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Asia in 2020: Coping with COVID-19 and other crises

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Nicola Mocci
Filippo Boni

viella



CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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Articles meant for publication should be sent to Michelguglielmo Torri (mg.torri@gmail.com), Nicola Mocchi (nicola.mocchi@unifi.it) and Filippo Boni (filippo.boni@open.ac.uk); book reviews should be sent to Oliviero Frattolillo (oliviero.frattolillo@uniroma3.it) and Francesca Congiu (fcongiu@unica.it).



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Aurelio Insisa

The University of Hong Kong
insisa@hku.hk

The year 2020 started with President Tsai winning a second term and the DPP obtaining once again a parliamentary majority in the general elections held on 11 January. By the end of the year, Taiwan emerged as one of the few polities able to effectively put the COVID-19 pandemic under control. More impressively, it was able to do so without resorting to lockdown strategies, relying instead on timely decision-making and effective tracing, testing, and treating. Taiwan's success, in turn, amplified the island's relevance in Asia-Pacific international politics. Foreign support for expanding its access to international organizations, and especially the WHO in light of the pandemic, reached new heights, but it met Beijing's vehement pushback. Chinese military pressure, a constant across the Strait since 2016, reached new heights, as the PLA Air Force routinized operations within Taiwan's Air Defence Identification Zone. The policies of the outgoing Trump administration, which accelerated the freefall of Sino-American relations and continued to dramatically expand the scope of Washington's relations with Taiwan, further exacerbated cross-Strait relations. The worsening security environment, however, did not hinder a Tsai administration buoyed by the successful management of the pandemic, economic growth, and widespread refusal of China's strategy for unification among the public. Conversely, the KMT, Taiwan's major position party, after a brief flirt with populist politics with the failed presidential candidature of Han Kuo-yu, continued to struggle under the new leadership of Johnny Chiang. Post-electoral calls for reforming the party and move its China policy away from the 1992 Consensus did not produce any meaningful change.

KEYWORDS – Taiwan; cross-strait relations; COVID-19 pandemic.

* Relevant terms and expressions are reported in English followed by a transcription in Chinese characters. Traditional characters are used for terms and statements drawn from Taiwanese sources, while simplified characters are used for terms and statements drawn from Chinese sources. Given the lack of a standardised system for proper nouns in Taiwan, people's names and place names are transliterated either in Wade-Giles or in Gwoyeu Romatzyh, following their most common usage. Proper nouns from the PRC are transliterated in Hanyu Pinyin.

1. *Introduction*

This study reviewing the major political and economic events occurred in the Republic of China (ROC) - Taiwan in 2020 partially deviates from the standard *Asia Maior* template, in light of the essay published in the previous volume, which covered the results of the general election held on 11 January 2020 and its immediate aftermath together with the events of 2019.¹ Consequently, this essay explores major developments in the fields of cross-Strait relations, international politics, and domestic politics and economics by taking the central government's management the COVID-19 pandemic as the entry point for a yearly review. The essay consists of four sections in addition to this introduction. The first covers the management of the viral outbreak on the island during the first year of the pandemic. The second tackles cross-Strait relations in the aftermaths of the 2020 elections, with a focus on the politicization of the pandemic by both Taipei and Beijing. The essay continues with an analysis of Taiwan's external relations, with a focus on the US-Taiwan relation against the backdrop of the end of the Trump administration, Joseph Biden's victory in the American presidential elections in November, and the freefall of Sino-American relations. This segment is followed by a brief panoramic of Taipei's relations with other major actors in regional and international politics, in particular Japan and the European Union (EU) and its member states. The final section focuses instead on domestic and economic policies. First, it provides an overview of the yearly performance of the Taiwanese economy and of the economic policies of the administration of President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文). Successively, it analyses the troubled attempts of the major opposition party, the Kuomintang's (KMT, 國民黨), to reboot its China policy in the wake of the general elections defeat.

2. *Taiwan's successful response to the COVID-19 outbreak*

Taiwan emerged as one of the few unquestionable «champions» in the public health management of the COVID-19 pandemic. By 31 December 2020, it recorded only 799 cases and 7 deaths among a population of 23.57 million.² It also experienced the longest streak without a domestic infection on record, between 12 April and 22 December.³ Impressively, Taiwan was able

1. Aurelio Insisa, 'Taiwan 2019 and the 2020 Elections: Tsai Ing-wen's Triumph', *Asia Maior*, XXX/2019, pp. 185-213.

2. Ensheng Dong, Hongru Du & Lauren Gardner, 'An Interactive Web-Based Dashboard to Track COVID-19 in Real Time', *The Lancet Infectious Diseases*, Vol. 20, Issue 5, May 2020, pp. 533-534. Dashboard consulted on 1 January 2021.

3. 'World's Longest Virus-Free Streak Ends with New Taiwan Case', *Bloomberg*, 22 December 2020.

to manage the outbreak without adopting mandatory lockdowns, relying instead on timely and highly effective measures of testing, treating, and tracking of COVID-19 cases since the very beginning of the outbreak in the Mainland are of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The political, social, medical, and bureaucratic experiences gathered in the struggle against SARS in 2003, together with a high degree of discipline and social cohesion among the populace, itself bolstered by sophisticated and skilful government communications, further contributed to this success.

As noted by Yasuhiro Matsuda, this successful response in containing the pandemic also presents a unique feature: Taiwan's unparalleled ability to monitor developments and gathering information and intelligence from Mainland China.⁴ Taiwanese state media began to report news of a «pneumonia of unknown origins» in Wuhan as of the third week of December 2019; while official inquiries to Chinese authorities and reports to the World Health Organization (WHO) were submitted before the end of 2019. The first screening measures for travellers arriving from Wuhan were also implemented as early as 31 December 2019. This resulted in the completion of the bureaucratic and legal groundwork necessary for activating and empowering the Central Epidemic Command Center by the third week of January.⁵ Such initial response was implemented as the country prepared for holding its general elections held on 11 January. By 11 February, a wide array of measures regulating the flow of people from and to Mainland China was enacted.⁶ Crucially, Taiwan's response throughout January 2020 stood in stark contrast with the WHO's handling of the COVID-19 outbreak: as late as on 30 January, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom stated that other countries should not let the outbreak «interfere with international travel and trade».⁷

There is in fact a modicum of dark humour in Taiwan's predicament during the earliest stages of the pandemic. The collapse of cross-strait relations and the consequent exclusion of Taiwan from the WHO at the hands of Beijing (after it had joined with observer status during the presidency of Ma Ying-jeou 馬英九 between 2008 and 2016), together with plummeting perceptions of China in Taiwan, especially in the wake of the management

4. Matsuda Yasuhiro, 'Changes in the Dynamics of the Taiwan Strait due to Taiwan's Success in Controlling the Novel Coronavirus', *Asia-Pacific Review*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 2020, pp. 57-79.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

6. A complete chronology of Taiwan's responses to the COVID-19 outbreak between December 2019 and February 2020 is available in C. Jason Wang, Chun Y. Ng & Robert H. Brook, 'Response to COVID-19 in Taiwan: Big Data Analytics, New Technology, and Proactive Testing', *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 3 March 2020.

7. 'WHO Chief Says Widespread Travel Bans Not Needed to Beat China Virus', *Reuters*, 3 February 2020.

of the Hong Kong protests,⁸ provided the Tsai administration the political capital *and* the necessary latitude to implement preventive measures which shielded the island from the first high tide of the pandemic. Other countries, including regional neighbours which have been relatively successful in containing the virus such as Japan, arguably squandered this initial opportunity out of a mix of cautiousness against the risk of encountering Beijing's wrath,⁹ and an over-reliance on Chinese and WHO sources at the beginnings of the outbreak.

Such a timely reaction constituted only the first component of Taiwan's success in the fight against the virus. The immediate cooperation between health and immigration state agencies, which through the integration of their respective data banks allowed the rapid identification and containment of cases, also played a key role.¹⁰ The bureaucratic and logistic effort to control the market of surgical masks, and the creation of an island-wide network of functioning testing centres, were other crucial components in the successful containment of the viral outbreak.¹¹ The positive impact of government communication and digital governance by the Tsai administration decisively contributed to this success, but given the political implications of this endeavour, both at cross-Strait and international level, this dimension of Taipei's response is fully explored in the next section of this essay.

3. *Cross-Strait relations*

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic caused a further deterioration of already fraught cross-Strait relations. Political tensions related to the pandemic between the two sides immediately emerged in January, with the issue of the repatriation of Taiwanese residents in the first epicentre of the outbreak, Wuhan, as Chinese authorities refused to fully cooperate with their Taiwanese counterparts. After weeks of negotiations, two charter flights ultimately departed from the Hubei province capital respectively on 3 February and 10 March.¹² During this early critical juncture, the question regarding Taiwan's access to the WHO began to flare up. First, Taipei accused Beijing of providing false information on the unfolding of the viral outbreak on the

8. Election Study Center, National Chengchi University (ESC), 'Taiwan Independence vs. Unification with the Mainland (1992/06~2020/12)', 25 January 2021.

9. 'China Hits Back at International Travel Bans as Concerns Grow Coronavirus Could Damage Economy', *South China Morning Post*, 7 February 2020.

10. C. Jason Wang, Chun Y. Ng & Robert H. Brook, 'Response to COVID-19 in Taiwan: Big Data Analytics, New Technology, and Proactive Testing'. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Vol. 323, No. 14, 2020, pp. 1341-1342.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 1342.

12. Matsuda Yasuhiro, 'Changes in the Dynamics of the Taiwan Strait due to Taiwan's Success in Controlling the Novel Coronavirus', pp. 63-64.

island to the WHO.¹³ Successively, it contested Chinese accounts of a WHO online technical meeting on 11-12 February, which presented Taiwanese officials' participation as a concession allowed by Beijing.¹⁴ As both sides successfully put the outbreak under control by March, tensions started to concentrate on Taiwan's exclusion from the coming World Health Assembly (WHA) – the WHO decision-making body – scheduled in Geneva. In April, the Tsai administration launched an international public diplomacy campaign named «Taiwan Can Help». The campaign aimed at mustering international support for accessing the WHA and pressuring Beijing to give up its veto on Taiwan's participation. Humanitarian assistance focusing on the gift of surgical masks and medical equipment was thus destined to 80 countries in order to publicize Taiwan's «democratic model of excellence» to fight the pandemic through «transparency and honesty».¹⁵

Taipei's strategic narratives of democratic technogovernance found a vocal platform in mainstream Western media,¹⁶ which had been caught between the success of China's authoritarian model in fighting the virus and the dismissive, and at times even denialist, approach of the Trump administration in the management of the pandemic. President Tsai was at the helm of this operation, appearing on the cover of an April issue of *Time Magazine* and authoring an article touting Taiwan's success.¹⁷ Beyond Tsai, two other members of the administration were embraced and lauded by Western media: exiting Vice-President Chen Chien-jen (陳建仁), and Minister without Portfolio Audrey Tang (唐鳳). Chen, an epidemiologist who had previously served as Minister of Health and head of the National Scientific Council, embodied a traditional strand of technocratic competence.¹⁸ Tang, a unique figure in Asian politics by virtue of being a transgender self-taught polymath, rose instead to international fame following their leadership in the reform of the digital ecology after the electoral campaign leading to the November 2018 elections. The electoral campaign was characterized

13. 'Taiwan Says China Feeding WHO Wrong Information about Virus Cases on Island', *Reuters*, 6 February 2020.

14. 'Taiwan Says It Didn't Need China's Permission for WHO Meeting', *Reuters*, 12 February 2020.

15. Republic of China (Taiwan), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Taiwan Can Help, and Taiwan Is Helping*; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *The Taiwan Model for Combating COVID-19*.

16. Shiroma Silva, 'Coronavirus: How map hacks and buttocks helped Taiwan fight Covid-19', BBC, 6 June 2020. Strategic narratives are state-driven narratives purposefully created and disseminated with the aim to structure responses among target audiences that in turn, would enhance the realization of a state's own strategic goals. See: Alistair Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin & Laure Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*, New York and London: Routledge, 2013.

17. Tsai Ing-wen, 'How my country prevented a major outbreak of COVID-19', *Time Magazine*, 16 April 2020.

18. Javier C. Hernández & Chris Horton, 'Taiwan's weapon against coronavirus: An epidemiologist as Vice President', *The New York Times*, 9 May 2020.

by a notable up-tick in online disinformation, mostly targeted at Pan-Green candidates, which was successfully neutralized by Tang's novel anti-disinformation digital approach.¹⁹ This new approach relies on big data analysis, real-time monitoring, and rapid-response teams making use of memes and other types of humorous communication to counter online disinformation and misinformation, together with timely *ad hoc* amendments to existent legislation and the promulgation of an Anti-Infiltration Law in January 2020. Armed with these novel anti-disinformation techniques, Taiwan was then ready to withstand the first wave of «infodemic» at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which the ROC Ministry of Justice traced back to Mainland China.²⁰

Unsurprisingly, Beijing did not lift its veto in occasion of the WHA 2020 sessions held first in May and successively in November. Chinese authorities instead vehemently and consistently framed Taiwan's diplomatic pro-activism as an attempt to «use the pandemic to plot for independence» (以疫谋独).²¹ This notwithstanding, the Tsai administration's campaign was not a failure. First, it bolstered the expansion and solidification of international support from friendly partners at a juncture during which Taiwan's grip over its so-called «diplomatic allies» has become increasingly tenuous.²² Public endorsements for Taiwan's participation to the WHA in May came not only from the Trump administration via US State Secretary Mike Pompeo, but also from Japanese PM Shinzō Abe,²³ and from both the Canadian and UK governments.²⁴ A majority of members of the European Union Parliament (644/705) also joined these calls in the build-up to the other WHA

19. Andrew Leonard, 'How Taiwan's unlikely Digital Minister hacked the pandemic', *WIRED*, 23 July 2020.

20. Jude Blanchette *et al.*, 'Protecting Democracy in an Age of Disinformation: Lessons from Taiwan', *CSIS*, January 2021, pp. 13-19. The terms «infodemic» describes the proliferation of disinformation in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, see: 'The COVID-19 Infodemic', *The Lancet Infectious Diseases*, Vol. 20, No. 8, 2020, p. 875.

21. PRC Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council (TAO), '国台办: 强烈谴责民进党当局«以疫谋独»不择手段' (*TAO: We Resolutely Condemn the DPP Authorities Reckless Use of the Pandemic to Plot for Independence*), 9 April 2020 (http://www.gwytb.gov.cn/wyly/202004/t20200409_12264050.htm); TAO, '国台办: 民进党当局«以疫谋独», 不过是闹剧一场' (*TAO: The DPP Authorities' Use of the Pandemic to Plot for Independence Is Nothing but a Farce*), 12 August 2020 (http://www.gwytb.gov.cn/wyly/202008/t20200812_12290008.htm).

22. Thomas J. Shattuck, 'The Race to Zero: China's Poaching of Taiwan's Diplomatic Allies', *Orbis*, Vol. 64, Issue 2, 2020, pp. 334-352.

23. 'Japan Supports Taiwan's Bid to Attend World Health Assembly in Move That Could Anger China', *The Japan Times*, 9 May 2020.

24. 'Canada Backs U.S.-Led Campaign for Taiwan to Get Observer Status at WHO over China's Objections', *CBC*, 9 May 2020; 'UK Bodies Back WHA Attendance', *Taipei Times*, 13 April 2020.

session in November.²⁵ More broadly, the contrast between Taiwan's public health success and the exclusion from the WHO contributed to provide Taipei the moral high ground among Western audiences in regard to the issue of the island's international isolation.²⁶

Moreover, by promoting a «transparent» and «democratic» model in the struggle against COVID-19, the diplomatic campaign successfully exploited the growing backlash over China's own attempt to politicize the pandemic among Western countries. Throughout the year in review, Beijing oscillated between ham-fisted attempts to shape foreign audiences' perceptions (mainly via the sale of medical equipment masqueraded as gifts and through the use of propaganda on social media), and aggressive «wolf-warrior diplomacy» to fend off international criticism.²⁷ In addition, increasing international scrutiny on the WHO further exposed the international organization, and in particular its leadership, to accusations of excessive deference to Beijing. Against the backdrop of previous lavish praises to the Chinese government for its initial response to the pandemic outbreak in January,²⁸ both Director-General Tedros' unsubstantiated accusations of a Taiwanese racist cyber-campaign against his persona,²⁹ which were promptly echoed by Chinese authorities and state media,³⁰ and Assistant Director-General Bruce Aylward's clumsy attempt to deflect a question on Taiwan's admission to the WHA by an RTHK journalist,³¹ contributed to damage the credibility of the organization among Western media and their audiences.³²

China's response to Taiwanese pro-activism in the first stage of the pandemic was not confined to diplomacy. After a first isolated occurrence in 2019, the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) operated 380 sorties

25. Chris Horton, Lauly Li & Cheng Ting-Fang, 'Taiwan counters China's isolation campaign with mask diplomacy', *Nikkei Asia*, 23 April 2020.

26. '«WHO Is Excluding Us Under China Pressure», Taiwan Minister Says', *Nikkei Asia*, 7 May 2020.

27. Francesco Bechis & Gabriele Carrer, 'How China unleashed Twitter bots to spread COVID-19 propaganda in Italy', *Formiche*, 30 March 2020; Luke Baker & Robin Emmott, 'As China pushes back on virus, Europe wakes to «wolf warrior» diplomacy', *Reuters*, July 2020.

28. 'WHO Lauds Chinese Response to Virus, Says World at «Important Juncture»', *Reuters*, 30 January 2020.

29. World Health Organization, *COVID-19 Virtual Press Conference - 8 April, 2020*, 8 April 2020. Taiwan rebutted Tedros' accusations with a report of the Investigation Bureau of the Minister of Justice making the case for a wider PRC misinformation operation through «troll factories». See: 'Taiwan: Mainland China Behind Attacks on Tedros', *RTHK*, 10 April 2020.

30. 'China Says Taiwan Attacks on WHO Are «Venomous», Aimed at Independence', *Reuters*, 9 April 2020.

31. 'Govt Says RTHK Has Breached «One China» Principle', *RTHK*, 9 April 2020.

32. 'What Influence Does China Have Over the WHO?', *Deutsche Welle*, 17 April 2020; Hinnerk Feldwisch-Drentrup, 'How the WHO became China's coronavirus accomplice', *Foreign Policy*, 2 April 2020.

within Taiwan's Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) on 91 days between 1 January 2020 and 30 November. These sorties saw repeated trespassing of the so-called «median line» (中線) of the Taiwan Strait – which had functioned for decades as an unofficial line of demarcation between Beijing and Taipei.³³ The enforcement of a «punitive logic», highlighting Beijing's displeasure for Taiwan's diplomatic pro-activism and the continuous strengthening of its relation with the US is the most immediate explanation for the increase in PLAAF operations. The deployments of Chinese aircrafts in the Strait were generally clustered in periods of heated public diplomacy spats between the two sides, such as during the Taipei's campaign to access the WHA session held in May, or in the immediate aftermath of Taiwanese diplomatic breakthroughs, such as the numerous high-profile contacts with American officials and delegations (as it will be showed in the next section of this essay). Furthermore, an examination of the chronology of Chinese operations suggest that the US Air Force's own deployment in the airspace and waters in proximity of the ROC – designed as a response to the increasing presence of Chinese armed forces in the area – appeared to be a factor behind the tempo of PLAAF activities, thus creating a dangerous downward spiral for Taiwanese security.³⁴ Within this context, the further up-tick of PLA activities between the end of 2020 and early 2021 is arguably due to Beijing's willingness to send a warning signal to the new Biden administration in Washington.

A second explanation of the logic of PLAAF operations, which integrates the former, sees the increasing deployment of PLA forces in the Strait from an instrumental perspective. From this standpoint, Chinese military pressure, beyond enhancing preparedness to a potential invasion of Taiwan in the near future, is designed to overstretch and wear down ROC armed forces and adjacent actors, such as the Coast Guard Administration (CGA). This strategy is implemented through «grey zones» approaches aimed at maximizing the asymmetry in defence budget between the two sides.³⁵ The almost daily deployment of PLAAF aircrafts in the ROC-controlled ADIZ is the most manifest case in point, but the transits of the People's Liberation

33. Hung Tzu-Chieh, '2020 年解放軍共機擾台與對台軍事威嚇' (PLAAF Aircrafts' Incursions and Military Intimidations toward Taiwan in 2020), in Hung Tzu-Chieh & Lee Kuan-chen (eds.), 2020 年中共政軍發展評估報告 (*Evaluation Report on the Development of the PLA in 2020*), Caituan faren guofang anquan yanjiuyuan, 2020, pp. 73-99.

34. For a detailed chronology of PLAAF, ROCAF and USAAF military deployment, together with Taiwanese and American diplomatic interactions, see: Hung, '2020 年解放軍共機擾台與對台軍事威嚇', pp. 87-99.

35. Grey zone approaches are «efforts intended to advance one's security objectives at the expense of a rival using means beyond those associated with routine statecraft and below means associated with direct military conflict between rivals». See: Kathleen Hicks *et al.*, 'By Other Means. Part I: Campaigning in the Gray Zone', CSIS, July 2019, p. 4.

Army Navy's (PLAN) carrier groups *Liaoning* and *Shandong* across the Strait in April and in December also fall in this category.³⁶ Extensive sand-dredging by Chinese civilian vessels in proximity of the ROC-controlled Matsu Islands' waters since June, which highlights the role that state-controlled civilian actors play in Beijing's grey zones approach, should also be included.³⁷ Against this backdrop, the Tsai administration's decision to raise by 10.2% the 2021 defence budget is evidence of the difficult economic choices that Taipei will have to face in the next years in light of ever increasing Chinese pressure.³⁸

This explanation, in turn, paves the way for an understanding of Chinese military deployment across the Strait as «psychological warfare» (心理戰), in line with its emergence since the Third Strait Crisis of 1995-1996 and its formalization as a component of the «Three Warfares» (三戰) doctrine in the early 2000s.³⁹ From this perspective, the operations conducted by PRC bureaucratic actors are construed to shape perceptions of Chinese domination and Taiwanese impotence among domestic, cross-Strait and international audiences. An episode such as the PLAAF pilot directly communicating to ROC Air Force personnel that «there is no median line» (沒有海峽中線) across the Strait during an operation, which found a wide diffusion among Sinophone media,⁴⁰ is a case in point, especially in light of President Tsai's promise to forcefully expel Chinese aircrafts following the first trespassing of the median line in 2019.⁴¹ The same dynamic can be seen in the speculations surrounding a Chinese invasion of ROC-con-

36. 'Taiwan Scrambles Warships as PLA Navy Aircraft Carrier Strike Group Heads for the Pacific', *South China Morning Post*, 12 April 2020; 'China's Shandong Aircraft Carrier Crosses Taiwan Strait a Day after USS Mustin', *South China Morning Post*, 23 December 2020.

37. Yimou Lee, 'China's latest weapon against Taiwan: The sand dredger', *Reuters*, 5 February 2021.

38. 'Taiwan To Boost Defense Budget 10% in Face of China Pressure', *Nikkei Asia*, 13 August 2020.

39. The Three Warfares is a PLA doctrine of hybrid warfare that formalizes operations in the cognitive domain («psychological warfare» and «public opinion warfare») and in the legal domain («lawfare») both during a kinetic conflict and in peacetime. On China's psychological warfare against Taiwan since the Third Strait Crisis, see: Ma Chen-kun, 中共對臺「心理戰」 (*Communist China's «Psychological Warfare» Targeted at Taiwan*), Taipei: Zhengzhi zuozhan xuexiao junshi shehui kexue yanjiu zhongxin, 2006, pp. 44-46. For an outline of the formalization of the doctrine, see: Elsa B. Kania, 'The PLA Latest Strategic Thinking on the Three Warfares', *China Brief*, Vol. 16, No. 13, 2016, pp. 10-14.

40. '台军喊话: 你已飞过「海峽中線」, 解放军飞行员: 没有「海峽中線」' (Taiwan Cries: You Trespassed the «Strait's Median Line», PLAAF Pilot Replies: There Is No «Strait's Median Line»), 观察者 (*The Observer*), 18 September 2020.

41. '共機蓄意越中線 蔡英文下令軍方第一時間強勢驅離' (Tsai Ing-wen Orders to the Military the Immediate, Forceful Expulsion of PLAAF Deliberate Incursions Across the Median Line), 自由時報 (*Liberty Times Net*), 1 April 2019.

trolled Pratas Island (東沙).⁴² Rumours of a coming invasion of the uninhabited island, had emerged in light of the fact that most of PLAAF's incursions occurred within the southwestern sector of Taiwan's ADIZ – where Pratas is located – and were fuelled by the announcement that a Chinese joint PLAAF/PLAN large-scale drill in the island's proximities was to be held in September.⁴³ While these rumours were eventually denied by the same Chinese sources who first disseminated it,⁴⁴ the whole *affaire* fits within a wider design aiming at intimidating the Tsai administration and undermining the Taiwanese public's trust in the domestic institutions' ability to guarantee Taiwan's security.

Reflecting this «race-to-the-bottom» trend, the two sides refrained from introducing new policies for overcoming the deadlock of cross-Strait relations. The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) annual Taiwan Work Conference held in January – days after the general elections in Taiwan – confirmed the calcification of Beijing's policies.⁴⁵ PRC Prime Minister Li Ke-qiang (李克强) even broke with conventions in his report to the National People's Congress at the yearly «Two Sessions» (两会) held in March, as he omitted the adjective «peaceful» (和平) in reference to China's objective to achieve «reunification» (统一) with Taiwan, even though the standard formulation was eventually mentioned by other Chinese officials.⁴⁶ Similarly, President Tsai remained highly critical of Beijing, publicly calling China a «threat» in September, as PLAAF operations across the Strait intensified.⁴⁷ A partial exception to this trend was her annual ROC National Day speech

42. Pratas is an uninhabited island located 444 km southwest of the Taiwanese city of Kaohsiung and 260 km south of the Chinese city of Shantou, Guangdong province.

43. 'China to Conduct Major Military Drill Simulating Seizure of Taiwan-Held Island', *The Japan Times*, 14 May 2020; 'Taiwan Denounces Large-Scale Chinese Drills Near Island', *Reuters*, 10 September 2020.

44. 'Chinese Military Expert Says Kyodo Misinterprets His Words over Dongsha Islands Drill', *Global Times*, 3 August 2020.

45. '2020年对台工作会议在京召开 汪洋出席并讲话' (The 2020 Taiwan Work Conference Was Held in Beijing, Wang Yang Attended and Delivered a Speech), 中共共产党新闻 (www.cpcnews.cn), 20 January 2020.

46. PRC State Council, '政府工作报告——2020年5月22日在第十三届全国人民代表大会第三次会议上' (*Government Work Report – Third Plenum of the 13th National People's Congress on 22 May 2020*), 29 May 2020 (http://www.gov.cn/premier/2020-05/29/content_5516072.htm). The translation of the Chinese term 统一 into English is inherently political, as PRC official sources always translate it as «reunification», rather than «unification», when used in documents or statements concerning Taiwan. In this essay, the translation «reunification» is used only when referring to Chinese sources and Chinese policies.

47. Ben Blanchard, 'Taiwan president says drills show China is threat to region', *Reuters*, 20 September 2020.

on 10 October which stroke a more accommodating tone.⁴⁸ The President not only reiterated previous calls to mend relations with Beijing, but also avoided to mention the 1992 Consensus. This is the contentious formulation endorsed (in different versions) by the CCP and the KMT and stating that both the Mainland and Taiwan belong to One China, which Tsai had refused to agree upon since coming to power.⁴⁹ Yet, the significance of Tsai's speech for a potential détente between the two sides should not be over-emphasised, in light of Beijing's refusal to work with Tsai before an explicit acceptance of its interpretation of the Consensus. Rather than being a realistic overture, the speech aimed at projecting an image of Taipei as the «responsible stakeholder» in the cross-Strait relation to both domestic and external audiences.

Finally, the evolving situation in Hong Kong continued to be a further element of friction between the two sides. President Tsai criticized the new National Security Law introduced in the former British colony a week before its promulgation on 30 June, promising Taiwanese support for Hongkongers wishing to relocate to Taiwan.⁵⁰ Taipei launched then a new organ under the Mainland Affairs Council, the Taiwan-Hong Kong Services and Exchanges Office (臺港服務交流辦公會) on 1 July.⁵¹ Neither the Tsai administration nor the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民主進步黨) majority in the Legislative Yuan (LY), however, pushed for amendments of the Laws and Regulations Regarding Hong Kong and Macau Affairs, which do not include provisions for asylum seekers.⁵² Nonetheless, by the end of the year a record 10,813 Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HK-SAR) passport holders (compared to 5,858 in the previous year) relocated to Taiwan, mainly via investment visa schemes.⁵³ Beyond customary warnings against DPP «black hands» (黑手) interferences via the PRC Taiwan Affairs

48. ROC, Office of the President (ROCOP), *President Tsai Delivers 2020 National Day Address*, 10 October 2020 (<https://english.president.gov.tw/NEWS/6051>).

49. Russell Hsiao, 'President Tsai Calls for Dialogue with Beijing in 109th National Day Speech', *Global Taiwan Brief*, Vol. 5, Issue 20, 2020, pp. 1-3.

50. Tsai Ing-wen, '這一刻，我們同所有民主陣營的夥伴們，都和香港人民站在一起' (At this moment, we and all the friends in the democratic camp stand with the people of Hong Kong), *Facebook*, 24 May 2020.

51. ROC Mainland Affairs Council, '陸委會公布「香港人道援助關懷行動專案」，成立「臺港服務交流辦公室」，提供港人必要協助' (*The MAC Announces the «Hong Kong Humanitarian Aid and Care Action Project» and Establishes the «Taiwan-Hong Kong Services and Exchange Office»*), 18 June 2020 (https://www.mac.gov.tw/News_Content.aspx?n=05B73310C5C3A632&sms=1A40B00E4C745211&s=B-6D96A501C175E4D).

52. ROC Laws & Regulations Database, 香港澳門關係條例 (*Laws and Regulations Regarding Hong Kong & Macao Affairs*).

53. 'Nearly 11,000 Hongkongers Moved to Taiwan in 2020 as Security Law Accelerates Exodus', *Hong Kong Free Press*, 3 February 2021.

Office of the State Council (TAO),⁵⁴ Beijing responded by continuing to require the signature of a statement endorsing the «One China» principle to release visas to the personnel of the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Hong Kong, severely affecting its operations as the unofficial Taiwanese consulate in the city.⁵⁵

4. *Taiwan's external relations*

Beyond being a year marked by the beginning of a global pandemic, 2020 was also arguably the best year in US-Taiwan relations since the end of diplomatic relations in 1979. Conversely, US-China relations, reeling from the trade war which had resulted in the Phase One Trade Agreement on 15 January, experienced a freefall as Washington blamed the COVID-19 pandemic squarely on Beijing.⁵⁶ The last year of the Trump administration started with an official statement from Secretary of State Mike Pompeo congratulating President Tsai for her re-election in January.⁵⁷ The following month, Vice President-Elect William Lai Ching-te (賴清德) visited Washington in what was arguably the highest profile visit from a ROC official since the end of diplomatic relations in 1979. Lai met a cohort of pro-Taiwan Representatives and Senators as well as House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, visited the National Security Council, and joined an invitation-only event attended by the US President.⁵⁸ President Trump himself signed the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative Act (TAIPEI) Act, originally introduced in the US Senate in 2019, in March. The act is designed to provide support for Taiwan's remaining diplomatic allies, which China has lobbied to switch diplomatic recognition, and help expanding Taiwan's access to international organizations.⁵⁹ By signing the COVID-19 relief and government funding bill into law in December, Trump also turned into law

54. TAO, '国台办: 香港国安法必将斩断民进党当局乱港的黑手' (*TAO: Hong Kong National Security Law Will Inevitably Chop the DPP Authorities' Black Hands Disrupting the City*), 30 June 2020 (http://www.gwytb.gov.cn/xwdt/xwfb/wyly/202006/t20200630_12284131.htm).

55. Kari Soo Lindberg, 'China begins to remove democratic Taiwan's toehold in Hong Kong', *Bloomberg*, 20 July 2020.

56. Bonnie S. Glaser & Kelly Flaherty, 'US-China Relations in Freefall', *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 22, No. 2, 2020, pp. 23-38

57. U.S. Department of State, *On Taiwan's Elections, Press Statement, Michael R. Pompeo, Secretary of State*, 11 January 2020.

58. 'Taiwan's Vice President-Elect Meets U.S. National Security Officials', *Focus Taiwan*, 6 February 2020; 'Taiwan's Next VP Visits Washington and Attends Trump Event', *Nikkei Asia*, 7 February 2020.

59. [US] Congress.Gov, S.1678 - *Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI) Act of 2019*.

the Taiwan Assurance Act first introduced into Congress in 2019.⁶⁰ Washington also agreed to eight separate arms sales to Taipei throughout the year, including drones and multiple rocket and missile systems.⁶¹ On its part, Beijing responded for the first time with sanctions against major US defence companies selling armaments to Taiwan.⁶²

Further evidence of the Trump administration's support for Taipei came first from the decision to declassify two 1982 cables concerning the US' stand on arms sale to Taiwan and the Reagan administration's «Six Assurances» in August,⁶³ and, successively, from the unexpected declassification of the Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific in January 2021. While the declassification of the cables was largely symbolical, given that their content was widely known, the publication of the Strategic Framework aimed at dissipating remaining concerns over the exiting administration's commitment to Taiwan. Starting from the premise that «China will take increasingly assertive steps to compel unification with Taiwan», the document outlines a clear objective for Washington: to enable «Taiwan to develop an effective asymmetric defense strategy and capabilities that will help ensure its security ... and ability to engage China on its own terms». More bluntly, the Strategic Framework also states the US will defend «the first-island-chain nations, including Taiwan».⁶⁴

Indeed, 2020 marked a more profound strategic synergy between the two administrations. President Tsai fully embraced the Indo-Pacific narrative in the inaugural address of her second term in May, stating her administration's intention to proactively contribute to «peace, stability and prosperity» in the region.⁶⁵ This was followed by the announcement of the reopening of the Taiwan Economic and Cultural Office in the US unincorporated organized territory of Guam, one of the geopolitical pivots of the Indo-Pacific.⁶⁶ The Trump administration provided an endorsement of Taiwan's own nar-

60. [US] Congress.Gov, H.R.2002 - *Taiwan Assurance Act of 2019*. For details on the bill, see: Aurelio Inisisa, 'Taiwan 2019 and the 2020 Elections', pp. 198-199.

61. An up-to-date list of US arms sales to Taiwan sourced from the U.S. Defense Security Cooperation Agency is available on Wikipedia. See: 'List of US Arms Sales to Taiwan', *Wikipedia*.

62. PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on October 26, 2020*, 26 October 2020 (https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1826657.shtml).

63. American Institute in Taiwan (AIT), *Arms Sale to Taiwan* (<https://www.ait.org.tw/wp-content/uploads/sites/269/08171982-Reagan-Memo-DECLASSIFIED.pdf>).

64. The Trump White House, *U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific* (<https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/IPS-Final-Declass.pdf>).

65. ROCOP, 第十五任總統暨副總統就職專輯 (*Inauguration of the 15th-Term President and Vice President*), 20 May 2020 (<https://www.president.gov.tw/Page/586>).

66. MOFA, *The ROC (Taiwan) Reestablishes Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Guam*, 3 July 2020 (https://www.mofa.gov.tw/en/News_Content.aspx?n=1EADDCCFD-4C6EC567&sms=5B9044CF1188EE23&ss=22727C77A54244A5).

rative of democratic model for the management of the pandemic with the visit of US Health Secretary Alex Azar to Taipei in August. Azar's became the highest-ranking visit of an American official to the island since 1979.⁶⁷ Increasing contacts between US armed forces officials and ROC counterparts constituted another avenue to communicate Taiwan's involvement in the construction and reproduction of an Indo-Pacific narrative, as well as the island's contribution in the fight against the pandemic, and, obviously, closer relations between the two polities from a security perspective.⁶⁸ Tsai herself then reiterated her administration's alignment with the US in September, at a time of increasing military pressure from Beijing, by calling for an alliance of «like-minded partners with shared values» and for «a new future for the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific» at the annual Ketagalan Forum held in Taipei.⁶⁹

The excellent state of the relation, in turn, led the Tsai administration to take concrete steps to remove one of the major obstacles in the signature of a trade agreement with Washington: the ban on US pork containing ractopamine and beef from cattle aged over 30 months. After the ROC President expressed her administration's plans in August, the DPP majority in the LY approved the removal of the ban in December.⁷⁰ The Tsai administration spent some of the political capital gained in the efficient management of the COVID-19 pandemic to push a deeply unpopular measure.⁷¹ The economic dimension of US-Taiwan relations experienced then a new momentum in the second half of the year. State Department Under-Secretary Keith Krach led a US business delegation in September;⁷² while the interministerial U.S.-Taiwan Economic Prosperity Partnership Dialogue was launched in Washington, D.C. in November.⁷³ In addition, Washington and Taipei's respective representative offices, AIT and TECRO, signed a Framework to Strengthen Infrastructure Finance and Market Building Coopera-

67. Republic of China (Taiwan), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *MOFA Welcomes Visit by US Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar II*, 5 August 2020.

68. 'Taiwan Among 19 Countries to Take Part in US Air Force Video Conference', *Taiwan News*, 4 May 2020; 'Taiwan Military Joins US-Hosted Indo-Pacific Landpower Conference', *Taiwan News*, 21 May 2020; 'U.S. Navy Admiral Makes Unannounced Visit to Taiwan, Sources Say', *Reuters*, 23 November 2020.

69. Republic of China (Taiwan), Office of the President, *President Tsai Attends the Ketagalan Forum - 2020 Asia-Pacific Security Dialogue*, 9 September 2020.

70. 'Legislature Approves Directives to Lift Restrictions on Pork Imports', *Focus Taiwan*, 24 December 2020.

71. 'Taiwan Public Has Bone to Pick with Tsai over Easing US Meat Ban', *Nikkei Asia*, 8 October 2020.

72. Yu Nakamura & Tsuyoshi Nagasawa, 'US woos Taiwan and its chipmakers in step toward trade pact', *Nikkei Asia*, 19 September 2020.

73. U.S. Embassy & Consulates in China, *Inaugural U.S.-Taiwan Economic Prosperity Partnership Dialogue*, 20 November 2020.

tion in September and a Science and Technology Agreement in December.⁷⁴ The ban lift, however, did not reach its main objective, as the US Trade Representative of the Trump administration, Robert Lightizer, continued to refuse to open talks on trade agreements without a full removal of trade barriers for US meat products.⁷⁵

Even before the Biden administration was seated on 21 January 2021, American foreign policy environments and punditry did not expect a fundamental change of course in Washington's China policy.⁷⁶ The solid track of bipartisan consensus for bills concerning Taiwan in both the House of Representatives and the Senate during the Trump administration, as well as the invitation of Taiwan Representative to the US Hsiao Bi-khim (蕭美琴) to the Biden's inauguration ceremony, and the first pronouncements of his administration on Taiwan delivered in January 2021, appeared to confirm such expectations.⁷⁷

Taiwan's relations with its other major partner, Japan, were also characterized by a leadership transition, as Shinzō Abe resigned from his position as Prime Minister in September 2020 after eight years in power and was succeeded by his former chief cabinet secretary, Yoshihide Suga. During the final leg of the Abe cabinet, Tokyo did not fail to provide support to the Tsai administration even within the rigid constraints of its One China policy. Minister of Foreign Affairs Toshimitsu Motegi sent a congratulatory message for Tsai's re-election in January,⁷⁸ and Tokyo issued an official statement in support of Taiwan's participation in the WHA – as previously mentioned in this essay – while former Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori led a high-profile visit on the occasion of the funeral of the first democratically elected President of the ROC, Lee Teng-hui (李登輝) in August.⁷⁹ In the first months of the new administration, the Suga cabinet continued the policy

74. AIT, *AIT-TECRO Infrastructure Financing Framework Strengthens U.S. and Taiwan Cooperation on Infrastructure Development in the Indo-Pacific*, 30 September 2020 (<https://www.ait.org.tw/ait-tecro-infrastructure-financing-framework>); AIT, *AIT and TECRO Sign an Agreement on Scientific and Technological Cooperation*, 18 December 2020 (<https://www.ait.org.tw/ait-tecro-agreement-on-scientific-and-technological>).

75. David J. Keegan & Kyle Churchman, 'Overcoming COVID-19, Navigating US-China Tensions, and Anxiously Awaiting a New US Administration', *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 22, Issue 3, 2021, pp. 80-81.

76. Oriana Skyler Mastro & Emily Young Carr, 'Biden will speak softer but act stronger on Taiwan', *Foreign Policy*, 10 November 2020.

77. U.S. State Department, *PRC Military Pressure Against Taiwan Threatens Regional Peace and Stability*, Press Release, Ned Price, Department Spokesperson, 23 January 2021; The White House, *Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki, February 11, 2021*, 11 February 2021.

78. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Result of the Presidential Election in Taiwan (Statement by Foreign Minister MOTEGI Toshimitsu)*, 11 January 2020.

79. 'Former Japan Premier Mori Meets Taiwan's Tsai on Mourning Trip', *Bloomberg*, 9 August 2020.

of cautious support that characterized his predecessor.⁸⁰ Both the appointment of Abe's brother Nobuzaku Kishi – a figure considered particularly close to Taiwan in Japanese politics – as Ministry of Defence in the new cabinet,⁸¹ and the release of the *MOFA Diplomatic Bluebook* in October, which defined Taiwan as an «extremely crucial partner and an important friend»,⁸² confirmed a solid rapport with Taipei. A worrying development for Taipei has been however the lack of progress over Taiwan's request to join the Japan-led Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) free trade agreement (FTA). The most immediate reason behind Tokyo's resistance to unlock the negotiations is Taipei's continuing ban on the import of food products from areas affected by the 2011 Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster. The economic dimension of Sino-Japanese relations and Beijing's explicit interest in joining the CPTPP arguably also played a role in the protracted negotiations.⁸³ Beijing's access would spell the end of Taipei's hopes to join the regional mega-FTA.

Mainly due to China's assertiveness, India acquired a growing relevance in Taiwan's external relations throughout 2020. In May the PLA began a series of co-ordinated incursions within India-controlled areas along the contested Tibet-Ladakh and Tibet-Sikkim borders, which eventually resulted into a protracted series of deadly skirmishes between the two countries' ground forces.⁸⁴ By fall, as Indian media and nationalist constituencies vehemently endorsed closer relations with Taiwan as retribution against China,⁸⁵ a *Bloomberg* report claimed that the Modi government had been considering a potential trade agreement with Taiwan.⁸⁶ The absence of successive updates on this issue suggests that this was in fact a leak aimed at Beijing during a critical juncture in the bilateral negotiations for disengagement.⁸⁷ However, even though a breakthrough trade agreement between

80. 'Japan Has No Plan for Phone Call with Taiwan Leader: Spokesman', *Nikkei Asia*, 24 September 2020.

81. Tachikawa Tomoyuki, 'China wary of Japan's pro-Taiwan new defense minister's moves', *Kyodo News*, 26 September 2020.

82. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *MOFA Diplomatic Bluebook 2020*, p. 58.

83. Masaya Kato & Kosuke Takeuchi, 'With eye on China, Japan refuses to ease TPP rules for new members', *Nikkei Asia*, 18 December 2020; Cybil Chou, 'Taiwan casts net for trade deals as China blocks RCEP entry', *Nikkei Asia*, 25 December 2020.

84. For an up-to-date synopsis of the crisis, see: Arzan Tarapore, 'The Crisis after the Crisis: How Ladakh will Shape India's Competition with China', *Lowy Institute*, 6 May 2021.

85. Aditya Sharma, 'China tensions push India and Taiwan closer together', *Deutsche Welle*, 22 October 2020.

86. Archana Chaudary & Chris Horton, 'India considers Taiwan trade talks as both spar with China', *Bloomberg Quint*, 9 October 2020.

87. The *Bloomberg* report published in early October preceded a PLA decision to withdraw from multiple areas that it had previously come to control in the Pangong Tso basin, as per Indian requests for disengagement. While it would be an exaggeration to claim that the report itself had any direct impact on the Chinese decision,

New Delhi and Taipei appears as a remote possibility in light of the potential Chinese reaction and of the necessity to scale down tensions after a successful disengagement, India's increasing attention to Taiwan does constitute a meaningful development. A tangible sign of this new course was the Modi government's decision to allow Taiwanese Apple assemblers to invest in the country, which appears to be part of India's attempt to delink its economy from China-dependent supply chains.⁸⁸ In the broader geo-economic context of the Indo-Pacific, this strategy dovetails with the Tsai administration's own plans of economic decoupling from China, which are organized around the New Southbound Policy (NSP) agenda, targeting South Asia, South-East Asia, and Oceania. Moreover, this geo-economic convergence has the potential to provide a lifeline during a year in which the NSP – an initiative that puts a premium on entrepreneurial activities, tourism, training, and education exchanges – stagnated due to the pandemic.⁸⁹

Taiwan also obtained small but meaningful diplomatic successes in the context of Beijing's global pressure, especially in its relations with the European Union (EU) and its member states. The most important, as previously mentioned, was the EU Parliament's support for Taiwan's access to the WHA. Another sign of progress in relations with Brussels was the launching of the first EU-Taiwan Investment Forum in September in Taipei.⁹⁰ Outside of the EU framework, the most high-profile development was the seven-day visit delegation from Czechia led by Senate President Miloš Vystrčil in September,⁹¹ which followed Prague mayor Zdeněk Hřib decision to establish sister-city ties to Taipei in 2019. The visit occurred in the midst of a nationwide backlash against perceived Chinese influence in the country under the tenure of the populist president Miloš Zeman.⁹² The visit also impacted

the author of this essay argues that it was part of a broader, cross-spectrum effort by the Modi government to project resolve against Beijing. For an account of the PLA withdrawal built upon Indian sources, see: Snehes Alex Philips and Nayanima Basu, 'How India stood its ground and forced China to end Pangong Tso aggression', *The Print*, 12 February 2021.

88. 'iPhone Makers Win Nod for \$143 Billion India Manufacturing Plan', *Bloomberg*, 6 October 2020.

89. Jeremy Huai-Che Chiang, 'How COVID-19 Challenges Taiwan's New Southbound Policy', *The Diplomat*, 6 May 2020.

90. Lauly Li & Cheng Ting-Fang, 'EU-Taiwan investment forum signals warmer ties amid China chill', *Nikkei Asia*, 22 September 2020.

91. Katherine Schultz, 'The Historic Czech Delegation to Taiwan: When a Small Democracy Stands Up to China's Intimidation', *Global Taiwan Brief*, Vol. 5, Issue 18, 2020, pp. 12-16; Katherine Schultz, 'The Historic Czech Delegation to Taiwan: A Roadmap for Europe's Ties with Taiwan', *Global Taiwan Brief*, Vol. 5, Issue 19, 2020, pp. 12-15.

92. Robert Tait, 'Zdeněk Hřib: the Czech mayor who defied China', *The Guardian*, 3 July 2019; Martin Hála, 'United Front Work by Other Means: China's «Economic Diplomacy» in Central and Eastern Europe', *China Brief*, Vol. 19, No. 9, 2019, pp. 21-26.

the course of EU-China relations at a critical juncture. In the midst of a diplomatic trip to Europe to repair relations strained by Chinese aggressive politicization of the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's (王毅) threats that Vystřil would «pay a heavy price» were met with rare stern rebukes from German and French diplomacy.⁹³ Other minor successes for the Tsai administration were the opening of a new representative centre in the French city of Aix-en-Provence, and the name change of the Dutch representative office in Taiwan from Netherlands Trade and Investment Office to Netherlands Office Taipei.⁹⁴ A counterpoint to Taipei's progress in relations with EU member states was the case of Italy, the only country in the bloc that applied a «One China» blanket travel ban to Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan at the onset of the pandemic in February, to which the Tsai administration replied with a ban on the import of pork products from the country.⁹⁵

Taiwan's attempts to escape diplomatic isolation also took an unexpected turn. The island and the self-declared state of Somaliland, located within the internationally recognized borders of Somalia, announced the establishment of representative offices in both polities in July.⁹⁶ Chinese reactions, after having failed to convince the local authorities to accept a standard «package» of economic incentives to avoid establishing relations with Taipei,⁹⁷ were expectedly harsh. Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian (赵立坚) warned of a «bitter fruit» to «swallow» for whoever opposed Beijing's One China principle.⁹⁸

93. Patrick Donahue, 'Merkel's top diplomat warns on Chinese «threats» over Taiwan', *Bloomberg*, 1 September 2020.

94. ROC Embassies and Missions Abroad, *Cérémonie d'inauguration du Bureau de Taïwan à Aix-en-Provence* (Inaugural Ceremony of the Taiwan Office in Aix-en-Provence), 16 December 2020 (https://www.roc-taiwan.org/fr/prv_fr/post/265.html); 'Netherlands Changes Name of Representative Office in Taiwan', *Taiwan News*, 28 April 2020.

95. Giulia Pompili, 'Il pasticcio del virus' (The virus imbroglio), *Il Foglio*, 4 February 2020; 'Taiwan Bans Italian Pig Imports in Quarrel over Flight Ban', *Reuters*, 20 February 2020.

96. MOFA, *Taiwan Announces Mutual Establishment of Representative Offices with Republic of Somaliland*, 1 July 2020 (https://www.mofa.gov.tw/en/News_Content_M_2.aspx?n=1EADD4C6EC567&s=57C4CB95C8BAC4C0).

97. Thomas J. Shattuck, 'China-Taiwan Competition over Somaliland and Implications for Small Countries', *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 28 August 2020.

98. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on August 19, 2020*, 19 August 2020.

5. Domestic economics and politics

Major economic indicators for 2020 show the positive effects of the successful management of the pandemic on the Taiwanese economy. Taiwan's GDP growth stood at 2.98%,⁹⁹ while industrial production grew 9.9%.¹⁰⁰ In line with these results, total exports reached a historically high US\$ 345 bn total, recording a 4.9% growth compared to 2019, driven by the electronics manufacturing sector that counted for 39.3% of all exports. Imports, instead, totalled US\$ 286 bn, growing 0.3%. As a result, Taiwan's trade balance recorded a US\$ 58.7 bn surplus, leading to a plus 35.1% compared to the previous year.¹⁰¹ China's own rapid economic recovery from the pandemic played a fundamental role in Taiwan's recovery, with exports to the Mainland and HKSAR recording a 14.6% growth that amounted to US\$ 151.4 bn, counting for 43.9% of total exports. Similarly, imports from the two PRC areas also raised by 10.8%, amounting to US\$ 64.7 bn. By comparison, exports to the US counted for roughly a third of those to China (US\$ 50.5 bn with a 9.3% growth), while imports shrank 6.4%, amounting to US\$ 32.6 bn.¹⁰² The strength of the domestic economy during the pandemic-induced global recession was also evident from the available data on the labour force, which saw the unemployment rate remaining virtually unvaried at 3.68%.¹⁰³ The pandemic had also a heavy impact on the flux of foreign direct investments (FDI) to Taiwan, which saw a 18.3% contraction compared to the previous year, totalling US\$ 9.1 bn. Within this overall trend, FDI from Mainland China recorded a 29.9% increase compared to the extremely low baseline of 2019, amounting to US\$ 126 million.¹⁰⁴ FDI from the US shrank instead 27.7%, standing at US\$ 261 million.¹⁰⁵

The recession, however, did not stop US Big Tech's investments to Taiwan, continuing an important development that first emerged in the context of the Sino-American trade war. Google and Facebook chose the

99. Directorate-General of Budget, Accounting and Statistics, Executive Yuan, R.O.C. (Taiwan) (DGBAS), *GDP Advance Estimate of 2020Q4*, 29 January 2021 (https://eng.stat.gov.tw/public/data/dgbas03/bs4/ninews_e/11002/enews11001.pdf).

100. ROC Ministry of Economic Affairs (MOEA), Department of Statistic, *Industrial Production Index in December 2020*, 17 February 2021 (https://www.moea.gov.tw/Mns/dos_e/bulletin/Bulletin_En.aspx?kind=13&html=1&menu_id=6743&bull_id=8317).

101. ROC Ministry of Finance, *Trade Figures for Dec. 2020*, 8 January 2021 (http://service.mof.gov.tw/public/Data/statistic/trade/news/10912/10912_英文新聞稿.pdf).

102. *Ibid.*

103. DGBAS, *Manpower Survey Results in December 2020* (<https://eng.stat.gov.tw/ct.asp?xItem=46799&ctNode=1830&mp=5>).

104. ROC MOEA, Investment Commission (MOEAIC), *Taiwan FDI Statistics Summary Analysis (December 2020)*, 20 January 2021 (https://www.moeaic.gov.tw/news.view?do=data&id=1493&lang=en&type=new_ann).

105. MOEAIC, *Monthly Report (December 2020)*, 20 January 2020 (https://www.moeaic.gov.tw/news.view?do=data&id=1495&lang=en&type=business_ann).

island as the ultimate destination of an underwater data cable connecting the US to Asia, after a US Justice Department recommendation against the original destination, Hong Kong.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, both the Mountain View company and Microsoft decided to open new data centres in the island by the end of the year.¹⁰⁷ Coupling American investment was the continuing reshoring of Taiwanese business back to the island, with electronics manufacturing companies such as Quanta, Innolux, and Unimicron following industry heavyweight Pegatron with new investments. Overall, major Taiwanese companies have invested US\$ 38 bn back home since the introduction of ad hoc measures for reshoring by the Tsai administration in 2019.¹⁰⁸ The post-pandemic reality of the global economy, however, suggests that state-led attempts to diminish Taiwan's economic dependency from the Chinese market remain extremely difficult, as the main engine of Taiwanese economic recovery, the impressive gains of Taiwanese chipmakers, relied on China's own rapid recovery and its demand.¹⁰⁹

Even though effective public health management created the context for a successful economic recovery, this would have not been possible without the economic policy of the Tsai administration. In February, the Special Act for Prevention, Relief and Revitalization Measures for Severe Pneumonia with Novel Pathogens, introduced by the Ministry of Health and Welfare, provided a US\$ 2.1 bn fund to withstand the immediate impact of the pandemic. An additional package amounting to US\$ 5.3 bn was then added through an amendment of the Special Act in April,¹¹⁰ and a further US\$ 7.1 bn were allocated in July through a special budget.¹¹¹ The three packages provided financial aid for both businesses and workers; subsidies for employees who had been furloughed; unemployment payments for those who had lost their jobs; and tax breaks for businesses. In addition, the Committee of the National Financial Stabilization Fund decided to deploy

106. 'Google, Facebook Dump Plans for U.S.-Hong Kong Undersea Cable', *Bloomberg*, 29 August 2020.

107. 'Google Embraces Taiwan as Asia Hub with Third Data Center', *Nikkei Asia*, 4 September 2020; 'Microsoft to Establish Its First Datacenter Region in Taiwan as a Part of Its «Reimagine Taiwan» Initiative', *Microsoft*, 27 October 2020, (<https://news.microsoft.com/apac/2020/10/27/microsoft-to-establish-its-first-datacenter-region-in-taiwan-as-a-part-of-its-reimagine-taiwan-initiative>).

108. Kensaku Ihara, 'Taiwan tech companies' China exit fuels \$25bn investment drive', *Nikkei Asia*, 28 May 2020; Raymond Wu, 'Growing Distrust of China Brings \$38 Billion Windfall for Taiwan', *Bloomberg*, 13 September 2020.

109. Rurika Imahashi & Lauly Li, 'Japan and Taiwan companies to gain from China's quick recovery', *Nikkei Asia*, 11 November 2020.

110. Law & Regulation Database of the ROC, '嚴重特殊傳染性肺炎防治及紓困振興特別條例' (*Special Act for Prevention, Relief and Revitalization Measures for Severe Pneumonia with Novel Pathogens*), 21 April 2020 (<https://law.moj.gov.tw/LawClass/LawAll.aspx?pcode=L0050039>).

111. [ROC] Executive Yuan, *Cabinet Approves Second Increase in COVID-19 Special Budget*, 23 July 2020.

in March its US\$ 1.6 bn war chest to contrast market volatility, operating in the Taiwan Stock Exchange until October.¹¹²

Polls by the authoritative Election Study Center of the National Chengchi University conducted at the end of 2020 reflect the widespread appreciation of the Taiwanese electorate for the Tsai administration. They also confirmed an ongoing trend favouring localist identities and independence or independence-leaning positions among the public. 64.3% identify as «Taiwanese», an all-time high, while 29.9% identify as «both Chinese and Taiwanese», and 2.6% as «Chinese» – the last two being the lowest percentages on record.¹¹³ Similarly, 25.8% of Taiwanese support a «maintain status quo, move toward independence» (another all-time high), while the position «maintain status quo, move toward unification» stood at 6.6%, the second lowest polling ever. Support for immediate unification also polled at a historically low 1%. More moderate positions, namely «maintain status quo, decide at later date» and «maintain status quo indefinitely» polled respectively at 28.8% and 25.8%.¹¹⁴ Party preferences largely reflected these trends, with appreciation for the DPP reaching an all-time high 34%, and the KMT recording its second worst performance on record at 17%. Taipei mayor Ko Wen-je's (柯文哲) Taiwan People's Party (台灣民眾黨) at 4.9%, overcame the pro-independence New Power Party (時代力量) as the third political force in the country.¹¹⁵ MAC polls commissioned to the Election Study Center released in November also showed that 86.7% of Taiwanese oppose the «one country, two systems» (一国两制) framework, and that 74.4% oppose the 1992 Consensus.¹¹⁶

With the DPP in a dominant position, the KMT struggled to design a new path to come back to power after having briefly succumbed to the temptation of populist politics following the meteoric rise of Kaohsiung mayor Han Kuo-yu (韓國瑜) as Presidential candidate in 2019. In the aftermath of the electoral defeat, the party appeared to be on the cusp of a fundamental policy shift in its electoral platform, eventually to revert to a stagnating and unimaginative approach to cross-Strait relations by the end of the year. Previously, between 2017 and 2019, the party, under the chair-

112. ROC Ministry of Finance, '國安基金決定啟動安定市場任務, 維護臺股穩定' (*The National Financial Stabilization Fund Decided to Begin Operations for Stabilizing the Market and Protecting the Stocks*), 19 March 2020 (<https://www.mof.gov.tw/single.html/3844b3077bb349ea973e7fc6f13b6974?cntId=a9bed3624c15416682503dbf-944f19ad>).

113. ESC, 'Taiwanese / Chinese Identity(1992/06~2020/12)', 25 January 2021 (<https://esc.nccu.edu.tw/PageDoc/Detail?fid=7800&id=6961>).

114. Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, *Taiwan Independence vs. Unification with the Mainland (1994/12~2020/12)*, 25 January 2021.

115. Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, *Taiwanese/Chinese Identity (1992/06~2020/12)*, 25 January 2021.

116. ROC Mainland Affairs Council, *Summarized Results of the Public Opinion Survey on the «Public's View on Current Cross-Strait Relations»*, 12 November 2020.

personship of Wu Den-yih (吳敦義) had backtracked from the short-lived pro-unification turn took under the leadership of Hung Hsiu-Chu (洪秀柱). Wu aimed at rallying the party back to the cross-strait policy of the Ma era, centred on the so-called «One China, respective interpretations» (一中各表) understanding of the 1992 Consensus. This formulation was fundamentally a rhetorical device allowing the party to pursue a policy of increasing socio-economic integration with the PRC while presenting itself as a defender of ROC statehood.¹¹⁷

Even though Wu's attempt had received a frosty response from Beijing,¹¹⁸ a persistent degree of political ambiguity and misinformation surrounding the Consensus among the Taiwanese electorate allowed the party to side-line thorny questions over its capacity to guarantee the current political status-quo.¹¹⁹ Initially, the strategy appeared successful, in light of the victory in the 2018 local elections and of the short-lived popularity of Han Kuo-yu. The major speech delivered by the Chinese leader Xi Jinping (习近平) on Taiwan in January 2019, which implicitly equated the 1992 Consensus to a roadmap for eventual reunification under «one country, two systems», frayed however the foundations of the KMT's electoral strategy.¹²⁰ The Hong Kong protests that marked the second half of 2019 and their management by both the HKSAR government and the PRC central government resulted into an even firmer refusal of Beijing's reunification agenda, leaving virtually no room for the party's delicate balancing act on cross-strait relations. With the contradictions of its China policy laid bare, Han's electoral run rapidly derailed.

After the route in the elections, in which the KMT also failed at denying a new parliamentary majority to the DPP, the party elected the 48-year old LY Minority Leader Johnny Chiang Chi-chen (江啟臣) as its Chairperson in March.¹²¹ Although even party sources had claimed, just days before the internal contest, that Chiang was ready to abandon the 1992 Consen-

117. For further details on this formulation of the 1992 Consensus, see: Aurelio Insisa, 'Taiwan 2012-2016: From Consolidation to the Collapse of cross-Strait Rapprochement', *Asia Maior*, XXVIII/2016, pp. 54-55.

118. Chinese media stopped refer to «One China, respective interpretations» during Wu's mandate. See: Jessica Drun, 'Taiwan's opposition struggles to shake pro-China image', *Foreign Policy*, 11 March 2020.

119. On misperceptions of the 1992 Consensus among the Taiwanese electorate, see Austin Horng-En Wang, 'Surveying the Taiwanese Psychology on Self-Defense and Self-Determination', *Global Taiwan Institute*, December 2019. On disinformation in Taiwan, see Valeriya Mechkova *et al.*, 'Measuring Internet Politics: Introducing the Digital Society Project (DSP)', Digital Society Project, May 2019, pp. 18-19 (http://digitalsocietyproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/DSP_WP_01-Introducing-the-Digital-Society-Project.pdf).

120. Aurelio Insisa, 'Taiwan 2019 and the 2020 Elections', pp. 187-190.

121. '江啟臣壓倒性勝出 成最年輕國民黨主席'(Chiang Chi-chen Obtained an Overwhelming Victory and Became the Youngest KMT Chairperson Ever), *CNA*, 7 March 2020.

sus, the new Chairperson opted instead for a collegial approach by establishing a Party Reform Committee, itself featuring a Cross-Strait Discussion Group.¹²² While by June the party appeared close to discard the Consensus and explore alternatives,¹²³ it ultimately backtracked in September, restating instead its support for the «One China, respective interpretations» version of the 1992 Consensus as the cornerstone of its China policy.¹²⁴

Tensions with Beijing, which already in March had avoided to send the customary message of congratulations by the General Secretary of the CCP, remained however high even after the party's re-affirmation of the Consensus. For instance, in September, the KMT withdrew from the annual Straits Forum (海峽論壇), held in Xiamen for the first time, after a China Central Television (CCTV) programme described the expected visit of the leader of the party delegation, former LY Speaker Wang Jin-pyng (王金平), as aimed to «sue for peace» (求和).¹²⁵ Arguably, the worsening of inter-party relations since Chiang came to power is evidence that the CCP expects more than a mere return to Ma-era policies from the KMT.

The party's *annus horribilis* also saw Han Kuo-yu being recalled from his position as Kaohsiung mayor in June, with exiting ROC Vice-Prime Minister Chen Chi-mai (陳其邁) overwhelmingly winning the mayoral by-election for the DPP in August.¹²⁶ Han's erratic behaviour and manifest incompetence as a mayor, coupled with his decision to focus on national politics only months after having surprisingly won the election in a historical DPP stronghold, were the driving factors behind the recall. Party tribulations, however, did not stop KMT representatives in Taiwanese institutions from showing a flair for combative politics. In November, KMT members of the LY protested against the lifting of the ban on pork and beef imports from the US by throwing pig guts in the legislative chamber.¹²⁷ Behind the *bizarro* staging of the protest, there was a shrewd political calculation of taking ad-

122. Kathrin Hille, 'Taiwan's KMT to drop Beijing-friendly policy to regain voter trust', *Financial Times*, 6 March 2020; '國民黨改革委員會成立 蘇起加入兩岸論述組' (The KMT Established Its Reform Committee, Su Chi Joined the Cross-Strait Discussion Group), *CNA*, 1 April 2020.

123. 'KMT Criticized for Sidestepping Consensus that Enabled Good Relations', *Focus Taiwan*, 19 June 2020.

124. KMT, '中國國民黨改革委員會全體會議新聞稿及兩岸論述組建議案' (*Press Release of the Plenary Meeting of the KMT Party Reform Committee and Proposals by the Cross-Strait Discussion Group*), 19 June 2020 (http://www.kmt.org.tw/2020/06/blog-post_19.html); 'KMT To Stick to «1992 Consensus»: Party Chairman', *Focus Taiwan*, 6 September 2020.

125. '央視節目稱王金平求和 主持人再辯是指尋求和平' (CCTV Host Confirms That Wang Jin-pyng Will Come to Beg for Peace), *CNA*, 13 September 2020.

126. 'Kaohsiung Voters Recall Han Kuo-yu', *Taipei Times*, 7 June 2020; 'DPP's Chen Chi-mai wins Kaohsiung By-Election by Wide Margin', *Focus Taiwan*, 15 August 2020.

127. 'Pig Guts Fly in Offal Fight over Meat Imports in Taiwan's Parliament', *The Guardian*, 27 November 2020.

vantage of the most unpopular policy pushed by the Tsai administration in 2020. By the end of the year, KMT LY-member Lim Ui-tsiu's (林為洲) request to collect signatures for a referendum on the issue to be held in August 2021 was approved by the Central Election Commission.¹²⁸

6. *Conclusions*

Taiwan's response to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic during the year in review showed the many strengths of its society and democratic institutions, thanks to the combination of competent governance and social cohesion. Yet, at the same time, the international politics of the COVID-19 pandemic underscored the fragility of the island's position in the regional chessboard of the Asia-Pacific, as Sino-American tensions morphed into a full-fledged rivalry between superpowers. This predicament accelerated then major trends that first emerged with the electoral victory of Tsai Ing-wen and her DPP in the 2016 general and that successively became fully entrenched in 2019, following China's management of the Hong Kong protests and their impact on Taiwanese perceptions of Beijing. China further intensified its full-spectrum pressure, in particular via a calculated escalation in the deployment of military forces surrounding the island as a source of coercion. Taiwanese, in turn, responded to Beijing's assertiveness with a stronger backlash that consolidated the DPP's dominant position in the domestic political landscape and put the KMT in front of a political conundrum that further hindered its electoral viability. Finally, Taiwan-US relations continued to strengthen across the diplomatic (even in the absence of official relations), military, and economic domains, as a by-product of the two sides' own worsening relations with China, thus contributing to the deterioration of political and military stability across the Strait.

128. ROC Central Election Commission, '中選會委員會議審議3項全國性公民投票提案' (*The Central Election Commission Examined Three Proposals for Nationwide Referenda*), 18 December 2020 (<https://www.cec.gov.tw/central/cms/109news/34733>).