



Research Article

Chains, Continuums, and Virtuous Cycles: Parsing Taiwan's Strategic Narratives and Soft Power Leadership in the Indo-Pacific

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Abstract: Following the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in late 2019, Taiwan's international profile rose to prominence. Its public diplomatic campaign in distributing then-depleted stocks of facemasks provided a degree of international solidarity in a growing atmosphere of economic nationalism. Its government-led strategy of preventative measures that kept normalcy on the island while large swaths of the world entered restrictive lockdowns also became a model of resilient public health policies and trust in government directives. Capitalizing on these developments, Taiwan's soft power approach toward its constrained international profile also took on new prominence as it sought to leverage its technological leadership in the context of disrupted, vulnerable global supply chains. This article analyzes Taiwan's strategic narratives as it invests in conceptualizing an arena of increased great power contestation: the Indo-Pacific. It focuses on how elite narratives have employed several discursive strategies that increasingly aim to redirect and reorient supply chains to meet the (un)certainities of geopolitical ideological positioning.

Keywords: Taiwan, strategic narratives, leadership, Indo-Pacific.

Introduction

In a 2021 op-ed piece in *Foreign Affairs*, Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen placed the island nation on the "frontlines of a new clash of ideologies" in the Indo-Pacific region. President Tsai identified the Indo-Pacific as a region of economic

opportunities challenged by an assertive “self-assured authoritarianism.” Highlighting the importance of vigilance in upholding regional security, she invoked narratives reminiscent of the Cold War-era domino theory:

Taiwan lies along the first island chain, which runs from northern Japan to Borneo; should this line be broken by force, the consequences would disrupt international trade and destabilize the entire Western Pacific ... a failure to defend Taiwan would not only be catastrophic for the Taiwanese; it would overturn a security architecture that has allowed for peace and extraordinary economic development in the region for seven decades.¹

Tsai’s interweaving of economic and security regional concerns are combined with a reflexive deployment of identity narratives that position Taiwan ideologically with “like-minded partners” of the liberal international order and diametrically opposed to those perceived as threatening that order. This article analyzes Taiwan’s strategic narratives as it attempts to conceptualize an arena of increased great power contestation: the Indo-Pacific. It focuses on how elite narratives have employed several discursive strategies that increasingly aim to redirect and reorient supply chains to meet the (un)certainities of geopolitical ideological positioning.

Situating the Indo-Pacific: Whose Region and for What Purpose?

How Taiwan fits into the architecture of the Indo-Pacific region has been dependent on external actors and events, as well as on state attempts to work within preexisting frameworks. The “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” gained credence within the US government under the Trump administration as an open-ended concept to redefine American engagement in the Pacific region. The concept aimed to address the challenges posed by perceived Chinese threats and the opportunities for cooperation across a range of issues among like-minded partners. According to the now declassified US *Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific*, issued by the Trump administration, America has

a long history of fighting back against repressive regimes on behalf of those who value freedom and openness. As the world’s largest economy, with the strongest military and a vibrant democracy, it is incumbent on the United States to lead from the front.²

¹ Ing-wen Tsai, “Taiwan and the Fight for Democracy: A Force for Good in the Changing International Order,” *Foreign Affairs* 100, no. 6 (November/December 2021), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/taiwan/2021-10-05/taiwan-and-fight-democracy>.

² Key elements of the Framework include: unobstructed access to international sea and air traffic; liberalizing trade and investment; promoting political liberalization and maintaining the U.S.-led postwar liberal international order. Robert C. O’Brien, “A Free and Open Indo-Pacific,” White House, January 5, 2021, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/OBrien-Expanded-Statement.pdf>.

Political elites and stakeholders' acts in problematizing and defining the region bear powerful consequences on how the Indo-Pacific region is conceived. For example, Indo-Pacific policies can be interpreted as counterbalancing China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) infrastructure projects and state-led financing of strategic ports, transportation hubs, etc. Yet, for the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue partners ("The Quad": US, Japan, India, and Australia), the framework is often construed as being purposely vague on specifics beyond the aspirational, perhaps due to underlying perceptual problems among each of its members' objectives, needs, and insecurities toward the region. These, in turn, affect how actors problematize the scope of possible involvement and how the region is construed from geographical, political, and economic standpoints. For instance, while the US military has sought to connect Indo-Pacific matters to its outlay of command hierarchy, Japan's conceptions are more in line with economic and political systems. While there may be aligning perceptions on a Chinese threat to existing power structures, this does not easily translate into a coherent understanding that could lead to unified strategies or policies to address such concerns.³

Taiwan, which has an important yet unofficial relationship with the United States, has seen its role in the Asia-Pacific elevated because of the Sino-U.S. trade war, the decoupling of 5G technology supply chains, and the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although it is not a party to the Quad's strategic framework for the Indo-Pacific, Taiwan's outsized role in global technological supply chains and its centrality in maintaining the ready supply of advanced semiconductors that fuel the products and applications of the world economy have given it new power. Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) accounted for half of the global foundry sales in 2020 alone and made up a sizeable portion of the island's total exports.⁴ In 2022, the company announced capital expenditures of \$44 billion (equivalent to 5% of Taiwan's entire economy). Much of it was dedicated to overseas expansion to meet the world's insatiable appetite for chips.⁵

While power is about technological and material dominance that maintains center-periphery relations of dependency,⁶ it is also the ideational and cognitive

³ Cleo Paskal, "Indo-Pacific Strategies, Perceptions and Partnerships: The View from Seven Countries," Chatham House Research Paper: Energy, Environment, and Resources Programme and Asia-Pacific Programme (March 2021): <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/03/indo-pacific-strategies-perceptions-and-partnerships>.

⁴ Min-Hua Chiang, "Taiwan's Prowess in the ICT Industry," *Taiwan Insight*, January 17, 2022, <https://taiwaninsight.org/2022/01/17/taiwans-prowess-in-the-ict-industry>.

⁵ Chien-Hua Wan, Samson Ellis, and Betty Hou, "Taiwan Economy Grows Fastest Since 2010 as TSMC Gives Boost," *Bloomberg*, January 27, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-01-27/tsmc-s-40-billion-spreemay-tip-the-scales-ontaiwan-s-growth>.

⁶ Esther Majerowicz, "China and the International Political Economy of Information and Communication Technologies," Discussion Paper UFRN-DEPEC No. 2 (July 2019),

reorganizational power that gives and constrains Taiwan's abilities to reshape the global division of labor in upstream technologies, placing it as a key stakeholder. Despite the inherent interdependencies that constitute them, the vulnerability of supply chains to disruption either due to geopolitical conflicts, shutdowns due to natural or man-made disasters, and other disruptions have also given credence to policymakers to redefine and remap modes of production previously taken for granted. This begs the question: how are actors shaping the changing scenarios involving disruptions in "normal" supply chain management? And how can we evaluate the deployment of soft power by small and medium-sized states in the quest for regional positioning?

The Soft Power Role of Strategic Narratives

Soft power can be distinguished from traditional hard power resources and capabilities. Whereas primarily state actors dominate and marshal the military and economic resources of hard power, in exercising soft power—including culture, values, and policies—they often intermingle with societal actors. The assets of culture, whether inculcating through people-to-people exchanges, business networks, or cultural venues, can likewise be instrumentalized by states to satisfy specific objectives in public diplomacy and international relations.⁷

Strategic narratives can be defined within the realm of soft power "storytelling," which signifies the attempts states make to explain key moments in the international sphere. Focusing on the formation, projection, and ultimate retention of said narratives provides a framework for analyzing and understanding soft power. Through plot sequencing, actor role assignment, and morally didactic resolutions, narratives are also employed to bring clarity toward collective goals. Accordingly, these narratives aim to persuade and direct actor perceptions toward various issues, including higher-level systemic narratives, second-level national narratives, and policy-specific issue narratives.⁸

On the international system level of strategic narratives, global trade politics has been a continued area of soft power contestations ever since the institutionalization of the US-led liberal trade regime. Hopewell, for example, has shown how strategic narratives used by the world's largest economy employ various ways to legitimate protectionist policies against rivals, even though the US painstakingly maintains an outward image of defending free trade.⁹ Therefore, strategic narratives represent a soft power means of helping states achieve political

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334711023_China_and_the_International_Political_Economy_of_Information_and_Communication_Technologies.

⁷ Laura Roselle, Alister Miskimmon, and Ben O'Loughlin, "Strategic Narrative: A New Means to Understand Soft Power," *Media, War & Conflict* 7, no. 1 (2014): 73-4.

⁸ Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin, "Strategic Narrative," 76.

⁹ Kristen Hopewell, "Strategic Narratives in Global Trade Politics: American Hegemony, Free Trade, and the Hidden Hand of the State," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 14, no. 1 (Spring 2021): 51-86, 59, <https://academic-oup-com.eres.qnl.qa/cjip/article/14/1/51/6177698>.

objectives, whether legitimating and reinforcing current power dynamics or targeting perceived antagonisms and threats. Indeed, the “moral tale” of fair and unfair traders, free markets versus state capitalism undergirds continued state-firm cooperation in specific sectors of the domestic economy seen as priorities for economic and national security.

The above-mentioned BRI also involves a constellation of strategic narratives and counter-narratives among China, adherents to the initiative, involving would-be partner states, skeptics, and opponents discoursing across issues of economic development, national security, and others. As its sponsored projects came under scrutiny and criticism as being “debt traps” for vulnerable, less developed countries, China modified the communication strategies behind the BRI, emphasizing its inclusiveness as an alternative to Washington Consensus-based development models.¹⁰ Noort and Colley demonstrate that the uptake of narratives toward eventual policy adoption depends on a congruence of material gain and ontological security.¹¹ Strategic narratives and their role in policy change/adoption can be interpreted as storylines or scripts that will stick if they explain “convincingly how future material gain will transpire while enabling a state to maintain a stable sense of ‘who they are’.”¹² While a direct relationship between convincing narrative constructions and policy adoption favorable to narrating states may be more nuanced when considering a multitude of interrelated variables, the constraints of material and ontological factors contribute to the policymaking process. For China, the success underpinning the implementation of BRI objects is also its point of vulnerability: the concurrent efforts by China-skeptic actors in the region to seek counterbalancing action.¹³

With the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic, the fate of disrupted supply chains as the lifeblood of production, distribution, and consumption for nations has been situated prominently in national security pronouncements and economic policies. Bottlenecks, shortages, and risks associated with geopolitical rivalries revealed state and firm differences in supply chain vulnerabilities and ways to reorganize them.¹⁴ The perception of dependencies on key production and technological components while pressuring the state to seek homegrown

¹⁰ Sarah Babb and Alexander Kentikelenis, “Markets Everywhere: The Washington Consensus and the Sociology of Global Institutional Change,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 47, no. 1 (2021): 521-541, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-090220-025543>.

¹¹ Carolijn van Noort and Thomas Colley, “How Do Strategic Narratives Shape Policy Adoption? Responses to China’s Belt and Road Initiative,” *Review of International Studies* 47, no. 1 (January 2021): 39-63, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210520000388>.

¹² Van Noort and Colley, “How Do Strategic Narratives Shape Policy Adoption?”

¹³ David Scott, “China’s Indo-Pacific Strategy: The Problems of Success,” *Journal of Territorial and Maritime Studies* 6, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2020): 94-113, 107-8, <https://dscottcom.files.wordpress.com/2019/08/china-indo-pacific-unlocked.pdf>.

¹⁴ Jim Tankersley and Ana Swanson, “Amid Shortfalls, Biden Signs Executive Order to Bolster Critical Supply Chains,” *The New York Times*, February 24, 2021, www.nytimes.com/2021/02/24/business/biden-supply-chain-executive-order.html.

alternatives¹⁵ does not entail a unified vision of supply chain resilience. For example, the influential industry lobby Semiconductor Industry Association (SIA), while citing the importance of diversification against risks of supply concentration, warned against the “staggering costs and questionable execution feasibility” of complete national self-sufficiency in semiconductor supply chains.¹⁶

Taiwan’s attempts to use soft power to gain international recognition have followed several distinct strategies that reflect changes in domestic politics and shifts in cross-Strait relations with China. For example, the state has effectively used Taiwan’s democratization to highlight its upholding of international norms. These range from transposing international law and covenants into domestic law to seeking a voice and active participation in as many international institutions as possible. Moreover, China’s growing economic clout has also meant that Taiwan has shifted the material power of “checkbook diplomacy” toward soft power: being a champion and cheerleader to international regimes and norms that include human rights, free markets, and democratic governance. According to Choi, adherence to international norms is instrumentalized to overcome the island’s security dilemma vis-à-vis China by allowing it to be connected to foreign policy objectives that can ensure its continued survival.¹⁷

It is, therefore, necessary to see Taiwan’s moves to define its role as a middle power within the confines of security and defense commitments of its allies, its ability to forge economically viable partnerships, and its ability to garner support for its international participation. Taiwanese political elites’ bandwagoning of its own regional policies (cross-Strait relations with China and its New Southbound Policy toward Southeast Asia) to the US-led and Japanese-supported Indo-Pacific strategies have been interpreted as a balancing strategy. In his analysis of official statements made by state officials in Taiwan, Scott shows how the island has tried to align itself to the interests of both security and economic issues of concern perceived by actors feeling threatened by China. They include state and Track 1.5 mechanisms to facilitate communications among Taiwan’s key unofficial backers, including the Indo-Pacific Security Dialogue, Maritime Affairs Cooperation Dialogue, the Taiwan-US Indo-Pacific Democratic Governance Consultations, and the Taiwan-US-Trilateral Security Dialogue.¹⁸ Taiwan’s government has sought “asymmetrical and nontraditional channels” to link its capabilities as

¹⁵ Thomas Kaplan, “Semiconductor Makers and Users Form a Group to Push for Chip Funding,” *The New York Times*, May 11, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/11/business/semiconductor-shortage.html>.

¹⁶ Antonio Varas, Raj Varadarajan, Jimmy Goodrich, and Falan Yinug, “Strengthening the Global Semiconductor Supply Chain in an Uncertain Era,” SIA/BSG Report, April 2021, https://www.semiconductors.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/BCG-x-SIA-Strengthening-the-Global-Semiconductor-Value-Chain-April-2021_1.pdf.

¹⁷ Kyong Jun Choi, “Weapons Brushed by the Enemy: The Bounded Autonomy of Taiwan’s Middle Power Foreign Policy,” *The Korean Journal of International Studies* 18, no. 1 (April 2020): 87-122, 111, <https://doi.org/10.14731/kjis.2020.04.18.1.87>.

¹⁸ David Scott, “Taiwan’s Pivot to the Indo-Pacific,” *Asia-Pacific Review* 26, no.1 (2019): 29-57, 41-3.

it faces renewed political and economic means of isolation.¹⁹ Strategic narratives play a central role in placing Taiwan at the center of Indo-Pacific contexts as it attempts to use its role in supply chains to link seemingly unrelated issues together to demonstrate a sense of vulnerability and interdependence on the one hand and the possibilities of a systemic reorganization and resilience on the other.

Methodology

To address how strategic narratives are contextually interlinked across multiple discursive fields and issues, this article analyzes statements and speeches given by Taiwan's head of state, President Tsai Ing-wen, from the discovery and outbreak of the COVID-19 virus in late 2019 to the end of 2021. Using the keyword "Indo-Pacific" on the database of press releases on the official Presidential Office website, a total of 32 speeches and statements were located and selected for narrative analysis. The texts include speeches delivered in person, remarks to visiting foreign dignitaries (ranging from US, Australian, European, and others), and video addresses (due to the pandemic) to think tanks, symposia, and forums.

Based on a suggested framework for analyzing strategic narratives posited by Roselle and colleagues, this article places its primary analysis on the projection of narratives to better understand the contestation and presentation of state claims and justifications.²⁰ The aim was to chart how emerging concepts of regional identity are employed to align Taiwan to the Indo-Pacific and subject the regional interests to existing frameworks of national identity and international solidarity.

In addition to applying strategic narratives and narrative analysis, the article includes two additional aligning frameworks. The first involves placing strategic narratives within the current context of evaluating how states make sense of disruptions to global supply chains. The onset of the disruptive forces previously seen as external to the dynamics of supply chains has therefore called into question the theorization of supply chains as *being* static constructs. Traditional supply chain management theory assumptions have taken for granted the stability of inputs mediated by competitive advantage and efficiency. In contrast, this research answers the calls for the theoretical interpretation of supply chains as a dynamic process of *becoming* as different systems (political-economic, socio-cultural, and supply chain levels) interact with each other.²¹ This panarchical model

¹⁹ Tsai, "Taiwan and the Fight for Democracy." Tsai writes: "[O]ur bid to play a more meaningful role in the international community is evolving in the context of changing regional politics, with more assertive challenges to the liberal international order, *backed by the economic and political power to turn those ambitions into actions.*" (emphasis added)

²⁰ Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin, "Strategic Narrative," 79.

²¹ Andreas Wieland, "Dancing the Supply Chain: Toward Transformative Supply Chain Management," *Journal of Supply Chain Management* 57, no. 1 (January 2021): 60, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jscm.12248>.

of supply chains is interpretive and based upon the interactions between different systems in which the supply chain is embedded. For the purposes of this research, the author focuses on the supply chain level and political-economic level narrative interactions as cross-level linkages.²² The “new” normal caused by pandemic-induced disruptions appears to be hardening ideological pathways that have questioned the apolitical interdependencies of global supply chain operations.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Phases in the Adaptive Cycle (Panarchic model, adapted from Wieland by the author).²³

Phase	<i>Supply Chain Level</i>	<i>Political-Economic Level</i>
<i>Exploitation</i>	Low connectedness of supply chain due to its initial establishment; high level of resilience due to lack of sunken costs	Supply chain management concepts, including division of labor, specialization within globalized production, and sourcing
<i>Conservation</i>	Apex of supply chains connectedness and potential due to mutual dependencies; rigidity causes low resilience	Stability and taken-for-granted status quo of economic management equilibrium narratives under growth and globalization
<i>Release</i>	Current chain setup is unable to meet demand induced by external shocks or changing downstream preferences	Vulnerability of dominant modes of production to external shocks or crises as critical junctures in innovations
<i>Reorganization</i>	Release phase leads to a window of opportunity to reorganize and shift toward innovative processes, structures, norms, routines, etc.	Rapid changes following the release phase lead to new theories, norms, routines, and structures

²² Wieland, “Dancing the Supply Chain,” 67.

²³ Wieland, “Dancing the Supply Chain.”

The second framework in analyzing the strategic narratives involves crisis communication linked with how political actors manage discourse during the unfolding of the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior analysis has shown that political communication language in health-related crises has been imbued with militaristic metaphors that help mobilize communities, assign and/or deflect blame, construct enemies, and boost the resilience of national sentiments.²⁴ *When combined with the above cross-level linkages related to release and reorganization phases, strategic narrative formation during the pandemic can trace the formulation of how supply chains should be reorganized.*

Situating the Indo-Pacific in Narrative Contexts

A lack of economic integration amongst like-minded countries would only drive us to seek short-term solutions with those who do not share our values and beliefs. Divided we fall.

Tsai Ing-wen, President of Taiwan²⁵

Ways in Which the Concept Is Employed in Text

As previously mentioned, the diverse priorities and mutual perceptions of collaborating actors in the Indo-Pacific contribute to the ambiguity in regional policies. This also has a bearing on the texts and statements originating from Taiwan with regard to the region. Especially during the beginning of the pandemic, the Indo-Pacific region is mentioned as part of cooperative partnerships with its most important ally, the United States. The most common attribute is the island's commitment to contributing to the "peace, stability, and development" of the region. After August 2020, the utterances of Tsai showed marked changes in specificity in strategic narratives beyond the above abstract aspirations. Beyond US audiences, the region is also seen as a basis for cooperation based on "shared values of democracy and freedom." For instance, having elaborated on the complementary nature of Australian-Taiwanese trade, Tsai links both actors as key members in maintaining peace and prosperity, which is "both our responsibility and in our best interest."²⁶

Addressing US-based think tanks in a videoconference, Tsai elaborates that cooperation with the US is to prioritize engagements with like-minded democracies and challenges posed by authoritarian regimes. For the first time, the President refers to "taking a forceful stance in defense of global democracy" with Taiwan as a frontline defender and the "bastion of freedom and democracy in the

²⁴ Eunice Castro Seixas, "War Metaphors in Political Communication on Covid-19," *Frontiers in Sociology* 5 (January 2021), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2020.583680>.

²⁵ "President Tsai Attends the Ketagalan Forum – 2020 Asia-Pacific Security Dialogue," Office of the President (Republic of China), September 8, 2020, accessed December 21, 2021, <https://english.president.gov.tw/NEWS/6036>.

²⁶ "President Tsai Addresses Indo-Pacific Leaders Dialogue Session," Office of the President (Republic of China), August 27, 2020, accessed December 21, 2021, <https://english.president.gov.tw/NEWS/6030>.

Indo-Pacific region.”²⁷ At the 2020 Ketagalan Forum on Asia-Pacific Security Dialogue, the elements of economic security and supply chain reorganization are named as solutions to prevent the destabilization of the region from “aggressive actors”:

One of the most important and painful lessons we have learned is this: the global supply chains and trade mechanisms, we have come to heavily rely on, are highly fragile and are often subject to coercive measures by aggressive actors... The discussion included the need for restructuring global supply chains to bring them closer to home, or locate them in like-minded economies. Most importantly, these global supply chains should also be secure and free from political coercion.²⁸

In sum, the use of the Indo-Pacific region from an abstract concept to an increasingly instrumental platform for action and self-definition has occurred. Of course, these narratives are not arbitrarily formulated: the classification of COVID-19 as a threat to regional stability is made relative to the ambitions of authoritarian regimes and contrasts their response to the pandemic. Designating these threats as common to all actors who share the same values of “the rules-based order” mitigates the complexities of the region’s disparate foreign policies and national security priorities.

The Context of Indo-Pacific in National Issue Areas

As mentioned in the previous section, the Indo-Pacific region is utilized as an orientation and setting for a variety of policy issues categorized as international affairs. The presidential speeches and statements during the pandemic attempt to link geopolitical issues that have once been examined individually into a broader regional canvas. In her 2021 New Year’s address, traditionally directed at domestic audiences, Tsai placed the continued political tension with China into a wider regional context and “no longer just an issue for the two sides.” Chinese military maneuvers in the Taiwan Strait also pose a threat to the “peaceful and stable status quo in the Indo-Pacific.”²⁹ A month later, following a top-level national security meeting, she stated that cross-Strait relations have “been

²⁷ “President Tsai Addresses Taiwan’s Diplomatic, Security, and Economic Challenges at Videoconference Jointly Sponsored by US-based Think Tanks,” Office of the President (Republic of China), August 12, 2020, accessed December 21, 2021, <https://english.president.gov.tw/NEWS/6027>.

²⁸ “President Tsai Attends the Ketagalan Forum – 2020 Asia-Pacific Security Dialogue.”

²⁹ “President Tsai Delivers 2021 New Year’s Address,” Office of the President (Republic of China), January 1, 2021, accessed December 21, 2021, <https://english.president.gov.tw/NEWS/6089>.

elevated to a key regional and global interest” and reiterated that Chinese aircraft intruding into the country’s air defense identification zone was undermining regional peace.³⁰

Democracy as Regional Identity Boundary

The Indo-Pacific texts analyzed are linked in various densities with the concept of democracy and democratic values (“democratic” and “democracy” appear in 24 of the texts). Moreover, in placing Taiwan into the context of the region, the president repeatedly reinforces universal democratic identity as a shared value among stakeholders. Democratic values have several purposes when linked with the Indo-Pacific region. One, it helps differentiate the “like-mindedness” of actors in the region and their common goals while connecting Taiwan to a democratic alliance (mentioned in nearly a third of the texts). Secondly, it serves as justification for actions against threats to democracy in the region.

Textual analysis reveals that the role of democracy in the discourse has shifted. Democracy fits into the narrative of Taiwan’s success in several freedoms: political, religious, and economic. Primarily, it showcased Taiwan as an international success story for overcoming underdevelopment, one-party rule, and its resistance to China’s increased posturing for unification. For instance, in her second inauguration, Tsai extols “our democratic elections and... our success in the fight against COVID-19” as having “amazed the international community twice.”³¹ As the pandemic lingered and intensified, tying democracy and the containment of the virus were more explicitly linked:

The most important lesson for us all is that Taiwan was able to become one of the safest places in the world during this pandemic, and we made sure of this while maintaining our democratic principles and freedoms. The effectiveness of our democratic governance in spite of the pandemic was made possible through the joint efforts of individual citizens, the business community, civil society, and the government.³²

Civil society, business, and cultural aspects of liberal democracy are seen as contributing to a harmonious network of interlocking components. Furthermore, being democratic not only serves as an identity marker; it maps out courses of action for the region (namely, as a solution to authoritarianism, which is mentioned in nearly half of the texts). The connection between democracy at home and democracy in the region is built upon historical claims of having overcome an authoritarian past. This narrative of transformation and adaptation was presented to both domestic and international audiences. For example, experience in democratic governance gives Taiwan the “obligation to speak out and act

³⁰ “President Tsai Convenes High-level National Security Meeting Ahead of the Lunar New Year,” Office of the President (Republic of China), February 9, 2021, accessed December 21, 2021, <https://english.president.gov.tw/NEWS/6101>.

³¹ “President Tsai Addresses Taiwan’s Diplomatic, Security, and Economic Challenges.”

³² “President Tsai Attends the Ketagalan Forum – 2020 Asia-Pacific Security Dialogue.”

against the demise of Hong Kong’s freedoms.” Of the 13 texts that mention authoritarianism, five relate it to Taiwan’s own history. These past experiences help position Taiwan beyond a showcase of successful democratization that should survive against authoritarian threats but also serve to legitimize claims it makes in speaking on behalf of the Indo-Pacific region as a whole. While addressing the 2021 Open Parliament Forum and calling on the democratic alliance around the world to face up to authoritarianism, the President said:

Having endured authoritarian rule, the Taiwanese people bravely walked a long and difficult path of democratization and built a resilient and dynamic civil society. But every democracy, no matter how hard-won, requires constant renewal and strengthening.³³

The use of the renewal narrative extends beyond democratic regimes and to supply chains. Tsai noted in the 2021 Asia-Pacific Security Dialogue that the island is “well positioned to serve as an indispensable partner in democratic renewal and in sectors such as biotechnology, renewable energy, and the semiconductor industry.”³⁴

Supply Chain Management as Regional Leadership

Of the approximately 30 texts, 20 mention supply chains. The Indo-Pacific region is more explicitly linked to the economic interests of like-minded countries and strategic competitors alike and the fate of global industrial supply chains. One of the purposes of defining the region as one of economic opportunity has been to bolster the island’s case in becoming a member of bilateral and regional trade agreements. During the pandemic, Taiwan’s supply of surgical masks and personal protective equipment at a time of protectionism was lauded by recipient countries. In turn, struggling at first to secure vaccines against the virus as domestic outbreaks surfaced on the island in 2021, Taiwan’s president described donations from Japan, the US, and Poland, among others, as part of a “virtuous cycle” from the international community that Taiwan intended to expand upon.

As exemplified by critical technologies, Taiwan’s high-tech sector is synonymous with hard power.³⁵ It is not difficult to imagine that the portrayal of supply chains is heavily dependent on context and its intended audience. For example, in her second inaugural address and half a year into the pandemic, Tsai stated the need to keep critical supply chains in Taiwan and that during “the current

³³ “President Tsai Addresses 2021 Open Parliament Forum,” Office of the President (Republic of China), December 2, 2021, accessed December 21, 2021, <https://english.president.gov.tw/NEWS/6199>.

³⁴ “President Tsai Addresses Ketagalan Forum – 2021 Asia-Pacific Security Dialogue,” Office of the President (Republic of China), August 31, 2021, accessed December 21, 2021, <https://english.president.gov.tw/NEWS/6156>.

³⁵ Tsai placed high-precision manufacturing, AI, 5G applications, renewable energy, biotechnology among those for creating “resilient supply chains” – differentiating them from Taiwan’s soft power (education, human resource development, public health, medicine, natural disaster prevention).

international climate, countries that end their dependence on others will have a head start on national development.” Development through government intervention by ensuring domestic demand and organizing key manufacturing industries under the flag of the national brand indicates a strong role in state policies toward strategic industries, including semiconductors, digital, and cybersecurity industries.³⁶ In the national day address of 2020, the rapid dismantling of supply chain realignment was stated to be irreversible. Securing Taiwan as an “indispensable force in global supply chains” required “integrating government and private sector resources... to achieve full and comprehensive participation in the realignment process.”³⁷ These statements, directed at a domestic audience, play homage to political norms that take for granted a proactive state in managing markets and directing strategic industries ever since the postwar period.

On the other hand, supply chain management can be used to place Taiwan as a key node that benefits the region. In promoting global health and its track record in preventing the spread of COVID-19, Taiwan seeks collaboration in the health industries with the international community and the Indo-Pacific region.³⁸ Similarly, the supply chain is used discursively to identify the players that are optimal for the realignment required and the benefits their collaboration brings. In welcoming investment from Microsoft that would add “innovative momentum” and a “jolt of added vitality across the board,” Tsai linked firms, states, and supply chains into a synergetic continuum:

Taiwan and the US are committed partners in developing global markets. Together we can create a global sales network, enter and establish ourselves in the Indo-Pacific region, build brand new supply chains, and develop vast new business opportunities.³⁹

The restructured and resilient supply chains would benefit Taiwan and US national security concerns by bringing high-end technology manufacturing to America and investment and infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific.⁴⁰ The coupling of shared values with trade is made explicit on several occasions. For example, in

³⁶ “Inaugural Address of ROC 15th-term President Tsai Ing-wen,” Office of the President (Republic of China), May 20, 2020, accessed December 21, 2021, <https://english.president.gov.tw/NEWS/6004>.

³⁷ “President Tsai Delivers 2020 National Day Address,” Office of the President (Republic of China), October 10, 2020, accessed December 21, 2021, <https://english.president.gov.tw/NEWS/6051>.

³⁸ “President Tsai Attends 2020 Global Health Forum in Taiwan,” Office of the President (Republic of China), October 23, 2020, accessed December 21, 2021, <https://english.president.gov.tw/NEWS/6057>.

³⁹ “President Tsai Attends Microsoft’s Announcement of Investment in Taiwan Press Conference,” Office of the President (Republic of China), October 26, 2020, accessed December 21, 2021, <https://english.president.gov.tw/NEWS/6059>.

⁴⁰ “President Tsai Attends 2020 AmCham Taipei Annual General Meeting,” Office of the President (Republic of China), November 17, 2020, accessed December 21, 2021, <https://english.president.gov.tw/NEWS/6070>.

her remarks to the 2021 EU Investment Forum to highlight Taiwan's mention in the joint communication on strategic cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, Tsai noted:

Taiwan and the European Union enjoy shared values, including democracy, freedom, the rule of law, and human rights. This makes Taiwan a reliable and natural partner for the European Union, whether in regional security, economic partnership, trade, or investment.⁴¹

This section has revealed how strategic narratives in the pandemic period have shifted toward orienting Taiwan's domestic concerns to the regional architecture defined externally by regional powers. These narratives include broader international/regional narratives intended to position Taiwan in the Indo-Pacific region, national narratives that increase the coherency and compatibility of policy aims with domestic agendas, and issue narratives geared toward solving present issues like the fate of global industrial supply chains. The pandemic has served as a key narrative aligning agent which has been used to equate previous geopolitical disruptions to supply chains as part of a series of threats that require a rethinking of global supply chains.

Conclusion

In February 2022, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the "America Competes Act," which will provide the domestic semiconductor industry with billions of dollars in funding for infrastructure, research, design, and bolstering of the supply chain. The bill also includes provisions to improve relations with Taiwan and "the Quad."⁴² If successfully reconciled with a similar bill passed in the U.S. Senate earlier and signed by the president, it would likely heighten the geopolitical stakes in the struggle for supply chain restructuring while reinforcing the island's importance in the Indo-Pacific.

While it is still too early to ascertain whether this legislation and other actions taken by states in the region will create ideologized supply chains of a bipolar nature not seen since the end of the Cold War, political narratives of the involved powers do suggest cognitive exercises that challenge and reshape the efficacy of once-established economic networks.

Strategic narratives can give scholars and policymakers an "early warning system" of how earlier systems have been perceived to be overturned and what actors identify (or do not explicitly identify) as the root causes of new ideational innovation. For instance, none of the strategic narratives analyzed from the Taiwanese perspective mention the geopolitical and economic jujitsu of balancing

⁴¹ "President Tsai Addresses 2021 EU Investment Forum," Office of the President (Republic of China), October 14, 2021, accessed December 21, 2021, <https://english.president.gov.tw/NEWS/6178>.

⁴² Jacob Fromer and Owen Churchill, "US House Finalises Bill to Confront China, Including Provisions on Semiconductors and Taiwan Ties," *The South China Morning Post*, January 26, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/3164736/us-house-finalises-bill-confront-china-including-provisions>.

competing political and economic interests that took place before this current phase and why the status quo of depoliticized supply chain leadership has been maintained for so long and indeed why it came to such a critical stage at present.

Future research could greatly expand the scope of sources of strategic narratives and their interactions with an increasingly complex media ecology that goes beyond traditional media and includes social media and discursive concepts along a diversity of areas, including culture, people-to-people exchanges, and values. As the interest in the Indo-Pacific region increases, how different issue networks, policy entrepreneurs, and thematic coalitions create, destroy, or maintain strategy frameworks will rely heavily on the interacting perceptions of material and ideational resources that can be leveraged to meet (new) demands of order and predictability.

Disclaimer

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