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TAIWAN: The EU and Taiwan, partners for human rights and the defence of democracy

The EU and Taiwan, partners for human rights and the defence of democracy

By Dr. Zsuzsa Anna Ferenczy (*) for Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (17.02.2022) – Against the backdrop of turbulent times for international peace and security, Taiwan’s global profile has increased enormously. Today, democratic countries around

the world perceive Taiwan as a vibrant democracy, and a like-minded and critical partner in the fight against authoritarianism. It is no exaggeration to claim that in the three decades since it made the transition to democracy, Taiwan has never been as international as today. This positive change in perceptions means much more than just enhanced visibility. It means a heightened awareness of Taiwan's geostrategic relevance to international security and prosperity, as well as to the protection of democracy.

Two factors have played a key role in bringing about this change: one, Taiwan's technological prowess and key role in the global manufacturing of advanced semiconductors, and two, its democratic resilience. In reality, however, neither of these factors would carry such weight if not for the authoritarian threat posed by the People's Republic of China (PRC) – on Taiwan – and far beyond the region.

China in the world

At the centre of globalization, Beijing has been amassing wealth as a way to develop its international power and project influence. It has continuously worked to discredit Taiwan's democracy, actively shrinking its international space and seeking to isolate it from a deeply interconnected world. So far, however, despite efforts to attempt to persuade and more brazenly coerce, Beijing has failed to advance its **objectives**.

In assessing its development over the past four decades, experts have described China as a **power trader**, steering its economy towards comprehensive national power. The central

authorities have been supporting domestic companies to adopt superior technologies in order to dominate the most advanced industrial sectors in the country, but also worldwide.

Conducting political influence operations and using centralized control, in this process Beijing has prioritized investment in technology in order to help advance its industrial and military capacities, including via **civil-military fusion**. With the objective to become a dominant technology power by 2049, Beijing has sought to reduce China's dependence on foreign technology. Yet, unable to manufacture the most advanced semiconductors itself, China **relies** heavily on Taiwan's microchips.

Therefore, upholding its false **claim** over Taiwan – as its own territory – and **aggressively** imposing its one China principle in its relations with other countries, remain key strategic elements in Beijing's agenda regarding Taiwan. While the PRC continues to pose an existential threat to Taiwan, in reality China's assertiveness is now an issue for countries around the world, which has had a negative impact on its global image.

China's deteriorating global image

The paradigm shift in how democracies perceive their relations with China has intensified as a result of Beijing's pursuit of its **global ambitions** at the expense of transparency and accountability, its domestic **crackdown** on fundamental freedoms, its **refusal** of international cooperation in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as its efforts to shape the international narrative on human rights and overall on

global norms, while supporting international institutions and agreements only if these align with its own goals.

For decades, Beijing has been using a mix of economic incentives and coercion to intimidate, punish and threaten the people of Taiwan, and weaken their trust in their democratically elected leaders. China's leaders fear the appeal of liberal democracy as a system of governance which places individual human dignity at the centre, in stark contrast to the narrow and claustrophobic system of authoritarian rule.

'Taiwan can help'

In the face of mounting pressure, Taiwan has sought to present itself to the world as a vibrant and democratic Indo-Pacific partner who stands ready and willing to help find global solutions to global problems, and – critically – defend democracy everywhere.

With democracy under assault as a political system that values transparency, rule of law, good governance and human rights, Taiwan's readiness to contribute to democratic resilience is both timely and vital.

The world has taken note that Taiwan sits on the frontline of authoritarianism, whereby not only its own democracy, but democracy at large is under threat. It is in this context that Taiwan's relevance, its global profile and, most importantly, its readiness to defend democracy must be appreciated.

Authoritarian actors, with Russia and China at the forefront, have invested in sophisticated capabilities to discredit democracy, mutually reinforcing each other and exploiting the interconnectedness between nations. While EU member states, and the bloc as a whole, have for long failed to agree on a joint vision and effective strategy to counter authoritarian threats, a strong narrative has gradually taken shape, indicative of an emerging convergence on the need to take adequate measures to protect European interests.

New narrative, new approach?

In 2019 the European Union (EU) labeled China a “**systemic rival**” promoting alternative models of governance. In June 2020, for the first time, the EU named China, in addition to Russia, as a source of online disinformation linked to the coronavirus aimed at undermining Western democracies, sowing internal divisions and projecting a distorted view of China’s response to the pandemic.

In 2022, for the first time NATO countries agreed that China now poses “systemic challenges” to the West. They also **stressed** that the deepening partnership between the PRC and Russia and their mutually reinforcing attempts to undercut the rules-based international order run counter to democratic countries’ values and interests.

But it wasn’t until Russia’s unprovoked war against Ukraine, **launched** on February 24, 2022, that EU member states and their democratic allies converged strategically in an effective effort to defend democracy. Taiwan has since joined these

efforts, seeing the existential struggle of Ukraine as their own, against their own authoritarian neighbor.

Taiwan as a key partner

Taiwan is a thriving democracy with a strong civil society, albeit not without its own challenges and difficulties. Given its unique situation in the international community, Taiwan has been denied opportunities to participate in multilateral or bilateral international treaties but has found creative ways to develop its own mechanisms to monitor the state of human rights in the country.

The government has been periodically publishing national reports while civil society has been issuing their shadow reports, with the NGO coalition founded in 2009, the [Covenants Watch](#), playing the leading role. The government has been also inviting international human rights experts to come review the state of human rights inside the country. Through [human rights diplomacy](#), Taiwan has sought to connect with the rest of the democratic world.

Nonetheless, significant challenges remain to ensure Taiwan becomes an even more open and democratic society, with genuine plurality in culture, religion and perspectives in politics; areas such as transitional justice, judicial reform, the rights of migrant workers including in the fishing industry as well as domestic workers, women's rights and gender equality, still need ongoing improvement.

The EU and Taiwan understand that their prosperity and security are closely intertwined. Democracy promotion and the respect of human rights are already at the core of their bilateral cooperation. The two have regularly held human rights consultations, and continue to [cooperate](#).

In this spirit, in their first stand-alone [report](#) on Taiwan in October 2021, Members of the European Parliament urged that Taiwan be considered as “a key partner and democratic ally in the Indo-Pacific on its own merit, as a robust democracy and technologically advanced economy that could contribute to maintaining a rules-based order in the middle of an intensifying great power rivalry”.

Opportunities to defend democracy

Going forward together with democratic allies, the EU must lead global efforts to support Taiwan’s democracy, as they stand united to defend Ukraine. Regular bilateral exchanges between the EU as a bloc and Taiwan, and also between individual member states and Taiwan, have contributed to each other’s democratic resilience. These exchanges must continue – and intensify.

The 2021 EP resolution on Taiwan also urged the EU to further promote youth exchanges with Taiwan through initiatives such as the working holiday, the Erasmus programs or the Taiwan-Europe Connectivity Scholarship, and explore opportunities for cooperation in higher education with the goal of strengthening Chinese and Taiwanese expertise in Europe and contributing to a better understanding of Europe in Taiwan. There should be no

delay in following up on these opportunities.

Taiwan's authorities must ensure that democracy and human rights education, and international exchanges in this area, receive as much attention and financial support as talent cultivation in technology and technical cooperation, the kind [Lithuania and Taiwan](#) recently agreed on. After all, investing in systems to ensure society understands and appreciates the value of a democratic way of life is the best investment in democracy itself, and ultimately serves to deepen national resilience.

'Democracy academies'

Taiwan already has its "[semiconductor academies](#)", which follow up on previous government proposals to support collaboration between the industry and academia. Establishing "democracy academies" across Taiwan, funded by the government and supported with scholarship programs from high school all the way to university, would contribute to Taiwan's resilience. Taiwan's own academic community must be well equipped and prepared to help society and the government to address the obstacles that hinder Taiwan's further opening up and its better alignment with international human rights standards.

To secure its further internationalization and capitalize on the support it has recently seen, Taiwan must invest in democracy and human rights education. This is vital to sustain its existence. Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen recently [warned](#) that the danger of authoritarian regimes corroding democratic institutions, and tarnishing human rights and civic space

cannot be ignored. Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine has shown that dictatorships will do whatever it takes to achieve their goal of expansionism, she stressed. Her warning should spur Taiwan, Ukraine and democracies across the world forward to coordinate efforts in the defence of democracy.

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