. However, it is a long-term process and it is still unclear to what extent Taiwan's growing international recognition can deter a Chinese military intervention to settle the unification issue once and for all.

In the final analysis, in order not to lose the domestic support of its own electorate, it may be argued that any government in Taiwan must strike a balance between rapprochement with mainland China on the one hand and the defense of Taiwan's dignity and autonomy on the other.⁶³

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