

## Time for a positive EU policy on Taiwan

***The EU must have its own Taiwan policy, not one that is determined in Washington and controlled by Beijing.***

By Zsuzsa Anna Ferenczy

The Diplomat (21.10.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3mvudFX> - The outbreak of the coronavirus in Wuhan, China, has amplified geopolitical uncertainty. It has made us all recognize how interdependent and vulnerable we are in the face of global threats, making international cooperation vital. This suggests that no country and no nation should be isolated from global efforts to address the crisis.

As elementary a statement as this might sound, for Taiwan, [bullied](#) and [blocked](#) by China from the rest of the world, increased international cooperation remains a distant goal.

With the United States and China intensifying their great power [rivalry](#), further escalation of tension in bilateral relations is to be expected in the Indo-Pacific. The United States is just a few weeks away from what looks to be its most contested presidential election in decades. Chinese President Xi Jinping keeps [tightening](#) domestic control and projecting power beyond China's borders, while facing serious internal [challenges](#) to his authority.

In the meantime, the European Union [risks](#) being caught in the middle.

It is unavoidable that escalation in U.S.-China competition will increase Taiwan's vulnerability. For Taiwan, the risk China poses is real and imminent. President Tsai Ing-wen has [called for](#) a coalition of countries to take a stand against "authoritarian aggression" from China.

To that end, turning Taiwan into a bargaining chip must be avoided and ruled out as an option.

Taiwan, a thriving democracy in its own right, should not be used for leverage. Instead, the world should take Taiwan seriously on its own merits and strengths in global health, and beyond. As Taiwan's former ambassador to the EU, Dr. Michael Y.M. Kau points out, the EU, as a normative power and a like-minded partner, should feel encouraged to nurture Taiwan's soft power in three main areas, namely public health, technology and democracy.

The regional volatility leaves the EU as the only global actor in the position to bring some sober sense into the Beijing-Washington-Taipei trilateral dynamic. But the EU, as the world's largest [trading](#) bloc, with the largest [procurement](#) market globally, and a leader in international investment, must first understand that it has more leverage both over the U.S. and China than it assumes.

Europe must also remember it has its own regional interests to protect. In the [words](#) of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, the EU should apply its existing power in a more targeted way in areas where European interests are concerned: "Europe must also learn the language of power," she stressed.

Having the United States as a close but now [difficult](#) ally, and China as at once a strategic partner and [systemic rival](#), Brussels must be more ambitious. By bringing clear-headed, positive thinking into the trilateral dynamic, the EU could help turn the narrative away from hostility and toward dialogue. This is vital to help defuse U.S.-China tensions and bring the

people of Taiwan the respect they deserve. This would also help the world to avoid a terrible war.

The moment for the EU to play this role is now. EU High Representative Josep Borrell [said](#) that in the rebirth of geostrategic competition, the EU “has the option of becoming a player, a true geostrategic actor, or being mostly the playground.” The EU has understood that global challenges can’t be solved by the world fragmenting into two adversarial camps. It is now taking measures to [rethink](#) its China policy, seeking to [project](#) a “strong, clear and unified voice in its approach.”

A vital part of this process must be to rethink its approach to Taiwan. In other words, the EU must have its own Taiwan policy, not one that is determined in Washington and controlled by Beijing. It is a good moment to recall that the EU already [committed](#) “to pursue a strategic course of action and increase its capacity to act autonomously to safeguard its interests, uphold its values and way of life, and help shape the global future.” Embracing Taiwan, including through [promoting](#) “practical solutions regarding Taiwan’s participation in international frameworks,” fits right into this commitment.

In April this year, von der Leyen [thanked](#) Taiwan for its donation of 5.6 million masks to help fight COVID-19. Brussels should now [move](#) from gratitude to meaningful support for Taiwan. It should mobilize member states to draw lessons from Taiwan’s effective handling of the pandemic, including its success in building public trust with its citizens and in harnessing digital platforms to keep the public informed and updated. In the words of Digital Minister Audrey Tang, Taiwanese people [see](#) democracy itself as a set of technologies that they can improve, so that “it’s not just about a few people talking to millions of people but rather listening to millions of people.” As Europe struggles with a [second wave](#) of the pandemic, this approach could now serve as inspiration.

Furthermore, by diversifying supply chains with help from Taiwan, the EU could address the asymmetry and lack of balance in its relations with China. This, as some in the EU fear, and as Beijing continues to insist, should not be perceived to compromise relations with China. The EU must choose reason in pursuing global ambitions, something both Washington and Beijing seem to neglect.

Although isolated, Taiwan has successfully [contained](#) the spread of COVID-19. But in order to achieve this, the island nation has had to practically quarantine itself from the rest of the world. With its already abnormal international status, sustained isolation will make prospects for Taiwan’s integration even more difficult. Taiwan’s future is therefore even more uncertain than most of us had assumed in a pre-pandemic world.

Based on medical professionalism and science, not populist politics, and rooted in transparent governance and public trust, the [Taiwan Model](#) could serve as a soft power tool for Taiwan’s international integration. Showing support for Taiwan’s soft power is the EU’s moral duty as a normative power. Embracing Taiwan on its own merits would be a win-win for all: for the EU and the U.S., in upholding a rules-based international order; for Taiwan, in receiving the respect and support it deserves; and for China, in developing as the peaceful global power the world wants to see, and the people of China deserve.

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