De-Isolating Taiwan: The Costs of Swimming Against the Current in Lithuania and the Czech Republic

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Abstract

This research paper examines the efforts of some of Taiwan's non-diplomatic allies to counter its international isolation, particularly in a context where the broader international community appears to defer to China—effectively granting it a veto over any changes to Taiwan's global status. Lithuania and the Czech Republic have recently drawn attention for enhancing their engagement with Taiwan, in ways that have provoked strong reactions from Beijing. This raises questions about what motivates these governments to adopt a divergent policy stance towards Taiwan, whether defying the dominant trend comes at a cost they are willing to bear, and how sustainable their de-isolation efforts are over the long term. While domestic political dynamics have been influential in Lithuania, and normative affinity—or "sympathy"—has shaped Czech policy, both countries still possess considerable agency in resisting external pressure from China. Despite the risks, their engagement with Taiwan may prove difficult to reverse.

Keywords:

(De-)isolation, China, Taiwan, Lithuania, the Czech Republic

Introduction

This research paper examines how Taiwan's non-diplomatic allies have interacted with the self-governing island amid China's ongoing efforts to marginalize it internationally—efforts that have intensified since the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) assumed the presidency in 2016. It has become a well-known fact that today the DPP supports a state-to-state approach to cross-Strait relations, echoing President Lee Teng-hui's 1999 stance while he was with the Kuomintang (KMT), and firmly rejects unification under the 'One Country, Two Systems' model.[1] Moreover, since the 1990s, Taipei has renounced its claim to be the sole legitimate government of China,[2] and currently rejects both the "1992 Consensus" and the "One China" framework[3]—previously key to fostering

[1] Fabry, Mikulas (2024). The Effect of 'One China' Policies of Foreign States on the International Status of Taiwan. *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 35:1, p. 100.
[2] Jie, Dalei (2012). Sovereignty–Security Nexus, Domestic Constraints, and the Taiwan Independence Policy (1988–2010), *Asian Security*, 8(2), pp. 189–190.
[3] Qiang, Xin (2022). *Mainland China's Taiwan Policy: From Peaceful Development to Selective Engagement*. London: Routledge.

closer cross-Strait ties and maintaining a "diplomatic truce."[4]. This leaves the impression that Taiwan seeks to maintain the *status quo*—if not formal recognition as a sovereign state while asserting its citizens' right to avoid being governed by external authorities against their own will.[5]

China has attempted to marginalize Taiwan legally, institutionally, and politically in all these years. Since the DPP assumed power in 2016, Taiwan has lost 10 diplomatic allies—Burkina Faso, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Honduras, Kiribati, Nauru, Nicaragua, Panama, São Tomé and Príncipe, Solomon Islands. Taipei's efforts to secure dual representation for "One China" at the UN level have been unsuccessful. Previously, Taiwan has only managed to join international organizations where statehood is not a prerequisite or under terms dictated by Beijing, using designations such as "Chinese Taipei" and "Taiwan, China". Taiwan's use of "dollar diplomacy"—offering financial incentives to secure or retain diplomatic allies—has produced inconsistent outcomes. While it has helped preserve some formal ties, several countries have still switched recognition to Beijing, highlighting the strategy's limitations. Overall, the broader international community appears to defer to China, effectively granting it a veto over any changes to Taiwan's international status.

Amid China's growing assertiveness under Xi Jinping—particularly its continued prioritization of national reunification—this paper investigates why some of Taiwan's non-diplomatic allies choose to engage in de-isolation efforts despite the diplomatic and economic costs of straining ties with Beijing. It begins by outlining China's position on the Taiwan issue and the methods it employs to constrain Taiwan's international space. After establishing the broader context of China's isolation strategy, the paper turns to the cases of Lithuania and the Czech Republic, which offer valuable insights into why some states are willing to defy pressure. Finally, it examines the conditions under which punitive measures against these "rule breakers" either succeed or fail.

Fight against Taiwan's "incremental independence"

Taiwan's separation from Mainland China traces back to the Chinese Civil War. After the Nationalist government (Kuomintang, KMT) was defeated by the Communist Party in 1949, it retreated to Taiwan, where it continued to govern the Republic of China (ROC) in exile. Meanwhile, the Communist Party established the People's Republic of China (PRC) on the mainland, leading to an enduring political division between the two entities. Unlike many partially recognized entities, the Republic of China (Taiwan) did not emerge as a secessionist state proclaiming unilateral independence. Instead, its contested statehood is a consequence of a regime change on the mainland, which relegated the ROC to a *de facto* government-in-exile in Taiwan.[6]

From 1949 to 1987, China's efforts to retake Taiwan evolved from direct military threats and planned invasions to a strategy of diplomatic isolation and psychological pressure.[7] In the early 1950s, Mao's PRC considered invading Taiwan to complete national reunification. However, the onset of the Korean War (1950) and the U.S. military commitment to defend Taiwan through the U.S. Seventh

[4] During Ma Ying-jeou's presidency (2008–2016), a tacit agreement emerged to suspend diplomatic competition and reject overtures from countries allied with Taipei seeking to establish diplomatic relations with Beijing. To uphold this 'diplomatic truce' and maintain cross-Strait stability, Beijing turned down requests for diplomatic switches from Paraguay, Malawi, El Salvador, and the Gambia (see Qiang, 2022).

[5] Fabry, Mikulas (2024). The Effect of 'One China' Policies of Foreign States on the International Status of Taiwan. *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 35:1, pp. 90-115.

[6] Geldenhuys, Deon (2009). *Contested States in World Politics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, p. 208.

[7] Garver, John W. (1997). *The Sino-American Alliance: Nationalist China and American Cold War Strategy in Asia*. Routledge.

Fleet halted those ambitions.[8] Two major crises followed: the First Taiwan Strait Crisis (1954–55) saw the PRC shelling Taiwan's offshore islands, aiming to test U.S. resolve; the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis (1958) brought a renewed bombardment campaign again against targeted offshore islands. The U.S. resupplied ROC forces, reaffirming its commitment. Although, during the Mao and early Deng eras, the PRC used propaganda to undermine the legitimacy of the ROC government and promote unification, and also espionage and subversion efforts aimed to destabilize the KMT regime internally,[9] the major breakthrough came in the 1970s, especially after the PRC replaced the ROC at the United Nations in 1971,[10] and after in 1979 after the U.S. switched the recognition of the ROC to the PRC. By the late 1980s, with military conquest deemed too risky—especially due to U.S. protection of Taiwan—China pivoted toward long-term reunification through political and economic influence, though always under the non-negotiable premise of "One China." It was only from 1987 onward that Taiwan's Pan-Green coalition began actively constructing Taiwan as a sovereign state, thereby distancing itself from the "One China" principle. Accordingly, Taiwan has been perceived in Beijing as a *de jure* extension of China, where any implicit or explicit move toward independence may be interpreted as an attempt to secede from the Mainland.[11]

The Anti-Secession Law of 2005 codified China's longstanding position and drew Taiwan even more explicitly into China's orbit. The law declares that "The state shall never permit 'Taiwan independence' secessionist forces to separate Taiwan from China under any name or by any means".[12] Similarly, the 2015 National Security Law emphasizes that "Safeguarding national sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity is the shared responsibility of all Chinese citizens, including those from Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan".[13] Xi Jinping's revival of the slogan "One Country, Two Systems," aims at eventual reunification, preferably by 2049 at the latest.[14] While not tolerating any forms of "incremental independence", Xi has been blunt to declare that "China will never allow anyone, any organization, or any political party to rip out any part of our territory at any time or in any form".[15]

Since 2016, Beijing has gradually forged a dual-track Taiwan policy framework featuring "selective engagement" that Qiang characterizes as "a combination of confrontational measures in security, political, and diplomatic fields, with coordinative approaches on economic, social, and cultural affairs".[16] According to the white paper "The One-China Principle and the Taiwan Issue", one of the

[8] Chao, Linda and Ramon H. Myers (2000). *The Divided China Problem: Conflict Avoidance and Resolution*. Hoover Institute on War, Revolution and Peace. Stanford University, p. 10

[9] Gershaneck, Kerry K. (2020). *Political Warfare: Strategies for Combating China's Plan to "Win without Fighting"*. Quantico: Marine Corps University Press.

[10] Resolution 2758 (XXVI) of the United Nations General Assembly, titled "Restoration of the Lawful Rights of the People's Republic of China in the United Nations" (1971), https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/192054?ln=en&v=pdf#files.

[11] Wachman, Alan M. (2000). Taiwan: Parent, Province, or Blackballed State? *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 35(1), p. 197.

[12] Anti-Secession Law (2005). Adopted at the Third Session of the Tenth National People's Congress on March 14, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004_2009/documents/fd/d-cn2005042601/d-cn2005042601en.pdf.

[13] Xinhua (2022-08-10). The Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era, https://english.news.cn/20220810/df9d3b8702154b34bbf1d451b99bf64a/c.html.

[14] Blanchette, Jude; Briana Boland and Lily McElwee (2023). What is Beijing's Timeline for "Reunification" with Taiwan? CSIS Interpret: China, May 26, https://interpret.csis.org/what-is-beijings-timeline-for-reunification-with-taiwan/.

[15] Lin, Bonny (2022). Enabling "Patriots" to Be Masters of the Island: Evolution of Xi's Policy on Taiwan Since 2013. *China Leadership Monitor*, Issue 73, September 1, p. 15.

[16] Qiang, (2022), p. 35.

three conditions under which Beijing may resort to force is if "the Taiwan authorities indefinitely refuse the peaceful resolution of cross-Straits reunification through negotiations".[17] On November 6, 2020, Liu Jieyi, Minister of the Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO), emphasized that "the development and progress of the motherland is a key factor in shaping the direction of cross-Strait relations and advancing the process of national rejuvenation".[18] This self-reliant policy framework underscores that the ultimate goal of reunification—along with its initiative, timeline, roadmap, methods, and measures—will and must be determined by Beijing, not Taipei.

The tense cross-Strait relations are likely to intensify hostility and push ordinary Taiwanese further away from China, making it increasingly difficult for Beijing to win public support for its ultimate goal of peaceful reunification. Annual surveys conducted by Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) and National Chengchi University reveal that less than 2% of Taiwanese favour immediate unification, fewer than 6% support immediate independence, and over 80% overwhelmingly prefer maintaining some form of the *status quo*.[19] For many, Taiwan itself has emerged as the primary symbol of identity.[20] As Taiwanese identity has grown stronger, some have increasingly sought to distance Taiwan from an idealized China, the PRC, or, to the ROC. Regardless of individual views on formal independence, references to Taiwan and identification with it have come to occupy a more prominent place in the island's political discourse.

Squeezing Taiwan's operational space

China has pursued a multifaceted strategy to restrict Taiwan's international presence and diplomatic manoeuvrability. This effort to "squeeze Taiwan's operational space" involves pressuring countries, international organizations, and corporations to deny Taiwan diplomatic recognition, participation, or even symbolic acknowledgment. Tactics range from poaching Taiwan's formal allies and obstructing its entry into international forums, to leveraging economic and political tools that discourage pro-Taiwan engagement abroad. The overarching goal is to reinforce the "One China" principle globally and delegitimize any expression of Taiwanese sovereignty by erasing its name and curbing its international visibility. As a result, Taiwan faces mounting challenges in asserting its voice on the global stage, despite its democratic governance and strong informal partnerships.

A cornerstone of this strategy is to foster international isolation and a sense of futility within Taiwan. Beijing has, for example, blocked Taipei's participation as an observer in the World Health Assembly, as a guest in the International Civil Aviation Organization, and as a delegate in INTERPOL's General Assembly.[21] In the corporate sphere, China has pressured international companies to remove

[17] Taiwan Affairs Office (2000). White Paper: The One-China Principle and the Taiwan Issue, February 21. http://www.gwytb.gov.cn/zt/zylszl/baipishu/201101/t20110118_1700148.htm.

[18] ARATS (2020). Director Liu Jieyi's Speech at the Symposium on the 5th Anniversary of the Historic Cross-Strait Leaders' Meeting, November 6. http://www.arats.com.cn/yw/202011/t20201107_12305385.htm.

[19] ESC (2021). Changes in the Unification–Independence Stances of Taiwanese as Tracked by Election Studies Center, NCCU (1994–2021.06), NCCU, June. https://esc.nccu.edu.tw/PageDoc/Detail?fid=7805&id=6962.

[20] Chang, Hui-Ching and Rich Holt (2007). Symbols in Conflict: Taiwan (Taiwan) and Zhongguo (China) in Taiwan's Identity Politics, *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 13:1, p. 140.

[21] Madoka, Fukuda (2022). The Xi Jinping Regime's Maneuvering against Taiwan: Characteristics and Prospects. *Asia-Pacific Review*, 29(2), 79–101. https://doi.org/10.1080/13439006.2022.2105523.

references to Taiwan as a separate entity on websites and maps.[22] In 2018, the Civil Aviation Administration of China ordered 44 international airlines to alter their websites to replace "Taiwan" as a country with designations like "Taiwan, Province of China" or "Taipei, CN".[23] Similarly, China's "Blue Book on the Cyber Rule of Law" instructed 66 multinational firms—including Apple, Siemens, Nike, and Amazon—to refer to Taiwan as "Taiwan, China", warning that non-compliance could result in app or website bans, permit revocations, fines, or even criminal prosecution.[24]

Beijing has also pressed countries with official diplomatic ties to China to restrict Taiwan's informal representation. In 2017, the "Business Delegation of the ROC in the Federal Republic of Nigeria" was renamed the "Trade Representative Office of Taipei in Lagos". Other Taiwanese offices in countries such as Jordan, Bahrain, Ecuador, the UAE, Papua New Guinea, and Fiji were similarly required to adopt neutral names excluding "Taiwan" or "Republic of China". The "Taiwan Office" established in Guyana on February 4, 2021, was shut down the following day under pressure from Beijing.[25] This incident illustrates how swiftly and forcefully China reacts to any perceived violation of the "One China" principle. Still, the reach and resonance of China's message are not uniform across all international actors.

Western countries' value-based approach to China prioritizes often normative concerns—such as human rights, rule of law, and democratic principles—over purely economic or strategic calculations. This framing has led to heightened scrutiny of China's actions in Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Tibet, and to broader criticism of its authoritarian governance. In this context, Taiwan has emerged as both a practical partner and a normative counter-model to China. With its vibrant democracy, rule of law, and global tech leadership, Taiwan embodies many of the values Western nations seek to promote. Engagement with Taiwan—through trade offices, parliamentary visits, and academic cooperation—allows countries to express solidarity with democratic principles without formally recognizing Taiwanese statehood.

Countries seeking to strengthen ties with Taiwan—like-minded nations[26], often do so within the limits of the "One China" policy, carefully navigating strategic ambiguity. They advocate for Taiwan's inclusion in international organizations, support its observer status, and promote cooperation in science, technology, and cultural exchanges.[27] Typically, such engagements remain within the bounds of what China considers acceptable. Actions that could appear contentious or subject to differing interpretations are deliberately avoided. Most countries seeking to maintain good working relations with China adopt a pragmatic approach, ensuring that universalistic values, as perceived in the West,

[22] Englund, Johan (2022). Isolating Taiwan Beyond the Strait: Chinese Pressure Tactics in Four Democracies. Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency, https://www.foi.se/en/foi/reports/report-summary.html?reportNo=FOI-R--5250--SE.

[23] Xinhua (2018-10-13). Foreign Airlines Make Changes to Reflect One-China Principle, www.shine.cn/news/nation/1807269416/; BBC News (2018-07-25). Three Biggest US Airlines Bow to China Taiwan Demand as Deadline Passes. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-44948599.

[24] Sands, Gary (2019). "Beijing's Blue Book on Cyberbullying Taiwan". *Asia Times*, January 29. https://asiatimes.com/2019/01/beijings-blue-book-on-cyberbullying-taiwan/.

[25] Qiang (2022), pp. 45–46.

[26] 'Like-minded nations' refers to countries that share similar values, interests, political ideologies, or policy objectives. These nations tend to align on key international issues and often collaborate in multilateral settings to advance their common goals.

[27] See Englund (2022).

do not become a decisive factor. Lithuania and the Czech Republic, however, stand out as an exception to this trend.

Lithuania: Political values on the frontline

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Baltic states emerged as prime candidates for diplomatic engagement with Taiwan. Their economies, in urgent need of investment and financial aid, created opportunities for closer ties. Additionally, their strong anti-communist stance fostered sympathy for democratic Taiwan's resistance to Beijing's influence. Given their newly formed diplomatic institutions, they were also more inclined to take a flexible approach toward the "One China" principle.[28] In the Baltics, Latvia was the only country to briefly host the Consulate General of the Republic of China in Riga during the early 1990s. However, Taiwan's minimal financial aid and limited trade with Latvia did little to compensate Riga's diplomatic stalemate and stagnation in economic cooperation with China.[29] Riga's decision to revoke its consular treaty with Taipei in 1994 ended Taiwan's hopes that other Baltic states would follow Latvia's lead. For instance, Estonia embraced alignment with the "One China" policy as a strategic move to secure Beijing's support for its foreign policy objectives, whereas Lithuania carefully balanced adherence to the "One China" policy with efforts to attract Taiwanese business interests.[30] But not indefinitely.

Lithuania's decision of October 2021 to permit Taipei to formally open an office under the name "Taiwan" was allegedly not consulted with other EU member states in advance. As all the other EU member states have managed to avoid "Taiwan" in the names of these representative offices, this marked a significant diplomatic shift, showcasing that resisting Beijing's efforts to isolate Taiwan on the international stage might be possible. Some five months earlier, Lithuania had announced its withdrawal from China's 17+1 cooperation forum with Central and Eastern European states, describing it as "divisive".[31] Taipei's exceptionally effective handling of the pandemic and the assistance it provided to Lithuania may be an important factor explaining pro-Taiwanese sympathies but there were also other things at play, namely domestic politics. It was possible to notice the politicization of the "One China" issue already in 2020 when the question whether to support Taiwan's bid to join the WHO highlighted a clear division within Lithuanian's higher political echelons. President Gitanas Nausėda declined to endorse Taiwan's membership, and the then-Lithuanian Foreign Minister Linas Linkevičius reached out to the head of the WHO, urging them to at least invite representatives from Taiwan to the upcoming World Health Assembly as observers.[32]

In June 2021, the incoming Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis and his deputy Mantas Adomėnas published an op-ed on the popular web portal *15min*, advocating for Lithuania to enhance its relations with Taiwan and support its political recognition within the international community as a

[28] Tubilewicz, Czeslaw (2002). The Baltic States in Taiwan's Post-Cold War "Flexible Diplomacy." *Europe-Asia Studies*, 54(5), p. 793.
[29] *Ibid*, p. 807.
[30] *Ibid*, p. 808.
[31] The Guardian (2021-11-21). China Downgrades Diplomatic Relations with Lithuania over Taiwan Row. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/21/china-downgrades-diplomatic-relations-with-lithuania-over-taiwan-row.
[32] LRT.lt (2020-04-22). Lithuanian President Doesn't Back Taiwan's WHO Membership – Aide. https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1166291/lithuanian-president-doesn-t-back-taiwan-s-who-membership-aide; LRT.lt (2020-05-13). Lithuania Calls on WHO to Invite Taiwan to International Assembly. https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1178102/lithuania-calls-on-who-to-invite-taiwan-to-international-assembly.

de facto independent democratic state governed by the rule of law.[33] Following parliamentary elections in October 2021, Lithuania's centre-right and liberal political parties drew inspiration from Iceland's bold decision to recognize Lithuanian independence on February 11, 1991—well ahead of most other countries. This served as a model for the new government's commitment to pursuing a value-based foreign policy aimed at defending those fighting for freedom worldwide, including in Belarus and Taiwan. The new Lithuanian government took Taiwan's offer to establish a permanent representation in Vilnius seriously, hoping that bilateral trade and mutual investment as a side-effect to its value-based foreign policy, would foster further cooperation between Lithuania and Taiwan, extending into education, tourism, and other non-political domains. Furthermore, it was portrayed as being largely in line with the EU's commitment to strengthening its ties with Taiwan and upholding the shared values that form the foundation of its democratic governance.[34]

On November 18, 2021, Taiwan inaugurated its *de facto* embassy, the Taiwanese Representative Office in Lithuania, located in Vilnius. Despite China's opposition, Lithuania allowed the office to proceed with the "Taiwan" designation. Lithuanian officials clarified that the office would not hold diplomatic status, and its name did not signify recognition of statehood.[35] This move prompted a strong backlash from Beijing, which condemned it as an attempt to create "two Chinas" on the global stage.[36] In retaliation, Beijing implemented a series of punitive actions, including halting freight train services to Lithuania, suspending food export permits, recalling its ambassador from Lithuania, and demanding that Lithuania recall its ambassador from China on October 8, 2021. On December 3, 2021, Lithuania reported that China had ceased all imports from the country. This included delisting Lithuania as a country of origin, effectively preventing goods from clearing customs and rejecting all import applications.[37]

Furthermore, on November 21, 2021, Beijing officially downgraded its diplomatic relations with Lithuania to the chargé d'affaires level.[38] "The Lithuanian government must bear all consequences that arise from this", the PRC MFA statement said, adding that its actions "created a bad precedent in the international arena". Lithuania's MFA in an official press release regretted China's decision to downgrade ties. "Lithuania reaffirms its adherence to the One China policy, but at the same time has the right to expand cooperation with Taiwan", the ministry said in a statement.[39] To neutralise a potential backlash that Lithuania's decision might have caused, the Taiwanese Representative Office in Vilnius announced plans by the Taiwanese government to invest 200 million USD in Lithuania's industrial and technology sectors to be spent later that year.[40]

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[33] Adomenas, Mantas and Gabrielius Landsbergis (2020). Lithuania – It's Time for Choosing. *15min*, 11 June. https://www.15min.lt/en/article/opinion/lithuania-it-s-time-for-choosing-530-1331612.

[34] European Commission (2016). Elements for a New Strategy on China, June 22, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint_communication_to_the_european_parliament_and_the_council_-_elements_for_a_new_eu_strategy_on_china.pdf.

[35] Delfi (2021). URM: taivaniečių atstovybė Vilniuje diplomatinio statuso neturės, Nov 18, https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/urm-taivanieciu-atstovybe-vilniuje-diplomatinio-statuso-netures-88709599.

[36] PRC MFA (2021). Foreign Ministry Spokesperson's Remarks on Lithuania's Approval of the Taiwan Authorities' Establishment of the So-called 'Taiwan Representative Office in Lithuania', https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/fyrbt_673021/dhdw_673027/202111/t20211119_10450119.shtml.

[37] Bounds, Andy (2021). Lithuania Complains of Trade 'Sanctions' by China After Taiwan Dispute. *Financial Times*, December 3, https://www.ft.com/content/0ebaa7c7-761d-445e-b3e4-f5d2c9b4768f.

[38] Qiang (2022), p. 46.

[39] The Guardian (2021).

[40] LRT.lt (2022-01-05). Taiwan to Invest $200m in Lithuania to Offset Beijing's Sanctions, https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1581629/taiwan-to-invest-200m-in-lithuania-to-offset-beijing-s-sanctions.

Whereas some see China lacking significant leverage in Lithuania due to the relatively limited bilateral economic relationship[41], others point out Lithuania's increasingly vulnerable position.[42] According to the first view, Lithuania's dependence on the Chinese market is considerably smaller compared to that of most larger European countries—Lithuania exported goods worth €300 million to China in 2020, accounting for less than 1% of its total exports.[43] Another view from Enterprise Lithuania argues that trade between the two countries had almost doubled since 2011, exports grew 2.5 times and re-exports, 8.8 times.[44] In 2017 alone, exports of Lithuanian-produced goods to China increased by over 40%, making the country more vulnerable to Chinese pressure. Ultimately, China's sanctions had a clear impact: Lithuania's exports to China plummeted by 91% shortly after the punitive measures were enforced, compared to trade figures of December 2020.[45]

It is even more important to note that China has exerted pressure on Continental AG and other international companies to cease their business operations with Lithuania.[46] The dispute extended to the broader EU level when China threatened to ban the import of goods containing Lithuanian components, potentially disrupting the integrated supply chains within the EU single market. In early 2022, reports surfaced that the German-Baltic Chamber of Commerce cautioned Lithuania that German-owned factories in the country might shut down unless relations with China were improved.[47] The German companies' representatives, however, insisted that their plans in Lithuania remained unchanged.[48]

Despite harsh reaction from Beijing, Lithuanian Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė has characterized relations with Taiwan as "vibrant and productive", emphasizing that the decision to strengthen ties with Taiwanese businesses and universities (through opening the Taiwanese Representative Office in Lithuania) was a sovereign choice by Lithuania.[49] This decision was driven by domestic politics, by political parties seeing their chance to gain bigger political clout through promoting value-based foreign policy. However, by May 2024, President Gitanas Nausėda expressed the view that, to normalize Lithuania's relations with China, the name of the Taiwanese representative office should be

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[41] Andrijauskas, Konstantinas (2021). Taiwan and Lithuania's Ties Grow Tighter. *Choice* 13 January. https://chinaobservers.eu/taiwan-and-lithuanias-ties-grow-tighter/.

[42] Jevsejevas, Tomas (2020). China Is Undermining Western Democratic Values and Lithuania Is No Exception – Opinion, *LRT.lt*, September 3, https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1149687/china-is-undermining-western-democratic-values-and-lithuania-is-no-exception-opinion.

[43] Bounds (2021).

[44] Enterprise Lithuania (2018). Lithuania – China Bilateral Trade Review. https://inovacijuagentura.lt/site/binaries/content/assets/analitika/uzsienio-rinkos/archyvas/2018.09.11_china_en.pdf.

[45] Barros, Bryce and Krystyna Sikora (2022). China's Sanctions Regime and Lithuania: Policy Responses for European Institutions. Hinrich Foundation, https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Chinas-sanctions-regime-and-Lithuania-Alliance-For-Securing-Democracy-Hinrich-Foundation-August-2022.pdf.

[46] Sytas, Andrius and John O'Donnell (2021). China Pressures Germany's Continental to Cut out Lithuania – Sources. *Reuters*, December 17, https://www.reuters.com/world/china/exclusive-china-asks-germanys-continental-cut-out-lithuania-sources-2021-12-17/.

[47] LRT.lt (2022-01-21). German Firms Pressure Lithuania to De-escalate China Tensions – Media, https://web.archive.org/web/20220121085657/https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1594168/german-firms-pressure-lithuania-to-deescalate-china-tensions-media/.

[48] Kalinkaitė-Matuliauskienė, Vaida (2022). German Investors in Lithuania Refrain from Comments about Alleged Chinese Pressure. *LRT.lt*, March 31, https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1659484/german-investors-in-lithuania-refrain-from-comments-about-alleged-chinese-pressure.

[49] Chen, Kelvin (2022). Lithuania Prime Minister Has no Regrets over Taiwan Ties. *Taiwan News*, April 8, https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/news/4501138.

changed yet again. Similarly, the new Prime Minister, Gintautas Paluckas, has shared this objective, though no concrete steps have been taken so far.[50] Thus, the story remains unfinished and the very episode of pushing back against Beijing may be reversed in the future.

Czechia: Setting Boundaries with Beijing

The end of the Cold War turned out as a window of opportunity for Taiwan. In the Czech Republic, this window of opportunity was embodied by first post-Communist President Václav Havel.[51] His disdain for Communism and silencing of dissent ensured that he empathised strongly with those who were facing oppression elsewhere, including Taiwan and Tibet. Having a defiant personality, it seems, meant that his political engagement went beyond mere rhetoric. In 1995, Havel met with Taiwanese Prime Minister Lien Chan even as China ramped up its threatening rhetoric and canceled a cooperation agreement.[52] The same year, Havel advocated for Taiwan's re-inclusion at the United Nations, stating many years later that he would do so again and that his support for the island was unwavering. His heartfelt sympathy for the Taiwanese cause culminated in him receiving the Order of the Brilliant Star by Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian in 2004.[53]

Sympathy, it seems, is the name of the game of the Czech Republic's current embrace of Taiwan. A first attempt was made in 2019 when Czech Senate President Jaroslav Kubera planned an initial visit to Taipei. His plans, however, never came to fruition and were harshly criticized by both President Zeman, Prime Minister Babiš and China's ambassador to the Czech Republic. The embassy, as was later revealed, had sent a "threatening letter" to Zeman complaining about Kubera's plans which was then forwarded to Kubera. Kubera died shortly after and before he could embark on his trip; with his family asserting that the "stress caused by the explosive affair" had caused his health to deteriorate.[54] It was the first case made public that shed light on the pressure tactics employed by Beijing to try and block Taiwan's diplomatic channels. In the end, the embassy's threats did little to stop Kubera's planned visit, even though it was his successor Miloš Vystrčil who travelled to Taipei despite ongoing critique from both the Chinese government and President Zeman.[55] During Vystrčil's trip, he famously referred to himself as a "Taiwanese" akin to John F. Kennedy's "Ich bin ein Berliner". Beijing promptly responded, calling Vystrčil an overt supporter of Taiwanese independence and that he "grossly violated China's sovereignty".[56] Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi doubled down on his

[50] Jakučionis, Saulius (2024). Lithuania's Presumptive PM Vows to Restore Ties with China. *LRT.lt*, October 31, https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2402538/lithuania-s-presumptive-pm-vows-to-restore-ties-with-china.
[51] BBC News (2011-12-18). Vaclav Havel, Czech Leader and Playwright, Dies at 75. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-16236393.
[52] Mufson, Steven (1995-06-21). Beijing Fumes over Taiwan Leader's Prague Meeting. https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1995/06/22/beijing-fumes-over-taiwan-leaders-prague-meeting/cec3b6dd-179d-49e8-a13d-56600a790b14/.
[53] Chen, Melody (2004). Chen gives Vaclav Havel the Order of the Brilliant Star. *Taipei Times*, November 23. https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2004/11/23/2003212199.
[54] Charouz, Ladislav (2023). Czech-Taiwanese Relations on the Rise. *New Eastern Europe*, April 04, https://neweasterneurope.eu/2023/04/04/czech-taiwanese-relations-on-the-rise/.
[55] The Straits Times (2020-09-03). How a Politician's Death Deepened the Czech Rift with China. https://www.straitstimes.com/world/europe/how-a-politicians-death-deepened-the-czech-rift-with-china.
[56] Kyodo News (2020-09-01). "I am a Taiwanese": Czech Speaker Tells Taiwan Assembly, Irking China. https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2020/09/529d208da9f1-i-am-a-taiwanese-czech-speaker-tells-taiwan-assembly-irking-china.html.

ministry's initial criticism, saying that Vystrčil committed an "unendurable provocation" for which he would have to "pay a heavy price".[57]

A few years later, in early 2023, not long after Russia invaded Ukraine, the Czech Republic saw its perhaps most visible shift in its dealings with China, one which dealt a blow to Beijing' ambitions to become a strategic asset for Prague. Presidential elections in January catapulted independent candidate Petr Pavel to power, whose inclination towards NATO and being equipped with a more realistic outlook vis-a-vis China and Russia seemingly resonated with more than half of all eligible voters.[58] Pavel openly distanced himself from Zeman's fairly cosy dealings with Beijing. Instead, Pavel broke "a longstanding taboo" by holding a brief congratulatory call with then-President Tsai Ing-wen in which both sides seemingly reaffirmed their "shared values of freedom, democracy and human rights".[59] China's Foreign Minister denounced the call as Pavel "ignore[ing] China's repeated dissuasion" and having crossed "China's red line".[60]

Pavel's official inauguration followed the yet most high-profile delegation visit for both sides. The speaker of the Chamber of Deputies of the Czech Parliament, Markéta Pekarová Adamová, accompanied by around 150 business leaders, scientists and political decision makers, made her way to the self-governing island.[61] Just one year later, yet another Czech delegation made its way to Taiwan, even if only five lawmakers travelled to the island this time around. Under the auspices of the Czech Republic-Taiwan Parliamentary Platform leader Marek Benda's leadership, the group held meetings with President William Lai, Minister of Foreign Affairs Lin Chia-lung and Han Kuo-yu, President of the Legislative Yuan.[62] For the relatively new Lai government, the Czech visitors were a source of optimism following many months of increased Chinese military drills in the Taiwan Strait.[63] Bilateral relations between the Czech Republic and Taiwan have never been perfectly linear; nevertheless, the uptick in activity in recent years only underscores that the Czech Republic is perfectly able to set boundaries despite Beijing's pressure tactics or to go as far as demanding more support for "bullied" Taiwan while being in charge of the six-month rotating EU Council presidency.[64]

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[57] Ibid.

[58] Tait, Robert (2023). Pro-western Petr Pavel Sweeps to Landslide Win in Race for Czech Presidency, *The Guardian*, January 28. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/28/petr-pavel-wins-landslide-victory-in-czech-presidential-elections.

[59] Blanchard, Ben and Robert Muller (2023). In Diplomatic Coup, Taiwan President Speaks to Czech President-elect. *Reuters*, January 31, https://www.reuters.com/world/czech-president-elect-speak-taiwan-president-diplomatic-breakthrough-2023-01-30/; Hála, Martin (2023). Time to Break Old Taboos: Pavel's Call with Tsai as A New Normal. Prospect Foundation Blog, February 24. https://www.pf.org.tw/en/pfen/33-9937.html.

[60] Feng, John (2023). China Clashes with Czech Republic over Taiwan Overtures. *Newsweek*, February 01. https://www.newsweek.com/china-taiwan-czech-republic-petr-pavel-tsai-ing-wen-1778106.

[61] Reuters (2023-03-20). Czech Republic Readies Big Taiwan Delegation in Defiance of China. https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/czech-republic-readies-big-taiwan-delegation-defiance-china-2023-03-20/.

[62] Taipei Times (2024-11-11). Czech Lawmakers Arrive in Taiwan. https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2024/11/11/2003826738.

[63] Davidson, Helen (2025). China's Military Drills Around Taiwan Set to Increase: Analyst. *Taipei Times*, January 14. https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/feat/archives/2025/01/14/2003830158.

[64] Lau, Stuart (2022). Czech Foreign Minister Eyes Closer Ties with "Bullied" Taiwan. *Politico*, April 13, https://www.politico.eu/article/czech-foreign-minister-eyes-closer-ties-with-bullied-taiwan/.

By 2024, relations continued to prosper, exemplified by Vice-President-elect Hsiao Bi-khim's visit to Prague[65] and former President Tsai Ing-wen's speech at Forum 2000.[66] Unsurprisingly, both Hsiao's and Tsai's visit ruffled feathers in Beijing, prompting the Chinese embassy in Prague to once again denounce the Czech side's decision to allow Tsai to meet with government officials.[67] China's Foreign Ministry issued stern warnings, hinting that the politicians who met with the Taiwanese politicians represent a minority "anti-China clique" that supports full-fledged "'Taiwan independence".[68] In hindsight, China's response merely exposed that the CCP is in no position to accept behaviour that goes against its long-term goal to retake Taiwan. Unease with China's pressure to conform with its territorial narrative also regularly appears in the Czech Economic and Cultural Office's frequent calls for Taiwan's inclusion in the World Health Assembly.[69] In an interview with a Taiwanese newspaper in 2024, Czech Representative David Steinke underscored that a "solid bond" lies at the heart of what ties Prague to Taipei.[70]

Overall, it seems that the Czech Republic's embrace of Taiwan is not merely coincidental. Economic promises by China promoted during Zeman's term failed to bear fruit, China's intimidation tactics might have inadvertently caused more friction, and China's decision to not criticise Russia's invasion of Ukraine all cumulated in Taipei gaining some ground in Prague. Zeman, during his last days in office even went out of his way to call on Xi Jinping to help end the war in Ukraine, and to improve conditions for Czech companies operating in China after coming under pressure at home.[71] Thus, even his seemingly cosy relationship with Beijing did not bring about the change that both Zeman and Xi advocated for. Even the initially hailed 17+1 framework lost its overall appeal, not least since the departure of the Baltic states.[72] Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assume that the Czech political establishment has always collectively swung towards either Beijing or Taipei. In fact, during Zeman's term, critical voices such as Vystrčil's or Kubera's co-existed just as pro-Beijing voices persisted even during Pavel's term.[73] Even when examining a broader time frame from 1989 onward, one can observe several instances in which the Czech president and government held divergent views on the country's stance toward China. These positions have ranged from that of a "defender of values" (prior to 2012),

[65] Deutsche Welle (2024). Taiwan's Vice President-elect Visits Czech Republic. March 19. https://www.dw.com/en/taiwans-vice-president-elect-visits-czech-republic/a-68612336.
[66] Scanlan, Sean (2024). Former President Tsai Defends Democracy at Forum 2000. Taiwan News, October 15. https://taiwannews.com.tw/news/5952228.
[67] Reuters (2024-10-15). China Criticizes Former Taiwan President's Visit to Prague. https://www.reuters.com/world/china-criticises-former-taiwan-presidents-visit-prague-2024-10-15/.
[68] Hompot, Sebestyén (2024). Chinese Media Watch: After Hsiao's Bi-khim's Europe Trip, State Media Warns Czechia, Bloggers Target DPP "Secessionists" and European "Anti-China Cliques". *Chinese Media Watch*, April 25.https://ceias.eu/chinese-media-watch-after-hsiao-bi-khims-europe-trip-state-media-warns-czechia-bloggers-target-dpp-secessionists-and-european-anti-china-cliques/.
[69] Czech Economic and Culture Office Taipei (2024). Joint Press Release: Support for Taiwan's Meaningful Engagement with the World Health Organization and Participation as an Observer in the World Health Assembly. Czech Economic and Culture Office Taipei, May 24. https://mzv.gov.cz/taipei/en/news_events/joint_press_release_support_for_taiwan_s_1.html.
[70] Su, Lynn (2024). A New Chapter in Taiwan-Czechia Relations. *Taiwan Panorama*, July. https://www.taiwan-panorama.com/en/Articles/Details?Guid=264bc5c2-9dd5-46e0-9dde-5c674f841bee&CatId=7&postname=A%20New%20Chapter%20%20in%20Taiwan%E2%80%93Czechia%20Relations-An%20Interview%20with%20%20David%20Steinke%2C%20%20Czech%20Representative%20%20to%20Taiwan.
[71] Kowalski, Bartosz (2023). The Czech Republic Puts Another Dent in China's Relations with Europe. *RUSI*, February 13. https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/czech-republic-puts-another-dent-chinas-relations-europe.
[72] Lau, Stuart (2023). China's Club for Talking to Central Europe is Dead, Czechs Say. *Politico*, May 4. https://www.politico.eu/article/czech-slam-china-xi-jinping-pointless-club-for-central-europe/.
[73] The Straits Times (2020), Kowalski (2023).

to a "faithful ally of China" (during 2013–2017), and, more recently, to an "internal developer" approach (since 2018).[74]

For now, however, ties with China—or at least the influence of voices favouring closer relations with Beijing—appear to limit the scope of deepening engagement with Taiwan, even though Beijing itself seeks to prevent any form of coexistence. After all, Czechia has the highest dependence on Chinese imports as a share of GDP and share of overall imports of the eleven European countries analysed,[75] and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi reportedly sought to influence Czech Foreign Minister Jan Lipavský during a meeting on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference in February 2025.[76] Yet just two months later, the Deputy Speaker of the Czech Chamber of Deputies, Jan Bartošek, visited Taipei with the explicit aim of "strengthening cooperation to resist disinformation and threats from China"—a signal that Taiwan and China are not viewed as mutually exclusive in certain Czech political circles.[77] Bartošek's visit also brought announcements of increased cultural exchanges beginning in late 2025, as well as plans for direct flights between Taipei and Prague. This suggests that the Czech Republic is currently pursuing a dual-track approach—engaging pragmatically with Beijing while simultaneously supporting Taiwan's international space, despite China's criticism.

Conclusion

This paper explored the evolving dynamics of Taiwan's international engagement amid intensifying efforts by the People's Republic of China (PRC) to isolate it. As Taiwan increasingly rejects the "One China" framework and seeks recognition as a self-governing democracy, China has responded by accelerating its campaign to reduce Taiwan's global presence through diplomatic coercion, economic pressure, and institutional exclusion. In this context, Western democracies that emphasize human rights and democratic values have found in Taiwan a like-minded partner—supporting engagement short of formal recognition. Among these, Lithuania and the Czech Republic are particularly notable for pushing back against China's narrative, suggesting de-isolation as a response to authoritarian coercion. However, this support to Taiwan in defiance of China's retaliatory measures, is often driven by normative values and domestic political shifts.

This paper reveals that Lithuania has taken a highly principled approach in its relationship with Taiwan, allowing the use of "Taiwanese" in its representative office's name—unprecedented in the EU. Domestic politics in Lithuania played a key role in framing and justifying this move and, as such, underscored the politicization of the "One China" issue in Lithuania. As expected, the chosen name for the representative office triggered a strong economic backlash from China, including sanctions and downgrading diplomatic ties with Lithuania. Likewise, Czechia's support for Taiwan has been

[74] Bajerová, Alžběta and Richard Q. Turcsányi (2019). Between Defender of Values and Faithful Ally: Czech Approaches to China in the Prism of Role Theory Approach. *Studia Orientalia Slovaca*, 18(2), 93-120.
[75] These countries were the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden and United Kingdom. See MERICS (2024). Profiling European Countries' Resilience Towards China. MERICS Europe-China Resilience Audit, October 31. https://merics.org/en/report/profiling-european-countries-resilience-towards-china.
[76] CGTN (2023-02-16). China Expects to Enhance Cooperation with Czech Republic: FM. https://news.cgtn.com/news/2025-02-16/China-expects-to-enhance-cooperation-with-Czech-FM-1B2arRRciwE/p.html.
[77] Huang, Chin-hsuan and Sam Garcia (2025-04-16). Czech Lawmaker Calls for Cooperation Amid Threats. *Taipei Times*, https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2025/04/16/2003835272.

driven by political symbolism and historical legacy – its leaders have framed this support as consistent with values of freedom and solidarity against authoritarianism.

In both Lithuania and Czechia, Beijing's coercive measures (economic retaliation in Lithuania; diplomatic threats and intimidation in Czechia) have not only failed to halt engagement with Taiwan but often strengthened public and political resolve to support this self-governing entity. Despite their assertive actions, neither Lithuania nor Czechia has entirely severed ties with China. Lithuania reaffirmed adherence to the "One China" policy even after the Taiwanese Representative Office was opened, and Czechia seems to be pursuing a "dual-track approach"—sharing common values with Taiwan and cooperating in the field of culture, and trade, while maintaining cautious diplomatic engagement with Beijing.

The outcome of Lithuania's parliamentary elections in late 2024 suggest that the new Social-Democratic government is mulling the possibility of restoring ties with Beijing.[78] It remains to be seen whether normalising ties would subsequently alter Lithuania's Taiwan posture, given that its foreign policy tends to prioritise Western links such as the U.S. and NATO. Neither of whom currently seems willing to let go of the Chinese threat narrative, possibly indicating that Lithuania might stay on its current course. Similarly, political leaders in the Czech Republic have advocated for closer relations with Taiwan.

With the Czech population slated to head to the polling stations in late 2025, however, continuity in creating space for Taiwan is all but certain. Though, Prague's steadfastness in the past few years might speak to the fact that the Czech Republic may not be easily swayed by external pressure. For Taiwan, both Lithuania and the Czech Republic represent a ray of hope and debunks the argument that China is persistently successful in its mission to squeeze Taipei internationally. In fact, it begs the question whether Beijing's isolationist agenda is effective in achieving the desired outcome as it does reflect that the states at the receiving end have significant agency in their ability to resist external pressures.

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[78] Pinelytė, Elzé (2024). Lithuania's Parliamentary Elections: Foreign Policy Outlook on China and Taiwan, *chinaobservers.eu*, October 22. https://chinaobservers.eu/lithuanias-parliamentary-elections-foreign-policy-outlook-on-china-and-taiwan/.