

SOCIAL DISTANCING? THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON CROSS-STRAIT RELATIONS

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Abstract: Owing to changes in Taiwan's domestic politics, the PRC's turn to a more assertive foreign policy, and the rapid deterioration in Sino-US affairs, cross-Strait relations were already at their lowest point in recent history when the Covid-19 pandemic broke out. This article analyses how the interplay between these already existing factors and the pandemic have impacted relations between Beijing and Taipei. The analysis is conducted on three levels: Taiwan's domestic politics; cross-Strait perceptions and interactions; and changes in the international space available for Taiwan. It is argued that the pandemic has primarily accelerated and amplified trends already in place rather than introduce fundamentally new factors. Taiwan's successful management of the pandemic has stabilized DPP rule and given the government enlarged policy space. It has further entrenched negative views of the other on both sides of the Strait and decreased cross-Strait social contact. The country's success has also provided a boost to Taiwan's manoeuvring in the increasingly fragmented international economic and political space that has resulted from intensifying great power competition.

Keywords: China, Taiwan, pandemic, Covid-19, cross-Strait relations

Introduction

On 15 January, 2020, representatives of the US and the People's Republic of China (PRC, China) signed the Phase One trade deal, trying to put a break on the rapidly deteriorating relations between Washington and Beijing. Four days earlier, on 11 January, the Democratic Progressive Party

(DPP), helped by its firm stance vis-à-vis Beijing, had won the general elections in Taiwan, retaining its majority in the Legislative Yuan and ensuring a second term for President Tsai Ing-wen. On the same day, the PRC reported the first death attributed to a disease later named Covid-19. On 23 January, the city of Wuhan in China's Hubei province was locked down by the authorities in Beijing in an attempt to control the fast-spreading epidemic, and a week later the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a global health emergency. In the context of rapidly deteriorating US-China relations and a predictably frosty post-election atmosphere across the Taiwan Strait, the pandemic emerged as a new force impacting the relations between Beijing and Taipei at a time when "cross-Strait relations are at their most precarious point since the 1995–1996 third Taiwan Strait crisis; and the US-Taiwan relationship is stronger now than it has been since 1979" (Hsiao & Hsiao, 2021, p. 155).

This article analyses the extent and direction of the influence the Covid-19 pandemic has had on cross-Strait relations. There are sound reasons to expect a considerable impact. The pandemic has caused a massive disruption in economic activity, trade relations, political dynamics, as well as everyday life around the world. It has pitted countries against each other in a nationalistic competition for scarce medical resources, triggered unprecedented border closures, highlighted the weaknesses of domestic and global governance and the pitfalls of international cooperation, and provided particularly fertile ground for the spread of disinformation (Brands & Gavin, 2020). The pandemic has also directed plenty of attention to both sides of the Strait – to the PRC as the locus of the first large outbreak, and to the governments representing alternative methods in managing the pandemic at home (Alon et al., 2020). Moreover, seventeen years earlier, the SARS epidemic of 2003 had demonstrated the destabilizing potential of a cross-border epidemic. It disrupted cross-Strait travel and led to a sharper differentiation of Taiwanese identity and more negative views regarding the PRC. President Chen Shui-bian (DPP) also used the opportunity to improve his popularity before the 2004 elections by calling for a national referendum on whether Taiwan should join the WHO, and by adding the word "Taiwan" on the cover of Taiwanese passports (Brown, 2003; Shen, 2004).

Isolating the impact of the pandemic on cross-Strait relations from other trends is, of course, close to impossible, and this article aims less to identify an independent influence than place various pandemic-related

effects in the broader context of other simultaneous developments, to see how Covid-19 has shaped, restrained, or amplified other co-existing trends and dynamics. Three of these broader trends are worth mentioning at the outset.

First, the identity of Taiwan's population has long been shifting away from a sense of unity with the mainland, a process that accelerated after the 2014 Sunflower Movement against closer economic ties with the PRC (Dreyer & deLisle, 2021). The DPP's success in 2016 in simultaneously taking control of the presidency and the legislature signalled the rise to political dominance of this new identity, ending the lingering illusion that the two sides of the Strait agree that they belong to a single community (Cole, 2020).

Second, for the last several decades, the cross-Strait military and economic balance of power has been shifting toward the PRC, fundamentally altering the dynamics between Beijing and Taipei and making peaceful reunification based on a compromise agreement acceptable to both sides even less likely (Dittmer, 2017). Whereas earlier Beijing had shown strategic patience, shelving the question of reunification while waiting for a more advantageous power position and international context, under Xi Jinping Beijing has shown increasing impatience, stating that reunification with Taiwan is a necessary part of the "rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (Hsiao & Hsiao, 2021; Xi, 2019).

Third, since the 2017 US National Security Strategy identified China, alongside Russia, as powers that "want to shape a world antithetical to US values and interests," a bipartisan consensus has emerged in Washington in favour of a more confrontational policy towards the PRC (*National Security Strategy*, 2017, p. 25). Although the Biden administration has moderated the rhetoric of its predecessor's broad unilateral effort to contain China, in practice, it has expanded it into an attempt at multilateral coordination with US allies and other willing states. Since the United States looms large over cross-Strait relations, the rapidly deteriorating US-China relations have placed Taiwan in a particularly sensitive spot, especially as the Biden administration has continued, and in some ways has pushed further the Trump administration's pursuit of closer relations with it (Grothusen, 2021).

The analysis situates the impact of the pandemic in the context of these other major factors and proceeds in three stages. First, it looks at how Taiwan's domestic politics, which is both a major determinant and a primary battlefield of cross-Strait relations, has been impacted by Covid-19. Second, the effects on cross-Strait economic, social, and political interactions and mutual perceptions are analysed, including the role of (dis)information. Finally, the article investigates how the pandemic has influenced the global position of Taiwan and Mainland China, including their relative position in the global economic system, their global image, and their contestation over international political space through the use of traditional and public diplomacy.

Domestic Politics in Taiwan

Taiwan is a highly central issue for the PRC, with direct implications for the survival prospects of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and there is very little domestic contestation over government policy in this area (Weiss & Wallace, 2021). Therefore, the impact of Covid-19 on Chinese domestic politics has had little bearing on cross-Strait dynamics. In contrast, Taiwan's dynamic domestic political scene plays a major role in China-Taiwan relations due to the different positions the two major parties, the independence-leaning DPP and the more pro-unification KMT, take on Taiwan's relations with the PRC. Both the governing party and the stability of the government strongly influence the dynamics of cross-Strait relations and Taiwan's standing in the international community. Although it was expected to pose a major challenge to the Taiwanese government, the successful management of the pandemic has in fact ended up strengthening and stabilizing the government's position and expanding its space for political manoeuvring.

DPP controls both the Legislative Yuan and the Presidency since 2016, having retained both in the January 2020 elections. Under President Tsai, the issue of cross-Strait relations began to clearly benefit DPP domestically, since her moderate policies allayed fears that Taiwan's otherwise increasingly pro-interdependence population had about the party's earlier destabilizing actions towards the PRC (V. W.-C. Wang & deLisle, 2021). As a result, KMT's political strength now rests mostly on exploiting dissatisfaction with the state of the economy or various social issues, the political potential of which was clearly demonstrated by KMT's

considerable success at the 2018 local elections. However, by the 2020 elections the focus on Taiwanese politics had shifted back to cross-strait relations due to the large-scale protests in Hong Kong against Beijing's moves to curtail the city's autonomy, which greatly improved the results of DPP and made KMT's position on improving relations with China increasingly untenable (Rigger, 2020; Singh, 2021).

The coronavirus outbreak had the potential to generate an economic and social crisis in Taiwan that KMT could exploit to improve its electoral chances. At the beginning of the pandemic, Taiwan was identified as having the second highest risk of importing the disease due to the density of its travel links with the PRC (Gardner, 2020). In fact, Taiwan managed to avoid any major domestic outbreak until May 2021, before which time it had only registered 1,129 cases (many of them imported) and 12 deaths. Even the first wave that ultimately reached Taiwan in May 2021, with the number of daily cases peaking at around 500 per day in that month, was quickly brought under control, and by 15 September Taiwan had the relatively modest total of 16,103 cases and 839 deaths, both among the world's best track records according to the Worldometer coronavirus page (<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>).

There are many reasons behind Taiwan's remarkable success in managing the pandemic. Its linguistic and social proximity allowed the government in Taipei to gather early and high-quality information about the nature of the disease that appeared in China at the end of 2019. With the experience of the 2003 SARS epidemic and the 2009 H1N1 outbreak, as well as other health and food security challenges originating from China, Taipei acted with distrust and caution towards the PRC and immediately set in motion the policies and practices designed after the SARS epidemic (Yasuhiro, 2020). The government quickly securitised the outbreak, launching a response as early as 2 January, and it activated the Central Epidemic Command Center on 20 January (Kennedy, 2020; Su & Han, 2020). Within a week, Taiwan heavily restricted entry from the PRC, and later from most of the rest of the world, making good use of being an island. Taiwan also mobilised its digital capabilities and world-class healthcare systems to execute highly effective contact-tracing and quarantining affected individuals (C. J. Wang et al., 2020). As a result, the government only had to impose relatively strict restrictions – including universal mask-wearing, closure of leisure and entertainment

venues and on-site restaurant services, a ban on larger gatherings, an entry ban for all non-residents, etc. – for about three months between 20 May and 26 July.

The successful prevention of any major outbreak until May 2021 boosted satisfaction with Tsai's leadership and the performance of the government. Between January and May 2020, Tsai's approval rate increased by 14.5 percentage points, reaching an all-time high of 71.2% (Yasuhiro, 2020). Rich and Einhorn (2021) found that the population's satisfaction with the government's coronavirus management had a strong positive impact on President Tsai's approval rating. The government's popularity was helped by the fact that Taiwan was among the few advanced economies that managed to have a positive economic growth rate in 2020 (around 3%). Taiwan's economy benefited from avoiding any lockdown that year, which meant undisrupted manufacturing production, and also from increasing demand for electronics and digital tools resulting from lockdowns elsewhere (Cheng et al., 2021). This strong economic performance was also partially due to the ongoing China-US trade and technology war, which had incentivised the return to the island of Taiwanese capital (C. Yu, 2021)

In the year following Tsai's peak approval rate, controversial decisions by the government, including the lifting of the ban on importing pork from the US, public concerns over food security, press freedom, and DPP's links with organised crime, as well as power outages and water scarcity problems, saw the president's approval slide gradually down to 54.4% by April 2021, before taking a more drastic drop as a result of the May outbreak (Chou, 2021; L. Chung, 2021a). Although the outbreak was quickly brought under control, it exposed the weakness of the Taiwanese government's vaccination policy. By early May, only around 0.2% of Taiwan's population had received at least one dose of the vaccine, lagging well behind the average of high-income economies (27.3%), as well as the world average (7.6%) at the time (Ritchie et al., 2021). Although the government faced many external obstacles in purchasing vaccines, some of which are discussed in the next section, it also acted complacently and somewhat recklessly by relying on its plans of a zero Covid policy until locally-made vaccines became available in the second half of 2021 (L. Kuo & Chen, 2021; Tan, 2021). In June, disapproval of Tsai briefly surpassed her approval before the latter recovered to 45.3% in August, partly due

the successful control of the outbreak and the remarkably rapid rollout of a belated vaccination campaign. By the beginning of August, the share of people who had received at least one dose reached 33%, surpassing the world average of 28.4% (Ritchie et al., 2021). Although the disruption caused by Taiwan's first coronavirus wave clearly cost popularity, it still left President Tsai with a higher approval rate than for most of her own first presidency or for almost the whole of the two terms of her KMT predecessor, Ma Ying-jeou (T. Y. Wang & Cheng, 2015; You, 2021).

Cross-Strait Perceptions and Interactions

The pandemic broke out at a point when cross-Strait relations were at a low point. The PRC severed official political relations with Taiwan in 2016 after President Tsai had refused to explicitly acknowledge the “1992 consensus” that Beijing identified as the foundation for any continuing cross-Strait political interaction. Since then, Beijing's diplomatic assaults have lured away eight of Taiwan's former diplomatic allies, leaving the latter with only fifteen states with which it has official diplomatic relations. Taiwanese society has also turned increasingly cold on the PRC. By the second half of 2019, only 36% of Taiwanese supported closer political ties, and 52% supported closer economic ties, with considerably lower numbers, 16% and 39%, respectively, among the under 30s (Devlin & Huang, 2020).

The government in Beijing seems to have concluded that the Taiwanese will not realistically choose reunification even under future KMT rule (Bush, 2021). In his report to the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, President Xi omitted from among the list of principles pertaining to “resolving the Taiwan question” that of “placing hope on the Taiwan people” (Xi, 2017, p. 50). Instead of working through political relations, the Chinese government has opted for a combination of ramping up military threats and engaging more directly with the Taiwanese population through a broad set of measures to attract Taiwanese investments and individuals to the mainland, and stepping up its information and influence campaigns (Hsiao & Hsiao, 2021).

By 2019, Beijing's offer to Taiwan was clearly defined as a version of the “one country, two systems” model that had been implemented in Hong Kong in 1997. Therefore, the rapid and relentless *de facto* dismantlement of Hong

Kong's special status during the course of 2019 and 2020 ensured that this offer would have little traction in the Taiwanese population (Hsiao & Hsiao, 2021). Tsai's re-election in 2020 promised a deadlock for the next four years, with no hope for improving relations, but with at least relative stability, which the pandemic has put under pressure (Rigger, 2020).

Difficulties related to the political relationship between Taiwan and the PRC emerged early during the pandemic. As Wuhan entered lockdown, the evacuation of Taiwanese citizens became an urgent concern. In the absence of formal government-to-government relations, most of the negotiations and practical arrangements had to be conducted through unofficial actors, including businesspersons and KMT politicians (Rowen, 2020). Moreover, the evacuation was a sensitive question for Beijing, as it wanted to avoid giving the impression that Taiwanese citizens were "foreigners" similar to other nationalities being repatriated at that time. In the end, evacuation began using a PRC airline, but disagreements between the two sides over its execution quickly halted the operation until after the lockdown in Wuhan had been lifted (Brown & Churchman, 2020).

Access to medical resources became another point of contention. As the outbreak started to spread in the PRC in January, Chinese citizens began to buy up medical-grade face masks, sanitizers, and other protective equipment from all around the world, including Taiwan. To prevent drastic shortages, Taiwan first put in place export controls on 24 January and then allocated government funds for increasing medical manufacturing at the beginning of February. The decision was criticised both at home and in the PRC for holding back crucial resources from where it was arguably most needed (Wei, 2020; Yasuhiro, 2020). By late March, Taiwan itself became a major exporter of medical equipment and began to donate masks to other countries. After the government in Taipei announced on 18 March that it had agreed to donate 100,000 masks per week to the United States, the PRC's Taiwan Affairs Office called the move "despicable behaviour" and a "confrontation with the motherland" that privileges foreigners over compatriots (Everington, 2020).

By 2021 the focus had shifted to vaccine access, especially after the May outbreak. China's offer in May to send vaccines and pandemic specialists was rejected by Taiwanese authorities as an attempt to divide

the population of Taiwan (K. Huang, 2021). The Taiwanese government also rebuffed Chinese suggestions to provide Covid-19 jabs to Taiwanese citizens at mainland airports (L. Chung, 2021b). KMT politicians and the PRC, in turn, criticised the government for rejecting Chinese vaccines on political grounds in an emergency situation (Hioe, 2021; Yang & Wang, 2021). In any case, according to a poll conducted in February 2021, only 1% of Taiwan's population were willing to accept a Chinese vaccine, due to the lack of trust in medical products from the PRC (I. Lee, 2021).

Political relations with Beijing also complicated Taiwan's access to BioNTech vaccines. The Chinese pharmaceutical company Fosun Pharma enjoyed exclusive rights to sell BioNTech's mRNA vaccines in the Greater China region, which also includes Taiwan. Negotiations with BioNTech and Fosun Pharma dragged on until they finally collapsed in February 2021. The Taiwanese health minister blamed the failure on Chinese interference over the wording of the agreement with BioNTech, which would have identified Taiwan as a "country". Although the Taiwanese authorities agreed to change the language, negotiations stalled. Former president Ma Ying-jeou blamed the DPP, suggesting that KMT would have been better positioned to negotiate an agreement with the Chinese company. Beijing denied any interference (Chik, 2021; Zhong & Schuetze, 2021). In the end, the deadlock was only solved in mid-July through complex and unofficial channels to distance the PRC and Taiwan. Taiwanese companies Foxconn and TSMC, and the Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation purchased 15 million doses of BioNTech vaccines manufactured in Germany and distributed by Fosun Pharma through the intermediary of a Swiss-owned pharmaceutical firm, Zuellig Pharma, and donated them to the Taiwanese government (McGregor, 2021).

Social and economic interactions across the Strait suffered under the border restrictions implemented from February 2020, with trips from the PRC to Taiwan down by 95.7% by February 2021 and cross-Strait higher education mobility grinding to a halt (L. Chung, 2020; Yearender, 2020). Nevertheless, 2020 still gave China the highest share of Taiwan's exports in the last decade, although investments had dropped by both value and number (Keegan & Churchman, 2020, 2021). The post-pandemic resumption of regular exchanges across the Strait, however, has remained a priority for Taipei (Foreign and Overseas Chinese Affairs Committee, 2021).

In the information space, cross-border flows remained as active as ever during the pandemic, contributing to Taiwan's own infodemic, i.e. "too much information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak" (World Health Organization, n.d.). Disinformation complicated the government's pandemic management efforts and threatened Taiwan's political security. In a very early example, on the day before election day in January 2020, a poster was published on LINE, Taiwan's popular social media platform, warning that the possibility that some Taiwanese might have been infected with the virus from Wuhan could make voting unsafe (Doublethink Lab, 2020). This did not seem to have had a major effect on turnout, which remained exceptionally high. Later disinformation included the government's alleged cover-up of large numbers of unreported infections and deaths, hospitals having to burn or dump dead bodies into rivers, overflowing morgues, major infection clusters affecting the factories of important tech companies, people dying after receiving vaccination, and the government donating large amounts of vaccines to allies while Taiwan's population suffered from vaccine shortage (Hille, 2021; T. Huang, 2021; Yu M. & Lim, 2021).

Such disinformation does not necessarily originate in China, since local political or profit-oriented actors might also be behind some of the phenomenon (Aspinwall, 2020). Sharing the same language, however, makes Taiwan particularly vulnerable to disinformation campaigns originating from the PRC, which the latter undoubtedly exploits, making Taiwan the primary target of Chinese information operations (Yasuhiro, 2020). Fake news and other forms of disinformation might be generated by PRC propaganda organs, nationalistic Chinese citizens, or troll collectives and spread through Taiwanese social media, such as LINE, PTT, Facebook, or Youtube, in a decentralised manner by local individuals and groups, before being picked up by mainstream media (Hille, 2021). The source of disinformation is often given away by the use of simplified characters or phrases and terms used in the PRC, which also limits their credibility, and hence impact, on Taiwanese society (Blanchette et al., 2021; Monaco et al., 2020). The Taiwanese Ministry of Justice has attributed 70% of coronavirus-related disinformation to sources in the PRC (Bradshaw et al., 2020, pp. 388–393).

The pandemic has embittered views across the Strait, with polls in Taiwan showing a significant increase in the share of respondents who did not see the Chinese government as Taiwan's friend (Brown & Churchman, 2020; Yasuhiro, 2020). It is, however, unclear to what extent this has been influenced by the pandemic rather than earlier developments. Chen and Zheng (2021) argue that the breaking point in attitudes towards China in Taiwan took place around 2019, with the anti-China extradition bill protests, increasing US-China tensions, and more aggressive PRC policies towards Taiwan. The recent shift towards an increasing share of Taiwanese population claiming exclusively Taiwanese identity as well as favouring a move towards independence had already begun in 2018 (Election Study Center, 2021a, 2021b; Taiwanese Public Opinion Foundation, 2021).

International Space and Recognition

Taiwan and the PRC have long been in competition for international space and recognition, a contest that has increasingly favoured a rapidly rising China (deLisle, 2021). In the last few years, however, the international pushback against Beijing's turn to a more assertive foreign policy and diplomatic style, coupled with the impact of US-China tensions on the global political and economic system, has introduced a degree of instability, with potential opportunities and pitfalls. The pandemic has further upset the international order. Moreover, it has placed the PRC and Taiwan in the global spotlight, not only because the outbreak started in the PRC, but because the different ways the two government managed the pandemic became a symbol of the competition between authoritarian and liberal democratic systems. Increased concerns about global supply chains, shifts in the global image of the PRC and Taiwan, and active pandemic diplomacy have shaped their struggle for international space, although the impact of the pandemic has remained secondary compared to the more fundamental international realignments driven by the rise of China.

By demonstrating the dangers of depending on other countries for crucial products (e.g. medical supplies), as well as the vulnerability of global supply chains to disruptions in a few core countries, the pandemic has accelerated already growing trends in the global economic system towards deglobalization and production reallocation.

It has heavily impacted the global value chains in which both the PRC and Taiwan occupy core, although different, positions (H.-H. Lee & Park, 2020). Whereas the PRC has an interest in deepening economic interdependence with Taiwan, Taiwan's government and companies have shown increasing preference for reallocating their supply chains away from China. Most of the drivers of the latter trend predate the pandemic and will therefore most likely outlast it. Rising labour costs in China and the emergence of robotics and other digital technologies that constitute the Fourth Industrial Revolution have changed the economic incentives Taiwanese companies face when organising their production, making it more rational to move production back home or to lower-cost regions.

Diversification away from the PRC has also been a major political goal of Tsai's administration, which launched the New Southbound Policy to improve economic links with South and Southeast Asia, Australia, and New Zealand in 2016, and the "Action Plan for Welcoming Overseas Taiwanese Businesses to Return to Invest in Taiwan" to encourage reshoring from the PRC in 2019 (C.-C. Kuo, 2021). Even more significant a political factor was the beginning of the US-China trade and technology conflict in 2018, which made it both more costly and risky for many Taiwanese companies to have investments in and commercial relations with the PRC (Duchâtel, 2021). TSMC, for instance, discontinued taking orders from Huawei in response to US sanctions on the company (Keegan & Churchman, 2020). The chip shortage that developed during the pandemic, due to a combination of increased demand for electronics and disrupted production in some countries, underlined the dependence of the world on Taiwan's semiconductor-production, and hence Taiwan's successful avoidance of a large outbreak became crucial for the global economy as well. It also, however, led to calls in the US and the EU to move crucial choke points in global value chains away from a location threatened by one of the world's largest economic and military powers, which can undermine Taiwan's position in global value chains in the long run (Crawford et al., 2021).

How the PRC and Taiwan are perceived globally is a significant factor and battleground in their struggle for international recognition and status. China's image suffered heavily early on in the pandemic due to Beijing's initial cover-up of the outbreak and other signs pointing

to China's responsibility for the crisis. Negative associations with the Covid-19 pandemic certainly accelerated the deterioration of China's image among advanced economies, which reached a low in 2020. However, the increase in unfavourable views of China preceded the coronavirus outbreak, having already started around 2018-2019, influenced by a broader set of factors that the pandemic amplified (Silver et al., 2020; Turcsányi et al., 2021). Moreover, by 2021 China's image improved significantly as a result of its successful management of the pandemic at home, the spectacular mismanagement of the pandemic in the United States and other advanced economies, as well as in reaction to its provision of international assistance (Seah et al., 2021; Silver et al., 2021).

Taiwan's successful management of the pandemic, even with the weaknesses made visible by the May 2021 outbreak, offered a unique opportunity to improve Taiwan's global status. This was even more so because Taiwan's achievement was perceived to offer a rebuttal to the idea that authoritarian countries such as China enjoy an advantage over liberal democracies when handling such emergency situations (Y.-J. Chen & Cohen, 2020). As an implication, liberal democracies had come to have a stake in making sure that Taiwan would continue to succeed in its anti-pandemic efforts.

Capitalizing on its positive image, Taiwan's government moved fast to expand Taiwan's international space through pandemic and health diplomacy constructed around the terms "Taiwan model" and "Taiwan Can Help" (www.taiwancanhelp.us). This strategy was implemented through channels of traditional as well as public diplomacy, including an active use of social media platforms, organizing video conferences and media interviews, and participation in international events such as the Copenhagen Democracy Summit (Rowen, 2020). By the end of 2020, Taiwan had sent anti-pandemic experts to its diplomatic ally Eswatini, donated more than 50 million masks and other anti-pandemic supplies to over 80 countries, including an automated surgical mask production line to Czechia, and offered projects to train healthcare workers in other countries and share Taiwan's know-how in the use of digital technologies for pandemic control through its International Cooperation and Development Fund (Bisping, 2021; Wu, 2020, 2021).

Taiwan also sought to mobilise the sympathy it had gathered through its pandemic diplomacy to support its bid for membership in international organizations, a further step towards securing full international legal sovereignty. The disadvantages of the lack of full membership in major organizations, and thus being listed as part of the PRC, were demonstrated early on in the pandemic by Taiwan's constrained access to meetings of, and information from, the WHO and by the collateral banning of Taiwan's China Airlines by Italy based on documents of the UN's International Civil Aviation Organization (Blanchard, 2020). The main aspiration for Taiwan was achieving observer status in the World Health Assembly (WHA), the governing body of the WHO. The pandemic created an ideal situation for such a bid, since Taiwan's exclusion from the organization, coupled with its successful handling of the pandemic, created problems of legitimacy as well as efficacy for the WHO, and the bid could be launched on a purportedly non-political, functional ground (deLisle, 2009).

The pressure that the negative consequences of Taiwan's exclusion from the organization during the SARS epidemic placed on China and the WHO had played a role in Taiwan gaining observer status in the WHA in 2009 (deLisle, 2021; Lindemann, 2014). However, Taiwan's participation remained subject to the "one China principle" and to annual approval by Beijing, which the latter ultimately withdrew in 2017, after Tsai's election to the Presidency. Taiwan has thus not been invited to the WHA since 2016. Although Taiwan's bid to get an invitation failed both in 2020 and 2021 due to China's opposition, the international attention generated by the attempts has further underlined Taiwan's presence on the international stage. Taipei has received particularly strong support from the United States, which encouraged its allies to stand by Taiwan's bid in line with the 2020 TAIPEI Act instructing the US government to assist Taiwan in improving its relationships in the world and its standing in international organizations (Hinshaw & Alpert, 2020; Keegan & Churchman, 2020).

The PRC has also tried to use its substantial resources for pandemic and vaccine diplomacy to curtail Taiwan's political space, although ultimately with little success. After the name of the representative office of the Netherlands in Taiwan received a diplomatic upgrade, the *Global Times* published a thinly veiled threat to withhold medical supplies (*Netizens Call for Dutch Products Boycott*, 2020). China's vaccine diplomacy has also targeted Taiwan's remaining diplomatic allies, who occasionally struggled

with vaccine shortage (Tiezzi, 2021). Honduras considered opening a trade office with the PRC in exchange for access to vaccines, but it did not follow through on it (Harrison, 2021). Beijing allegedly approached the government of Paraguay with an offer of help with vaccine access in exchange for switching sides. Taiwan secured vaccines for Paraguay with the support of India, redirecting money from the Taiwan–Pakistan cooperation programme, while Washington applied diplomatic pressure on the South American country (Foreign and Overseas Chinese Affairs Committee, 2021; *Taiwan Says India Helped Paraguay*, 2021). In 2021, the Taiwanese foreign ministry indicated that it would help allies with funds to secure Covid vaccines as long as the money is not used to buy Chinese vaccines, and that it was considering providing locally-made Taiwanese vaccines to diplomatic allies (Chung Y. & Lim, 2021; Reuters, 2021).

The fact that Taiwan's anti-pandemic efforts have acquired symbolic political significance due to its competition with China have also benefited Taiwan in unexpected ways. After the May 2021 outbreak, beside its own purchases of Astra Zeneca and Moderna vaccines and its access to some supplies from the Covax initiative, Taiwan also received donations of 3.4 million doses from Japan and a further 2.5 million from the United States (Strong, 2021c). Both donors had a stake in preserving Taiwan's stability and anti-pandemic success. As a result, Taiwan could implement one of the most rapid vaccination campaigns in the world while having a relatively small outbreak, while countries with much larger epidemics continued to face serious vaccine shortages. Vaccine donations to Taiwan have also become diplomatic signals of goodwill as attitudes shifted in Europe against the PRC and in favour of Taiwan. Lithuania donated 20,000 doses in July 2021, before deciding to exchange representative offices with Taiwan and allowing the use of Taiwan's name in the office in Lithuania – a first in a European country. It followed on with donating a further 235,900 doses in September. Czechia, whose Senate leader visited Taiwan in September 2020, donated 30,000 doses in August 2021. In September, Slovakia donated 160,000, Poland 400,000 doses (K. Chen, 2021a, 2021b; Everington, 2021; Strong, 2021a, 2021b). Vaccine donations thus confirmed both Taiwan's improved international status and the fact that, although on the surface this improvement was linked to its success in managing the pandemic, it in fact rested on the foundation of intensifying geopolitical competition between China, the United States, and other major powers, including Japan and India.

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic has primarily acted as an accelerator and amplifier of trends and processes that had predated it, but nevertheless had an independent effect on various factors affecting cross-Strait relations. In Taiwan's domestic politics the largely successful management of the pandemic has increased the popularity of the DPP government, enabling it to pursue policies that otherwise might have generated unacceptable political costs. This includes, most prominently, the lifting of the ban on US pork imports, which opened the door to a potential trade deal with the United States and thus trade diversification and improved relations with Washington. It remains to be seen, however, for how long this effect on popularity will last. In cross-Strait relations access to vaccines and other medical supplies, as well as disinformation originating in the PRC have become major points of tension, but they have not radically altered the pre-existing trends dominated by the ongoing shift towards a non-Chinese identity in Taiwan and a hardening and more unilateral position taken by Beijing. Perhaps the longest-lasting impact can be identified in terms of Taiwan's skilled use of pandemic diplomacy to position itself as offering a liberal democratic alternative to the PRC's mode of pandemic management, and hence carving out a crucial symbolic place in the intensifying strategic and ideological struggle between China on the one hand and the US and its allies on the other. It was this latter underlying trend, however, that has made Taiwan's successful expansion of its political space possible. This reminds us that, in the long run, cross-Strait relations will continue to be shaped primarily by trends more fundamental than a pandemic, including the shift in the identity of Taiwan's population, the growing asymmetry of power between the two sides of the Strait, and the reordering of the world around the emerging US-China confrontation.

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