

## EU-Taipei ties rise as China falters

Written by Huynh Tam Sang and Tran Hoang Nhung  
Friday, 10 September 2021 05:19

---

While China is losing its luster in Europe, Taiwan's importance is growing in the eyes of European countries. Against the backdrop of Beijing's worsening image, European states should work with Taipei to develop a robust and sustainable relationship.

Amid Taiwan's vaccine shortage, European partners donated COVID-19 vaccines to help Taiwan. Lithuania was the first EU member state to donate vaccines to Taiwan, with 20,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine. The Czech Republic followed with a donation of 30,000 doses of the Moderna vaccine last month. Poland donated 400,000 AstraZeneca doses this month and Slovakia has pledged to donate 10,000 doses.

Central and eastern European countries' assistance are reciprocal gestures for Taiwan's donation of masks and personal protective equipment last year, which is a show of friendship, but falls short of formal diplomatic relations.

In a January report, the European Parliament affirmed that it would "remain vigilant regarding the situation in Taiwan and the upgrading of political and trade relations between the EU and the Republic of China (Taiwan)," and called for "the EU and its Member States to revisit their engagement policy with Taiwan." It also reiterated "its support for Taiwan's meaningful participation in international organizations, mechanisms and activities," such as an observer at the World Health Assembly.

The report expressed concern over China's increasingly provocative maneuvers aimed at changing the "status quo" in the Taiwan Strait, and warned "against Chinese efforts towards stronger power projection in the region, particularly in Taiwan." The annual report demonstrated the EU's consideration of expanding and deepening EU-Taiwan cooperation.

On Wednesday last week, the European Parliament Committee on Foreign Affairs hailed Taiwan as a "key partner" in the Indo-Pacific region, and urged the EU to push for stronger ties with Taiwan amid China's rise.

In addition to vaccine donations, there are cooperative arrangements between Taiwan and these countries. A case in point is the arrangement between Taiwan and Slovakia on Judicial

## EU-Taipei ties rise as China falters

Written by Huynh Tam Sang and Tran Hoang Nhung  
Friday, 10 September 2021 05:19

---

Cooperation in Criminal Matters signed last month. Taiwan concluded a similar agreement with Poland in June 2019. These arrangements help institutionalize cooperative activities in combating transnational crime, showcasing Taiwan's shared common values with the European countries, such as democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

While Taiwan — a lighthouse of buttressing success in promoting democratic values and taming COVID-19 — is receiving attention from European countries, China, in stark contrast, is losing its economic game among them.

In 2012, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched the 17+1 initiative to boost trade and investment with 17 central and eastern European countries. For these nations, as *The Diplomat* reported in February, China's initiative "is just an annual summit featuring a plethora of unfulfilled promises and projects," and there has been a slowdown in trade with China since 2012. "In contrast to its oft-repeated claim of 'win-win' cooperation, some believe China is pursuing an assertive strategy of 'divide and conquer' designed to benefit China at Europe's expense," a September 2019 *Europe-Asia Studies* article said.

In March, the Lithuanian parliament opted to leave China's 17+1 mechanism, and in the words of Lithuanian Minister of Foreign Affairs Gabrielius Landsbergis, the China-led format brought Lithuania "almost no benefits."

Meanwhile, economic relations between Taiwan and central and eastern European countries have grown significantly. Trade between Taiwan and the Czech Republic totaled nearly US\$820 million in 2019. Last year, trade between Taiwan and Slovakia, Poland and Hungary amounted to US\$102.17 million, US\$1.23 billion and US\$963 million respectively.

As central and eastern European countries are less economically dependent on China, they might not be as impacted by China's heavy sanctions. In March, Lithuania announced its decision to open a trade representative office in Taiwan, and promised to allow Taiwan to set up a similar office under the name "Taiwanese Representative Office in Lithuania."

The confident move sparked condemnation from Beijing, which criticized the nation for contravening its "one China" principle and demanded that Vilnius withdraw its ambassador to Beijing. The government-backed *Global Times* said that "Lithuania has gone too far and

## EU-Taipei ties rise as China falters

Written by Huynh Tam Sang and Tran Hoang Nhung  
Friday, 10 September 2021 05:19

---

touched the most sensitive hot spot in East Asia.”

The Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs then stood up to China’s intimidation by reiterating that “in line with the one China policy Lithuania is determined to pursue mutually beneficial ties with Taiwan like many other countries in the European Union and the rest of the world do.”

Some EU member states, notably Germany, are dependent on the Chinese economy. In 2016, China became Germany’s top trading partner, and has since retained that spot. Germany predominately relies on the Chinese market for its automotive industry, and electronics, medical and chemical products. About 40 percent of Germany’s Volkswagen vehicles are sold in China. As a result, Germany has been reluctant to collaborate with Taiwan, given its concerns about economic retaliation from China.

European countries and Taiwan are well-positioned to foster their relations. Beijing’s “wolf warrior” diplomacy and lack of transparency regarding the origins of COVID-19 have weakened Sino-European ties, while European countries have recognized the importance of Taiwan’s semiconductor industry and sought to work with Taiwanese high-tech firms. Taiwan’s success in handling the pandemic impressed European countries, and its commitment to a free, open and prosperous Indo-Pacific region through its New Southbound Policy — a flagship foreign policy initiative launched by President Tsai Ing-wen’s (蔡英文) administration in 2016 — helped enhance Taiwan’s reputation among European states.

The EU should prioritize economic cooperation and cultural exchanges with Taiwan. The 27-country bloc is Taiwan’s fifth-largest trading partner and biggest foreign investor, while Taiwan ranks as the EU’s sixth-largest trading partner in Asia. European governments should capitalize on this positive trend by opening doors for more Taiwanese investment and collaboration in practical fields of cooperation.

For example, European countries could work with Taiwan on the green energy sector, in which the government says it has put considerable effort to “augment the proportion of renewable energy in electricity generation to 20 percent by the year 2025.” Energy cooperation is a business opportunity for both sides.

To enhance mutual understanding and foster people-to-people connections, European

## EU-Taipei ties rise as China falters

Written by Huynh Tam Sang and Tran Hoang Nhung  
Friday, 10 September 2021 05:19

---

countries should invest in city-to-city diplomacy by signing agreements with local governments in Taiwan and encouraging bilateral visits. Virtual exhibitions, educational discussions and cultural fairs could be utilized to promote mutual sharing and enhance cross-regional perceptions. Taiwan is one of the most progressive Asian societies and could serve as good leverage for the EU's engagement with the Indo-Pacific region.

European countries might need to collaborate with Taiwan on less sensitive areas of Taiwan's soft power, namely public health, technology and democracy, and foster information exchange in global health, maritime affairs, anti-piracy and beyond. Both sides could collaborate on viable schemes, such as coping with climate change and sharing experiences in tackling the pandemic.

European countries are forging relations with Taiwan while re-evaluating their ties with China. As the EU has not reached "the China consensus" and concrete ways to support Taiwan, Taipei should not expect a dramatic change in the Europe-Taiwan relationship in the coming years. Instead, Taiwan should focus on tightening diplomatic and economic relations with central and eastern European countries, and seek cooperation with like-minded partners. Perhaps a good start for both sides would be with a step-by-step approach to enhance mutual awareness and collaboration on less sensitive issues.

*Huynh Tam Sang is an international relations lecturer and research fellow at the Center for International Studies at Ho Chi Minh City University of Social Sciences and Humanities. Tran Hoang Nhung is a research assistant at the center.*

Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2021/09/10](#)