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The US-Taiwan-Lithuania Triangle: Partners with a Common Vision for Security



The first part explains the drivers of increased US support for Taiwan, especially the role of military assistance to Taipei and the need to expand the network of likely-minded partners willing to resist China's influence.

The second part analyses Lithuania's political decision to enhance the partnership with Taiwan and its consequences.

Summary

- During 2021-22, Washington, Taipei, and Vilnius formed a new geopolitical triangle. The three capitals are bound by a common understanding that the People's Republic of China is becoming an aggressive challenger of the democratic world and international security. In the wake of China's pressure, more bold and sound political support for Taiwan came from Washington and Vilnius. In November 2021, Lithuania's government agreed to establish a Taiwanese representative office in Vilnius; in August 2022, Nancy Pelosi, the US Speaker of the House, made a bold visit to Taiwan despite all the threatening rhetoric from the People's Republic of China. Both actions provoked an aggressive response from China, but this only strengthened mutual support among all three democratic partners.
- This publication reviews the changing geopolitical reality and the strengthening of political and security cooperation between the US, Taiwan, and Lithuania.
- The first part explains the drivers of increased US support for Taiwan, especially the role of military assistance to Taipei and the need to expand the network of like-minded partners willing to resist China's influence. The second part analyses Lithuania's political decision to enhance the partnership with Taiwan and its consequences.
- These two parts, prepared by the researchers from the Global Taiwan Institute (Washington, DC) and the Eastern Europe Studies Centre (Vilnius), create a better understanding of why the US and Lithuania make political support of Taiwan's security and independence a foreign policy priority.



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Part I

Amid Growing International Uncertainty, US and Taiwan Strengthen Security Ties

On the evening August 2 of this year, US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi¹ touched down at Taipei's Songshan Airport. The visit, part of longer Indo-Pacific swing, represented the highest-level US diplomatic visit to Taiwan since then-Speaker Newt Gingrich led a congressional delegation in 1997. While certainly significant in its own right, the Pelosi visit was far from an isolated incident. Rather, it was the culmination of a multi-year expansion of the US-Taiwan relationship, which has evolved from a limited, exclusively informal arrangement to a far more expansive, comprehensive partnership. In the face of mounting aggression from the People's Republic of China, the United States and Taiwan have substantially upgraded their ties, particularly from a defense and security standpoint. In a time of mounting uncertainty and unprecedented threats, such cooperation is more vital than ever.

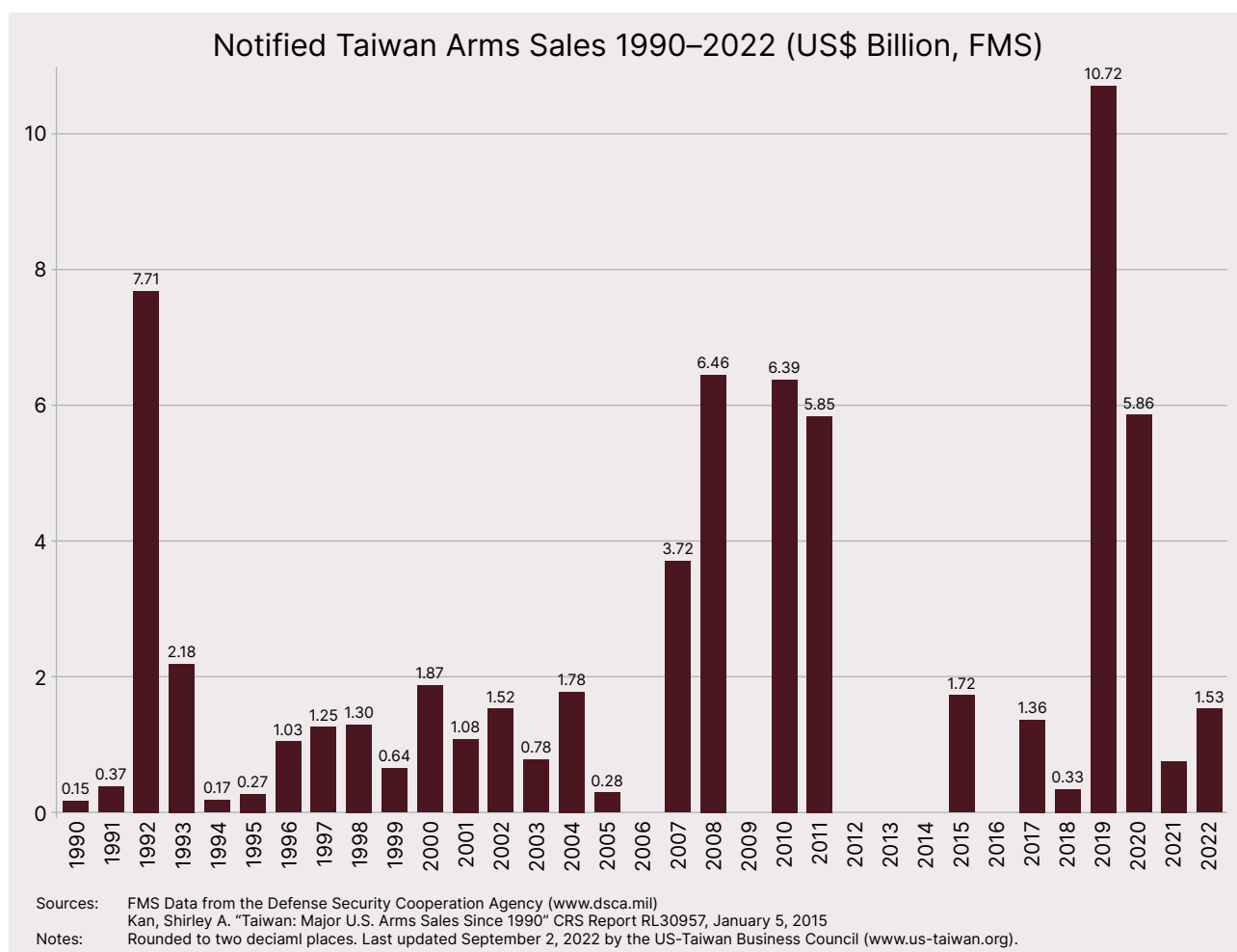
Evolving US-Taiwan Security Cooperation

In response to the Pelosi visit, the PRC initiated a series of naval and air drills in the vicinity of Taiwan, touching off what many have described² as the "fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis." Beginning on August 4, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) engaged in what has been widely interpreted as a show of force, launching 11 missiles into the waters surrounding Taiwan, sending numerous planes into Taiwan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ), and deploying a carrier group and several submarines to the Taiwan Strait. Notably, the missile launches and accompanying naval operations appeared designed to simulate a potential blockade of Taiwan's main island, a scenario feared³ by many stakeholders. While the PLA has long pushed Taiwan's boundaries in the Taiwan Strait – as shown by its well-publicized predilection for ADIZ incursions⁴ – these drills represented a remarkable escalation. For military planners in Taipei and Washington, the message was clear: the time for complacency has passed. Now more than ever, US-Taiwan defense cooperation is crucial to the peace and stability of the Taiwan Strait.

Despite their lack of official diplomatic relations, the United States and Taiwan have a long history of security ties. This relationship has primarily consisted of US arms sales to Taiwan, which have been a standard feature of US policy towards the island de-

mocracy since the Carter Administration. In fact, US arms sales to Taiwan form a key part of the 1979 Taiwan Relation Act⁵ (TRA), which continues to govern US Taiwan policy. Specifically, the TRA mandates that the “United States shall provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive character;” while leaving the exact definition of “defensive” up to interpretation. This ambiguity has given successive US administrations wide discretion⁶ in determining what sorts of weapons systems they provide to Taiwan.

As Scott Harold⁷ points out, US arms sales to Taiwan have long enjoyed remarkably durable bipartisan support. Since 1990, the US has approved over USD \$67 billion⁸ in arms sales to Taiwan, with an average of over USD \$2 billion per year. Critically, these numbers have largely been unaffected by the political ideology of the current administration, as numbers have remained relatively consistent⁹ between Democratic and Republican administrations. Even as the United States has grown increasingly polarized domestically, congressional and executive support for Taiwan has only grown stronger.



Graphic: Notified US arms sales to Taiwan, 1990-2022 (Source: Taiwan Defense)

While US arms sales to Taiwan are relatively uncontroversial in US policy circles, the content of arms packages has become a matter of some debate. This dissension is primarily a product of a longtime disconnect between Washington and Taipei over what sorts of armaments would provide Taiwan with the most effective defense against a potential Chinese invasion. As numerous commentators¹⁰ have

noted, Taiwanese leaders – particularly those within Taiwan’s Armed Forces and Ministry of National Defense (MND) – have historically lobbied for the purchase of larger, more visible weapons platforms, such as F-16 fighter aircraft¹¹ and M1A1 Abrams¹² main battle tanks. While such platforms are certainly valuable as symbols of Taiwanese military power and prestige, their value as military assets has long

been questioned by defense experts¹³ due to Taiwan's cramped geography and the PLA's growing quantitative and qualitative advantages over the ROC military.

In light of these concerns, US experts have increasingly pushed Taiwan to adopt a more realistic and cost-effective asymmetric approach to national defense. Rather than investing in large, easily targetable platforms, scholars such as Michael Hunzeker¹⁴ argue that Taipei should instead purchase large quantities of smaller, more easily concealed weapons systems, including "coastal defense cruise missiles, short-range mobile air defenses, naval mines, and drones." While less flashy and prestigious than the aforementioned tanks and fighters, such armaments could make an invasion of Taiwan¹⁵ perilously difficult for the PLA.

Notably, some elements of Taiwan's defense establishment have acknowledged these concerns in recent years. This shift was perhaps most clearly demonstrated by the Overall Defense Concept (ODC)¹⁶, proposed by then-Chief of the General Staff of the ROC Armed Forces Adm. Lee Hsi-Ming (李喜明) in 2017. At its core, the ODC reflected many of the aforementioned concerns and placed heavy emphasis on asymmetric deterrence and maximizing Taiwan's unique geography. Upon its announcement, the strategy was welcomed by US defense analysts¹⁷, who applauded its realistic and organized approach to national defense. However, this optimism has been tempered in the years since, as Taiwan's leadership – once again, primarily the MND – has gradually pulled back from the ODC¹⁸.

Changing Geopolitics, Changing Expectations

As previously mentioned, the US-Taiwan security relationship has historically been relatively stable and consistent. Even as administrations have come and gone, the economy has waxed and waned, and norms have shifted, the partnership has remained largely unchanged. However, two events in 2022 have fundamentally altered this dynamic, potentially permanently: the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the PRC military drills in the wake of the Pelosi visit.

Almost immediately after Russian troops first crossed into Ukrainian territory on February 24, commentators around the world were quick to draw compari-

sons¹⁹ between the conflict and a potential contingency in the Taiwan Strait. While such equivalences were largely reactionary and incomplete²⁰ – Ukraine and Taiwan differ in a variety of respects, as do Russia and China – the war in Ukraine has nevertheless provided powerful lessons for US and Taiwanese military planners. In contrast to early projections of Russian battlefield dominance, Ukrainian forces have more than held their own. After repulsing Russia's initial push towards Kyiv, Ukraine has steadily pushed the invaders back²¹, culminating in a stunning counteroffensive²² in September that has reversed much of Moscow's territorial gains. The manner in which they have accomplished this has been of great interest to the US and Taiwan.

Rather than relying purely on high-value, high-profile weapons platforms, Ukraine's forces have deployed a wide array of smaller, cheaper, and mobile systems, such as man-portable air-defense²³ systems (MANPADS) and drones²⁴. Through strategic use of these armaments, Kyiv has been able to wear down a quantitatively – and ostensibly, qualitatively – superior Russian force, inflicting devastating casualties and forcing Moscow to resort to a politically risky partial mobilization²⁵. In doing so, Ukraine has helped to validate proponents of asymmetric responses to traditional military invasions.

Additionally, the conflict in Ukraine has provided a highly visible display of the value of Western-sourced military equipment. While Ukraine's armed forces were far from helpless²⁶ in the lead-up to the invasion, their efforts have been exponentially strengthened by a steady flow of weapons, ammunition, and advisors, much of which has come from the United States²⁷. In contrast to Russia's equipment, which has been exposed as woefully out-of-date and poorly maintained, these foreign systems have performed exceptionally.

For the United States and Taiwan, these lessons have not gone unnoticed. Already, US officials have begun urging their Taiwanese counterparts²⁸ to follow Ukraine's lead in reforming their own military. Specifically, experts have sought to draw attention to the success of smaller, asymmetric weapons systems, including the FIM-92 Stinger anti-aircraft missile and the FGM-148 Javelin anti-tank missile. In addition to these suggestions, the US has also taken more concrete steps to reform Taiwan's approach to national defense. In May, the US military sent a letter to Taiwan²⁹ in which it rejected Taipei's request for anti-submarine helicopters and instead recom-

mended the purchase of a smaller mobile artillery system. Increasingly, it seems that Washington is taking a more forceful, proactive tone as it works to push Taipei towards asymmetry.

In the wake of China's aggressive response to the Pelosi visit, these lessons have only gained increased salience. While the exercises were just that, they nevertheless demonstrated the PLA's vastly improved capabilities in the air and sea domains. Through coordinated missile launches, naval maneuvers, and air incursions, the PRC displayed its power for all to see. As discussed during a recent Global Taiwan Institute event³⁰, the drills have fundamentally altered the status quo in the Taiwan Strait. Through its repeated incursions across the long-observed median line in the strait, the PLA has effectively rewritten the rules in the cross-Strait relationship and pushed the standoff perilously close to the edge. For military planners in Washington and Taipei, this has not gone unnoticed.

In the United States, the drills have added additional urgency to the Taiwan Policy Act of 2022³¹, a bipartisan bill first introduced in June. Described³² as "the most comprehensive revamp of US-Taiwan policy in more than four decades," the Act notably calls for the United States³³ to provide "billions of dollars in military financing for Taiwan, fast-track weapons sales, and increase military coordination." Significantly, the bill includes USD \$6.5 billion in grant assistance intended to strengthen Taiwan's defenses. However, these grants would be contingent on Taiwan bolstering its own military spending. As commentators have noted³⁴, such conditions could allow the United States to exert additional pressure on Taipei and perhaps encourage greater investment in asymmetric systems. While the Act remains somewhat controversial – the Biden Administration has reportedly balked³⁵ at its more hawkish statements – much of its body was included in the proposed 2023 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). Though it remains to be seen just how much the Taiwan Policy Act will impact US military policy towards Taiwan, its mere existence suggests an evolution in US thinking regarding Taiwan's defense.

Support from Like-Minded Partners

While the expansion of the US-Taiwan security relationship primarily concerns Washington and Taipei, it could be augmented by the actions of like-minded partners, particularly in Europe. In recent years, Europe has emerged as a hotbed of support for Taiwan. As skepticism of Chinese influence has grown, so too has interest in engaging with Taiwan. This is especially true in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), where states such as the Czech Republic³⁶, Slovenia³⁷, and – most visibly – Lithuania³⁸ have proven increasingly willing to push back against PRC narratives and expand their ties with Taiwan. Given the US' long-held desire for increased transatlantic coordination³⁹ on China and Taiwan, these developments have been welcome news⁴⁰ in Washington. Already, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has expressed his support⁴¹ for Lithuania, while also condemning China's efforts to bully Vilnius. For policymakers in the United States, such support for Taiwan strengthens Washington's hand in confronting the PRC and confirms the necessity of maintaining the US-Taiwan relationship.

For all countries with an interest in safeguarding democracy and combating autocracy, the growth of US-Taiwan military relations should be heartening. As Russia's invasion of Ukraine has made perilously clear, the rules-based international order is increasingly fragile. Long-held conceptions of international norms and understandings appear to be fraying at the edges, while malign authoritarian influence continues to eat away at institutions. In the face of these challenges, it is critical for the US to continue its efforts to strengthen Taiwan's defense. While doing so may necessitate uncomfortable conversations about asymmetric defense and military acquisitions, the time for complacency is over.



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PART II

Lithuania's Confrontation with China over Taiwan: Lessons from a Small Country

Last year, Lithuania became one of the primary targets of Chinese propaganda and trade sanctions. The ongoing Sino-Lithuanian diplomatic standoff should not come as a major surprise, as Lithuania caused great outrage in China in November 2021, when it allowed Taiwan to open a new representative office in Vilnius. The office was notable for its bold choice of names: rather than the typical "Taipei Representative Office," the office was officially dubbed the "Taiwanese Representative Office in Vilnius" (駐立陶宛台灣代表處). Such a move was significant, as it marked the first opening of a new Taiwan representative office in Europe in 18 years (the last office opened in 2003 in Slovakia); as well as the second such office to exist under the name "Taiwanese" in the world, after Somaliland.

For a long time, China paid little attention to Lithua-

nia, a small and distant country in Europe. Yet, after the opening of the Taiwanese Representative Office in Vilnius, Beijing decided to make Lithuania an example of how China could punish another country if it did not respect China's interests.

The Example of China's Revenge

Lithuania has been clearly indicating its intention to distance itself from China for some time. In the spring of 2021, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania announced⁴² Vilnius' withdrawal from the 17 + 1 initiative (formally titled "Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries"). Additionally, the Parliament prohibited⁴³ Chinese companies from developing a 5G network in Lithuania under national law, while Lithuanian diplomats openly supported granting observer status to Taiwan in the World Health Organization (WHO). Those were not accidental moves. As the US-China rivalry intensified, Lithuania joined the anti-People's Republic of China (PRC) coalition formed by the United States and became one of the most vocal critics of China in the European Union.

Yet, the opening of a Taiwanese Representative Office in Vilnius unleashed the full wrath of China. As a result, Beijing downgraded the status of its diplomatic representation in Lithuania to the level of the

chargé d'affaires, renamed its embassy in Lithuania as the Office of the Chargé d'Affaires (中國駐立陶宛代辦處), and began urging the Lithuanian side to do the same. Shortly thereafter, Lithuanian diplomats in China were forced to leave Beijing urgently⁴⁴ because their diplomatic status was simply revoked. Then, in December 2021, Lithuanian exports to China were almost completely blocked, with more than 90 percent of the usual flow of goods prevented from entering the Chinese market. These unofficial trade sanctions (China never issued a formal decision to sanction Lithuanian goods) had little impact on Lithuania's economy, as exports to China accounted for less than 1 percent of Lithuania's total exports.

Yet, concern rose significantly following unofficial reports that China had blocked exports from other EU companies when they contained components of Lithuanian origin⁴⁵. "Nobody expected that Beijing would go after Lithuania's trading partners in Europe," said Deputy Foreign Minister Mantas Adomėnas⁴⁶, the main advocate for Vilnius' so-called values-based diplomacy toward China. Some Lithuanian companies, especially those working in the laser sector, publicly expressed criticism that the Lithuanian government was unprepared for the Chinese sanctions and did not warn Lithuanian businesses about possible economic retaliation. Several heavily impacted foreign investment companies asked Lithuania's political leaders to deescalate the dispute with China, while the German-Baltic Chamber of Commerce stated that⁴⁷ imports of Chinese machinery and parts – as well as the sale of Lithuanian products to China – had ground to a halt, and that some firms may have to leave Lithuania.

At the end of January 2022, the EU requested WTO dispute consultations with China concerning alleged Chinese restrictions on trade with Lithuania. Later, Taiwan, Australia, Canada, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States requested to join the WTO's consultations on this case. This was seen in Lithuania as sorely needed political support from the democratic allies of Vilnius.

More than half a year after China's trade sanctions began, the situation has stalled. Lithuania refused to change its decisions and opened a trade representative office in Taipei in November 2022⁴⁸. Likewise, China continues to stop Lithuania's goods at customs, only occasionally allowing a small part of the goods to pass (for example, small quantities of copper have still been accepted by China). The president of the Association of Lithuanian Chambers

of Industry, Trade and Crafts has stated⁴⁹ that while exports to China are almost nonexistent, imports from China have stabilized. Although Lithuanian importers still face increased risks and strict requirements, such as full, up-front payment for goods instead of the 15–20 percent prepayment that was the norm before relations soured.

Despite China's economic revenge, Lithuania has not experienced a resultant economic collapse. The EU's quick reaction seems to have slowed down China's aggressive actions, and there have been no recent reports of EU companies being openly discriminated against in China due to supply-chain connections with Lithuanian businesses. The Lithuanian government also allocated up to €130 million (USD \$130 million)⁵⁰ as loans for companies that suffered from China's actions. This kind of financial strategy to help businesses that are facing challenges due to the coercive actions of third countries was the first of its type in the EU.

On the other hand, it is clear that the Chinese market is already closed for Lithuanian companies. However, some Lithuanian businesses have found new ways to transport goods from neighboring countries' ports, thus avoiding labelling their products "made in Lithuania," while others have hidden from China's sanctions by moving company branches to other EU countries.

Gains and Losses for Lithuania

In January 2022, the Lithuanian National Bank issued estimations⁵¹ of the economic impact on Lithuania's economy resulting from China's restrictions on Lithuanian businesses. Preliminary calculations showed that Chinese sanctions could lead Lithuania's GDP growth to decrease by between 0.1 to 0.5 percent in 2022, and between 0.3 to 1.3 percent in 2023. The lower numbers represent the impact of ceasing direct trade with China only, while the larger negative numbers included the indirect results on investments.

The expanding economic ties between Lithuania and Taiwan could at least partly compensate for those projected losses. Lithuania and Taiwan have exchanged several business and diplomatic missions⁵² already. The Lithuanian government believes in the potential benefits of enhanced trade and investment flows with Taiwan. The biggest hope for Lithuania

is to become a part of the semiconductors supply chain. In February 2022, the Taiwan and Lithuania Center for Semiconductors and Materials Science (TLCSM, 臺立半導體暨材料科學中心) was established in Vilnius. In addition to this, Taiwan set up a USD \$200 million fund⁵³ to invest in Lithuania and other Central and Eastern European countries, while also offering USD \$1 billion in loans for joint projects between the countries. Taiwanese governmental representatives⁵⁴ have also expressed intentions to help Lithuania expand its semiconductor industry in areas ranging from integrated circuit design, packaging, and testing to manufacturing. With competition for semiconductors increasing, Lithuania's involvement in this technology field would be particularly important for the country's economic potential, and even for its geopolitical significance.

On the other hand, the political lessons for other European countries are ambiguous. Lithuania has shown that it is possible to resist China's economic coercion. Vilnius' fight against Beijing encouraged the entire EU to seek solutions to protect itself from third-party economic sanctions against EU countries. To this end, on December 8, 2021, the European Commission published its proposal for an EU Anti-Coercion Instrument⁵⁵. Previously, in October 2021, the European Parliament for the first time formulated recommendations to the European Commission on strengthening relations with Taiwan⁵⁶. All these trends show that Europeans are increasingly aware of the risks of economic ties with China, while at the same time, they are willing to strengthen political support for Taiwan's sovereignty. Lithuania has become another wakeup call for the EU and other democratic countries, which have long ignored the political risks due to the benefits of trade with China.

Yet, other EU countries do not seem to be in any hurry to follow the example of Lithuania and establish new representative offices in Taiwan or to rename existing offices. It could be that China's economic sanctions were more effective in deterring other small European countries that do not want to repeat Lithuania's path and face China's economic aggression. Many European governments are trying to solve numerous economic problems simultaneously – including Western sanctions against Russia, broken supply chains, high prices of energy resources, extremely high inflation, as well as other pressing issues. During economically rough times, getting into a row with China is not a desirable choice, it seems.

Nevertheless, Lithuania has provided one precious lesson: sooner or later, uncomfortable decisions regarding economic dependence on China will have to be made. Lithuania's decision to stand against China and its growing ambitions in the region was possible due to its insignificant bilateral trade volumes: according to 2020 trade statistics, Lithuania had weaker economic links to China⁵⁷ than almost every country in the region. Despite Eastern and Central Europe's relatively low dependence on China, the situation with the rest of the EU is alarming. Germany, the EU's economic powerhouse, is highly dependent on trade with China, Germany's most important trade partner for the sixth consecutive year⁵⁸. This situation creates new challenges for the EU and significantly affects its ability to form a tougher, more united stance against China that would better reflect and safeguard the shared values of the EU. Given the increasing number of cases in which China has employed its economic leverage as a weapon, reducing dependence on China should be one of the most important long-term goals for the EU. Economic diversification would ensure that China will lose significant leverage against the EU. The war in Ukraine is already showing how reliance on an authoritarian regime can result in dire economic consequences for the whole bloc.

Practically speaking, it would be better to cut off the most sensitive links with China now, so as not to suffer painful consequences later. And most importantly, the potential fight against China will require concentrated efforts by the entire EU, as well as the support of all democratic partners. China is a large country, but it is mostly alone. The consolidation and unity of many countries, even small ones, is the most effective way to withstand bullying by authoritarian regimes like the PRC.

To sum up, the ongoing Sino-Lithuanian diplomatic standoff has already demonstrated how China might use its economic leverage to coerce countries into submission, and shows that a joint EU response is the best way to counter China's bullying. In Lithuania, Taiwan is seen as an increasingly important partner that could help to offset the politically motivated costs, but both sides must work to ensure the sustainability of the relationship.

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