Agreeing to Disagree

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Erik Tiedemann



"The worse thing would be to think that we Europeans must become followers on this topic and take our cue from the U.S. agenda and a Chinese overreaction."

These were the remarks made by French President Emmanuel Macron a few months ago on a visit to China with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen when asked about what Europe's stance on Taiwan should be prompting criticism by other European countries as well as the United States and leaving French officials trying to control the damage. The central tenet being whether the European Union would act united in its policy towards democratic Taiwan and its response to a potential aggression of China against the island country. Mere hours after Macron departed,

China launched renewed military exercises around Taiwan, highlighting the tense geopolitical situation. In spite of this Europe's position remains vague, with the EU navigating in between cooperation with democratic Taiwan and trade benefits with China.

Whilst Macron's statements and the way they were delivered may have fueled international outrage, the content was nothing new. Despite praise for Taiwan's democracy and concern for Chinese military threats, official relations exist only on a low level with occasional visits of parliamentarian delegations from national assemblies or the European Parliament. Most recently a delegation of the European Parliament comprised of a handful of central and eastern European MEPs visited Taiwan and met with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-Wen, calling for closer diplomatic ties. Adherent to the One-China-Policy though, not one European country recognizes the sovereignty of Taiwan. Even the United States, one of the closest allies and biggest defenders of Taiwan recognize the Peoples Republic of China rather than Taiwan. It seems as though economic arguments are more convincing than normative ones.

Despite this, there have been some significant geopolitical shifts and ruptures in Europe since the beginning of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. EU Ambassador to China Jorge Toledo Albiñana likened the situation between China and Taiwan to Russia and Ukraine, pledging to react accordingly with similar sanctions and measures. This year Germany, the biggest member state of the EU, signed an expanded cooperation agreement with Taiwan during a high-profile visit of German justice minister Marco Buschmann. Nevertheless, Germany also repeatedly voiced its support and preference for the One-China-Policy and the status quo in its new official "China-Strategy" paper, published in July 2023.

The desire to maintain close relations with China may also be a response to a more multipolar world in which Europe is trying to find its place between global superpowers such as China or the United States. French President Emmanuel Macron especially is a proponent of this, envisioning Europe as some sort of global "third pole". Such positions are cause of irritation, especially in Central and Eastern Europe where the transatlantic alliance with the United States is more valued. There Macron's remarks are seen as having the potential to disrupt the transatlantic consensus with a much-needed partner. One of Taiwan's closest partners in the European Union has been Lithuania. The Baltic country has maintained close ties with Taiwan since supporting its accession bid to the World Health Organization during the pandemic. The opening of Taiwan's de facto embassy in Vilnius under the name of Taiwan instead of Taipei in late 2021 caused a strong diplomatic reaction of China with the expulsion of the Lithuanian ambassador to China.

As for the EU however, big disagreements remain – Both internally between member states and externally like with China. The lack of a clear and common European stance amidst a tense geopolitical situation may be

difficult to handle but is not necessarily surprising. The EU has often been divided in important questions and yet still it has always managed to unite and advance in times of crises. For now though regarding Taiwan, everyone will have to agree to disagree.

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