

23 Million People on a Canoe

Why Europe should care about Taiwan's future

On the day when the opposition party announced its presidential candidate for the 2020 election, I was sitting at a lunch table in Taipei listening to my intellectual friends uttering their concerns about the future of Taiwan. The pessimists phrased their pessimism in the form of questions such as “How many years do you think Taiwan has left?” The optimists expressed their optimism with dark humour, “Thank God they will be too busy with Hong Kong and the US for a while.”

Like Germany, Taiwan operates a trade surplus with mainland China and Hong Kong, amounting to \$83.1 billion in 2018. With 41% of Taiwan's exports going to China, Taipei's economy depends on trade with the mainland. However, given the increasing tension across the Taiwan Strait, the opposition Kuomintang (KMT) in particular has been worrying whether Taiwan will be able to sustain these figures. The ruling Democratic Progressive Party, on the other hand, is capitalizing on voters' intense distrust of Beijing, stepping up measures to “contain” China's influence. Taipei recently drafted a national security law that would make it a punishable offense to spread “political propaganda” for China.

As in Europe, Taiwanese feel highly ambivalent about mainland China: When China signifies economic opportunities, most Taiwanese are



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“pro-China”; when China represents oppression and potential invasion, most Taiwanese are “anti-China”. The problem is that China resembles both. The result is a deep division among Taiwanese extending far beyond the political and economic spheres.

Given the circumstances under which Taiwan emerged and evolved, its evolution into an authentic democracy represents an extraordinary achieve-

ment. It was without a revolution that the KMT, which had ruled Taiwan for more than 40 years, put an end to martial law and, whether convinced or compelled to act, opened the country's political system to sharing power. Without bloodshed, dissidents who had once sat in jails became legislators and political leaders. Since the lifting of martial law 1987, power has changed hands fairly and orderly, following the results of each election.

Taiwan has been a quiet democracy for more than thirty years, nearly as long as the four decades during which it has been isolated by the international community. The US does not formally recognize Taiwan but, as with Germany, acts as the country's security guarantor. While Washington has indicated that arms sales to Taiwan will become more of a routine, China has devised a routine of its own by holding long-range combat drills and ordering its fighter jets to cross the maritime line.

However, the threat to Taiwanese democracy is twofold. The obvious one comes from China, and to a large extent lies beyond Taipei's control. The less obvious threat is home-made, as the looming China threat tempts domestic politicians to mobilize the population's collective fear to foment a tribal nationalism. Their success would pose a real danger to Taiwan's democratic institutions.

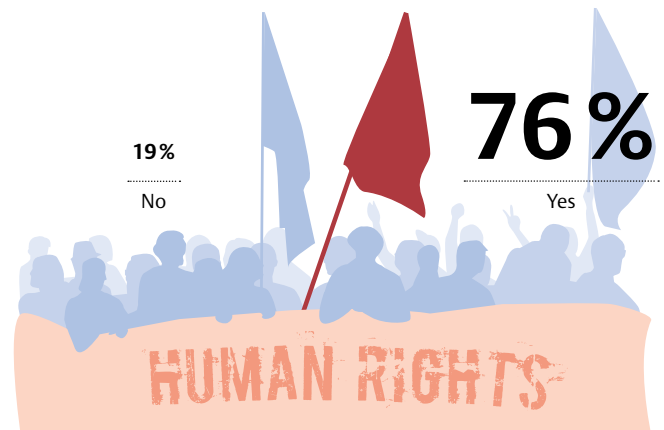
Those who applaud Taiwanese democracy for the sole purpose of criticizing China make me nervous. Generations of Taiwanese fought and ultimately achieved a democracy – it is simply too precious for other people's agendas, internal or external.

Germany has a unique history: its people have experienced first-hand how easily democratic institutions may fall apart when not meticulously guarded. Having received democracy as a gift following World War II and struggled to regain their freedom from Communist rule, Germans are in a unique position to understand both the predicament as well as the aspirations of the Taiwanese. Moral courage often comes from past sufferings. As a leading EU member state, Germany has a responsibility to maximize its own efforts as well as to influence others' efforts for world peace.

But why should the world care about the future of Taiwan? First of all, save the Taiwan model, the

world might have to accept the claim that democracy and Confucianism are incompatible, and that a communist China presents the only logical and inevitable path to modernity. Secondly, Taiwan deserves respect on its own merits. True, if China were an aircraft carrier, Taiwan would be a lone canoe. But standing on this canoe are 23 million people aspiring for a life with liberty and dignity. If it were an EU member, Taiwan would be the 7th largest of the Union's 28 member-states (27 after Brexit), smaller than Poland but larger than the Netherlands or Belgium, with a developed economy ranking 22nd in the world by purchasing power parity. Do we really want to return to a world in which it is imaginable that countries such as Poland or the Netherlands should be deprived of their autonomy to determine their own way of life and political system? ✗

In dealing with China, should Germany defend its political interests more strongly, even if doing so might harm its economic interests?



2019: don't know 3%, no answer 2%