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## Taiwan's Naval Shipbuilding Programs Point towards an Evolving Direction in Defense Policy

John Dotson

## A Revamped Taiwanese Approach to Foreign Assistance

Bonnie Glick

## The New Italian Government Signals a Closer Relationship with Taiwan

Michael Malinconi

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By: Russell Hsiao and Katherine Wagner

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Taiwan held its closely watched "9-in-1" elections (九合一選舉) over the weekend on November 26. [1] With [most of the races](#) accounted for, the Kuomintang (KMT, 中國國民黨) won 13 of the top political posts of local governments across 22 cities, counties, and special municipalities, while the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民主進步黨) won only five. Of the remaining contested localities, one was held by the Taiwan People's Party (TPP, 台灣民眾黨), and the other two went to independent, non-affiliated politicians. [2] With this electoral victory, the KMT continued its winning streak at the local level since 2018, and made progress toward reconstituting the electoral ground it [lost in 2014](#).

Local elections tend to be focused on local issues rather than cross-Strait and national issues, and this year's competition is no exception. Nevertheless, the results of the local elections will affect party politics heading into the 2024 presidential and legislative elections—which in turn could influence internal dynamics within Taiwan, as well as relations across the Taiwan Strait. This preliminary analysis will examine the results of the local elections, what they mean for party politics, and their implications for the 2024 presidential and legislative elections.

### A Blue Wave?

Many [pundits](#) and [commentators](#) have already opined that the local elections represent a "historic defeat" for the DPP and a "blue wave" for the KMT, which could carry over to the presidential and legislative elections in 2024. Indeed, the election saw the DPP win the lowest number of top local offices in its history. However, while the political momentum from the local elections could certainly influence the 2024 elections, such projections may be overblown: in terms of the net number of seats that the DPP lost—which would be a stronger indicator of the strength of any so-called wave—this performance is far from the DPP's worst, or the KMT's best.

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To put matters into perspective, the KMT currently has a net loss of one office and the DPP has a net loss of two offices from what they had going into these elections. In terms of net losses, the [2018 local elections](#) were far more devastating for the DPP and represented the KMT's best performance in over 20 years. During those elections, the KMT trounced the DPP by regaining control of nine offices for leading local governments and won control of 15 of the 22 top local offices—whereas the DPP lost a whopping seven posts that it previously controlled, falling to six. [3]

Overall, in terms of net gains, the KMT's victory in 2022 could be best described as modest. Even if it retains control of Chiayi City (which is [scheduled to hold its election](#) separately in December), that will mean that the KMT will control 14 of the 22 seats, the same total number of seats it held going into the elections. Moreover, the number of seats won is historically not a strong indicator of who will win in the presidential and legislative elections. Indeed, despite its significant losses in the 2018 elections, the DPP still managed to win the 2020 presidential election and maintain its majority in the Legislative Yuan.

Finally, local elections also tend to favor the KMT. In the [eight local elections](#) held in the past 20 years (not including 2022), the DPP only won three in terms of popular vote received. That is a win rate of 62.5 percent for the KMT and 37.5 percent for the DPP. If one also considers the 2014 election an outlier due to the impacts of the Sunflower Movement, the odds against the DPP winning in local election contests may be seen as even lower.



*Image: Taipei mayoral candidate Wayne Chiang (left) and KMT Chairman Eric Chu (right) wave to supporters from a campaign motorcade on November 22. (Image source: [Central News Agency](#))*

### ***Symbolic but Significant Victories for the KMT***

While the net difference in the number of seats controlled by each party does not reflect a significant change in the local electoral map, the seats won by the KMT—and to a lesser extent, the TPP—compared to the DPP do hold important symbolic value and suggest that certain political conditions may be playing out. In turn, these could affect the more consequential 2024 presidential and legislative elections. At the same time, the KMT's losses were arguably insignificant (i.e., Miaoli, Penghu, and Kinmen), as the party now controls four of the six special municipalities under the central government: Taipei, New Taipei, Taoyuan, and Taichung. Of all the races, the most significant races for their symbolic value were Taipei City, Taoyuan City, Keelung City, and Hsinchu City.

#### *Taipei City*

Taipei City is arguably the most prestigious mayoral post in the whole country. It is the capital and commands significant political status and resources. For 16 years from 1998-2014, Taipei City was a [KMT stronghold](#), until the TPP's Ko Wen-je (柯文哲) won in 2014. Even after losing Taipei City, the KMT had been gradually progressing toward reclaiming the mayor's office. For instance, in 2018 it lost only by a razor-thin margin of 3,567 votes (a .23 percent difference). Despite having a mayor for the last eight years who was not aligned with either the “pan-Green” or “pan-Blue” coalitions, Taipei City still leans Blue. The only time that the DPP controlled Taipei City was from 1994-1998, and in the 2018 mayoral race, the DPP's candidate only managed to win 17 percent of the votes. Given these electoral conditions, it is not all that surprising that the KMT won, as Ko was not in the running. Overall, Chen Shih-chung's (陳時中) [showing in this election](#) is the closest the DPP has been in recent years, garnering a respectable 31.9 percent of total votes to Wayne Chiang's (蔣萬安) 42.3 percent.

KMT Chairman Eric Chu (朱立倫) staked a great deal on having Chiang run as the KMT candidate in the Taipei City mayoral race. With Chiang's win, he could potentially revitalize the KMT and give the party a prominent new political face to attract younger voters. It is no secret that the KMT has struggled to connect with youth in Taiwan, and to shake off its image as a party of elderly politicians. This has contributed to its flagging support rate among the general population. According to Academia Sinica researcher [Nathan Batto](#), approximately 74 percent of the age 20-29 cohort who voted in the 2020 elections cast their ballot for Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文). Although the 2022 [referendum to lower the voting age](#) from 21 to 18 failed, the youth vote will

likely continue to be an important dynamic in the 2024 presidential and legislative elections.

Even if Chiang's win may not have a direct bearing on the KMT's chances in 2024, it is the most coveted position for politicians in Taiwan, and is traditionally seen as a step to the presidency—thereby setting Chiang up for a potential 2028 run for the top political office.

#### *Taoyuan City and Keelung City*

Both [Taoyuan](#) and [Keelung](#) represent symbolic losses for the DPP, since it won both these seats in the 2014 wave that swept many DPP mayors and magistrates into previous KMT strongholds. The popular incumbent mayors in those two cities were barred from running for a third term due to term limits, and the KMT put up [high-profile political heavyweights](#) like former Premier Simon Chang (張善政) and Hsieh Kuo-liang (謝國樑), an entrepreneur and former legislator, to run in those races.

#### *Hsinchu City*

Similar to Taoyuan and Keelung, the DPP was able to gain electoral control of Hsinchu City in 2014 in the green tidal wave that swept through Taiwan's local offices in 2014 in the wake of the Sunflower Movement. Like many cities and counties in northern Taiwan, it had been strongly in the grip of the KMT for well over a decade since 2000. Like the DPP mayors in Taoyuan and Keelung, the DPP mayor that ran Hsinchu from 2014 through 2022 was barred running for the same office due to term limits. While it was the TPP and not the KMT that [won this race](#), Hsinchu City nevertheless represents a symbolic loss for the DPP.

#### ***Whither Sunflower Effects?***

The impact of 2014's Sunflower Movement on the present-day electoral map cannot be overstated. Since being swept out in the local elections in 2014 and losing the presidential election in 2016, the KMT has [struggled to recover electorally](#) at the national level. It faced significant internal discord that prevented unified tickets, while its national policy positions increasingly rendered it out of touch with the mainstream of public opinion. The KMT as the opposition party has had to grapple with [maintaining internal cohesion](#), which is still ongoing as competing factions vie to determine the party's future relations with the People's Republic of China. The party's electoral defeats in the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections have only [exacerbated these tensions](#).

However, by reclaiming Taipei, Taoyuan, and Keelung—which it lost in 2014—the KMT may finally be overcoming the effects of

the Sunflower Movement and returning to a more traditional role in Taiwan's local politics. Far from a tidal wave, however, this has represented a gradual reconstituting of the KMT's historically strong position at the local level.

#### ***Implications for 2024***

Even though the local elections are often referred to by observers as a bellwether for the country's presidential and legislative elections, the 2022 results should not be automatically interpreted to mean that the KMT will win in the 2024 presidential and legislative elections. To be clear, the predictive value of the local elections as to which party will win the presidential election is marginal at best. Over the past 22 years, there were only [two local elections](#)—2006 and 2014—in which the party that won in terms of total votes went on to win the presidential elections.

Perhaps the most significant result of the 2022 local elections is that they resulted in the resignation of Tsai Ing-wen as chair of the DPP. While it is customary that the [chairman of the losing party steps down](#) to take responsibility for the party's poor performance, Tsai's resignation from the post will weaken her influence over the party's upcoming primary process, which is set to begin in first quarter of 2023. This could inject unknown variables into that contest. While Vice President Lai Ching-te (賴清德) appears to be the likely frontrunner to become the DPP's presidential candidate, the lack of a formal role for Tsai in managing the situation between the party's factions could make the process more unpredictable. However, [supporters of the vice president](#) in the DPP's central committees will likely militate against any unexpected outcomes.

It should be noted that there were [calls early on from within the party](#) for KMT Chairman Eric Chu to step down if the party did not win at least two additional seats. Even though Chu did not win a net of two additional seats, as noted earlier, the KMT chairman did win some important seats. Whether this technicality will satisfy his political opponents remains to be seen. To be clear, the KMT chairman cannot rest peacefully. Chu's performance is not a game changer for the 2024 elections. Recall the aftermath of the significant electoral victory in 2018, when then-Chairman Wu Den-yih (吳敦義) passed on the chance to run in the party's primary that led to a [special process](#) enacted to draft Han Kuo-yu (韓國瑜). So despite the significant electoral victory in 2018, the KMT still lost in the 2020 presidential election.

KMT leaders allied with the current chairman will likely want to spin the results as positively as possible in order to ensure that

Chu remains the leader. At the very least, Chu should be able to convince centrist-leaning party members to give him more time to build on the momentum from the local elections and consolidate greater support around his leadership, thereby giving the party a more competitive chance in the 2024 presidential and legislative elections. Yet, there are still many important variables that could upend his management of the party: party unity, his own flagging popularity, and, perhaps more notably in this upcoming election, third-party candidates like Ko.

Taiwan's local elections tend to focus on local issues. A factor that worked in favor of the KMT in the local elections was the inability of the DPP to [turn cross-strait relations](#) into an electoral issue (despite efforts by Tsai and the DPP to make it so, which were probably too little, too late). Despite events such as the Chinese military's massive exercises in August, and KMT Vice Chairman [Andrew Hsia's \(夏立言\) untimely visit to China](#), there does not appear to have been a noticeable [impact on voter preferences](#) in the 2022 election. By contrast, [COVID-19](#) remains at the forefront of voters' minds. The local elections tend to be more about personalities and less about national policy, and this was the case in this year's elections, as well.

Moreover, the TPP remains a viable third party. It controls five seats in the Legislative Yuan and was able to retain at least one seat in the local offices. It would have liked to win some of the other local races in order to build its local infrastructure, but local elections are challenging for third parties with limited resources. There is no doubt that TPP Chairman Ko Wen-je has [ambitions for higher office](#) and is gaming out his options for the 2024 election. Given his popularity, he could be a wild card in the 2024 presidential race. While speculative, the KMT's tight victory in the local elections may convince him that he has a better chance and more bargaining power than previously expected. The TPP could team up with either the KMT or DPP in the 2024 presidential and legislative elections, potentially making it a kingmaker in those contests.

The local elections themselves have little direct impact on cross-strait relations. Indirectly, however, the results could produce cascading effects that would have implications for the 2024 presidential and legislative elections. In turn, this could significantly impact the situation across the Taiwan Strait. Even though it was not a "blue wave" as some described, the KMT is certainly the party heading into the 2024 elections with the stronger momentum.

**The main point:** While the 2022 local election cycle represented a substantial victory for the KMT, it is unclear the degree to

which the win will influence the 2024 presidential and legislative elections. Nevertheless, the KMT has regained crucial political momentum.

[1] They are called "9-in-1" because voters in Taiwan's 22 cities and counties will cast ballots for candidates vying for nine different local government posts, including city mayors, county magistrates, and members of city and county councils. For one exemplary discussion, see: <https://focustaiwan.tw/video/004340282>.

[2] Chiayi City will have its [election in December](#), in which the KMT incumbent is favored to win.

[3] The KMT later lost a seat due to a [successful recall of Kaohsiung Mayor Han Kuo-yu](#) in 2020.

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## Taiwan's Naval Shipbuilding Programs Point towards an Evolving Direction in Defense Policy

By: John Dotson

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Throughout 2022, People's Liberation Army (PLA) [military aircraft flights](#) into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) and across the Taiwan Strait centerline—as well as the [August missile launches](#) conducted in the waters around Taiwan (and in at least four instances, over northern Taiwan itself)—have provided the most visible examples of People's Republic of China (PRC) military intimidation directed against the island and its people. However, [PRC military "gray zone" operations](#) intended to pressure Republic of China (ROC, Taiwan) territorial sovereignty have also been occurring in other domains, including interactions between PRC and Taiwan navy and coast guard vessels in the waters around Taiwan and its outlying islands.

One such incident drew [press attention in mid-November](#), when an audio recording (apparently made by a nearby merchant vessel) was posted online of an interaction between the PLA Navy Type-052D (*Luyang III*) destroyer *Xiamen* (廈門) and the ROC Navy *Keelung* class destroyer *Ma Kong* (馬公) at an unidentified location in the waters to the east of Taiwan. In the recording, a voice from the bridge of the *Ma Kong* warns the PLA vessel that it is approaching the line of Taiwan's contiguous zone (24 nautical miles from shore). In response, a voice from the *Xiamen*

responds: “Xiamen to Ma Kong, the so-called ‘24 nautical-mile baseline’ does not exist. Please check your terminology. Our ship has the right to sail here. Please maintain a safe distance of at least 3 nautical miles.” (For their part, Taiwan defense officials have [declined to comment](#) on the validity of the recording.) This exchange of communications was apparently not threatening—and per the recording, the ships communicated on distance and headings in a professional manner—but it does provide a further example of the refusal by the PRC to recognize any legitimate claims to sovereignty by Taiwan over its own territory.

Viewed in isolation, such incidents—in addition to the PLA Navy’s [August “joint blockade” exercise](#) around Taiwan, as well as incidents such as the [reported stand-offs](#) between Taiwan-based civilian research vessels and Chinese (as well as Japanese) coast guard vessels—appear to be minor in nature. However, taken in broader context, they further illustrate the PRC’s steady and forceful encroachment upon Taiwan’s sovereignty in the maritime domain. Such incidents help to explain the ROC Ministry of National Defense’s (MND, 中華民國國防部) continued interest in acquiring new naval platforms—even in the face of [admonitions by US observers](#) to adopt a more dispersed and asymmetric defense posture. Although Taiwan has turned away from foreign ship purchases in recent years, it is investing significant resources in indigenous ship production, in ways that could signal future trends for Taiwan’s defense posture overall.

### ***Increases in Taiwan’s Defense Budget – and the Composition of Taiwan’s Legacy Navy***

Throughout 2022, President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) and other senior Taiwan officials have [vowed to increase Taiwan’s defensive capabilities](#) amidst the continued military intimidation directed against the island by the PRC. In August, the Executive Yuan (行政院) [proposed a defense budget for 2023](#) that would see a 13.9 percent boost from the previous year: with NTD \$415.1 (approximately USD \$13.3 billion) in base spending, and additional supplementals for fighter jets and other unspecified spending that would take the budget to an estimated NTD \$586.3 billion (approximately USD \$18.8 billion). This boost to the defense budget comes on the heels of the defense special budget supplemental [approved in November 2021](#), which allocated NTD \$240 billion (approximately USD \$7.7 billion)—separate from the annual budget process—for indigenous anti-ship missile production and other programs over a five-year period from 2022 to 2026. Currently, it is unclear what percentage of the 2023 budget is intended for indigenous shipbuilding, although defense planners have publicly indicated clear intent to devote further resources towards ship construction (*see further*

*discussion below*).

These increases to the overall defense budget take place at a time when many commentators, both [in the United States](#) and [within Taiwan itself](#), have criticized the MND for its traditional focus on acquiring force-on-force conventional platforms. This force structure includes the ROC Navy’s (ROCN) legacy fleet of small- and medium-sized naval surface combatants, which many observers fear could be destroyed or crippled by missile and air attacks early in any actual conflict. Many active ROCN vessels are refurbished ships purchased after their retirement from service in the US Navy (USN): *Keelung*-class destroyers (former USN *Kidd*-class destroyers), *Chi Yang*-class frigates (former *Knox*-class frigates), and *Cheng Kung*-class frigates (former *Oliver Hazard Perry*-class frigates). While such vessels still make up the backbone of the ROCN fleet, the MND is turning increasingly towards indigenous production of smaller, and arguably more unconventional, surface ships.



*Image: ROC Navy sailors stand in formation at the launch ceremony for the missile corvette Ta Chiang (PGG-619) in Yilan County, September 2021. (Image source: [Taipei Times](#))*

### ***The Tuo Chiang-Class Missile Corvette Program***

The [special budget supplemental](#) approved late last year provided NTD \$69.6 billion (approximately USD \$2.24 billion) for indigenous shipbuilding programs, focused primarily on the construction of additional [Tuo Chiang \(沱江\) guided missile patrol craft](#) (PGGs). The *Tuo Chiang*-class vessels are small missile corvettes, approximately 200 feet long and reportedly displacing 685 tons, assigned to service in the ROCN. The ships are designed with stealth features including waterjet propulsion, as well as a catamaran hull design with a reduced radar cross-section (RCS) profile. The *Tuo Chiang* corvettes are intended to serve as more mobile and survivable surface combatants, capable of targeting larger vessels with their *Hsiung Feng* (HF, 雄風) [HF-II](#) and [HF-III](#) anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs).

The prototype ship of the class, *Tuo Chiang* (PGG-618), was commissioned in 2014. Taiwan's Lung Teh Shipbuilding (龍德造船) reportedly [received a contract](#) in 2018 to build a total of 11 more of the vessels (for a total of 12) by the end of 2026, at a reported [cost of NTD \\$2.2 billion](#) (approximately USD \$71 million) each. To date, three of these ships have been commissioned into service: the *Tuo Chiang*, the *Ta Chiang* (塔江) in 2020, and most recently, the *Fu Chiang* (富江) in September of this year. Immediately following the [commissioning of \*Fu Chiang\*](#), Taiwan's MND reiterated plans to take [delivery of nine more of the ships by 2026](#), and provided a list of the planned names for these future vessels. [1]

### **A Future Indigenous Frigate Program: Lighter, More Numerous Ships**

In addition to the *Tuo Chiang* corvette program, debates are also underway regarding the potential future production of indigenously built light frigates, intended to give the ROCN a smaller and more modern ship for patrol (and potential surface combat). For example, in August, Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民主進步黨) legislator Wang Ting-yu (王定宇) [called for a more modern frigate](#) to replace aging (and slower) platforms such as the 1970s-vintage, steam turbine-powered *Chi Yang*-class frigates. The ROCN has a [“next-generation” guided missile frigate development program](#) with a budget of NTD \$24.5 billion (approximately USD \$792.7 million), intended to produce a new class of ship by 2026—although differences over desired capabilities and design have reportedly delayed production.

Originally, this program was geared towards producing a single, approximately 4,500-ton displacement vessel (roughly the same size, or perhaps a bit larger, than one of the current *Cheng Kung* or *Chi Yang* frigates). However, in mid-October MND officials announced an abrupt change to this plan in testimony presented before the Legislative Yuan (立法院). ROCN Chief of Staff Admiral Chiang Cheng-kuo (蔣正國) and other senior officials indicated [intent to scrap the previous plan](#), in favor of focusing on new models of lighter frigates—citing as justification both design delays, as well as the need for more ships to respond to the PRC's escalating “gray zone” encroachments upon Taiwan's maritime space. In place of the original plan, these officials announced plans to build two smaller (approximately 2,000-ton displacement) prototype frigates: one geared towards an anti-air warfare (AAW) role, and the other oriented towards an anti-submarine (ASW) mission, with both models to also be armed with *Hsiung Feng III* missiles for an anti-surface role.



*Image: Taiwan Defense Minister Chiu Kuo-cheng (邱國正, left) and National Security Bureau Director-General Chen Ming-tong (陳明通, right) testifying about the decision to change the focus of the ROC Navy's indigenous frigate program (October 12, 2022). (Image source: [Central News Agency](#))*

### **Conclusion**

As with all branches of Taiwan's armed forces, the ROC Navy is having to re-examine its traditional force structure in the face of the breakneck military build-up pursued by the PRC—as well as the increasingly aggressive steps by Beijing to use the PLA as a coercive political tool, by pressing in ever-more forcefully on the air and sea spaces around Taiwan and its outlying islands. Taiwan's MND is caught between competing priorities: on one hand, the need to move towards a more asymmetric defense posture, in the face of both foreign criticism and internal calls for reform; and on the other, the need to maintain conventional capabilities with which to contest PRC “gray zone” encroachments.

Although the MND and the ROC Navy have [stepped back](#) from the more thorough-going advocacy of asymmetry that was set forth under former ROC Chief of Staff Lee Hsi-min (李喜明) (as seen, for example, in the August 2021 [cancellation of a research and development program](#) to produce up to 60 small missile boats), there does appear to be a clear realization of the need to reorient the navy's surface ship acquisitions over the next several years. Recent statements by senior officials, and the current budgetary allocation of resources, reveal two overarching trends: first, an emphasis on indigenous production rather than foreign ship purchases; and second, a move towards lighter, more mobile, and more numerous vessels, rather than the acquisition of larger platforms.

This points towards an evolving direction for Taiwan's defense strategy: one that is neither fully asymmetric on the model of Admiral Lee's [“Overall Defense Concept”](#) (整體防禦概念), nor fully focused on the acquisition of conventional prestige plat-

forms. Recent observable trends in naval surface shipbuilding indicate a focus on lighter, more mobile, and more numerous vessels capable of presence operations in peacetime, as well as the potential targeting of larger enemy vessels in wartime. This move to split the difference between competing priorities is unlikely to satisfy critics of Taiwan's defense posture, who offer compelling arguments as to why radical reforms within Taiwan's armed forces are needed now. However, it does demonstrate an effort to address (at least in part) the rapidly evolving threats to Taiwan, while balancing domestic political considerations and the need to assert sovereignty over Taiwan's own maritime spaces. It is arguably a move in the direction of partial, although by no means complete, naval asymmetry. How this trend plays itself out over the next few years, and whether the other services follow suit, will be worth watching.

**The main point:** Taiwan's naval acquisition programs are showing a clear orientation towards indigenous production, as well as an increasing focus on building more numerous and lighter surface combatants. This represents an effort to balance competing priorities: the need both to adapt to the growing gap in military capabilities with the PRC, while also maintaining capabilities to assert presence in the face of PRC "gray zone" territorial encroachments.

[1] In addition to the existing *Tuo Chiang* (沱江) (PGG-618), *Ta Chiang* (塔江) (PGG-619), and *Fu Chiang* (富江) (PGG-620), the announced names for the future ships of this class are: *An Chiang* (安江), *Wan Chiang* (萬江), *Hsu Chiang* (旭江), *Liu Chiang* (柳江), *Wu Chiang* (武江), *Wu Chiang* (浯江), *Dan Chiang* (丹江), *Lan Chiang* (蘭江), and *Bao Chiang* (寶江). See: "Navy *Tuo Chiang*-Class Ships Second Vessel Is Launched, Named *Fu Chiang*" [海軍沱江級艦第二艘量產艦下水 命名富江軍艦], *Central News Agency*, September 21, 2022, <https://www.cna.com.tw/news/aipl/202209210361.aspx>.

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## A Revamped Taiwanese Approach to Foreign Assistance

By: Bonnie Glick

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As Taiwan undertakes a review of its foreign assistance, there are some ways it can take advantage of its key differentiators as

a donor while also aligning its foreign assistance with other allied and like-minded donor nations. Amplifying its global profile as a donor will help Taipei share the important story of its own journey to self-reliance with the rest of the world.

The United States is the [largest bilateral donor in the world](#), investing over USD \$40 billion per year globally. Some, myself included, would argue that the United States should see a return on that investment in the form of improved and enhanced relations with the countries it assists. After all, every dollar of US assistance comes from American taxpayers. Conditioning US assistance on political support for the United States and its priorities—for example, at the United Nations—is generally not an idea at play in US foreign policy-making circles. America and Americans are generous, and traditionally give without expecting so much as a "thank you."

That is all well and good, but perhaps our choice to refrain from tying assistance to geopolitical support is a mistake that should not be repeated by Taiwan.

### **Conditioning Foreign Assistance: Plant a Flag**

Taiwan does not have the benefit of formal diplomatic relations with many countries. Yet, its informal relations—through economic and financial markets, educational exchanges, and people-to-people familiarity, as well as its foreign assistance—are all very important foreign policy tools. The lion's share of [Taiwan's foreign assistance](#) is in the form of technical assistance or capacity building. In plain language, that comes down to training: specialized technical training, vocational training, agriculture training, etc. Particular areas in which Taiwan excels in technical assistance include health, agriculture, and of course, technology and engineering.

Taiwan deploys experts and immense assistance to developing countries to help them build their own futures. The United States does this as well. While these programs are very important, I would posit that Taipei should look at some additional ways of crafting its development assistance programs that include more direct amplification of Taiwan's sponsorship and involvement. Taipei might think of it as planting a Taiwanese flag everywhere that Taiwan has an impact.

For many developing countries, Taiwan represents a tremendous success story, due to the hard work and the investment of its population in its early decades after 1949. This is also due to excellent stewardship in its management of the [small amount of foreign assistance](#) it received from the United States and other donors in the 1950s, which helped fuel its growth.

Today, it is one of the [wealthiest](#), [freest](#), and [largest](#) economies (in terms of GDP) in the world. The “Taiwan Success Story” is one that should be amplified and heralded to its allies, as well as to potential diplomatic partners. It exemplifies the “journey to self-reliance” for which donors have long advocated.



Image: The groundbreaking ceremony for the Taiwan-sponsored Center for Agricultural Technology Transfer in Nausori, Fiji on February 15, 2021. (Image source: [Facebook](#))

### **Winning Friends and Diplomatic Influence**

In the past, Taiwan has been loath to tout its success. Why? Perhaps Taiwan is concerned about looking vulnerable to countries with which it does not have formal diplomatic relations. But I would argue that raising the Taiwanese flag alerts countries that Taiwan is there as a partner, friend, and supporter. Additionally, monetary contributions from Taiwanese taxpayers have value, and that value should be acknowledged.

The list of countries with which Taiwan has informal relations is far longer than the list of countries with which it has formal relations, but soft diplomacy is the way to transform those relationships. Taiwan’s people-to-people engagement around the world is an important tool for winning friends and courting others. Students, especially those from emerging markets, are eager to study abroad, learning from professors and practitioners in successful countries. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) offers countless scholarships to woo students to its universities; Taiwan should do the same thing, in larger numbers. Nearly 150,000 international students study in Taiwan’s excellent universities. These students are ready-made goodwill ambassadors for Taiwan back in their home countries, because they have gotten to know more about their fields of study—and also about the Taiwanese people and culture. Scholarship opportunities will increase those numbers and build more people-to-people relationships over time. As those students become leaders, this will build stronger and stronger bilateral bridges for Taiwan out to the world.

### **Rev Up the New Southbound Policy**

Taipei has recently focused on expanding its relations with countries across the Indo-Pacific region: this includes the Pacific Islands, but it also includes countries in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), India, and Australia. Taiwan refers to this as its “[New Southbound Policy](#)” (新南向政策). Enhanced investment in trade and capacity building across these countries will build even stronger ties in bilateral relations, as the countries will have “skin in the game.”

The particular genius of the New Southbound Policy is that in building these stronger ties, Taiwan increases the likelihood of its being accepted as an observer into more international organizations. China’s withering efforts to cow countries into ostracizing Taiwan is harder to do when personal relations, trade relations, and educational relations have been built. When people-to-people relations are formed, they are harder to break.

### **Taking Credit and Standing Out**

Given Taiwan’s occasional reluctance to stand out in the crowd for fear of drawing attention and ire from Beijing, partnering with the United States and other like-minded and allied countries to showcase Taiwan’s development assistance can be amplified through joint programs and co-financing—and most important of all, co-branding. These are all ways in which Taiwan can gain prominence with a bit of a defensive shield from its development partners. The Taiwanese flag can and should be recognized and recognizable worldwide, and by partnering with the United States, the European Union, OECD countries, and other allies, the message of Taiwanese foreign assistance can go even farther. Joint press conferences should be *pro forma*, with all participants speaking (including the beneficiary countries). This will solidify in the minds of the leaders of developing countries that Taiwan is a genuine partner in their nations’ development journeys.

There was a recent controversy when international [media reported](#) that President of Paraguay Mario Abdo Benítez announced that Paraguay expected Taiwan to provide USD \$1 billion in foreign assistance, or else the country would consider transferring its diplomatic recognition to Beijing. While the government in Asunción was ultimately shamed over its alleged demand, it serves to demonstrate the potentially precarious nature of Taiwan’s global engagement in the face of competition from China. The alleged request from Paraguay of USD \$1 billion would amount to double Taiwan’s overall development assistance budget of approximately USD \$500 million.

My initial response to the media reports was that Taiwan's ambassador in Paraguay should reach out to the American ambassador and should undertake an immediate, joint program with broad outreach, flying all three countries' red, white, and blue flags. The nature of the joint program would certainly make local and regional media, and the partnership with the United States would amplify it still further.

A joint program *a là* Paraguay could equally be undertaken in the Pacific Islands with joint collaboration and co-financing, as well as co-branding, with Australia and possibly New Zealand. Outreach to like-minded OECD countries can elevate Taiwan's foreign assistance from purely bilateral and "under the radar," to a position of global collaboration and partnership.

Additionally, global collaboration is a key way to differentiate Taiwan's programs from the so-called assistance offered by the PRC. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, formerly known as "One Belt, One Road," [一帶一路]) has long been described in the United States as "[debt trap diplomacy](#)." Taiwan's assistance, on the other hand, is designed to help countries develop and participate in the global economy.

Nothing attracts a crowd like a crowd. Forming crowds around development highlights Taiwan's generous assistance, and could also lead Taiwan to consider increasing its current budgetary outlay of foreign aid. The "bang for the buck" for Taiwan has to be demonstrated, but once it is, Taipei may see the benefit of increasing its global contributions. The virtuous upward cycle—and Taiwan's enhanced public image—could also lead to more forceful calls for Taiwan to receive observer status in international organizations such as the World Health Assembly and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

Taiwan's strategic use of foreign assistance as a tool of soft diplomacy, along with more people-to-people engagements, can enhance Taiwan's position as a global donor. Taiwan's media channels can also be enlisted to broadcast widely the cooperation through outlets such as Radio Taiwan International (RTI, 中央廣播電台). As [argued](#) in a recent piece by Dan Runde, my colleague from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Taiwan should increase its foreign aid dramatically as Taipei reviews its current soft diplomacy footprint. He is right. This is an opportunity to engage on the world stage, alongside allies and partners, that will serve the longer-term benefit of improving Taiwan's self-defense posture. Soft diplomacy, foreign assistance, and enhanced people-to-people relations are all less expensive than defense spending—and they could result in rewards that are important and separate from military capabili-

ties, while simultaneously proving themselves complementary.

**The main point:** While Taiwan's foreign assistance programs have been very effective, Taipei should do more to publicize its efforts. In doing so, it could strengthen its soft diplomatic influence, and expand its informal relationships with nations around the world.

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## The New Italian Government Signals a Closer Relationship with Taiwan

By: Michael Malinconi

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As the relationship between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC) continues to [worsen](#), Taiwan has emerged into the Italian political debate. For the first time ever, Italy's relations with Taiwan—and, inevitably, with the PRC—have become important subjects in the electoral campaign. On September 25, the Brothers of Italy (Fdi)—the conservative and nationalist party led by Giorgia Meloni—[won the Italian parliamentary elections](#), making Meloni the first female prime minister in Italy's history. Fdi won more than 25 percent of the vote, while the wider right-wing coalition—which comprises Fdi, Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia, and Matteo Salvini's Lega—received 44 percent of the vote. During the electoral campaign, Meloni expressed surprisingly firm support for Taiwan in the face of the PRC's coercive actions. This position is not coincidental, and has to be considered as a part of a broader strategy of reassurance that Meloni is conducting regarding her government's foreign policy. The new Italian government is adopting a firmer stance *vis-à-vis* the PRC, and shedding renewed light on the importance of European ties with Taipei.

### *Italy and Taiwan: Moving Towards a Closer Relationship?*

Last July, Giorgia Meloni met with Andrea Sing-ying Lee (李新穎), head of the Taiwan representative office in Rome, and addressed him as "[the ambassador of Taiwan](#)." During the meeting, Meloni promised both to promote Italy-Taiwan relations and to play a positive role in advancing wider EU-Taiwan ties in the event of her appointment as prime minister. Then, in a September interview with Taiwan's *Central News Agency* (CNA)—the first one by an Italian candidate in decades—Meloni [expressed support](#) for Taiwan. She defined the island as "a strategic commercial partner for Italy and Europe," and firmly

condemned “together with all the democracies in the world” the PRC military activities in the Taiwan Strait in August.

These statements seemed designed to emphasize her pro-US position in the global competition with the PRC. In the strongest pro-Taiwan remark ever made by an Italian political leader, Meloni also cited Beijing’s repression of activists in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, as well as the ambiguous position adopted by the PRC regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Her [firm stance against Beijing](#) was further clarified when she stated that the [Memorandum of Understanding on the Belt and Road Initiative](#), signed in 2019 by the Conte I government, has been a “big mistake” and suggested that she would not confirm Italy’s participation in 2024. Meloni also criticized the European Union for not doing enough: she stated that “the EU should deploy all its political and diplomatic weapons” and “exert as much pressure as possible” on the PRC to avoid a military confrontation in the Taiwan Strait. Specifically, she proposed severe sanctions against the PRC, going so far as to suggest the closure of the European market to Beijing in the event of an invasion of the island.

The PRC Embassy in Rome [expressed deep discontent](#) with Meloni’s statements on Taiwan, labelling them as “external interference.” PRC Foreign Ministry Spokesman Wang Wenbin (王文斌) [exhorted Italy](#) to recognize the “highly sensitive nature of the Taiwan question,” to follow a “practical” One-China principle, and to not encourage the “Taiwan independence separatist forces.”

Despite Meloni’s comments, Italy still has a strong interest in maintaining a dialogue with Beijing, in particular as it relates to [Italian exports to the PRC](#). During the G20 Bali summit in November, Meloni had a last-minute [bilateral summit](#) with Chinese General Secretary Xi Jinping (习近平), during which they discussed mainly “mutual economic interests.” Notably, the Italian prime minister also accepted Xi’s invitation to visit mainland China. However, Meloni’s overall posture towards the PRC is unlikely to change after this meeting. Considering the Biden Administration’s new approach of [enhancing communication with the PRC](#) and the long [Biden-Meloni summit](#) the day before, it is plausible that the United States pushed Rome to temporarily tone down its rhetoric against Beijing.

Prior to the Brothers of Italy-led coalition, recent Italian governments had adopted a friendlier position towards the PRC. The Italian governments led by the anti-establishment Five Star Movement—the first cabinet of prime minister Giuseppe Conte from 2018 and 2019, and the second from 2019 and 2021—viewed the PRC as an opportunity to [export products made in](#)



*Image: Giorgia Meloni, leader of the Brothers of Italy party and now Italy’s first female prime minister, meeting in July 2022 with Andrea Sing-ying Lee, head of the Taiwan representative office in Rome. (Image source: [Twitter](#))*

[Italy](#), taking advantage of its huge market potential. Furthermore, the party’s founder, Beppe Grillo, had [multiple meetings with the PRC ambassador](#) to Italy and has often [spread PRC propaganda through his blog](#). Similarly, former Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio echoed Beijing’s non-interference mantra on Hong Kong in 2019. On the other side of the political spectrum, the left-wing Partito Democratico (PD) has [promoted profitable commercial exchanges](#) with China, and [has called](#) for “a selective and genuine dialogue with the PRC, within the European framework.”

On the Italian political scene, Meloni’s statements on Taiwan are relatively unique. She is taking advantage of a void in the Italian political debate: historically, Italian political parties have maintained a high degree of ambivalence toward Taiwan and cross-Strait relations, preferring to focus on the importance of trade ties with Beijing rather than on civil and human rights. The fact that Meloni, with her ultra-conservative views on abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, and social issues, has expressed firm support for Taiwan is undoubtedly embarrassing for the PD. The PD has long been the leading Italian proponent for civil rights and should reasonably be expected to be a strong supporter of Taiwan’s vibrant, progressive democracy—which has made civil rights a key element of the island’s identity, and a means of distinguishing itself from the PRC.

### ***The Stance of Meloni’s Government***

Giorgia Meloni is currently conducting a substantial operation

of reassurance towards the European Union and the United States. Although her past is decidedly Euro-sceptic, Meloni has recently adopted a more friendly position towards Brussels, [calling for a European solution](#) to current geopolitical issues, such as the current energy crisis. This shift seems designed to reassure European institutions, financial markets, and—perhaps most importantly—the United States. Italy considers the preservation of transatlantic relations to be essential, and Washington is seen as a crucial ally whose protection is even more important in these turbulent geopolitical times. Indeed, since the invasion of Ukraine, Meloni has been a strong voice of [support for Kiev and NATO](#), consistently arguing for imposing stricter [sanctions on Moscow and increasing military aid to Ukraine](#). Although in the past she advocated for the removal of Western sanctions on Russia in order to “[protect Italian interests](#),” she has been firm and absolute in her condemnation of the invasion since its outset.

Accordingly, her statements on Taiwan and her tough position regarding the PRC seem intended to publicly emphasize the transatlantic spirit of her government. They signal the acknowledgment of the need for a new direction in Italy’s foreign policy: a new path where Atlanticism is not compatible anymore with the Italian inconsistencies in Asia-Pacific policy, where its desire to play an active role in the transatlantic alliance is not hampered by an ambivalent approach to the PRC. In order to rebalance the relationship with the PRC, close consultations with European and Atlantic partners are likely.

The appointment of former President of the European Parliament Antonio Tajani as foreign minister signalled the new government’s intention to build positive and constructive relationship with both the European Union and the United States. Nevertheless, while Tajani is a dedicated Atlanticist, he is not one prone to drastic course changes, as a courageous Taiwan policy may require. By contrast, Adolfo Urso, the new minister for enterprises and Made in Italy economic development, [Guido Crosetto](#), the new minister of defence, and Giancarlo Giorgetti, the new finance minister, are all perceived as more inclined to take firmer and more daring positions. Moreover, the government is filled with personalities that have taken strong, critical positions toward the PRC: for example, in 2019, Anna Maria Bernini, the new minister of university and research, [described](#) the Memorandum of Understanding on the BRI as “a real hazard which flaunts smoky economic deals, entailing benefits only for the PRC.” These criticisms naturally lead to questions regarding the future of other Chinese-related initiatives in Italy, such as the Confucius Institutes. Accused of subversive operations, they

[have already been closed](#) in many other European countries.

Meloni’s posture also seems designed to further distance herself and Fdi from their coalition allies, who are perceived in Washington and Brussels as too close to Moscow and unreliable on the international scene. Silvio Berlusconi and Matteo Salvini’s past unreliability at the European and Atlantic level taught Fdi to not follow their steps if it wants to survive politically. Berlusconi [has recently stated](#) that he had spoken to Putin, that he has been nominated by the Russian leader as “the first one of his true five friends,” and that Ukraine bears responsibilities for the war. Meloni was fast to [distance herself](#) and her party from such comments. She firstly [restated](#) that her government will be staunchly pro-NATO and that she would remove any member that did not respect this position. She then [reassured the US embassy in Rome](#) and its chargé d’affaires, Shawn Crowley. Even Matteo Salvini is seen within EU institutions and in the US as [too close to Putin](#): in the past, Salvini has praised the Russian regime and has called multiple times for the removal of the sanctions on Moscow enacted in 2014.

Rome could indeed become a crucial scene for US-PRC relations. The United States has yet to nominate a new Ambassador to Italy. Beijing also has yet to nominate a new Ambassador to Italy. It is likely that the PRC is waiting for the nominee from Washington in order to “respond” adequately.

### ***European Expanding Cooperation with Taiwan***

Meloni’s statements on Taiwan and the formation of the new government came shortly after the restatement by the [EU High Representative Josep Borrell](#) of the EU’s “One China Policy.” Nevertheless, Borrell also stated that this policy “does not prevent us—the European Union—from persisting and intensifying our cooperation with Taiwan.” There is a growing awareness in Europe of the importance of Taiwan, “[not just for the security and prosperity of the region, but also for ours](#).” Indeed, the European Union has expanded its relationship with Taiwan beyond economic ties, and is increasingly focusing on common democratic values, the rule of law, and human rights. In the last several years, there have been increased reciprocal visits by [European](#) and [national](#) policymakers to Taiwan, including by European Parliament [Vice-President](#) Nicola Beer.

Such visits play an important role in setting the agenda, in raising awareness, and in encouraging increased economic, scientific, cultural, political, and people-to-people exchanges. Furthermore, Lithuania recently allowed Taiwan to [open a representative office](#) in Vilnius with the title of “Taiwan” and inaugurated its trade office in Taipei, potentially opening the way

to similar actions by other European states. Italy could soon further expand bilateral ties. A delegation of Lega's parliamentarians [visited Taiwan in 2019](#), and in October lawmakers across party lines launched the [Taiwan-Italy Inter-Parliamentary Amity Association](#). With its domestic strength and a stable international environment, Meloni's government could allow mutual high-level visits and promote closer relations, particularly in the technological field.

**The main point:** Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy won the Italian parliamentary elections and is now leading a conservative and nationalist government. During the electoral campaign, Meloni has firmly and explicitly expressed support for Taiwan while criticising the PRC. The new Italian government wants to clearly signal to Washington and Brussels that it will follow an Atlanticist line. This will entail a firmer stance towards the PRC—and likely, stronger, although veiled, relations with Taiwan.