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The EU's approach to Taiwan: Time to move from gratitude to support

By Zsuzsa Anna Ferenczy

9DASHLINE (18.09.2020) – <https://bit.ly/32Uy6NM> – “The European Union thanks Taiwan for its donation of 5.6 million masks to help fight the #coronavirus”, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen tweeted on 2 April. The fight against the global health crisis has offered a unique opportunity for the EU to upgrade its relations with Taiwan, as it rethinks its ties with the People’s Republic of China and seeks to diversify relations in the Indo-Pacific.

Cooperation in health security is the right place to progress relations from simple gratitude toward more substantial support for Taiwan's inclusion in the international community.

Through its efficient response to the corona virus pandemic, Taiwan has yet again demonstrated that it can bring an original contribution to the security and stability of the Indo-Pacific, and beyond, to the international community. As of this week, Taiwan has registered 500 confirmed cases and 7 casualties, which brought it international praise as number one in global statistics in containing the virus.

Yet, adhering to Beijing's one-China policy, most often out of fear of upsetting China, the world has ignored the success of the Taiwan Model, downplaying its relevance to global efforts to fight the pandemic. Ironically, in spite of widely shared calls for global cooperation, the place that has been most successful at protecting its people from the disease does not have a seat at the virus talks.

Taiwan should not be excluded from global cooperation and response to the pandemic

Building on its gratitude towards Taiwan for its provision of medical supplies, the EU and its member states should meaningfully push for Taiwan's inclusion in international efforts. More importantly, the EU should support Taiwan's participation in international organisations, its inclusion in the Indo-Pacific debate, and in its own efforts to develop an Indo-Pacific strategy.

If given the chance, Taiwan is ready to contribute. But Taiwan must also continue to actively pursue collaboration opportunities with the EU and its member states. The establishment of a comprehensive cooperation framework between the European Commission and member states, and Taiwan would enable the joint funding of research to combat COVID-19.

It is clear that both these calls for action raise significant challenges for the EU and its member states, both structurally and politically, in the midst of US-China competition locked in a downward spiral. Yet, if it wants to play a bigger 'geopolitical' role in the world, the EU must rethink its approach to Taiwan as it toughens its approach to China.

The EU's 'One-China policy' – what about Taiwan?

Following its 'One-China' policy, the EU does not have diplomatic or formal political relations with Taiwan. And this is certainly how Beijing wants things to stay. Beijing considers Taiwan an inalienable part of China, one of its three most sensitive domestic taboos, along with Tiananmen and Tibet. It therefore comes as no surprise that Chinese President Xi Jinping warned Taiwan that unification is the ultimate goal of any talks over its future.

China and the EU are strategic partners locked in an asymmetric relationship, burdened by lack of economic and political reciprocity. The EU has labeled China a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance. Yet, as a result of the EU's own structural constraints, member states continue their individual trade and economic – often very

lucrative – relations with Beijing. They do so because they can, as sovereign countries, making the EU's common foreign policy common in name only. This remains the major stumbling block and limits the EU from achieving a united front. The bigger the Chinese investment is in an EU member state, the stronger China's leverage over that member state has turned out to be.

At the same time with maintaining its 'One-China' policy, EU leaders made it clear that the EU has an interest in developing closer relations with Taiwan. In fact, the EU is Taiwan's largest foreign investor and the two consider each other like-minded partners on values such as human rights, democracy and the rule of law. This means that the EU has economic interests in Taiwan, interests that it must protect. But beyond trade, it is closer cooperation with Taiwan in research, climate change and education, that adds value to the EU's search for like-minded partners in developing its Indo-Pacific strategy and diversifying relationships, as it grapples with China's rise.

Towards an EU Strategy on the Indo-Pacific

Today the EU does not have an Indo-Pacific strategy. Yet, interest in the concept of the Indo-Pacific to shape the EU's geopolitical narrative is growing. This is indicative of the EU's awareness of a new security and political reality in the region. This requires coordination with such like-minded partners as Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, New Zealand, Singapore, and Taiwan. As the pandemic has demonstrated, the need for the EU to decrease its dependence on China is urgent. A bigger challenge now lies in finding common ground inside a fragmented EU to build a common vision

towards the region, one that accommodates member states' differences and protects the EU's interests in the region.

That France, and more recently Germany, have both developed their own inclusive visions towards the Indo-Pacific is a positive step. For the EU, having two of its founding member states and top traders with China embrace the concept of the Indo-Pacific is deeply significant. In particular, Germany's move to release its guidelines under its EU Council presidency suggests Berlin could make a real push towards an EU-wide approach to the region. Embracing Taiwan's democratic model of excellence centered on the respect for human rights with its technologically advanced economy, in addition to its critical geostrategic location off the coast of China can only benefit these efforts.

A shifting policy towards China?

To assess where the EU currently stands, several recent developments should be considered. The September visit of a 90-member delegation of Czech civic and political leaders to Taiwan can be considered a recognition of Taiwan as a full-fledged democracy, and an invitation for increased cooperation. It could also set a precedent for other EU member states. The visit angered Beijing, with China's foreign minister warning that Czech senate president Miloš Vystrčil would pay a "heavy price" for the visit. This statement saw his German counterpart Heiko Maas reciprocate and, in turn, warned China against making such threats against a member state.

While not much has been achieved at the latest virtual EU-China summit, it allowed the EU side to appear more united and be more assertive towards China. "Europe needs to be a player, not a playing-field", President Michel stressed. Before the summit, on September 10 a group of 63 Members of the European Parliament addressed a formal letter to Council President Michel, Commission President von der Leyen and German Chancellor Merkel asking them to bring up China's human rights atrocities at the summit. And, on the eve of the summit, in a joint address several Members of the European Parliament and China experts, and the former German Ambassador to China urged the EU to revisit its one-China policy and support Taiwan.

The European Parliament has long called for Taiwan's "meaningful participation in international organisations, mechanisms and activities". This should continue more forcefully and through the EU's foreign policy. Brussels has long used tough words, without meaningful follow up. Managing cooperation with Taiwan for mutual interests while limiting pressure from China will demand a clever approach. It is now up to Brussels to take these calls seriously and consider Taiwan while revisiting its approach to China. It should be particularly helpful that prioritising global engagement is a common EU-Taiwan aspiration. Taiwanese President Tsai's geopolitical strategy seeks to reinforce existing relationships with allies, with a focus on people-to-people contacts as laid down in the New Southbound Policy.

Taiwan can help. Taiwan is helping.

Taiwan's response to the pandemic is built on '5 Ts': transparency, transportation controls, tracking, testing and technology. As such, the pandemic has given Taiwan a critical

opportunity to test its commitment to digital democracy under the guidance of Digital Minister Audrey Tang. The public can interact with the government on vTaiwan, an online consultation process for open discussion to build consensus on public policies. Such cooperative strategy has secured the government collaborative trust, a valuable achievement Taiwan can bring to reinforce public health security in the region.

Such contributions would complement already existing EU-Taiwan cooperation in research and innovation. It would also add value to the EU's ongoing cooperation with partners in the Indo-Pacific. The EU and Taiwan face similar societal challenges – ageing societies, sustainable food security, climate change and energy needs. Successful cooperation in the field of ICT, smart industries, 5G and a circular economy between the two sides has occurred through joint business and technological endeavors, such as collaboration sealed in an MOU between Silicon Europe Worldwide and the Taiwan External Trade Development Council (TAITRA).

Greater cooperation of this nature would be mutually beneficial: it would help protect Taiwan's enviable innovation advantage by tackling challenges related to the internationalisation of its innovation firms, while helping the EU strengthen its own innovation agenda. As such, cooperation between Taiwan's Asia Silicon Valley established in 2016 and Silicon Europe would enhance the startup ecosystem for both side.

The EU's Research and Innovation framework, Horizon 2020, already offers Taiwanese researchers a unique gateway to Europe's world-leading scientific networks. While previous projects have enjoyed some level of Taiwanese participation

there is still a lot more that can be done to improve research relations. Europe's participation in the Taipei International Book Exhibition, or the European Film Festival Taiwan (TEFF), as well as the European Education Fair in Taiwan (EEFT) are just a few examples of EU-Taiwan collaboration to further build on.

If given the chance, Taiwan is ready to contribute. But Taiwan must also continue to actively pursue collaboration opportunities with the EU and its member states. The establishment of a comprehensive cooperation framework between the European Commission and member states, and Taiwan would enable the joint funding of research to combat COVID-19. This would be a natural follow up to the recent video conference between EU officials, including the European Economic and Trade Office (EETO) in Taiwan and Taiwan's top research institute, Academia Sinica. Setting up such a framework would help the two sides move closer, while helping the EU to move up from gratitude to support for Taiwan's international participation.

Finally, Taipei must continue to lobby stakeholder countries in the Indo-Pacific on all levels. But while the US remains Taiwan's key security ally and a like-minded partner, the EU and Taiwan need to pay more attention to each other. They both need to prioritise the health security of their people. Through the Taiwan Model, Taiwan can help and Taiwan is helping.

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