

# Delegation Diplomacy

## Recent string of official visits strengthening Taiwan-Europe convergence

David Scott

**E**VEN AS THE prime focus of the world's media outlets has been on the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine, unprecedented attention has been paid to several recent high-profile delegations of high-ranking politicians from democracies around the world seeking to visit Taiwan, kicked off by an August 2, 2022, trip by Nancy Pelosi that included talks with Tsai Ing-wen, president of the Republic of China (ROC). As Speaker of the House of Representatives and second in the United States presidential line of succession, the latter was a high-profile trip. As Pelosi flew into Taiwan amid strong denunciation from China, the German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock warned on August 2 that “aggressive

rhetoric can turn into dangerous action. China's comments with regard to Taiwan raise serious questions” for Germany and the European Union (EU).

The French Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs Catherine Colonna tweeted on August 5 that “Ms. Pelosi's visit must not serve as a pretext for China's escalation, which would increase tension. The status quo cannot be undermined by unilateral measures” by the People's Republic of China (PRC). This is precisely what China did, however, when on 4 August it launched its most extensive and longest-ever live-fire exercises and a simulated blockade around Taiwan. This caused widespread concern, including in Europe. The new UK Prime Minister Liz Truss, then serving



President Tsai meets with Lithuanian Vice Agriculture Minister Egidijus Giedraitis to show off goods baked with Lithuanian flour at a Taiwan food fair.

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Taipei rolled out the red carpet for the visit of US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, the first in a string of high-profile visits to Taiwan recently.

as Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs of the United Kingdom, summoned China's ambassador on August 10 to convey to him that her government "condemned in the strongest terms" China's "escalation" of "aggressive behavior" around Taiwan.

### *A wider context*

The wider context for these events was growing pressure from Beijing to bring Taiwan under PRC control. In Beijing's eyes this would be a "reunification," but to the people of Taiwan, it would be the extinguishing of their hard-won freedom and sovereignty. This is where Europe enters the picture. The European Union (and member states like France and Germany) and the United Kingdom have demonstrated a growing focus not just on China's uncomfortable behavior in Europe but also in the Indo-Pacific. Pelosi's visit and European responses to China's military squeeze on Taiwan can be traced through two channels: Lithuania and the European Union.

Lithuania's support for Pelosi's visit to Taiwan was immediate. Gabrielius Landsbergis, Lithuania's

Minister of Foreign Affairs, tweeted on August 2 that "now Speaker Pelosi has opened the door to Taiwan much wider, I am sure other defenders of freedom and democracy will be walking through very soon." This was in contrast to the prudent silence from other European capitals over the merits or otherwise of the Pelosi visit. Lithuania went on to denounce the Chinese military exercises around Taiwan, on which Landsbergis penned a widely read piece in *The Daily Telegraph* on August 8 titled "The free world cannot allow Taiwan to become a second Ukraine."

Other Lithuanian officials demonstrated solidarity with Taiwan as well. A week after the Pelosi trip, the Lithuanian Deputy Minister of Transport and Communications Agne Vaiciukeviciute led an 11-member delegation on a five-day visit to Taiwan from August 8 to 12, including discussions with ROC Minister of Foreign Affairs Jaushieh Joseph Wu and President Tsai. As Vaiciukeviciute left Taiwan, Beijing banned her from any future entry to the PRC and suspended all forms of exchange with Lithuania's Ministry of Transport and Communications. China also withdrew cooperation with Lithuania in the field of international road transport.

Beijing also expressed ire after the August 17 announcement that Paulius Lukauskas, previously an adviser to Lithuania's prime minister, had been appointed to head up Lithuania's new Trade Representative Office in Taipei. The PRC immediately accused Lithuania of breaching Chinese sovereignty and undermining the One-China policy by exchanging representatives with the island.

Representation issues had already brought Lithuania-China relations crashing down in November 2021, when it was agreed that Taiwan could open a new quasi-diplomatic presence in Lithuania, under the title "Taiwanese Representative Office," rather than using one of the euphemisms more palatable to Beijing, like "Taipei," or "Chinese Taipei." Punitive measures were maintained by the PRC, namely recalling its ambassador to Lithuania, downgrading diplomatic relations, expelling the Lithuanian ambassador to China, suspending direct freight rail services, and banning various Lithuanian products from the Chinese market.

Consequently, Lithuania-Taiwan links moved forward during 2021 and 2022. Economically, Taiwan

picked up some of the slack of lost China markets for Lithuania. The ROC Deputy Minister of Education Mon-Chi Lio and Lithuania's Vice Minister of Education, Science and Sport Agne Kudarauskiene jointly opened the Taiwan-Lithuania Higher Education Online Forum on May 27, 2022. A week before the Pelosi visit, ROC Legislative Speaker You Si-kun visited Lithuania on July 23 and held talks with his Lithuanian counterpart, before going on to the Czech Republic and France and holding talks with parliamentarians there.

### *Three divergent shifts*

Lithuania may have sharply diverged from China and converged with Taiwan, but a similar process, albeit at a slower pace, is evident with the European Union. This EU divergence from China can be seen in three shifts.

Firstly, having sought an economic partnership with China for over two decades, the EU position is now to label China as a "systemic rival" and "economic competitor," alongside some envisaged coopera-



Agne Vaiciukeviciute, center, and her delegation pose for a photograph with their counterparts in Taiwan during an official visit to the island.

tion on environmental matters. In this light, the EU Global Gateway strategy, announced in December 2021, can be seen as a counter to China's Belt and Road initiative.

Secondly, the European Union has moved to greater sharpness on normative divides with Beijing; over issues like democracy, international law, freedom of navigation, and observance of the United Nations

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Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). On April 24, 2021, the spokesperson for the European External Agency Service, the EU foreign policy wing, directly criticized the Chinese presence at Whitsun Reef in the South China Sea, characterizing it as “endangering peace and stability in the region.”

Thirdly, the European Union has sought to project itself into the Indo-Pacific, as witnessed in its release of the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific in September 2021. It outlined cooperation with a swathe of states like India, Australia, Japan (as well as ASEAN member states) which had developed Indo-Pacific strategies, warned of China's military buildup, argued that instability in the South China Sea and tensions in the Taiwan Strait had a “direct impact” on European security, proposed “enhanced” naval deployments by member states, and talked of the need for “deep” trade and investment relationships with Taiwan. Greater naval participation by European navies is a further issue of friction with Beijing, as indicated by Chinese anger over a French warship sailing through the Taiwan Strait in April 2020.

A further problem that the European Union has with China is over Beijing's treatment of Vilnius, Lithuania being an EU member. In the wake of China's eco-

nomical sanctions against Lithuania, sparked by that country's links with Taiwan, the European Union (backed by the UK and Taiwan, as well as the United States and Australia) launched a challenge at the World Trade Organization in January 2022 accusing China of discriminatory trade practices against Lithuania—practices that threatened the integrity of the EU single market.

During 2022, EU concerns over China were heightened by Beijing's strong support of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The other concern for the European Union has been that Russia's aggression against Ukraine could embolden China to carry out similar actions against Taiwan. Jorge Toledo, the new EU ambassador to China, warned in a July 17, 2022, interview in *La Vanguardia* that, “in the event of a military invasion [of Taiwan], we have made it very clear that the European Union, with the United States and its allies, will impose similar or even greater measures than we have now taken against Russia.”

### *Stage posts*

All of these developments have brought Taiwan into greater focus for the European Union. Again, there are certain stage posts. The European Parliament for the first time drafted and passed (by 580 to 26 votes) a stand-alone Report on EU-Taiwan Political Relations and Cooperation on October 21, 2021. Interestingly, they welcomed plans to set up the Taiwanese Representative Office in Vilnius and “condemned” any Chinese economic sanctions against Lithuania. The report stressed the important role of EU-Taiwan investments, noted Taiwan's domination of semiconductor manufacturing (with 65 percent of all semiconductors and almost 90 percent of advanced chips coming from Taiwan), and concluded that “Taiwan's location, its critical role in global high-tech supply chains, and its democratic way of life makes it strategically important for EU democracies.”



photo: President Of Ukraine

The French frigate *Vendemiaire* sailed through the Taiwan Strait in April, 2019. European navies are increasingly taking part in FONOPs in the Asia-Pacific.

Chinese “military belligerence” against Taiwan and “China’s Taiwan-related legislation” were denounced in the report. More intense and wider EU contacts with Taiwan, and with other “like-minded” actors (namely the United States, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, South Korea and India) to support Taiwan, were called for. Not surprisingly, Beijing immediately denounced the report strongly. The European Parliament has nevertheless continued to reach out to Taiwan. In November 2021, a delegation from the Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes traveled to Taiwan, the first such official trip from the European Parliament. They met with President Tsai, denounced Chinese disinformation tactics, and called for greater cooperation between the European Union and Taiwan.

The European Chips Act, announced in February 2022, specifically named Taiwan as a “like minded partner” whom the European Union could work with on semiconductors. The European Union and Taiwan upgraded trade talks from civil service officials to the ministerial level. This enabled the ROC Minister of Economic Affairs Wang Mei-Hua to hold talks on June 2, 2022 with Commissioner for Trade Valdis Dombrovskis of the European Commission, where

semiconductor cooperation was an issue very much in focus. Another was a bilateral investment program. Meanwhile, at the 9th EU-China High-Level Economic and Trade Dialogue, held on July 19, the EU side publically reiterated that “measures of economic coercion—including against Lithuania—are unacceptable.”

These important steps toward stronger Taiwan-European ties were denounced by leaders and mouthpieces in China, as was the July 20, 2022, trip to Taiwan by European Parliament Vice-President Nicola Beer, just two weeks before Pelosi’s trip. Beer told President Tsai not to doubt EU support as Taiwan strives “for a democratic, peaceful and sovereign” existence, with “sovereign” being a particularly touchy word for Beijing.

Thus although the European Union and most member states, with the notable exception of Lithuania, maintained a polite silence during Pelosi’s visit, the subsequent Chinese acceleration of military pressure against Taiwan has resulted in generating wider European support for the embattled island democracy. At the G7 meeting on August 3, in their Statement on Preserving Peace and Stability across the Taiwan Strait, the European side (represented by European

Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and European Council President Charles Michel), as well as foreign ministers from member states such as France, Germany, and Italy denounced China's "aggressive" military activity in the Taiwan Strait and "economic coercion" against Taiwan, for which "there is no justification to use a visit as pretext." Elsewhere, Josep Borrell, the high representative of the European Union for foreign affairs and security policy, told the ASEAN Regional Forum on August 5 that the European Union had a "clear interest" in the "preservation of peace and the status quo" in Taiwan, and was "strongly concerned" over China's firing of ballistic missiles over the island.

### *Baltic backlash*

Of further trouble for China was that its attempts to coerce Lithuania over Taiwan sparked a backlash in the wider Baltic region. Thus, Lithuania's withdrawal from the China-Central and East Europe Cooperation, or 17+1, framework in February 2021 was followed by similar action by Latvia and Estonia on August 11, 2022. The Czech Republic likewise signaled interest in withdrawing, in a backlash over rising Chinese anger over official Czech contacts with Taiwan. The Czech Senate President Milos Vystrcil's visit to Taiwan in July 2020, for example, included an impressive speech to the ROC Legislative Yuan on the need for solidarity among democracies and the protection of common values. ROC Foreign Minister Wu reciprocated, arriving at the Czech Senate in November 2021 to enhance the Taiwan-Czech relationship. In an interview with Politico on April 13, 2022, the Czech Republic's Minister of Foreign Affairs Jan Lipavský remarked "we understand that Taiwan is bullied by China. Democracies in the world should hold together—and Taiwan is a democracy." To complete another circle, on the eve of the Pelosi trip, Speaker You visited the Czech Republic in July

2022, drawing the usual criticisms from China. Thus, signs are positive that the Czech Republic's turn to hold the Presidency of the European Council for June-December 2022 will ensure that Chinese threats against Taiwan's democracy, as well as Russia's war on Ukraine, will remain on Europe's radar.

Chinese complaints about Pelosi's visit to Taiwan seem to have backfired as European legislators are not being deterred from visiting the island. On 2 September, in her video participation at the Forum 2000 conference held in Prague, attended by the Czech president and the German foreign minister, President Tsai denounced China's intimidation tactics, reached out for European support, and specifically welcomed the 2022 visits by European parliamentarians. More European visits are to follow. A delegation from the French Senate arrived in Taiwan on 7 September for a six-day visit, meeting with senior government officials including Speaker You and Vice President Lai Ching-te to discuss Indo-Pacific security. This followed a June visit by Joel Guerriau, vice-chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defense and the Armed Forces, who was awarded the Order of Propitious Clouds with Grand Cordon by President Tsai. From Germany, the Bundestag's Committee on Human Rights and Humanitarian Aid are scheduled to visit as well, with Committee Chairwoman Renata Alt telling *Reuters* that "the trip should send a signal that we support the independence of Taiwan and democracy there."

Next, the UK House of Commons' Foreign Affairs Committee is set to visit Taiwan in late November or early December. Last but not least, the European Parliament's Trade Committee re-affirmed its scheduled trip to Taiwan for December 2022. This ties in to the accelerating pace of EU-Taiwan trade talks, and proves that China's tactics of intimidation following Speaker Pelosi's trip have had the opposite of their intended effect. ■