

POLICY BRIEF

The Strategic Communications of Techno-Democratic Statecraft: The Case of Taiwan¹

Abstract

The Tsai administration has deftly used Taiwan's success in containing the COVID-19 pandemic to counter international isolation and increasing all-round pressure from Beijing through the strategic communications of a local 'democratic model' to fight the virus. This approach, in fact, is the result of a broader shift toward promoting the island's 'techno-democratic statecraft' to domestic and foreign audiences, aiming at positioning Taiwan as both a new global leader in the fields of cyber defence and digital infrastructure *and* as an outpost of a futuristic strand of 'digital democracy.' The emergence of this strategy, which is a result of both domestic and cross-Strait drivers, on the one hand, and of the current competitive path of Sino-American relations, on the other, shows how great power competition and technological development are affecting the strategic communications of state actors in the Asia-Pacific.

Introduction

The widely uneven paths in the containment of the COVID-19 pandemic around the world in the period preceding the rollout of vaccination programmes triggered a global search for 'solutions' and 'models' that other states could follow and adapt. This predicament, in turn, has created a highly receptive environment for those states able to 'package' their best practices in the struggle against the virus into 'content' designed to favourably structure

¹ The author wishes to thank Peter Busch, Giulio Pugliese and Michael J. West. Any errors are the authors' sole responsibility.

Authors

Aurelio Insisa, Hong Kong University



EU-Asia project

Issue 2021/25
June 2021

the perceptions and attitudes of foreign audiences, a type of political currency which can be spent to facilitate the achievement of strategic objectives. In short, the pandemic has triggered among multiple state actors a surge in the dissemination of a distinct strand of strategic communications, namely the “use of words, actions, images or symbols to influence the attitudes and opinions of target audiences to shape their behaviour in order to advance interests or policies, or to achieve objectives.”²

In this global search for virtuous examples to follow in the fight against the virus, Taiwan has stood out. The island succeeded in managing the viral outbreak without resorting to lockdowns, totalling only 1116 cases and 12 deaths among a population of 23.57 million, as of April 2021.³ The Tsai administration, in turn, has consciously put this success at the centre of its strategic communications effort, promoting a Taiwanese “democratic model of excellence” to fight the pandemic via diplomatic pro-activism, sustained engagement with Western mainstream media through public officials and “mask diplomacy” campaigns.⁴ The explicit objective of this strategic communications push has been to put international pressure on China, as Beijing continues to prevent Taiwan from participating in the World Health Assembly (WHA). This, in fact, was an unrealistic objective, given the Xi administration’s pursuit of a hard line against Taiwan since Tsai won the election in 2016 and refused to commit to Beijing’s own formulation of the ‘One China principle,’ known as the ‘1992 Consensus.’ Instead, Taiwanese strategic communications has aimed at sourcing broader international support from both foreign governments and public audiences at a critical juncture in cross-strait relations, as the island withstands the impact of all-round pressure from Beijing, and especially rising military pressure by sea and air.

Starting from these premises, this paper argues that the dissemination of a Taiwanese ‘democratic model’ to fight the virus is only the most immediate facet of a more comprehensive effort to favourably shape foreign, and in particular Western, perceptions of the island. The pandemic has provided Taipei with

a unique opportunity to showcase to a global audience what can be defined as a “techno-democratic” approach to statecraft, one purposely shaped to stand out from what critics of Beijing have defined as a paradigm of “digital authoritarianism.”⁵ Techno-democratic statecraft is “a comprehensive approach to technology policy” that is proactive, all inclusive, whole-of-society, flexible, values-driven, multilateral and pragmatic. It is designed to navigate “21st-century technology competition” through a focus on strengthening cybersecurity and securing supply chains, establishing collaborative R&D on beyond-5G technologies and funding “fair and secure” digital infrastructure.⁶ The concept can be understood as part of the efforts by the epistemic communities (professional networks) in the Anglosphere to shape the gradual transformation of the Australia-India-Japan-US ‘Quadrilateral’ from a security dialogue into a platform for strategic cooperation in infrastructure-building and the establishment of new technological standards and regulations – a process still in its early stages but evident from the March 2021 summit, if not earlier bilateral and plurilateral interactions.⁷ Beyond the Quad context, this dimension of statecraft can be understood as an approach that combines a forward-looking and national-security-oriented technology policy focused on rising challenges in the cyber domain, with the championing of liberal democratic values, both in international politics as a new era of great power competition looms, and at home, as the meaning of democratic political participation is questioned by the impact of new technologies on the information environment.

The rest of this paper proceeds as follows. The first section provides a brief account of the political and civic experiences behind the emergence of the Tsai administration’s techno-democratic agenda. The second provides a profile of the three main channels through which Taipei articulates this agenda. The third and fourth sections, instead, cover the crafting and the dissemination of strategic communications centred on technology policy and democratic values, respectively before and after the COVID-19

-
- 2 James P. Farwell, *Power and Persuasion: The Art of Strategic Communications* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2012), xviii.
 - 3 “Taiwan,” Coronavirus Resource Centre, Johns Hopkins University, <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/region/taiwan>. Dashboard consulted on 29 April 2021.
 - 4 ROC Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), “Taiwan Can Help, and Taiwan Is Helping,” <https://www.mofa.gov.tw/en/cp.aspx?n=AF70B0F54FFB164B>; MOFA, “The Taiwan Model for Combating COVID-19,” <https://www.mofa.gov.tw/en/theme.aspx?n=B-13D460AE0B33449&s=9C13959F19F93B2F&sms=BCDE19B435833080>.
 - 5 Lydia Khalil, “Digital Authoritarianism, China and COVID,” Lowy Institute, 2 November 2020, https://www.loyyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/Khalil%2C%20Digital%20Authoritarianism%2C%20China%20and%20Covid_web_print_021120.pdf.
 - 6 Martijn Rasser, “Networked: Techno-Democratic Statecraft for Australia and the Quad,” Quad Tech Network QTN Series, Australian National University, National Security College, February 2021, https://nsc.crawford.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/publication/nsc_crawford_anu_edu_au/2021-02/networked.pdf.
 - 7 Aurelio Insisa and Giulio Pugliese, “The Free and Open Indo-Pacific versus the Belt and Road: Spheres of Influence and Sino-Japanese Relations,” *The Pacific Review*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2020.1862899>.

outbreak, as well as the decisive inputs coming from shifting great power politics in the Asia-Pacific that enabled these processes.⁸ The conclusion assesses the results of and prospects for Taiwanese strategic communications and comments on the implications of Taiwan's experience for the European Union (EU) and its member states.

The Sources of Taiwan's Techno-Democratic Statecraft

Since it came to power in 2016, the Tsai administration has pursued a techno-democratic agenda aiming at enhancing Taiwan's defences against Chinese policies and operations for unification across the diplomatic, information, military, economic, financial, infrastructure and legal domains. The sources of this agenda can be traced back to two distinct phases in Taiwan's recent past: the Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) earlier experience in control of the executive branch during the Chen Shui-bian presidency (2000-2008) and the 2014 Sunflower Movement.

The Chen years saw the development of a new technology policy concerned with national security in the aftermath of the Third Strait Crisis of 1995-1996. Grey literature from this period shows state actors' preoccupation with a set of interrelated challenges such as: the disrupting impact of technological development on Taiwan's position in global supply chains and on the island's recently democratised society; its systemic vulnerabilities in the emerging cyber domain; and the wide-range implications of Beijing's shift from overt military coercion to non-kinetic forms of confrontation, known under the umbrella term 'Three Warfares' (psychological, public opinion and legal).⁹ The ambitious plans designed to meet these challenges, however, failed to translate into tangible results, as the Chen presidency

grappled in the second term with a sluggish economy, rising tensions with Beijing due to ill-designed experiments with independence via referendum, a deteriorating rapport with Washington, and the Kuomintang's (KMT) control of the parliamentary majority.¹⁰ The Chen administration was, however, more successful in its pursuit of an aggressive cultural policy aiming at 'indigenising' ROC institutions and Taiwanese society in order to create a distinct local 'subjectivity' – a process that Chinese authorities and local critics define as 'de-Sinification'.¹¹ The connection between national technology policy and the affirmation of a distinct Taiwanese identity in which democratic values constitute one of the multiple markers differentiating Taiwan from China remained, however, largely implicit and under-developed during the Chen years and would only become central to the emergence of a techno-democratic agenda under Tsai.

The second constitutive phase was the 2014 Sunflower Movement. Originally a student protest triggered by the signing of a trade agreement between Beijing and the Ma Ying-jeou administration, it rapidly morphed into a broader civic movement focusing on broader issues such as democratic accountability and deliberation mechanisms, reflecting a broader preoccupation with what was perceived as the 'black box nature' of cross-Strait dialogue between Beijing and Taipei during KMT rule.¹² More importantly, the movement kickstarted a popular backlash against the process of socio-economic integration with China championed by the Ma administration, paving the way to the Pan-Green victory in the 2016 elections, with which Tsai won the presidency and the DPP won a parliamentary majority for the first time, and in the up-ending of Beijing's strategy to pursue peaceful unification through economic integration with Taiwan.¹³

8 Regional power competition was already evident in the early 2010s: Giulio Pugliese and Aurelio Insisa, *Sino-Japanese Power Politics: Might, Money and Minds*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017; Giulio Pugliese, "Japan 2015: Confronting East Asia's Geopolitical Game of Go," in Michelguglielmo Torri and Nicola Mocci (eds.) *Asia Maior Vol.26* (Rome: Viella 2016), 93-132; Giulio Pugliese, "Japan 2016: Political stability amidst maritime contestation and historical reconciliation," in Michelguglielmo Torri and Nicola Mocci (eds.) *Asia Maior Vol.27* (Rome: Viella 2017), 121-142.

9 ROC Executive Yuan (EY), "Jianli wo guo tongzixun jichu jianshe – Anquan jizhi jihua (90 nian zhi 93 nian)" ["Security Mechanism Plan for the Establishment of Our Country's Information Infrastructure (2001-2004)], <https://nicst ey.gov.tw/File/FC950C6C4CB44751?A=C>; EY, "Jianli wo guo tongzixun jichu jianshe – Anquan jizhi jihua (94 nian zhi 97 nian)" ["Security Mechanism Plan for the Establishment of Our Country's Information Infrastructure (2005-2008)], <https://nicst ey.gov.tw/File/FC950C6C4CB44751?A=C>; EY, "Tiaozhan 2008: Guojia fazhan zhongdian jihua" [Challenge 2008: National Development Plan,] 31 May 2002, http://ebooks.lib.ntu.edu.tw/1_file/CEPD/68/2008R ev-20030106@41092.436773303656@.pdf; ROC National Security Council, "2006 Guojia anquan baogao" [2006 National Security Report,] 20 May 2006, <http://www.mac.gov.tw/public/Data/05271047271.pdf>.

10 Cal Clark, "Taiwan Enters Troubled Waters: The Elective Presidencies of Lee Teng-hui and Chen Shui-bian," in Murray A. Rubinstein (ed.), *Taiwan: A New History* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 496-535.

11 Bi-yu Chang, "From Taiwanization to De-Sinification: Culture Construction in Taiwan since the 1990s," *Chinese Perspectives*, Vol. 56 (2004): 1-19.

12 "Fan heixiang fu-mao xuesheng yaoqiu zongtong huiying" [Students Opposing the Black-Box CSSTA Demand a Response from the President], CNA, 18 March 2014, <https://www.cna.com.tw/news/firstnews/201403185013.aspx>.

13 Aurelio Insisa, "Taiwan 2012-2016: From the Consolidation to the Collapse of Cross-Strait Rapprochement," in Michelguglielmo Torri and Nicola Mocci (eds.), *Asia Maior Vol. XXVII /2016* (Rome: Viella, 2017): 53-87.

The legacy of the Sunflower Movement, however, goes beyond the collapse of the rapprochement between Beijing and Taipei and the DPP's return to power. The civic tech activists at the heart of the protest, rallying under the 'g0v.tw' (gov-zero) umbrella, played a fundamental role in establishing not only a set of practices and platforms for the emergence of a 'digital' democracy on the island but also a civic ethos that has 'survived' the success of the protests and has become embedded in Taiwanese politics and among the younger sectors of society.¹⁴ The civic tech activism that came of age with the Sunflower Movement created a 'grammar' that would eventually allow the Tsai administration to weld together a technology policy focused on national security with cultural and social policies that put Taiwan's democratic character at the centre.

At a deeper level, Taiwanese civic tech activism can be understood as a spontaneous civil society reaction to an information environment that since the late 2000s has become rife with internal and external disinformation.¹⁵ Together with slow economic growth and the fragility of an industrial sector centred on the semiconductor industry (which relies on Chinese demand while at the same time is threatened by Beijing's attempt to reach 'semiconductor independence'¹⁶), the potential impact of entrenched political polarisation driven by disinformation on Taiwan's security has loomed large behind the policies of the Tsai administration.

The Articulation of the Tsai Administration's Techno-Democratic Agenda

Taiwanese techno-democratic statecraft aims at facilitating the emergence of a domestic environment characterised by a safe cybersphere and secure digital infrastructure through industrial policy, legislative actions, and dialogue with civic actors. This 'sanitised' environment, in turn, would not only insu-

late Taiwan's democracy from 'malign' external influences and operations, but would also provide the tools for perfecting democratic institutions on the island, considered as the immediate bulwark against unification with China. Since coming into power in 2016, the Tsai administration has been developing this agenda through three different channels.

The first is a technology policy designed to link the enhancement of public and private cybersecurity to the development of digital infrastructure on the island. It is also worth noting that this technology policy traces a possible path to shift Taiwan's role in the global economy from global leader in the semiconductor industry to that of frontrunner in a new global cyber defence industry.¹⁷ Two institutions were established to guide the elaboration of this process in the early stages of the administration, the Department of Cybersecurity (DCS) within the Executive Yuan in August 2016 and the Information, Communication and Electronic Force Command under the Ministry of National Defense in June 2017 – the latter concerned exclusively with the military domain. The development of digital infrastructure on the island has been instead articulated through a set of industrial policy plans issued between 2016 and 2017: the Digital Nation and Innovative Economic Development Program – branded 'DIGI+', the Forward-Looking Infrastructure Development Plan and the 5+2 Innovative Industries Plan.

The second channel in the articulation of the agenda is the setting up of a legal and regulatory 'sanitary cordon' against 'malign' external actors who could affect the domestic cybersphere and, more broadly, its information environment – a feat made possible by the DPP control of the parliamentary majority in the Legislative Yuan following its victories in the 2016 and 2020 legislative elections. The centrepiece of this operation has been the promulgation of the Cyber Security Management Act (CSMA) in June 2018, which was followed by a set

14 Florian Schneider, "Digital Democracy in Taiwan: The Sunflower Movement and Its Legacies," Taiwan Fellowship Report, 2019, http://taiwan-fellowship.ncl.edu.tw/files/scholar_publish/1764-gvdpvxhggkfpqxht.pdf.

15 Valeriya Mechkova et al., "Measuring Internet Politics: Introducing the Digital Society Project (DSP)," Digital Society Project, May 2019, http://digitalsocietyproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/DSP_WP_01-Introducing-the-Digital-Society-Project.pdf; Nicholas J. Monaco, "Taiwan: Digital Democracy Meets Automated Autocracy," in Samuel C. Woolley and Philip N. Howard (eds.), *Computational Propaganda: Political Parties, Politicians, and Political Manipulation on Social Media* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 104-127; Jude Blanchette et al., "Protecting Democracy in an Age of Disinformation: Lessons from Taiwan," CSIS China Power Project, January 2021, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/210127_Blanchette_Age_Disinformation.pdf; Kathrin Hille, "Taiwan Primaries Highlight Fears over China's Political Influence," *The Financial Times*, 16 July 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/036b609a-a768-11e9-984c-fac8325aaa04>; Yimou Lee and I-hwa Cheng, "Paid 'News': China Using Taiwan Media to Win Hearts and Minds," *Reuters*, 9 August 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-taiwan-china-media-insight-idUSKCN1UZ014>.

16 James A. Lewis, "Learning the Superior Techniques of the Barbarians: China's Pursuit of Semiconductor Independence," CSIS China Innovation Policy Series, January 2019, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/190115_Lewis_Semiconductor_v6.pdf.

17 Robyn Klingler-Vidra, "Cyber Security as National Security, and Economic Opportunity, in Taiwan," *Taiwan Insight*, 14 November 2018, <https://taiwaninsight.org/2018/11/14/cybersecurity-as-national-security-and-economic-opportunity-in-taiwan/>; Industrial Technology Research Institute, "Research of Cyber Security Industry in Taiwan, Commissioned by the Netherlands Enterprise Agency," June 2020, <https://www.rvo.nl/sites/default/files/2020/07/Research-of-Cyber-Security-in-Taiwan.pdf>.

of corollary regulations concerning enforcement, audit, incidents, information-sharing and classification. In short, the CSMA requires government bodies and private actors to set up and implement plans for cybersecurity and to notify state authorities of cybersecurity incidents.¹⁸ Another legal tool, the Telecommunications Management Act (TMA), passed in June 2019, was instead introduced to re-define the responsibilities and tasks of the National Communications Commission (NCC), the independent administrative body which grants the licenses for telecoms in Taiwan, including frequencies for 5G.¹⁹ Prior to the passing of the TMA, the NCC had also banned the Chinese companies Huawei and ZTE on national security grounds earlier the same year.²⁰ Other legislative tools introduced between 2019 and 2020,²¹ while not directly concerning the regulation of digital infrastructure, also contribute to the techno-democratic agenda by closing potential avenues for influence in Taiwan's political and media environments to external actors.

Finally, the third channel is the continuous engagement with the 'civic tech' environments that emerged from the Sunflower Movement. The key figure in this process has been Taiwan's Minister without portfolio Audrey Tang, who had previously been one of the protagonists of the Sunflower Movement as a civic hacker in the g0v.tw collective. As Taiwan's 'Digital Minister,' Tang has coordinated the establishment of 'policy incubators' such as the Public Digital Innovation Space (PDIS) established in 2016, which acts as a Cabinet-level organ, and the Social Innovation Lab (SIL) launched in 2017. These organs constitute a critical junction in the articulation of the techno-democratic agenda, providing the administration's approach to technology policy with an actual 'whole-of-society' character. The PDIS and the SIL set up spaces where government actors, such as Tang herself, can disseminate narratives on digital democracy to the general public, favouring divulgation to older, less educated or less politically engaged constituencies. The PDS and

the SIL also function as clearing houses through which the central administration can receive proposals and feedback from civic society. Taiwan's emerging approach to the fight against 'fake news,' which relies on the collaboration between civic and government actors for both fact-checking and on-the-spot debunking of online disinformation, is the most relevant case in point, having achieved notoriety among Western observers and media even before the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.²²

Taiwan's Strategic Communications of Techno-Democratic Statecraft before the COVID-19 Outbreak

While the Tsai administration began to pursue its techno-democratic agenda after coming to power in 2016, the articulation of a strategic communications that promotes Taiwan as a global leader in cybersecurity and an outpost of digital democracy fully emerged in 2018. State actors had, in fact, overseen the dissemination of information on Taiwan's new course for foreign audiences since the very beginning of the administration. For instance, official translations and sleek webpages were provided for all the major policy plans launched between 2016 and 2017. Similarly, the activities of all cabinet-level organs, including the PDIS directed by Audrey Tang, have also been extensively covered on English-language institutional websites since the very beginning of the administration. However, until 2018 Taiwan lacked both meaningful avenues to disseminate its strategic communications and, above all, an international information environment which was truly receptive to what Taiwan had to offer.

The Trump administration altered this scenario in 2018. Its assertive turn on China, which gained momentum between late 2017 and early 2018, led first to the trade war and then to a freefall of the bilateral relation with the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, Washington paired hostility to Beijing with a comprehensive upgrade of its ties with Taiwan to

18 John Eastwood et al., "An Overview of Cybersecurity Law in Taiwan," Lexology, 19 January 2021, <https://www.lexology.com/library/detail.aspx?g=1a437d61-3198-4941-9210-8085f431867e>.

19 Patrick Marros Chu, Vick Chien and Sam Huang, "The Technology, Media and Telecommunications Review: Taiwan," The Law Reviews, 3 February 2021, <https://thelawreviews.co.uk/title/the-technology-media-and-telecommunications-review/taiwan>.

20 Lauly Li and Cheng-Ting Fang, "Taiwan Preps China Blacklist Banning Huawei and ZTE," Nikkei Asia, 22 January 2019, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Taiwan-preps-China-blacklist-banning-Huawei-and-ZTE>.

21 The laws amended are: the National Security Act, the Classified National Security Information Protection Act, the Act Governing Relations between the People of the Taiwan Area and the Mainland Area, the National Intelligence Service Law, Chapter Two of the ROC Criminal Code, plus the passing of a new Anti-Infiltration Act. English translations of these laws are available at: Law & Regulations Database of the Republic of China, <https://law.moj.gov.tw/Eng/>.

22 Gary Schmitt and Michael Mazza, "Blinding the Enemy: CCP's Interference in Taiwan Democracy," Global Taiwan Institute, October 2019, <https://globaltaiwan.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/GTI-CCP-Interference-Taiwan-Democracy-Oct-2019-final.pdf>; 15-17; Monaco, "Taiwan," 113-114.

levels unseen since the end of diplomatic relations in 1979.²³ This broader shift in regional politics has provided Taipei with new opportunities to promote its agenda to foreign audiences, in line with recommendations in the recently declassified 2018 US Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific, which aims at “developing public and private messaging and promoting activities that show the benefits of democracy and liberty ... including economic, technologic, and societal benefits.”²⁴

The key platform through which Washington has helped the enhancement of Taiwanese strategic communications is the Global Cooperation and Training Framework (GCTF), a forum originally launched in 2015 to provide an alternative platform for Taiwanese public and private actors to engage with their American counterparts in various fields related to public management. By late 2017, the GCTF agenda began to assume a marked political character along the techno-democratic themes of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy, with new workshops focusing on themes such as ‘Defending Democracy through Media Literacy’ (with the presence of Audrey Tang), ‘Network Security and Emerging Technology’ and ‘Good Energy Governance in the Indo-Pacific.’²⁵ More importantly, the involvement of third countries in the GCTF workshops began to expand dramatically: Japan became a full partner in 2019, while Australian, Swedish and Dutch personnel joined different workshops as guest co-hosts.²⁶

In a context of international isolation and all-round pressure from Beijing, the GCTF has emerged as a vector for strategic communications targeted at foreign governments and epistemic communities. The impact of sustained engagement with professional networks through cooperation and training, such as that pursued through the GCTF workshops, in fact, should not be underestimated, as the case of Prague mayor Zdeněk Hřib shows. By refusing to

comply as a city mayor with Beijing’s One China policy, Hřib, who in his youth trained as a medical doctor in Taiwan, was at the forefront of a wider national backlash against China that eventually swept Sino-Czech relations, leading to a switch in sister-city ties from Beijing to Taipei in 2019 and to a high-profile visit by a Czech parliamentary delegation to Taiwan in 2020.²⁷

Outside of formal platforms such as the GCTF, Taiwanese strategic communications on techno-democratic statecraft between 2018 and 2019 relied instead mostly on the divulgatory work of the ‘Digital Minister’ Audrey Tang, who, through articles and interviews on Western mainstream media such as *The New York Times*, the *BBC*, *France 24* and *Deutsche Welle*,²⁸ disseminated Taiwan’s state narratives to the general public in Western countries.

Taiwan’s Strategic Communications of Techno-Democratic Statecraft after the COVID-19 Outbreak

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in January 2020 provided Taiwan with a unique opportunity to effectively project its strategic communications focused on techno-democratic statecraft outside of the narrow perimeter of GCTF workshops, and to enhance its outreach to the foreign public. Taiwan’s success in containing the viral outbreak on the island by March 2020 primarily relied on: advanced intelligence on the earliest developments of the pandemic in Mainland China; a set of public health management best practices developed on the basis of the 2003 SARS epidemic; timely and effective coordination between bureaucratic actors to establish quarantines and ‘trace, test and treat’ protocols; and carefully calibrated government communication with the public.²⁹

These achievements allowed Taiwan to launch a worldwide campaign dubbed ‘Taiwan Can Help.’ At a time of mounting international criticism of Chi-

23 Aurelio Insisa, “Taiwan 2018: Heavy Setbacks for the Tsai Administration,” in Michelguglielmo Torri and Nicola Mocci (eds.), *Asia Maior* Vol. XXIX / 2018 (Rome: Viella, 2019), 131-154.

24 The Trump White House, “U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific,” <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/IPS-Final-Declass.pdf>.

25 American Institute in Taiwan (AIT), “Global Cooperation and Training Framework (GCTF) Programs,” <https://www.ait.org.tw/our-relationship/global-cooperation-and-training-framework-programs-gctf/>.

26 Ibid.

27 Katherine Schultz, “The Historic Czech Delegation to Taiwan,” *Global Taiwan Brief*, Vol. 5, Issue 19 (2020): 12-15.

28 Audrey Tang, “A Strong Democracy is a Digital Democracy,” *The New York Times*, 15 October 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/15/opinion/taiwan-digital-democracy.html>; “Audrey Tang: A Hacker-Turned-Minister in Taiwan,” *France 24 English*, 16 November 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H7thfNlo_iw; Carl Miller, “Crossing Divides: How a Social Network Could Save Democracy from Deadlock,” *BBC*, 26 October 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-50127713>; “Digital Battlegrounds Key: Says Audrey Tang,” *Deutsche Welle*, 22 November 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/digital-battleground-key-says-audrey-tang/av-51367512>.

29 Yasuhiro Matsuda, “Changes in the Dynamics of the Taiwan Strait due to Taiwan’s Success in Controlling the Novel Coronavirus,” *Asia-Pacific Review*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (2020): 57-79.

na for its management of the earliest stages of the pandemic, the Tsai administration's strategic communications emphasised a Taiwanese 'democratic model of excellence' to fight the pandemic through 'transparency and honesty.' The campaign's centrepiece was the donation of millions of items of medical personal protective equipment and supplies to 80 countries across every continent in a phase of global shortage – given China's predominance in the global supply chain of the products – but the campaign also engaged in 'anti-pandemic knowledge-sharing' activities (namely videoconferences) with officials of EU member states, the UK, the US and Canada.³⁰ The immediate aim of 'Taiwan Can Help,' officially launched in April, was to muster international support for Taiwan's participation in the 72nd and 73rd WHA, held in May and November 2020. Even though Beijing, predictably, did not lift its veto, the campaign cannot be deemed a failure, as it vocalised and bolstered international support from friendly partners, with endorsements for Taiwan's participation in the WHA coming from the American, Japanese, Canadian and British administrations, and from a majority of the members of the EU Parliament.³¹

In addition, mainstream Western media critical of the shambolic and at times denialist response to the pandemic by the Trump administration embraced Taiwan's message of scientific competence in a liberal democratic context. Beyond providing international coverage of local strategies to manage the viral outbreak,³² Western media focused on the role of Taiwanese political leaders: President Tsai appeared on the cover of *Time Magazine* and penned an article touting the island's success, while *The New York Times* celebrated the role of exiting Vice-President Chen Chien-jen – an epidemiologist

– in the management of the pandemic.³³ The real star, however, remained Audrey Tang, who especially since summer 2020 has further intensified her divulgatory work on Taiwan's management of the pandemic through multiple articles, interviews and seminars with the media, academic institutions and even private corporations.³⁴ Tang's work during this juncture has focused on fleshing out the role that government-civic tech synergy has played in responding to the many challenges that emerged during the pandemic, from logistic issues such as the optimal allocation of surgical masks during the first wave of contagions to the application of a 'fast, fair, fun' model to contrast pandemic-related disinformation (the so-called 'infodemic') on Taiwanese social media.³⁵

Overall, strategic communications vectored through Western media and the divulgatory activity of Audrey Tang has focused, as may be expected, on the more concrete dimension of Taiwan's success in fighting the virus. The key linkage between security-oriented technology policy and digital democracy at the heart of the techno-democratic agenda has emerged instead in more explicit terms through formal avenues such as the GCTF workshops. Throughout 2020, these events contributed to the adaptation of previous narratives to the pandemic, addressing issues such as 'COVID-19-related crimes,' 'COVID-19 disinformation' and public management preparedness for second-wave contagions.³⁶

30 MOFA, Taiwan Can Help, and Taiwan Is Helping, <https://www.mofa.gov.tw/en/cp.aspx?n=AF70B0F54FFB164B>; MOFA, The Taiwan Model for Combating COVID-19, <https://www.mofa.gov.tw/en/theme.aspx?n=B13D460AE0B33449&s=9C13959F19F93B2F&sms=BC-DE19B435833080>.

31 "EP Supports Taiwan on WHO Participation, Trade Pact Negotiations," Focus Taiwan, 27 November 2020, <https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202011270011>.

32 Shiroma Silva, "Coronavirus: How Map Hacks and Buttocks Helped Taiwan Fight COVID-19," BBC, 6 June 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-52883838>.

33 Tsai Ing-wen, "How My Country Prevented a Major Outbreak of COVID-19," *Time Magazine*, 16 April 2020, <https://time.com/collection/finding-hope-coronavirus-pandemic/5820596/taiwan-coronavirus-lessons/>; Javier C. Hernández and Chris Horton, "Taiwan's Weapon against Coronavirus: An Epidemiologist as Vice President," *The New York Times*, 9 May 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/09/world/asia/taiwan-vice-president-coronavirus.html>.

34 Anne Quito, "Taiwan Is Using Humor as a Tool Against Coronavirus Hoaxes," Quartz, 5 June 2020, <https://qz.com/1863931/taiwan-is-using-humor-to-quash-coronavirus-fake-news/>; Andrew Leonard, "How Taiwan's Unlikely Digital Minister Hacked the Pandemic," WIRED, 23 July 2020, <https://www.wired.com/story/how-taiwans-unlikely-digital-minister-hacked-the-pandemic/>; "Taiwan's Global Contributions, Audrey Tang Talks at Google," Talks at Google, 11 August 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SLEvwoD1kPM>; "The Frontiers of Digital Democracy: Taiwan Is Reinventing the Consent of the Governed," *Noema Magazine*, 4 February 2021, <https://www.noemamag.com/the-frontiers-of-digital-democracy/>; Milo Hsieh, "Fast, Fair, Fun: Taiwan Digital Minister Audrey Tang On Pandemic Response," *Ketagalan Media*, 6 February 2021, <https://ketagalanmedia.com/2021/02/06/fast-fair-fun-taiwan-digital-minister-audrey-tang-on-pandemic-response/>.

35 As of early 2021, Tang's divulgatory work targeted at Anglophone audiences is built around a set of PowerPoint slides accessible via YouTube and the PDIS website. See: "2020-04-21 DSI #TaiwanCanHelp," PDIS, 21 April 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ea80jU1E4o>.

36 AIT, "Global Cooperation and Training Framework (GCTF) Programs."

Conclusion

The emergence of a techno-democratic agenda in Taiwan can be traced back to internal and cross-Strait drivers: a fragile position in the global economy, political polarisation and rampant disinformation at home, Chinese all-round pressure for unification and isolation from international organisations. Consequently, the Tsai administration's attempt to 'brand' the island as an outpost of technological and political innovations for foreign audiences has been first and foremost an attempt to guarantee Taiwan's *de facto* independence by raising its international profile and its 'unique' traits in the eyes of foreign audiences. To do so, Taipei has attempted to carve a niche within the broader international debate on the political and social impact of AI-driven technological development – a debate that in recent years has percolated from academic and policy environments to mainstream media and the general public.³⁷

Nevertheless, the decisive inputs in this process came from the outside. As is clearly shown in the recently declassified US Indo-Pacific Strategic Framework, the Trump administration's blunt China policy and its Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy created a space for amplifying the outreach of Taiwan's strategic communications among friendly countries and foreign professional networks, mainly through the re-adaptation of the GCTF workshops. Against this backdrop, the COVID-19 pandemic and Taiwan's success in containing it provided the Tsai administration with an extraordinary opportunity to shape foreign perceptions of the island among the public and to mark again its 'otherness' to the PRC. From this perspective, claims by the Chinese authorities that the Tsai administration "makes use of the pandemic to plot for independence"³⁸ can be interpreted as a begrudging admission of Taiwan's success.

The Taiwanese experience since 2018 provides a window on how great power competition in the Asia-Pacific and a brooding technological competition centred on digital infrastructure and the ap-

plication of AI to public governance are shaping the avenues for dissemination of strategic communications by state actors and its content. The continuous development of Taiwan's techno-democratic statecraft, and consequently the effectiveness of its strategic communications in the next three years of the Tsai administration, however, will need two key developments. The first and most obvious of these is continuing support from the Biden administration, together with continuing emphasis on themes concerning techno-democracy by Quad countries in the coming years. The second, and most immediate, is a substantial improvement in the vaccination rollout on the island. Given that much of Taiwan's credibility as a rising techno-democratic polity has relied on its success in fighting the first stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the current slow pace of vaccinations on the island could begin to damage its brand.

To conclude, a note on the significance of the Taiwanese experience for the EU. The member states of the union do not face the pressing challenges that motivate Taipei's expansive use of strategic communications, but the ineffective public health management of the early stages of the pandemic and the stuttering beginning of the vaccination roll-outs among its member states have emphasised pre-existing trends such as deepening economic inequality, diminishing popular trust in institutions and an increasingly fraught information environment. The organised disinformation campaigns targeted at the EU during the first wave of the pandemic³⁹ executed by state actors following socio-political models divergent from the liberal democratic norms that Brussels champions suggest a need to link technology policy with a strategic-minded approach to communication centred on new digital democracy practices.

37 Jeffrey Ding, "Deciphering China's AI Dream: The Context, Components, Capabilities, and Consequences of China's Strategy to Lead the World in AI," Future of Humanity Institute, University of Oxford, March 2018, https://www.fhi.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/Deciphering_Chinas_AI-Dream.pdf; Ross Andersen, "China Is the First Surveillance Superpower," The Atlantic, 29 July 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/09/china-ai-surveillance/614197/>.

38 PRC Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council (TAO), "Guotaiban: Qianglie qianze Minjindang dangju 'yi bing mou du' buzeshouduan" ["TAO: We Resolutely Condemn the DPP Authorities' Dishonesty in 'Using the Pandemic to Plot for Independence'"], 9 April 2020, http://www.gwytb.gov.cn/wyly/202004/t20200409_12264050.htm.

39 European External Action Service, Strategic Communication Division, "Disinformation on COVID-19 – Information Environment Assessment," 20 April 2020, <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/6877118-INTERNAL-Coronavirus-3rd-Information-Environment.html>; Francesco Bechis and Gabriele Carrer, "How China Unleashed Twitter Bots to Spread COVID-19 Propaganda in Italy," Formiche, 31 March 2020, <https://formiche.net/2020/03/china-unleashed-twitter-bots-covid19-propaganda-italy/>.

The Global Governance Programme

The Global Governance Programme (GGP) is research turned into action. It provides a European setting to conduct research at the highest level and promote synergies between the worlds of research and policy-making, to generate ideas and identify creative and innovative solutions to global challenges. The Programme is part of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies of the European University Institute, a world-renowned academic institution. It receives financial support from the European Commission through the European Union budget. Complete information on our activities can be found online at: globalgovernanceprogramme.eui.eu

Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies

The Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies (RSCAS), created in 1992 and directed by Professor Brigid Laffan, aims to develop inter-disciplinary and comparative research on the major issues facing the process of European integration, European societies and Europe's place in 21st century global politics. The Centre is home to a large post-doctoral programme and hosts major research programmes, projects and data sets, in addition to a range of working groups and ad hoc initiatives. The research agenda is organised around a set of core themes and is continuously evolving, reflecting the changing agenda of European integration, the expanding membership of the European Union, developments in Europe's neighbourhood and the wider world.

www.eui/rsc



Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

Views expressed in this publication reflect the opinion of individual authors and not those of the European University Institute or the European Commission.
© European University Institute, 2021
Content © Aurelio Insisa.

doi:10.2870/647900
ISBN:978-92-9084-991-9
ISSN:2467-4540
QM-AX-21-025-EN-N