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By: Russell Hsiao

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### US Ramps Up Public Diplomacy Campaign for Taiwan's Participation in the 73rd WHA

As the international community struggles to grapple with the fallout from the global pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus—which originated in Wuhan, China—the term “Taiwan Model” has been widely used in reference to Taiwan’s effective response to COVID-19. Indeed, it has been held up by US officials and [leaders](#) worldwide not only for its success but for its clear contrast with China’s ruthless, albeit arguably efficient, response. Despite clearly demonstrating its role as a vital contributor to global health responses, Taiwan has been excluded from even participating as an observer at the World Health Assembly since 2016 due to Beijing’s objections. As an extension of the United States’ long-standing support for Taiwan’s meaningful participation in international organizations, in recent weeks the US government has visibly ramped up its public diplomacy campaign to garner support for Taiwan’s efforts to participate as an observer in the upcoming [73rd World Health Assembly](#), which will take place from May 17-21 in Switzerland.

Indeed, the US government’s campaign includes high-level political support from Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. On March 30, in response to a question referencing the recent passage of the [Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative \(TAIPEI Act\)](#), which includes—among various provisions—directions for the executive branch to assist Taiwan in maintaining its diplomatic space and participation in international organizations, [Secretary Pompeo stated](#):

*“The responsibility now falls to the United States Government to comply with each and every component of that [TAIPEI Act], and that includes working to make sure that in every organization—you identified the WHO in particular—that in every or-*

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*ganization that has a—has content that is related to what's taking place inside of Taiwan that we do our best to assist them in having their appropriate role there. We'll do that. We'll fully comply with that."*

This powerful and affirmative statement was accompanied by a [tweet by the Secretary of State](#) on April 8:

*"During tough times, real friends stick together. The US is thankful to #Taiwan for donating 2 million face masks to support our healthcare workers on the frontlines. Your openness and generosity in the global battle against #COVID19 is a model for the world."*

US efforts to "assist" Taiwan have included [a meeting](#), via teleconference, between the US Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar and Taiwan's Health and Welfare Minister Chen Shih-Chung (陳時中) on April 27. This meeting was the first direct cabinet-level official interaction between the two governments since 2014, when the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) administrator, Gina McCarthy, [visited the island](#) during President Obama's second term. In a [tweet publicizing the meeting](#), Secretary Azar noted:

*"This morning I spoke with Minister Chen of Taiwan regarding the #COVID19 outbreak. I thanked him for Taiwan's efforts to share their best practices and resources with the US. Now, more than ever, global health partnership is crucial and I appreciate Taiwan's contributions."*

While the meeting itself is not groundbreaking for US-Taiwan relations per se—the two sides have had senior cabinet-level interactions before as noted earlier—the timing of this virtual meeting could also have broader effects. Potentially, it could encourage other governments to engage in similar senior-level official interactions with counterparts in Taiwan in order to show solidarity and support for the island-democracy's efforts to assist the world in combating COVID-19, despite its continuing exclusion from the WHA in the face of Beijing's bullying.

These high-level efforts are being complemented by a ground game that incorporates a high-octane public diplomacy campaign, especially on social media. On May 1, the United States Mission to the United Nations and

the State Department's International Organizations Bureau both issued online statements expressing US support for Taiwan's international space. For instance, US Mission to the UN issued the [following tweet](#) on Twitter calling out UN restrictions barring Taiwanese passport holders from entering UN premises:

*"@UN was founded to serve as a venue for all voices, a forum that welcomes a diversity of views & perspectives, & promotes human freedom. Barring #Taiwan from setting foot on UN grounds is an affront not just to the proud Taiwanese people, but to UN principles. #TweetForTaiwan"*

The US Mission to UN's tweet was accompanied by a volley of six statements from the State Department's IO Bureau, [with one of them notably stating](#):

*"Join us to #TweetforTaiwan's inclusion at the upcoming World Health Assembly so #Taiwan can bring its incredible expertise to the fight against #Covid19. The world needs Taiwan in this fight! Tell @WHO that it is time for Taiwan to be heard."*

The Chinese government has not been standing still while this campaign goes on. In response to the US Mission to the UN's tweet, the Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations issued a [strongly worded response](#):

*"Another political trick. UNGA Resolution 2758 has long put an end to the Taiwan question. Strongly oppose using this question to interfere in China's internal affairs. Trying to shift the blame for inadequate response to #COVID19 in US? No way. @USUN @State\_IO"*

Far from putting to rest the issue of Taiwan's representation in the United Nations, the Chinese statement seemingly ignores the fact that the [UNGA 2758](#) makes no mention of Taiwan at all.

In a rare demonstration of bipartisanship with the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), the new chairman of Taiwan's opposition Nationalist Party (KMT), Johnny Chiang, fired a [strong retort](#) to the Chinese statement:

*"The Kuomintang today called on mainland policymakers to abandon the traditional thinking of*

*suppressing Taiwan, and not to ignore the right to health of the people of Taiwan because of political conflict across the Taiwan Straits, and the desire of the people of Taiwan to participate in and give back to the international community.”*

On the broader issue of the “Taiwan Model” for global governance, at a [webinar](#) hosted by the Global Taiwan Institute on April 30, Taiwan’s Deputy Foreign Minister Hsu Szu-Chien (徐斯儉) stated:

*“...the “Taiwan Model” has proved that transparency and accountability help build stronger trust between the government and its people, and this trust leads to public participation by the vibrant civil society with joint efforts to counter the outbreak. This model of governance is worth sharing and is undoubtedly a better path for democratic countries in dealing with the outbreak. The COVID-19 pandemic has once again showcased the urgent need to include Taiwan in the global pandemic response system, such as the World Health Organization.”*

With less than two weeks left before the World Health Assembly at the time of this publication, it remains to be seen whether the Trump administration’s public diplomacy campaign will be effective in persuading or pressuring [WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus](#) to exercise the authority vested entirely in his position to invite Taiwan, as an observer, to the upcoming WHA. Or, as a senior Republican policy adviser, Dr. Lanhee Chen, [posed during the GTI forum on April 30](#), will the Director-General continue to prioritize the political agenda of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) over the collective well-being of not only the more than 23 million people of Taiwan but also of the global health community? Either way—the international community is starting to hear about the unjustified exclusion of Taiwan not just from the Taiwanese themselves but from world leaders as well, loud and clear.

**The main point:** With two weeks remaining until the World Health Assembly, the United States has ramped a public diplomacy campaign to encourage Taiwan’s participation as an observer. While it still remains to be seen whether the campaign will be effective, it is nevertheless clear that the world is becoming more

acutely aware of Taiwan’s exclusion from international organizations.

### **President Tsai’s Approval Rating Hits Record High Amid COVID-19 Global Pandemic**

Riding on the high-tide from her decisive victory in the January 2020 presidential election, the political momentum behind President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) has been surging over the past several months. The likely causes of her rapidly rising approval ratings are her administration’s effective handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and the international attention generated by it that has swept the globe since earlier this year. Indeed, the global pandemic has thrown an unprecedented spotlight on Taiwan and the country’s successful containment of COVID-19, despite its proximity to the original epicenter of the outbreak in Wuhan, China. The implications of Tsai’s surging approval rating could have short and mid-term effects, both domestically and for the cross-strait relationship, as she begins her second term in office on May 20. A series of polls from both green and blue-leaning organizations—in reference to the colors of the ruling and opposition coalitions, respectively—have shown President Tsai’s approval rating rising to record high territory over the past several months. For instance, according to the latest polling from the blue-leaning television broadcast company [TVBS](#) conducted in March and another by a green-leaning organization, [My Formosa](#) (美麗島電子報), in late April show the president’s approval rating at 60 percent and 70.3 percent, respectively.

Following her election victory in January with a record breaking 8.17 million votes, Tsai was already in a far better political position in comparison to most of her first term, when the average range of her [approval ratings](#) was in the 20-30s. Holding on to an approval rating of around 56 percent following her reelection, according to polling data from the green-leaning [Taiwanese Public Opinion Foundation](#) (TPOF, 台灣民意教育基金會), Tsai was already in a solid position to lead for a second term. However, in the short span of a month—as the world started to learn about the severity of the COVID-19 outbreak in China—President Tsai’s [approval rating](#) spiked to 68.5 percent. This is perhaps associated with people’s [positive perceptions](#) of the

government's precautionary measures that it began taking in December 2019.

Similarly, in [another poll](#) conducted by *TVBS* in February, President Tsai Ing-wen's approval rating reached a new high, rising to 60 percent (an increase from 54 percent from the month before) and her disapproval rating decreasing to 22 percent (a drop from 29 percent from the month before), while 18 percent did not express an opinion. While Tsai's approval reached a [new high](#) when compared to previous polling done by the TV news organization, it is notable that her disapproval rate dropped to about 20 percent, which is only slightly higher than when she took office four years ago (18 percent).

Quite remarkably, in a [March 2020 poll](#) released by the green-leaning New Power Party (NPP), 75.7 percent expressed support for President Tsai. Subsequently, the most recent follow-up poll conducted by [My Formosa](#) in late April showed that 70.3 percent of respondents expressed that they were satisfied with the Tsai administration.

【美麗島電子報】2020年4月調查		正向評價 (增減百分點)	負向評價 (增減百分點)
經濟	國內整體經濟現況評價	24.7% (10.8%↓)	72.2% (11.3%↑)
政治	蔡英文總統信任度	67.4% (1.4%↓)	23.7% (1.0%↑)
	蔡英文總統執政滿意度	70.3% (0.9%↑)	24.1% (0.8%↓)
	行政院長蘇貞昌施政滿意度	67.1% (0.5%↓)	26.0% (1.4%↑)
	民進黨(執政黨)好感度	53.3% (1.6%↓)	29.8% (3.9%↑)
	國民黨(最大在野黨)好感度	22.3% (1.2%↑)	57.7% (1.7%↓)

The implications of President Tsai's surging approval rating, especially as she prepares to enter her second term, are numerous. It is perhaps worth noting that many of the controversial domestic reform issues that challenged her first term still exist, even as General Secretary Xi Jinping's hardening stance towards Taiwan and the events in Hong Kong redirected Taiwanese public opinion in 2019. Nevertheless, these domestic issues—which tend to be brought into spotlight during national elections—were eventually going to resurface, most likely in the local elections. However,

the global pandemic has once again dramatically shifted public attention towards the government's battle against COVID-19 and Beijing's unrelenting efforts to suppress Taiwan's international space and exclude it from the World Health Organization.

While Beijing now has a golden opportunity to show goodwill to Taiwan, it has clearly failed to do so. With no incentives for Taiwan to make any further concessions to Beijing at this point—and with all indicators pointing to Beijing hardening its approach to Taipei—cross-strait relations are likely going to deteriorate further in the near-term.

On the domestic front, the successful COVID-19 response has provided the Tsai administration with more political slack to push through reforms without taking on as much of the political risk associated with such reforms. Moreover, Beijing's inflexible position with regards to Taiwan's international space is also forcing the KMT to take a harder approach to Beijing than it has traditionally, as mainstream public opinion seems closely aligned with Tsai's approach. Indeed, President Tsai is going into her second term with a much stronger hand than initially assessed. Without the pandemic, it would have been difficult to re-focus the national attention away from some of the more controversial aspects of her domestic reform agenda still on the table. At the very least, her increased approval rating will likely give President Tsai more political buffer to continue to undertake major reforms once the pandemic subsides.

**The main point:** The global pandemic has caused President Tsai Ing-wen's approval rating to surge. The increased approval rating will likely give her more political buffer to continue to undertake major reforms once the pandemic subsides.

## Taiwan's Military Ties to Singapore Constrained by China

By: I-wei Jennifer Chang

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On April 8, Singapore's Ministry of Defense (MINDEF) and the Singaporean Armed Forces (SAF) held a [video conference](#) with counterparts from the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) to discuss bilateral efforts to combat the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). The latest engagement comes amid strengthened military relations in recent years. Last October, Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe (魏鳳和) and Singaporean Defense Minister Ng Eng Hen (黃永宏) signed an [updated Agreement on Defense Exchanges and Security Cooperation](#) (ADESC, 國防交流與安全合作協定) that formalized military-to-military exchanges and bolstered China's growing role as a military partner for Singapore. The agreement, signed on October 20, 2019, will include more frequent and [high-level defense dialogues](#) and [larger-scale military exercises](#) across the army, navy, and air force. The revised pact goes beyond the [initial deal reached in 2008](#), which only saw [limited and occasional defense exchanges](#). Despite the new defense agreement, the forty-year-old "[Starlight Project](#)" (星光計劃) between Taiwan and Singapore will remain operational, according to Taiwan's Defense Minister Yen De-fa (嚴德發). Amid improved Singapore-China relations—including military ties—over the past few decades, Taipei does not want to lose more ground in the cross-Strait competition over Singapore. In particular, it wants to protect its flagship military exchange program, which has formed the crux of Taiwan-Singapore relations since the mid-1970s.

### **The Starlight Project**

After Singapore separated from Malaysia and became an independent state in 1965, it turned to Taiwan to help train its armed forces. The city-state [lacked land](#) for military exercises, including war simulations, and Taiwan's ruling Kuomintang (KMT, 國民黨) shared Singapore's [anti-communist ideology](#) and had [combat experience](#) in the Chinese Civil War. Early contacts with Singapore led to Taiwan's establishment of a [representative office](#) in Singapore in 1969. Thereafter, in

April 1975, Singapore's founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew (李光耀) and his friend Chiang Ching-kuo (蔣經國), Taiwan's premier at the time, who would later become president, started a secret military exchange and cooperation plan. The plan, called the "[Starlight Project](#)" (星光計劃), allowed the Singapore Armed Forces to conduct military training in Taiwan. This Taiwanese-Singaporean military program formed the cornerstone of early defense cooperation and bounded the two sides together even in the absence of formal diplomatic relations.

Over the decades, the Starlight Project has become an [open secret](#), though both sides have tried to keep the program [low-key](#) to minimize attention, particularly from Beijing. SAF has a "[Starlight Command](#)" (星光部隊指揮部) in Taipei. Additionally, Singaporean troops have conducted training exercises throughout the island, including at the [Joint Operations Training Base Command](#) (三軍聯訓基地) in Hengchun (墾園) Township in southern Pingtung County, [Douliu Artillery Base](#) (斗六砲兵基地) in western Yunlin County, and [Hukou Armored Force Base](#) (湖口裝甲兵基地) in Hsinchu, southwest of Taipei. Hsinchu residents in the past have [protested](#) against the Singapore army's training exercises in their vicinity. However, under the Starlight program, Singapore's armed forces also have provided services to Taiwanese citizens. The Starlight Force (星光部隊) participated in [rescue missions](#) following the massive earthquake on September 21, 1999, and during severe flooding caused by Typhoon Morakot in August 2009.

Beijing's historical tolerance of Singapore's high-level relations and military links with Taipei is puzzling, not to mention an anomaly in Chinese foreign policy. Chinese Premier Li Peng (李鵬) said during a visit to Singapore in August 1990 that Singapore's military ties with Taiwan "is a fact and we should not mind too much." [1] After Singapore [established diplomatic relations with China](#) in October 1990, it still maintained military cooperation with Taiwan's [Starlight Project](#). Furthermore, frequent high-level visits by [Lee Kuan Yew](#) to Taiwan and [Lee Teng-hui](#) (李登輝) to Singapore underscored close bilateral relations, despite some [personal differences](#) between the two leaders over the development of cross-Strait relations. Singapore has continually emphasized its [official relations with Beijing](#) and may

have [reassured Beijing](#) that its training program with Taiwan will not change its official stance.

Nonetheless, Beijing in recent decades has put pressure on Singapore over its training program with Taipei. The People's Liberation Army has repeatedly offered to train Singapore's armed forces on Hainan Island, but the city-state has continually turned down the offer, reportedly due to [objections from the United States](#). In 2002, discussions over Singapore moving part of its training facilities in Taiwan to Hainan Island sparked concern among some in Taiwan that Singapore may [leak military training secrets](#) to the PLA. Beijing has gradually increased pressure on Singapore, particularly after Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) became president of Taiwan. In November 2016, Hong Kong port authorities seized [nine armored military vehicles](#) that Singapore had shipped through Hong Kong on their return from a training exercise in Taiwan. After the seizure, [China's foreign ministry](#) demanded Singapore abide by the "One-China" principle and said it "opposed countries that have diplomatic ties with the Chinese mainland to conduct official exchanges of any kind with Taiwan, including military exchanges and cooperation." Nevertheless, Singapore has over the decades signaled that it intends to [maintain its training program](#) with Taiwan despite compulsion from Beijing.

However, as Singapore has carried out [military training](#) in Australia, Brunei, Thailand, New Zealand, and other places, the number of Starlight troops training in Taiwan has dwindled from approximately [10,000](#) in the early years to about [3,000](#) troops per year. Furthermore, Singaporean armed forces also are now in greater communication with [the PLA](#), which may alter Taiwan's close defense ties with the city-state. If the Singaporean government decides to suspend the Starlight Project with Taiwan in the future, it would deal a significant blow to Taipei and terminate a historical bond between the two governments.

### ***Singapore's Balancing Act between China and Taiwan***

For the past several decades, Singapore has been engaged in a balancing act between Taiwan and China. As a small city-state nestled among larger neighbors, Singapore has traditionally had to use diplomatic ingenuity to [balance major powers](#)—particularly China—and has often commented that it [does not want to choose](#)

between rival countries. Singapore's foreign policy prioritizes [maintaining independence](#) and space to pursue its national interests. It also entails being an [active, constructive player](#) and building good relations with [neighboring countries](#). Indeed, a [main achievement](#) of Singapore's foreign policy under Lee Kuan Yew was its uncanny ability to maintain close relations with Taipei without damaging relations with Beijing. The Chinese government has desired good relations with Singapore, whose authoritarian capitalism led by ethnic Chinese serves as a useful [governance model](#) for China.

Both Taiwan and China's positive views of Singapore led to the city-state becoming a trusted and neutral meeting venue for landmark cross-Strait summits. Under Lee Kuan Yew's leadership, Singapore convened the [April 1993 summit](#) between Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF, 海峽交流基金會) Chairman Koo Chen-fu (辜振甫) and Wang Daohan (汪道涵), Chairman of China's Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits (ARATS, 海峽兩岸關係協會). Later, Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (李顯龍) hosted the first [summit](#) between the presidents of China and Taiwan, Xi Jinping (習近平) and Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九), in Singapore on November 7, 2015. During the Ma administration, Taipei improved relations with both Beijing and Singapore, signing a [free trade agreement with Singapore](#)—the first of its kind with a Southeast Asian country—in November 2013.

Despite Singapore's role in facilitating cross-Strait dialogue, Taiwan's relations with Singapore have not been without tension or political differences. Singapore has long been concerned over tendencies towards "[Taiwanese independence](#)," which led to chilly relations during the Lee Teng-hui and Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) administrations. Furthermore, Lee Hsien Loong has ushered in a new era of Singapore-China relations, including promoting [stronger military ties](#) with China, that have overshadowed Singapore's historical friendship with Taiwan. As China has undertaken a more [assertive foreign policy](#) under Xi Jinping, it has become more difficult for Singapore to maintain a middle path between Beijing and Taipei, as well as to [balance the Chinese and American superpowers](#). In the current era of great power competition, Singapore is deeply concerned that an open [US-China conflict](#) would create serious ramifications for the small city-state, arguably

posing a greater threat than China's ambitions and unilateral military actions in the Indo-Pacific region.

Unlike its relations with other countries, which tend to focus on economics and trade, Taiwan's relationship with Singapore was historically founded on military exchanges and cooperation. Amid closer Chinese-Singaporean ties, Taiwan faces uncertainty over its status within the triangular relationship. Taipei does not want to lose Singapore as an economic and military partner, nor as a longtime friend. Thus, Taiwan's government is trying to [preserve the historical Starlight Project](#), but it continues to face competition from China. If Singapore, however, decides that the [Starlight training exercises](#) in Taiwan no longer meet Singapore's needs, or if the quality and depth of Taiwan's [military exchanges and cooperation with Singapore](#) continue to lag significantly behind those with China, then Singapore may adjust Taiwan's role in its defense and foreign policy accordingly.

The United States, which has taken steps to [expand partnerships with Taiwan and Singapore](#), could also help to further integrate both Asian partners into a networked [Indo-Pacific security architecture](#) capable of deterring and withstanding aggressive actions by China. Washington could develop trilateral mechanisms to bring together Taiwan and Singapore, two like-minded partners, to help meet the shared challenges of a rising China. Washington should invite Taiwanese officials to meet with US and Singaporean counterparts to discuss collaboration on other regional security issues such as anti-piracy, counterterrorism, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. This would help promote the US interest to [link its network](#) of alliances and partnerships to promote peace and security in the Indo-Pacific region.

**The main point:** Close military cooperation, in particular the Starlight Project, have formed the cornerstone of close Taiwan-Singapore relations since the mid-1970s. As Singapore-China relations, including defense ties, have grown stronger over the past few decades, it has become more difficult for Singapore to balance relations between Beijing and Taipei.

[1] Jie Chen, *Foreign Policy of the New Taiwan: Pragmatic Diplomacy in Southeast Asia* (Edward Elgar, 2002), pg. 96.

## China Hardening Rhetoric Toward Taiwan Foreshadows Increased Tensions

By: J. Michael Cole

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Following a period of reduced tensions in the Taiwan Strait during the Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) administration (2008-2016), much uncertainty surrounded the future of cross-Strait relations after the election of Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in January 2016. Two months prior to that election in November 2015, Ma and his counterpart, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping (習近平), had met in a [historic summit in Singapore](#), leading some analysts at the time to [ponder](#) whether the mostly symbolic meeting could yield something more substantial. The brief interaction between the two party leaders did not help the then-ruling Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang or KMT) in the January elections, in which Ms. Tsai not only scored a major victory against her opponent but her party, the DPP, obtained a majority of seats in the Legislative Yuan for the first time in the nation's democratic history. From Beijing's perspective, following eight years of rapprochement, the outcome of the elections could only have been construed as a repudiation of its "goodwill" and a rejection of "one China" under the "one country, two systems" formula. Although Beijing would never admit it, the result also made it difficult for the CCP to continue to claim that only a limited number of DPP "separatists" opposed the "historical inevitability" of "peaceful unification." Consequently, Beijing has embarked on a systematic hardening of its rhetoric and actions toward Taiwan.

### **First Hardening: 2016**

In the months between the election and inauguration on May 20 of that year, it was possible to hope that relations between Taipei and Beijing could remain on a somewhat even keel. On the Taiwan side, Ms. Tsai extended an [olive branch](#) of sorts, offering to abide by the "status quo" in the Taiwan Strait—at some cost to her within the pro-Taiwan green camp—and the Republic of China (ROC) "[constitutional order](#)." Furthermore, although the incoming president refused to [recognize](#)

the so-called “1992 Consensus,” she nevertheless committed to respecting and building upon the “historical fact” of a meeting that had occurred between the two sides in 1992 and avoided rhetoric which risked inflaming the relationship. On the Chinese side, meanwhile, a number of respected Chinese academics, including Zhang Nianchi (章念馳) of the Shanghai Institute for East Asia Studies—the intellectual heir to former Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits (ARATS) chairman Wang Daohan (汪道涵)—suggested in interviews with [foreign media](#) that constructive and peaceful relations in the Taiwan Strait should be possible without the “1992 Consensus.”

As President Tsai gave her [inaugural address on May 2016](#), there was a chance that Beijing could agree to a new framework under which cross-strait relations could continue to evolve. Within six hours, however, the rhetoric in Beijing hardened significantly: President Tsai’s signals had been an “[incomplete test paper](#).” No sooner had the State Council’s Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) expressed its disagreement than official channels of communication between the two sides, the TAO and Taiwan’s Mainland Affairs Council (MAC), were [suspended](#). What followed were four years of a gradually hardening rhetoric against Taiwan, ramped up political warfare activities, economic and [military coercion](#), as well as the resumption of [efforts to poach Taiwan’s official diplomatic allies](#). Alongside these aggressive measures, Beijing nevertheless attempted to win over Taiwan’s youth and highly educated professionals through “[incentive programs](#)” meant to lure Taiwanese talent to China.

As Beijing’s animosity became more apparent, so too did President Tsai’s willingness to challenge China in her own rhetoric, often making her one of the very few heads of state to openly criticize Beijing for its human rights violations and excesses in Hong Kong.

Beijing then appeared to have gotten a break when, in the November 2018 local elections, President Tsai’s DPP suffered a [major setback](#), losing control of a number of municipalities. The poor results prompted President Tsai to step down as party chair and led Beijing to [interpret](#) the outcome as a sign of renewed public support for “peaceful unification” and a [rejection](#) of President Tsai’s overall China policy. Moreover, in Kaohsiung, the elected KMT candidate, Han Kuo-yu (韓

國瑜), emerged as a new, populist force in a hitherto moribund KMT and rode a wave which eventually took him to [directly challenge President Tsai in the January 2020 elections](#).

### **Second Hardening: 2020**

President Tsai’s [re-election in 2020](#), with a record-breaking 8 million votes—along with her party’s ability to maintain a majority, albeit reduced, in the legislature—sealed the deal on Beijing’s hopes for the KMT to prove itself as a partner in its ambitions for unification. By then, it had become evident that all efforts to weaken President Tsai had been in vain and, in fact, had probably [backfired](#).

But there had already been signs along the way, suggesting that the CCP only halfheartedly believed in “peaceful unification” and the effectiveness of economic incentives in winning over a sufficiently large number of Taiwanese. As early as January 2018, People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Major General Zhu Chenghu (朱成虎), a military strategist and former dean of China’s National Defense University [described](#) by the Washington Post as one of China’s leading military minds, that the KMT was simply no longer committed to unification and had become unreliable as a partner. Members of the KMT who visited China, he [said](#), were doing little more than “lying, eating, and drinking.”

Xi’s [tone-deaf address to “Taiwan compatriots”](#) in January 2019 also demonstrated, *inter alia*, that Beijing was in no mood to negotiate and that unification, under the by-then-unviable “[one country, two systems](#),” was the only option. By then, it had become clear that the wishes of the Taiwanese, if they ever were to be taken into consideration, were no longer relevant. Xi [also stated](#) that the use of force against Taiwan remained an option for Beijing. Then, on December of that year, Wang Hongguang (王洪光), a hawkish retired lieutenant-general, [told](#) a forum organized by the Global Times in Beijing that young Taiwanese no longer identify as Chinese and desire independence. “The ‘independent forces’ are now the majority in Taiwan and this has become an irreversible trend,” Wang [was quoted](#) by the South China Morning Post as saying. “In addition, public opinion on the mainland and Taiwan is moving in opposite directions and getting further and further apart. Time is running out and it will be an un-



affordable burden for both sides of the Taiwan Strait if we have to wait another five to 10 years for us to liberate or reunite with Taiwan,” he said, adding that “‘one country, two systems’ is unable to land in Taiwan and the window for peaceful reunification is closing.”

By then, the voices of moderation in Chinese academe, such as had existed in 2016, had been entirely silenced and gradually replaced by more hardline and vocal proponents of the [forced unification](#) of Taiwan. To them, Taiwan’s resistance was an affront, a refusal to subscribe to a Sino-centric hierarchical construct that puts the “peripheries”—societies like Taiwan, Hong Kong, Tibet, and Xinjiang—in a subject position vis-à-vis the “center” in Beijing. It was an unforgivable rejection of the so-called “China dream” by a people that should know better.

Equally worrying for Taiwan was the evidence that outside CCP organs, Chinese nationals who are not necessarily party members were also beginning to [adopt a much harder tone](#) toward Taiwan, with a higher frequency of genocidal terms and calls for the complete annihilation of the island and its people (e.g., 留島不留人, or “seize the island and get rid of the people;” another variant of this phrase leaves only birds alive). Such rhetoric spiked in early 2020 and, [according to preliminary research](#), its propagation may have been assisted by the use of bots on social media. The extent of state or party involvement in coordinating this rhetorical escalation remains to be determined, but it leaves no doubt that the nationalism that the CCP has been [cultivating](#) since the early 1990s has now to some extent reached ultra nationalistic levels both among CCP members and within Chinese society. Although not every Chinese citizen ascribes to such language, hardline voices have arguably gathered enough momentum on social media that it could be difficult for the Chinese government to de-escalate in a time of crisis, such as, for example, a military collision in the Taiwan Strait.

### ***Tumultuous Road Ahead***

Following an extensive [propaganda campaign](#) in recent weeks that has sought to rewrite the history of COVID-19 and to portray China as being in a stronger position internationally as the rest of the world struggles to contain the virus, this ultranationalist senti-

ment could compel the Chinese leadership to seize the opportunity to take military action against Taiwan. The desirability of such a move will inevitably also be predicated on whether Beijing interprets signals from the United States, such as the recent decision to [remove all its heavy bombers from Guam](#), as signs of “weakness” and strategic retrenchment.

Conversely, the prospect of a beleaguered Xi tapping into this ultranationalist sentiment to bolster his credentials and wrong-foot his opponents is difficult to ignore. There is a possibility that Xi has been weakened due to his government’s ineffective early response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Government sources have also suggested that rival factions within the CCP may be considering options for Xi’s removal had he not made himself [president for life](#) (his second term was expected to end in 2022). If and once those ultranationalist forces are unleashed, such vitriolic sentiment could make it very difficult to maintain control, which is an invitation for excess and, indeed, potentially genocidal action against the stubborn Taiwanese.

With President Tsai and Taiwan receiving unprecedentedly favorable attention from the international community and the possibility that neither the KMT, which has yet to regain its footing and sense of direction, nor any alternative party will be in a position to challenge the DPP in the 2024 elections, Beijing may be running out of patience. The voices of moderation within China have been silenced, while those calling for radical action are taking up most of the bandwidth. Ostensibly having given up on wining the hearts and minds of the Taiwanese, the CCP and the ultranationalists that it has cultivated may decide that the time has come for Taiwan to be “taught a lesson.”

Given the tone of the recent rhetoric, the outcome of a radical action by China could be a terrible one for Taiwan. At the very least, we can expect an intensification of political warfare efforts to undermine, polarize, and weaken Taiwanese society and subvert the ability of the central government to run the country. A more radical course of action would be the use of military force. As such, Taiwan and its allies must continue to present a credible deterrent and avoid any possibility of miscalculation on Beijing’s part.

**The main point:** Frustrated at every turn in its efforts

to annex Taiwan by “peaceful” means, the CCP and the ultranationalists it has cultivated have adopted much harsher rhetoric toward Taiwan recently, with a worrying spike in genocidal terminology.

## Is US-Taiwan Relations Heading Toward a Hungary '56 Redux?

By: Michael Mazza

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Is the Taiwan of today, or of the near future, the Hungary of 1956? This question arose from a recent Twitter exchange I shared with Robert A. Manning, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council and former government official. In response to my [contention](#) that there is a coming push in Washington to significantly elevate the US-Taiwan relationship, he suggested that the ultimate result could be [“another Hungary '56 redux.”](#) It is, on its face, an appealing analogy: two superpowers, with unbalanced interests and unequal capacity for armed intervention (in the very near term), face off over the fate of a much smaller country. Some may consider the parallels eerily similar, but a closer review of the historical circumstances reveal that the differences are far more illuminating, particularly for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Even so, there is at least one important lesson for the United States to draw from the failed Hungarian Revolution of 1956.

### **What Happened in Hungary in 1956?**

In a nutshell, a protest in Budapest against both the Soviet Union and the government of the People’s Republic of Hungary transformed into an armed uprising after the State Security Police fired on demonstrators. During what Charles Gati described as “thirteen days of high drama,” Soviet troops intervened indecisively; the government fell; Imre Nagy, a reformist communist, became prime minister and announced the end of one-party rule and Hungary’s intention to withdraw from the Warsaw Pact and join its neighbor Austria as a neutral state; and Soviet troops intervened once again,

this time decisively.

Although the Hungarian movement was organic, it almost certainly drew inspiration from the United States. The Eisenhower administration had, in its early days, espoused a policy of rollback of communism. John Foster Dulles, who would later become Eisenhower’s secretary of state, was a prominent proponent of the liberation of states under communist rule. And although [NSC 162/2](#), adopted in October 1953, embraced a more restrained policy of containment, “public statements ... portrayed optimistic prospects for the rollback of communism.” [1]

Liberation rhetoric in the United States may have contributed to an environment in which the pursuit of a free Hungary was more likely, but Radio Free Europe broadcasts directly encouraged the country’s revolutionaries. As Gati described:

*“RFE failed to encourage a gradualist, “Titoist,” or simply anti-Stalinist outcome that had a chance, however slim, to succeed; instead, it egged on the most radical insurgent groups to fight on until all their demands were met. In the end, and tragically, the United States did not find the proper balance between the admirable goal of keeping the Hungarians’ hopes alive and the dubious goal of encouraging them to fight a hopeless battle against the Soviet Union. Thus, the proper question, then or now, is not why the United States refused to fight for Hungary in what could have become World War III; the proper question is why the United States refused to press through its propaganda outlets and diplomatic channels for realistic if small gains.”*

*“Why wasn’t something better than nothing?”*  
[2]

What’s more, Gati describes the United States as a “disingenuous” actor, “when it kept the Hungarians’ hopes alive—without making any preparations at all to help them either militarily or diplomatically.” [3] Following a heady few days in autumn 1956, the revolution failed and Hungary would remain under the Soviet thumb until the Cold War’s end.

### **Taiwan and the Hungary '56 Analogy**

There are three primary similarities between the dy-

namics at play in 1956 and the dynamics that would be in play in a hypothetical Taiwan scenario involving Chinese military action.

First, both cases involve the world's major powers engaged in a contest over the fate of a much smaller third country. In both cases, the third country is geographically contiguous (or nearly so, in the case of Taiwan) with only one of the two major powers; in both cases, that major power is the authoritarian one. Hungary shared a border with the Soviet Union and was separated from the United States by Western Europe and the Atlantic Ocean. The narrow Taiwan Strait is all that separates Taiwan from China, while the United States sits across the Pacific Ocean.

Second, in both cases, the major powers involved are nuclear states. Any consideration of armed intervention was—and would be—colored by the knowledge that dangerous escalation was, and would be, distinctly possible.

Third, there is arguably an imbalance of US and Chinese interests vis-à-vis Taiwan just as there was an imbalance of American and Soviet interests vis-à-vis Hungary. In the latter case, Khrushchev needed to stave off potential challenges from his left flank following his February 1956 denunciation of Stalin. Moreover, Hungary's quest for independence posed a threat to the integrity of the Warsaw Pact, and thus to the national security of the Soviet Union. The United States simply did not have as much at stake in Hungary.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), meanwhile, has long seen Taiwan as posing a threat to its rule. Taiwan puts lie to the notion that democracy does not accord with the Chinese-speaking world, while its continued *de facto* independence keeps the CCP from delivering on promises of so-called "reunification." The CCP might well consider a Taiwanese declaration of independence or other move towards permanent "separation" as an existential threat (to be clear, no such move is in the offing). The United States, of course, has crucial interests in Taiwan. US concerns, however, do not extend to the very survival of the American constitution order.

Even so, an imbalance of interests does not necessarily lead to an imbalance in commitment and certainly does not predetermine outcomes in a crisis. Here, then, it is worth noting the profound differences be-

tween circumstances prior to the Hungarian revolution and those today. Put simply, Hungary was then behind the iron curtain, was a member of the Warsaw Pact, and hosted Soviet troops. Hungary was firmly in the Soviet camp—a successful revolution would have been a loss for Moscow and a win for Washington.

Taiwan, on the other hand, is a member of the democratic community of nations, a key cog in the global economy, and a close US security partner. It would be far harder for Chinese troops to conduct a successful amphibious landing than it was for Soviet tanks to roll across the border into Hungary. Taiwan's military, moreover, can put up a fight in a way Hungary's military and insurgents could not. As compared to Hungary in 1956, American military intervention in a Taiwan Strait crisis is far more likely and international opprobrium potentially far more effective due to China's economic ties to the West (which could, of course, lead to restraint in the West as well).

In 1956, the United States squandered an opportunity to put a dent in the iron curtain, but coming out of the crisis on the "losing" side was entirely bearable. This "loss" meant the maintenance of the status quo in Europe, which was an acceptable outcome for Eisenhower. [4] With respect to Taiwan today, however, there are far more ways for Washington to "lose." If Beijing coerces Taipei into unification, America's vital interests are harmed. If Beijing invades and occupies Taiwan while the United States stands idly by, America's vital interests are harmed. If Beijing invades and occupies Taiwan despite US armed intervention, America's vital interests are harmed.

One hopes that, to the extent that Beijing looks to this particular historical example in search of insight into how a future conflict over Taiwan's fate might play out, it takes note of these substantial differences.

### ***One Final Difference***

A final, obvious difference: while there was a revolution in Hungary in 1956, there will be no revolution in Taiwan because there is nothing against which to revolt. Taiwan is functionally free and independent, and its government's legitimacy is effectively unquestioned. (Although you may want to at least consider the dangers of a potentially disruptive scenario in which Taiwan approaches zero diplomatic partners.)

Robert Manning, in his Twitter exchange with me, seemed to suggest that in establishing a more normal relationship with Taiwan (note: not formal diplomatic ties), the United States would somehow [encourage](#) Taiwan to declare independence, which would in turn “provoke” Beijing. Getting from closer US-Taiwan ties to Taiwan independence, however, requires a leap of logic that does not make much sense. Indeed, closer US-Taiwan relations should lessen any perceived need on the part of Taiwan to declare formal independence. Why risk throwing away what you’ve got in pursuit of what you already have? [5]

A crisis in the Taiwan Strait is far more likely to be driven by Chinese domestic politics. Accordingly, Hungary ’56 is not useful for illuminating what shape a crisis so driven might take.

### ***Lessons from the Cold War***

Even if the analogy lacks predictive value, the Hungarian Revolution was a major event in early Cold War history, and one from which the United States should seek to draw lessons—especially as some experts argue that the United States and China may be entering a new cold war.

One is of particular relevance to the Taiwan Strait: Hungary ’56 clearly illustrated the danger of a gap between words and deeds. In his book, Gati described the Eisenhower approach as NATO: “No Action, Talk Only.” [6] Put simply, American rhetoric encouraged revolution, while the United States took no action to ensure revolution would succeed. The result was the squandering of a potential opportunity for a Titoist resolution—a neutral but still communist Hungary—and the decades long Soviet domination of Hungary and its people.

The US approach to the Taiwan Strait has long suffered not from “No Action, Talk Only,” but rather from “Confused Talk, Confused Action”—more frequently referred to as “strategic ambiguity.” The United States has long refrained from stating clearly if it will intervene in a military conflict in the Taiwan Strait. And although many US actions (arms sales, for example) make clear American interests in Taiwan’s continued *de facto* independence, the United States has refrained from the sorts of actions that would signal clearer intent to come to Taiwan’s aid—for example, frequent and intensive combined military training involving all

three services.

“No Action, Talk Only” helped contribute to a tragedy in Hungary by encouraging the Hungarian people to rise up against the Soviet Union with no intent to assist them. In the Taiwan Strait, the muddle of words and actions that is strategic ambiguity is far more likely to lead to miscalculation on the part of Beijing, not Taipei. Put very simply, one lesson from Hungary ’56 is that the United States should say what it means, mean what it says, and act accordingly. American leaders have not applied that lesson to the perennially tumultuous Taiwan Strait.

**The main point:** The Taiwan of 2020 is not the Hungary of 1956, but there is at least one important lesson for the United States to draw from the failed Hungarian Revolution: say what you mean, mean what you say, and act accordingly.

[1] Charles Gati, *Failed Illusions: Moscow, Washington, Budapest, and the 1956 Hungarian Revolt* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2006), 70-71.

[2] *Ibid*, 6.

[3] *Ibid*, 2.

[4] *Ibid*, 181.

[5] It is worth noting that a Taiwan declaration of independence is far more likely to result from China’s continued poaching of Taipei’s diplomatic allies, as I argued for GTB [previously](#), than from any steps the United States does or does not take.

[6] *Ibid*, 112.

## Lessons for Taiwan's Diplomacy from its Handling of the Coronavirus Pandemic

By: Michael Reilly

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Taiwan has rightly won considerable international praise for its handling of the response to the coronavirus pandemic. The speed and effectiveness of this are reflected in the low rates of infection and mortality, especially when compared to the stumbling efforts of many other countries, including the United Kingdom and the United States. Above all, it stands in marked contrast to China's own handling of the outbreak and its subsequent attempts to use it in support of its wider diplomatic objectives— attempts which the [Financial Times](#) has described as an “own-goal.”

As President Tsai Ing-wen explained in an [article for Time](#), there was no magic in Taiwan's response, just a readiness to learn from past experiences and a wariness about taking Chinese assurances at face value, especially given those experiences. She attributed the success of this response to “a combination of efforts by medical professionals, government, private sector, and society at large,” undergirded by strong and effective central control and coordination of all aspects of the response. Does this success have wider lessons that Taiwan can apply elsewhere, especially in its ongoing struggle against China for international space and influence?

This struggle is at the core of Taiwan's foreign policy, which Tsai [has described](#) as “full of tough challenges at the highest level.” Among four main priorities that she highlighted for the successful pursuit of this, two are particularly notable. First and foremost according to Tsai is the need for “experienced people with international perspective” to face the challenge. The second is to help Taiwanese companies gain business opportunities in international markets. In other words, she argued that Taiwan's sovereignty and economic success are inextricably linked. They cannot be separated, and an effective foreign policy is critical for both.

Taiwan's foreign policy is spearheaded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA). In terms of real estate, its overseas presence is extensive, with offices in 73 countries, as befits a country of Taiwan's population and economic size. However, most of these missions are unofficial, with no formal status. MOFA is also fortunate to have many highly skilled and experienced diplomats. Nevertheless, as the international response to the coronavirus pandemic has highlighted once again, Taiwan continues to be denied membership in almost every international organisation of any note. Furthermore, almost all of its formal diplomatic allies are microstates, in many of which the Taiwanese embassy is either the only diplomatic mission, as in Tuvalu or Nauru, or one of very few.

Without resident missions in such countries, Taiwan's diplomatic relations would almost certainly shrink further, so maintaining them must be central to the country's foreign policy. Yet crucial though they are, formal missions in microstates are hardly representative of, or suitable preparation for, Taiwan's broader diplomatic efforts more generally. Diplomacy today is driven by the need for international cooperation to tackle transnational challenges, be they global warming, terrorism, drug and people-trafficking, or barriers to trade. The cultivating of wider contacts, the building of networks, the lobbying, the negotiating, and the working for a consensus that are crucial to dealing with these issues are generally absent in relations with such small countries. Yet these skills are also essential if Taiwan is to effectively combat the insidious spread of Chinese influence. This is one reason why China is so determined to deny Taiwan access to international organisations, even as an observer. China knows that the formal sessions of these organisations are of far less importance than the opportunities they provide in the margins for seeking and building influence. The result is that Taiwanese diplomats are expected to work for their country's interests and recognition on the international stage while having few significant opportunities to acquire the experience and international perspective that President Tsai has rightly identified as being so important.

Taiwan is not barred from international organisations entirely. It is a [full member](#) of the World Trade Organisation (WTO)—albeit in the name of “Chinese Tai-

pei”—an important forum given the vital importance of trade to Taiwan as it seeks new global opportunities for its private sector. Despite the rise of regional trading blocs and bilateral trade arrangements—and notwithstanding US President Donald Trump’s [open feud with the organization](#)—the WTO continues to play the leading role in setting the rules of global trade and in negotiating new multilateral agreements, for example to cover trade in services or Information Technology. Here, almost uniquely, Taiwan’s representatives participate on an equal basis with their counterparts from other countries. Here, more than anywhere else, they are exposed to the everyday realities and practicalities of modern diplomacy: the behind the scenes negotiations, the networking, the lobbying, the consensus building, and the compromises that go into reaching agreements. Time spent at the WTO or similar organisations should therefore be invaluable experience for Taiwanese diplomats. It represents an opportunity both to acquire the necessary wider skills but also to put them into practice; an opportunity to engage with counterparts peers from other countries in a way that is otherwise rarely possible, and to acquire the perspective that President Tsai has rightly identified as being so important.

But in contrast to the centralized, carefully coordinated way in which Taiwan has responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, the country’s participation in the WTO is the responsibility of the Bureau of Foreign Trade (BOFT), which reports not to MOFA but to the Ministry of Economic Affairs (MOEA). This separation of foreign and trade policy is by no means uncommon: in the United States, trade negotiations are the remit of the US Trade Representative (USTR), rather than the State Department, while in Japan, trade policy falls to the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry (METI). But the USA and Japan are both G7 countries, the world’s largest and third largest economies respectively, with a global diplomatic presence and major trading relationships. For example, each has embassies in almost every African country, while Taiwan has just three offices on the entire continent.

Consider, by contrast, Korea and Australia, both members of the G20 whose economies are more comparable in size to that of Taiwan. Until 2013, Korea’s foreign and trade policies were handled by a unified Ministry

of Foreign Affairs and Trade before being separated during the administration of Park Geun-hye. Similarly, Australia has long handled the two in a single Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, seemingly without any difficulties or problems. Smaller countries such as Ireland also seem comfortable with a single ministry responsible for both foreign and trade policy.

The question for Taiwan, however, is not just—or even primarily—about whether merging MOFA and the BOFT makes bureaucratic sense. China’s relentless squeezing of Taiwan’s international space means it faces a unique threat to its very survival that is every bit as challenging as the one it has faced from the coronavirus pandemic. As President Tsai has made clear, sovereignty and economic prosperity go together. But at present, the two are dealt with by separate parts of the Taiwanese administration. Like many bureaucracies, coordination and cooperation between them appear limited, valuable experiences are probably not shared, opportunities to cultivate friendships and long-term relations are missed, and worse, anecdotal evidence even suggests a basic reluctance between the agencies to work together. Taiwan’s diplomatic efforts are weakened in consequence. When Taiwan needs to call on all the diplomatic weapons it can muster, Taipei cannot afford to see its efforts weakened by this division of responsibilities and bureaucratic infighting.

Merging MOFA and BOFT may not be the answer. But Taiwan has won so many international plaudits for its handling of the coronavirus pandemic because of its demonstration of crisis management at its best: clear leadership combined with effective coordination of policy and widely understood objectives. By contrast, few observers would consider diplomacy to be a matter of crisis management. Taiwan has long since grown accustomed to the steady hemorrhaging of its diplomatic allies, such that to describe its diplomatic relations as being in a state of crisis may be dismissed as alarmist. But if Taiwan is to preserve successfully its remaining international space in the face of an ever more assertive China, it should consider carefully whether its handling of the pandemic may have wider lessons for its diplomatic efforts.

**The main point:** Taiwan’s handling of the coronavirus pandemic has shown the Taiwanese bureaucracy at its best. It now needs to apply the lessons more broadly.