



Taiwanese Soft Power Diplomacy in Latin America and the Caribbean

La diplomacia de poder blando taiwanés en América Latina y el Caribe

KLAAS DYKMANN

Roskilde University, Denmark

dykmann@ruc.dk

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1232-2395>

Abstract: The article analyses Taiwan's soft power diplomacy towards Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). As a state with a contested statehood and a lack of sufficient hard power resources, Taiwan must refer to (hybrid) soft power activities to make other states, allies or not, want it to survive. Most of Taiwan's diplomatic supporters are in LAC. However, LAC countries' different relations with Taiwan, diverging views on the US and China, and dissimilar political cultures seem to require a "hybrid" and varied soft power diplomacy in LAC.

Keywords: Soft power; Taiwan; Latin America; China.

Resumen: El artículo analiza la diplomacia de poder blando de Taiwán hacia América Latina y el Caribe (ALC). Siendo un Estado con una condición de soberanía disputada y falta de recursos suficientes de poder duro, Taiwán debe recurrir a actividades (híbridas) de poder blando para lograr que otros Estados, aliados o no, deseen su supervivencia. La mayoría de los apoyos diplomáticos de Taiwán se encuentran en ALC. Sin embargo, las diferentes relaciones de los países de ALC con Taiwán, las visiones divergentes sobre Estados Unidos y China, y las disímiles culturas políticas parecen requerir una diplomacia de poder blando "híbrida" y variada en ALC.

Palabras clave: Poder blando, Taiwán, América Latina, China.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Republic of China (ROC), better known as Taiwan, has long maintained diplomatic relations with countries in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). For some

time since the end of the civil war in 1949, Taiwan had the upper hand in the diplomatic competition with Beijing. This began to change gradually after the Sino-US American rapprochement in the early 1970s that led to the ROC's replacement by the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the United Nations, including the prestigious Security Council. In the past decades, the PRC has grown rich and more powerful. President Xi Jinping abandoned Deng Xiaoping's belief in understatement and pursues to turn China into a superpower until 2049 (by the latest), which marks the 100th anniversary of the PRC's birth. Xi reaffirms the One China Principle that claims there is only one China (the PRC) and considers Taiwan a "renegade province". This also affects Beijing's diplomatic activities: other states must only recognise the PRC and cannot recognise both "Chinas" at once. In practice, however, many states hold official diplomatic relations with the PRC and unofficial relations with Taiwan. At the same time, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been an infrastructure and economic programme to facilitate China's trade connections world-wide, and a soft power offensive to show particularly poorer societies that Beijing offers an alternative to western values-conditioned investments and aid. LAC countries were also drawn into this appealing game since 2018. Ending the diplomatic recognition of Taiwan is the essential precondition to sign lucrative-seeming agreements with the PRC.

Today, despite occasional rapprochement phases, US-Chinese relations are tense, and the global geopolitical scenario is complicated. Rumours about a Chinese invasion or blockade of Taiwan increase. Western observers detect a more belligerent rhetoric from Beijing, claiming Taiwan's incorporation possibly already before 2030. There are speculations that ponder such an invasion could already take place because of China's domestic and international challenges such as faltering growth, significant tariffs by the new US administration, big inequalities between cities/countryside; an aging population, a disillusioned youth and a growing Taiwanese identity. The percentage of Taiwanese supporting unification with the mainland shrank from 20 percent in 1996 to five percent today (Batto 2022, 1). Over the past four decades, Taiwan has become a "liberal, tolerant, pluralist democracy" and the PRC has "remained a harsh autocracy" (Batto 2022, 1).

Scholars either see China's engagement in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) as essentially enriching and mutually beneficial or as Beijing's conscious challenge of US hegemony in the hemisphere (Zreik 2024b, 206/207; Dykmann and Hede 2025). While the first, more optimistic view is held by international political economy scholars, the second, more pessimistic position has been maintained by IR experts (Wise 2021, 44). Considering Washington's fading global outreach, the PRC started propagating a "multipolar world", attracting sympathies from non-western governments. With breathtaking growth rates, China's hunger for raw materials grew exponentially and led to increased connections with LAC (Zreik 2024b, 209).

As a region, LAC is still the numerally most important supporter of Taiwan. Of the twelve states maintaining full diplomatic relations with Taipei in August 2025, four are from the Caribbean (Haiti, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, and Saint

Vincent and the Grenadines), two from Central America (Belize, Guatemala) and Paraguay the only remaining one from South America. Ellis (2023) assumes that in case of a US-Chinese war over the Taiwan question, Latin America could become a “battleground” as well. The supposed “hegemon” of the western hemisphere, the United States, has maintained a “strategic ambiguity” concerning the possible defence of Taiwan in case of a Chinese attack, meaning that it officially did not guarantee military support for Taipei in the case of an attack on the island. This was meant to discourage too bold moves towards independence declarations from Taipei, but also to warn Beijing that the US nevertheless might defend Taiwan in case of an invasion. US President Biden had abandoned on four occasions this strategic uncertainty by stating US support for Taiwan if attacked. The new US administration has sent mixed signals: US president Trump criticised Taiwan as a security free-rider and stealing high tech jobs, while the State Department deleted a sentence on its website in February 2025 that had stated that the US did not support Taiwan’s independence (Department of State 2025).

As Taiwan lacks the military means and economic resources to guarantee its survival against China’s plans to integrate it, its soft power approach has a more existential significance than in other countries (Rockower 2011, 109): How does Taiwan’s soft power approach to LAC look like? To answer this question, this study first addresses the state of the art and then outlines the theoretical framework and conceptualises the notion of soft power. This is followed by an analysis of relations between LAC and Taiwan. The fourth part analyses Taiwan’s soft power approach in LAC. Finally, the conclusions will summarise the study and respond to the research question.

State of the art

Research on Taiwan’s diplomacy focuses on its peculiar role in the international system (Huang 2024; Tan 2019), the question of recognition (Wu 2024; Rich and Dahmer 2020; Shaohua 2015) and the limited options due to its isolation from international bodies and its few diplomatic partners (Wu 2017). Studies tackle challenges of Taiwan’s more recent public diplomacy (Alexander 2025; Otmazgin 2023) and on how Taiwanese official and informal diplomacy and soft power is shaped by media, diplomacy and propaganda (Rawnsley 2000; 2014; 2017), parliamentary activities (Šabič and Huang 2021) or carried out through its unofficial and official embassies (Pajtinka 2017) or think tanks (Abb and Hao Yang 2018). Research on Taiwanese soft power concentrates mostly on Asia (Hsin-Huang and Hao Yang 2025; Chan 2023; Chiao 2022; Rasool and Ruggiero 2022).

Newer research on the relations between LAC and Taiwan/PRC either put these in the context of the US-PRC rivalry (Wu 2024) or concentrate on Taiwan’s diplomatic allies – with a focus on development cooperation (Fonseca and Su 2024, 83; Lemus-Delgado 2023; Lemus-Delgado and Dueñas 2021; Teng 2021a) or the diplomatic struggle between the PRC and Taiwan in LAC (Fan 2021; Por-

tada *et al.* 2020; Rich and Dahmer 2022; Teng 2021b, Johnson 2024; Bock and Parilla 2024).

While scholars have analysed the soft power competition between Taiwan and the PRC in LAC (Zupello 2024; Zreik 2024a; Lee 2023; Fonseca 2021), most studies concentrate on current or previous diplomatic supporters of Taiwan (Su 2024; Xiang and Xin 2024). There is little research on Taiwan's soft power in LAC countries that have traditionally recognised the PRC (Fonseca and Su 2024; Moraiti 2024; Stamelos and Tsimaras 2024) or whether Taiwan should focus on unofficial relations with non-allies instead of small, allied nations (Rich and Dahmer 2020; Huynh and Truong 2024, 3). There is a research gap on how Taiwan designs its soft power approach to LAC countries and whether there are variations in its strategy.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

Robert A. Dahl summarised power as follows: A has the power to make B do what B otherwise wouldn't do. Soft power means that A appeals to B and makes B wish to want what A wants. The latter is more persuasion and not based on coercion but attraction (Carlsnæs 2013). This study relates to the concept of soft power as non-military and non-economic means to influence others. Joseph Nye developed the concept to add a new layer to the classic rationalist assumption of ("hard") power, usually associated with military strength, resources and economic capabilities, but also demography, geography and many other factors. His central definition is: "the ability to affect others and obtain preferred outcomes by attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment" (Nye 2023, 37). Nye originally developed the notion in 1990 to demonstrate that the United States had a pull-factor in its lifestyle model and culture that many societies in the world deemed appealing. This found expression in individuals and societies being attracted to or even emulating the US styles (pop culture, music, series, movies) or people wanting to move or at least visit the US (Nye 2023, 13-14). Gradually, soft power gained acceptance as an instrument in international relations in the European Union, the United States and eventually China, even though understandings and uses of the concept still vary considerably (Nye 2023, 35). Nye also speaks of "smart power" that demands a continuing adaptation to balance hard and soft power due to "changing geopolitical and economic contexts" (Nye 2023, 63, 37). China was eager to develop its own soft power in the early 2000s through Confucius institutes, historical references, "Third world solidarity" narratives, and notions such as "the China Dream", "harmonious world" or "All under Heaven" (Lemus-Delgado 2020; Dykmann and Bruun 2021). For instance, Hagström and Nordin (2020, 520) argue that the PRC's harmony discourse tried to transport the narrative that the world doesn't have to worry about a rising China as it pursues harmony, unlike its western and Japanese predecessors. In addition, they find that Beijing's soft power also paved the way and legitimised the use of hard power for a coercive "harmonisation". Even

though Nye focused on the virtual soft power competition between China and the US and highlighted that soft power cannot be prescribed from above, recent trends in Africa, Asia and Latin America have shown that China is gaining ground in the non-western world. Together with targeted mis- and disinformation, the west's bad reputation after vaccine nationalism in western societies during the Covid-19 pandemic, the divisive reaction to the Russian invasion in Ukraine or the controversial and seemingly unconditional support for Israel's war in Gaza have cultivated anti-western and anti-American sentiments in non-western societies (see Garip 2024) that provide fertile ground for Beijing's "South-South" narrative (Chao 2024; Rofel and Rojas 2022). Unlike the US and Europe with their imperial or colonial past in LAC, China appeared an attractive partner and could benefit from anti-American and western-critical sentiments (Erikson and Chen 2007, 75). The connection between the factors fuelling anti-western sentiments in the non-western world and US foreign policy decisions became obvious with the 95\$ billion legislative package that the US House of Representatives passed in April 2024 granting security support to Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan.

China's soft power moreover challenges the liberal international order, global institutions and the United States in particular. The Sino-US soft power competition also extends to the soft-power rivalry between the PRC and Taiwan. Sympathy and support for maintaining the status quo (Taiwan's de-facto independence) from non-diplomatic partners is a goal beyond diplomatic recognition (Delman 2024, 3).

Soft power activities project culture, values, and policies and interact with societal actors (Chiao 2022, 93). In the literature, there are distinctions but also almost synonymous uses of the notions, soft power, public diplomacy, culture diplomacy or a hierarchisation, where public diplomacy employs soft power as a tool. In this article, I use soft power, cultural and public diplomacy synonymously as consciously employed approach by the Taiwanese state to support its foreign policy goal to widen other states' support for Taiwan's survival in the existing status quo. As Taiwan maintains proper diplomatic relations with some states, informal or "hybrid" relations with others, employs actors that defy a clear state/non-state classification, and targets different audiences with diverse approaches, there could be various soft power strategies. As soft power diplomacy is state-driven, but not exclusively shaped by state actors, the notion of hybridity helps to detect the changing nature of soft power initiatives, especially in the case of Taiwan's soft power diplomacy towards LAC. Bringing in the concept of hybrid soft power practices, it enables research to analyse Taiwan's soft power activities beyond state/non-state, public/private, hard/soft power and ally/non-ally dichotomies that are in flux (Surowiec-Capell and Long 2024; Bouris and Fernández 2018).

To analyse Taiwan's soft power in LAC, this study relies on recent studies, a content analysis of the foreign minister's speeches and expert interviews. Nine semi-structured interviews with experts on the topic were conducted, such as diplomats, academics and other analysts of LAC-Taiwanese relations. These interviews took place

in Taipei and Asunción in April and May 2024 under the condition of anonymity.¹ In addition, presentations at the Paraguayan Foreign Ministry's Diplomatic Academy and at the Universidad Americana in Asunción, informal meetings with groups of academics, diplomats and journalists further contributed to a better understanding of the topic.

3. CHINA, TAIWAN AND THE FIGHT FOR DIPLOMATIC RECOGNITION IN LAC

Since the early 2000s, the People's Republic has been interested in LAC a) as a source of primary products, b) as a market for Chinese products, c) to isolate Taiwan diplomatically, and d) to compete with Washington by offering an alternative to the perceived US hegemony in the region. For China, Taiwan's diplomatic partners are "high-value strategic targets" and due to their economically small size comparatively easy to "tempt" with moderate aid packs or a promised preferential access to the lucrative Chinese market (Ellis 2009, 9, 13-16). Since 2000, the PRC intensified its investments and trade relations with LAC and became involved in regional governance structures as an observer to the Organisation of American States (OAS), the Rio Group and the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB). Moreover, Beijing also sent peacekeeping troops to Haiti (Zreik 2024b, 210-212). This is remarkable as the OAS and the IADB are Washington-based and US-dominated inter-American institutions, and Haiti is one of the few diplomatic allies of Taiwan. To win over LAC, China promoted its own success model and ideology as a counter concept to liberal democracy advocated by the US and Taiwan. Matching Chinese goals, LAC interests in China's presence rests on the region's hope for export-led growth, investment and the PRC as an alternative to US dominance. China's impressive economic growth in the past decades also served as an inspiration for LAC (Ellis 2009, 24, 25, 28).

Diplomatic recognition

The diplomatic competition between Taiwan and the PRC focused on Central America and the Caribbean, where China doesn't have access to vast natural resources and rather operates because of geopolitical concerns. The geographic closeness of these states to the US could also be relevant militarily and for information-gathering for the PRC in a potential conflict between the US and China.

¹ A set of questions on Taiwanese-LAC and specific bilateral relations as well as on the role of the US and China was the backbone of the questionnaire, leaving space for alternative pathways. In Asunción, all interviews were carried out in Spanish. In Taipei most interviews were conducted in English and some in Spanish.

Table 1: LAC countries with full diplomatic relations with Taiwan

State	Subregion	Relations established	Change of diplomatic recognition
Belize	Caribbean/Central America	1989	
Guatemala	Central America	1933	
Haiti	Caribbean	1956	
Paraguay	South America	1957	
Saint Kitts and Nevis	Caribbean	1983	
St. Lucia	Caribbean	1984-1997, 2007	Between 1998-2006 PRC
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	Caribbean	1981	

Table 2: Countries in LAC that previously recognised Taiwan

State	Subregion	Period of diplomatic recognition (Taiwan)	Change to recognising the PRC
Argentina	South America	1945-1972	1972
Barbados	Caribbean	1967-1977	1977
Bahamas	Caribbean	1989-1997	1997
Bolivia	South America	1919-1985	1985
Brazil	South America	1928-1974	1974
Chile	South America	1915-1970	1970
Colombia	South America	1941-1980	1980
Costa Rica	Central America	1941-2007	2007
Cuba	Caribbean	1913-1960	1960
Dominica	Caribbean	1983-2004	2004
Dominican Republic	Caribbean	1941-2018	2018
Ecuador	South America	1946-1971	1971
El Salvador	Central America	1941-2018	2018
Honduras	Central America	1941-2023	2023
Grenada	Caribbean	1989-2005	1989 switch to ROC as protest against Tiananmen massacre
Jamaica	Caribbean	1962-1972	1972
Mexico	North/Central America	1928-1971	1971

Nicaragua	Central America	1930-1985, 1990 to 2021	1985-1990 PRC (under Sandinista government) Since 2021 PRC
Panama	Central America	1912-2017	2017
Peru	South America	1913-1971	1971
Uruguay	South America	1957-1988	1988
Venezuela	South America	1941-1974	1974

Source: <https://www.taiwan-database.net/LL-M04b.htm#allies3>, 25 August 2025.

These states only established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic but never with Taiwan: Guyana (1972), Suriname (1976), Trinidad and Tobago (1974), Antigua and Barbuda (1983).

In broad lines, one could periodise the general change concerning the diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing into four phases. Historical exceptions are Cuba that recognised the PRC in 1960 after the Socialist Revolution on the island, and Uruguay as the so far last South American country switching from Taipei to Beijing in 1988. The first phase took place in the 1970s, the second between 2000 and 2008, the third between 2008 and 2016 and the fourth since 2016: 1) While some LAC governments switched recognition in line with the change of UN membership in 1971 (Chile (1970), Mexico, Ecuador, Peru (1971)), Argentina and Jamaica (both in 1972), Brazil and Venezuela (both in 1974)), 2) Chinese campaigning marked the period between 2000 and 2008, interrupted by 3) the “diplomatic truce” between 2008-2016; and 4) since 2016 a new Chinese campaign began to win over Taiwanese allies. Dominica (2004), Grenada (2005) and Costa Rica (2007) recognised the PRC after they had diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Between 2008 and 2016 Taiwan was governed by the now rather China-sympathetic Kuomintang party that agreed with Beijing on abstaining from the battle on diplomatic recognition, which ended with the inauguration of the Tsai Ing-wen. The fourth, more recent wave of shifts in diplomatic recognition witnessed five LAC countries changing sides: Panama (2017), the Dominican Republic (2018), El Salvador (2018), Nicaragua (2021) and Honduras in 2023. Especially Panama (with the US-built Panama Canal and the US Dollar as one of the two official currencies) and El Salvador had long been considered close US allies (Portada *et al.* 2020, 562-563).

In Costa Rica, the shift from Taiwan to the PRC was apparently more driven by President Oscar Ariás's personal beliefs who wanted to internationalise and be more pragmatic concerning Costa Rica's foreign relations. Costa Rican-Chinese negotiations were carried out very secretly (Ellis 2009, 215, 216). Following Costa Rica's

move, there emerged rumours about Panama becoming the next recognition-shifter in the region (Hwang 2024). The Panama Canal was obviously important for the PRC as it was a nodal point for global trade and the entry for Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative to LAC (Chávez Rodríguez and Mohlin 2023; Kellner and Wintgens 2021; Méndez and Alden 2021). Nevertheless, it took another ten years until Panama changed sides in 2017. Panama's switch away from Taiwan was a "major affront" to the Trump administration, but China "brought considerably more material resources to the table in Panama, including expensive upgrades to the Panama Canal, and had established a sound record of working collegially with Panama" (Wise 2021, 54). Chen-Huei Wu and Po-Hsiang Liao (2021) argue that the Taiwanese-Panamanian Free Trade Agreement from 2003 is still valid as both countries are WTO members and Taiwan also maintains other FTAs with WTO members that aren't diplomatic partners.

Nicaragua first had recognised the Republic of China and then under the left-wing Sandinistas switched to Beijing. However, after the Sandinistas lost at the polls in 1990 and were replaced by the conservative party National Opposition Union, Nicaragua again began recognising Taipei. After the Sandinistas returned to power in 2006, calls for switching back to PRC grew louder, especially since Costa Rica switched to Beijing in 2007 (Ellis 2009, 233). In the meantime, an alternative sea passage to the Panama Canal, the "Inter-Oceanic Canal" through Nicaragua, paid by the Chinese, filled some headlines, but eventually did not materialise (Grau Vila 2016). Nonetheless, it took 15 years until the Sandinista government switched back to Beijing in 2021.

Portada *et al.* (2020, 553) argue that Central American states may also have "fallen" to China as Taiwan and the US did not coordinate a "comprehensive investment strategy" to discourage a deeper engagement with the PRC instead. However, sources in Taiwan's Foreign Ministry acknowledge that there are some package solutions for diplomatic partners (f.i. access to both markets), where the US and Taiwan coordinate economic support (Interviews Taipei, 2024). For instance, The US State Department has facilitated a Partnership Opportunity Delegation to coordinate public and private cooperation between the US and "countries of strategic importance" with Taiwan and Paraguay on renewable energy (US Department of State 2021). But if this constitutes a coordinated strategic approach to keep Taiwan's partners content is doubtful and may see another turn with the new US administration. As only Guatemala and Belize are Taiwan's diplomatic partners in Central America in April 2025, the US strategy to counter Chinese advances in the region and roll back Beijing's influence seems not to have prospered also due to Washington's less "comprehensive and consistent" support for Taipei's partners (see Portada *et al.* 2020, 556-557).

Taiwan and the PRC in the Caribbean

After decolonisation, Caribbean states traditionally depended on Western assistance, investment and preferential market access and, due to their size, needed to protect themselves. With the changes of the Cotonou Agreement in the early 2000s, the Ca-

Caribbean nations lost some of the preferential treatment by the European Union. The Caribbean states then reoriented their external relations by diversification – and China “filled the void” (Johnson 2024, 41). The Caribbean states have been divided in terms of diplomatic recognition: four recognise the ROC, nine the PRC. Even though this keeps the Caribbean countries from speaking unanimously for instance in CARICOM (Caribbean Community), it doesn’t mirror an ideological divide but rather different responses to offers from Taiwan and the PRC by the national decision-makers. The aid the PRC provided to attract Caribbean states to change sides or to reward them for such a change, is sizeable (Ellis 2009, 246, 247). The PRC took advantage of the region’s hosting of the Cricket World Cup and promised help to build new and renovate old stadiums for that purpose (Johnson 2024, 43).

Grenada had recognised the PRC until 1989, then switched to the ROC to protest the Tiananmen Square crackdown in that year. Grenada turned again to Beijing in 2005 because of the destruction of its cricket stadium by Hurricane Ivan in 2004 – Taiwan did not provide sufficient funds to erect a new one before the Cricket World Cup in 2007, which gave the PRC the upper hand (Johnson 2024, 47). Grenada recognised Beijing in 2005 and in return, the Chinese build a multisport stadium, which was inaugurated with Chinese and local workers and officials. At the stadium’s inauguration, the band played the ROC anthem, which led to some dissonance with the Chinese (Ellis 2009, 247). In the aftermath of the diplomatic switch, Taipei filed a lawsuit of the Taiwanese Export-Import Bank against Grenada in December 2006 and requested 28,1 million Dollars repaid from Grenada. In January 2007, the court ruled that Grenada had to repay the loans in full back to Taiwan (Johnson 2024, 47-50). Similar to the Grenadian case, Bahamas recognised the PRC in 1997 and got a logistics hub of a Chinese company (important for container shipping via South America and the Panama Canal), which benefits the Bahamas but also causes worries in Washington concerning a potential military use of Chinese logistics operation close to the US (Ellis 2009, 248).

St. Lucia was “flip-flopping” between Beijing and Taipei (Johnson 2024, 50) and switched back to recognising Taiwan in 2007 because of a government change (former Prime Minister Compton returned to power). St. Lucia’s diplomatic switch was also expression of disenchantment with the way the PRC administered aid and dissatisfaction concerning a project for a football stadium. Insufficient planning placed the stadium in an area not very reachable for the people. In addition, the stadium construction was bound to Chinese firms and workers – even though it was not completely financed by China. This led the St. Lucian government to pay with tax-payers money for Chinese labourers and construction firms to complete the stadium (Ellis 2009, 248). Even after the previously pro-Chinese candidate Anthony won the elections in 2011, he surprisingly kept the alliance with Taipei. He stated that St. Lucia mustn’t “sell” its sovereignty. In 2017, St. Lucia opened an embassy in Taipei (Johnson 2024, 53, 50).

Apparently, the Dominican Republic and Haiti were in the PRC’s focus to campaign for a diplomatic switch during the 2000s. In 1996, China opened a Commercial

Office in Port-au-Prince and Haiti a trade office in Beijing. In the same year, the PRC threatened to veto MINUSTAH (peacekeeping mission to Haiti). Beijing's resistance to renew that mission's mandate by a year was interpreted as an attempt to put pressure on Haiti to end recognising Taipei (Ellis 2009, 249). Regardless of these Chinese efforts to block the peacekeeping mission in Haiti, the PRC had itself dispatched a Chinese police force to that mission two years earlier, which were "the first Chinese troops in Latin America in the modern era" (Ellis 2009, 249).

The intensified Chinese campaign and check book diplomacy between 2000 and 2008 resulted in the switch of diplomatic recognition by Dominica and Grenada. However, Taiwan could also surprisingly welcome St. Lucia again as an ally in 2007 – a switch back to Taipei that had become very rare. Johnson (2024, 47) holds that Dominica "paid China back" by criticising US House speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022. Taiwan's legal action against Grenada constitutes a case of small state leaders' decision-making "without complete assessment or prior consultation" but rather on more instant economic interests or even the necessity of survival (Johnson 2024, 53). One Caribbean diplomat held that "Taiwan is basically involved in all aspects of society, and visible, it makes a difference" (Interviews Taipei, 2024).

Taiwan and Paraguay

After the end of the diplomatic truce in 2016, Taipei got under pressure again, also in Paraguay. As a result, then President Horacio Cartes (2013–2018) was able to negotiate a trade deal with Taiwan with hitherto unprecedented favourable conditions for his country. Since 2018, under President Mario Abdo Benítez (2018–2023), Paraguay promoted a supportive Taiwan policy but also used commercial openings with Beijing. In 2021, bilateral Taiwanese-Paraguayan trade amounted to USD 196 million (but less than one per cent of all Paraguayan trade in that year) (Troisi Melean 2024, 75). Despite Paraguay's opportunity to trade with the PRC and receive beneficial treatment from Taipei, there are still rumours about a switch. However, Taiwan has so far reacted flexibly to these challenges, for instance by opening its market to different meat products from Paraguay after some protests from farmers (Interviews Asunción, 2024). Investments from the PRC and a better access to the Chinese markets could be very lucrative, but Taiwan seems to manage its relations with Paraguay well as it invests in future technologies such as high-technology: In 2018, the Taiwan-Paraguay Polytechnical University was established, training Paraguayans in advanced high tech – "a unique university in LAC" (Interviews Taipei, 2024). Moreover, it appears that almost all civil servants and persons employed in the public sector have been at least once to Taiwan to establish personal ties (Interviews Asunción, 2024). And these direct connections and the experience of getting to know Taiwan as a real place and having personal encounters, helps to create bonds – in terms of what Beijing also tries to establish under the label "people-to-people" approach. It also promotes a network

between Paraguayans and Taiwanese that promises to last (in the tradition of the Latin American “having contacts” or “amiguismo” and the Chinese “guanxi”) (Interviews Asunción, 2024).

The significant role of the United States for the diplomatic alliance between Asunción and Taipei is obvious and can hardly be overestimated. All interview partners in Asunción and Taipei implicitly or explicitly insinuated that the US plays a tremendous role – as enabler, financing partner or diplomatic mediator. This means that in the periodic re-negotiations of Taiwan’s support for its allies, the US can come in – or not, as in the case of several Central American countries. In Paraguay, the US has been a long-standing ally, going back to the times of joint anti-communism, which is mentioned as one factor why Paraguay would have a hard time switching to “communist China” (Interview Asunción, 2024). In addition, Paraguay’s partnership with Taiwan gives Asunción a privileged diplomatic access to the US.

The tense situation in the Corona pandemic and the need for medical equipment ushered in Chinese “vaccine diplomacy” and led the opposition in Asunción to request a diplomatic shift, which eventually failed and split the opposition (Hale 2020). One diplomat summarised the Chinese lack of reliably delivering promised vaccines to Paraguay as a case “why not to submit to China” (Interviews Taipei, 2024).

The country’s political and economic elites are comparatively homogenous and tend to announce Taiwanese projects also because of their own political and economic interests: “The golden rule is that the ruling Partido Colorado in Paraguay has always garnered the largest share of material benefits from foreign aid.” (Teng 2021b, 188). All interview partners in Asunción and Taipei emphasised that for now, relations have been solid and stable under the given circumstances. If the domestic situation in Paraguay, the PRC or Taiwan or the foreign policy orientation of the US change dramatically or the regional environment (Paraguay’s neighbourhood) or geopolitics at the global scale witness substantial alterations, the alliance could, however, face problems. Within Paraguay, it appears to be no secret that politicians are prone to corruption and therefore have been bought by the PRC to support a diplomatic switch. Beyond the political class, other sectors of the Paraguayan society can at any time cause problems for a Taiwanese-supporting government – the so-called “Paraguayan dilemma” (Romero and Dabolsco 2020) always requires a timely reaction from Taipei and the embassy in Asunción (Interviews Taipei and Asunción, 2024). The prevailing conservatism and anti-communism certainly give Taipei an advantage in Paraguay, even though both societies are “very different”: While civil liberties connect both countries, Paraguay remains “catholic and conservative” – and Taiwan allows “abortion and gay marriage” and has a broader vision and different views on nuclear energy (Interviews Taipei and Asunción, 2024). The people-to-people approach, consisting of numerous exchange programmes, has contributed decisively to a closer and more personal relationship between several sectors in Paraguayan society and their Taiwanese counterparts. It is reasonable to talk of “smart power”, which combines investment in key sectors, soft

power and people-to-people cooperation. According to a diplomat, (the government of) Paraguay “doesn’t demand for money but asks for openness, investments and training” (Interviews Taipei, 2024).

The Paraguayan case can seem unique because the country hasn’t shifted sides despite endemic corruption, internal pressures (the “Paraguayan dilemma”) and external scenarios (China-friendly governments in the big neighbour countries, vaccine crisis). The stability through the governing Colorado party, the people-to-people relations between Taiwanese and Paraguayans, the “smart cooperation” and traditional anticommunism in Paraguay and the preferential relations to the United States by keeping the diplomatic recognition of Taiwan are factors that jointly explain why Asunción still maintains its support for Taipei. As Paraguay also trades with the PRC and at the same time enjoys a special treatment from the US as long as it supports Taiwan, Asunción benefits from this alliance.

Smart cooperation after Honduras’s switch to the PRC

After ending diplomatic relations between Honduras and Taiwan, the ROC foreign ministry criticised that Honduras had asked for more money and compared the amount with what the PRC was willing to provide. It further warned its diplomatic allies of China’s broken promises and debt traps (MOFA 2023). Since Honduras’ policy shift, Taiwan has abandoned to compete in a “meaningless dollar diplomacy competence with the PRC”, recognising that it will no longer be able to compete economically with the People’s Republic when it comes to “buy” diplomatic recognition. Instead, the ROC targets specific areas and hopes to convince its diplomatic partners to maintain their support. Nevertheless, Taiwan had already declared the end of “dollar” or “check book diplomacy” as a reaction to the loss of nine allies between 2000 and 2008 (Zreik 2024b, 204). However, the Tsai government did engage in check book diplomacy despite rejecting this in public, which also partly explains why some of the Foreign Ministry’s budget is classified (Huang 2024, 506). Similarly, since 2011 Taiwan no longer reported on the aid provided to specific countries (Portada *et al.* 2020, 558).

Taiwan’s “smart cooperation” as a return value for continued diplomatic recognition is based on investments and support for infrastructure in the countries of its partners, which may resemble the way Beijing provides assistance in this regard. However, Taipei provides development in human capital and talent as well as in the area of digital transformation that cannot be matched by the PRC (Fabbro and Gramer 2023).

Taiwan uses its existing instruments: CATO (Central American Trade Office), TAITRA (Taiwan External Trade Development Council), ICDF (International Cooperation Development Fund) and the ROC-Export-Import Bank (Fonseca and Su 2024, 85). Nevertheless, there are differences between Central and South America and the Caribbean, between diplomatic partner countries and non-allies, and even

between diplomatic partners such as Guatemala and Paraguay. There is no coordination between LAC embassies in Taipei, partly as interests do not coincide or even are contrary (Interviews Taipei, 2024).

To support Taiwan in its endeavours to keep allies, US Congress adopted the TAIPEI Act (Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative Act) in 2020, which seeks to discourage Taipei's supporters from shifting sides. Even though the US recognises the "One China policy" (but not Beijing's "One China principle") and thus lacks official diplomatic relations with Taiwan, Washington has increasingly supported Taipei politically, economically and in international fora. Furthermore, the US supports Taiwan as a democratic beacon in the Western Pacific, but also in LAC and in international institutions and groups such as the G7 (Fabbro and Gramer 2023). One diplomat from the Caribbean commented on the trilateral relations: "Taiwan is a kind of additional extension of US diplomacy" (Interviews Taipei, 2024).

To keep its allies in LAC, Taiwan can be seen as "clinging onto sinking ships, but the ship has not sunk yet" (Veney and Abidde 2024, 392).

4. TAIWAN'S SOFT POWER DIPLOMACY IN LAC

"Asians think ahead, Latin American and Caribbean more short-term."
Diplomat from the Caribbean, Taipei, May 2024

This quote, reflecting stereotypical assumptions, may explain why long-term strategies from Taiwan don't always match immediate interests in LAC and thus constitute a mayor challenge for Taipei's soft power approach in the region.

Taiwanese soft power in LAC

Taiwan has soft power as it is a prosperous country with an impressive democratic transition, respect for the rule of law and human rights, and a quite successful economic progress particularly in the IT sector. Integrating Taiwan into global supply chains served as an international strategy (Alexander 2025, 595). Even though it is difficult to find reliable statistical information on economic and social indicators, as regional and UN-related institutions don't consistently provide data on Taiwan (or on "Chinese Taipei"), it is possible to approximate Taiwan's standing in the world: It is among the high performers. According to its GDP and wealth, Taiwan is a high-income country and among the richest in the world, has a stable middle class (Allianz Global Wealth Report 2024) and a high level of equality with a Gini coefficient of 33.9 – ironically more equal than the Socialist PRC (Statista 2024). In terms of gender equality, the OECD Development Centre's Social Institutions and Gender Index ranks Taiwan very high (9.2 SIGI Index). In the January 2024 election, women took

41,59% of the seats in parliament, more than the world average (26,7%) and double the Asian average (21.3%) (Delman 202, 10). As the first female president (2016-2024), Tsai Ing-wen did not derive from a political dynasty as many other leaders in the region. Minorities (indigenous people, LGBTQ+) are supposedly more respected (Otmazgin 2023, 247). In May 2019, Taiwan legalised same-sex marriages.

Soft power and national narratives

Rawnsley (2017, 984) clearly acknowledged its soft power potential but attests Taiwan a poorly designed public diplomacy. The challenge has been to organise and purvey Taiwan's soft power potential to gain international sympathies and support. More concretely, Taiwan wants to be more visible in international fora, participate more in international meetings and organisations and not lose more diplomatic allies that still recognise the Republic of China. One general obstacle is that knowledge of Taiwan in the world is still overwhelmingly shaped by ignorance (Rawnsley 2017, 985) beyond its role in the US-China rivalry and a potential conflict with the PRC and less so as a society or culture in its own right (Otmazgin 2023, 247). A successful soft power strategy is supposed to distribute an appealing national narrative. However, there is disagreement about what constitutes "Taiwanese culture" – cultural diversity, cosmopolitanism and a modern and open Taiwan for the DPP or traditional Chinese culture in Taiwan that belongs to the mainland for the Kuomintang (KMT) (Alexander 2025, 596; Otmazgin 2023, 255). Unlike other stable democracies, this leads to considerable variations in the projected narrative in case of a government change from one party to the other. Today, the DPP government constructs its strategic narrative on Taiwan's democratisation and back-up for international law and norms, promoting "human rights, free markets, and democratic governance" (Chiao 2022, 94). However, Krumbein (2022) found that Taiwan doesn't insist in human rights in its foreign relations with its allies that all rank lower in related indexes. Human rights are not a major concern in Taiwan's official diplomacy and are promoted by "outsourcing" through the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy (Krumbein 2022, 868-70). This non-official soft power diplomacy through foundations and NGO cooperation is a conscious choice as most societies in diplomatic partner countries tend to more conservative views.

Besides the disputed national narrative, Taiwan's foreign policy more consistently follows five pillars, summarised by Alexander (2025, 596) as PEACE: "Protect strong ties with the United States; Encourage a worldview that Taiwan is a morally "good" international actor. Abide by the One China Policy. Consolidate Taiwan's importance to global supply chains. Ensure congruence between what Taiwan says and what Taiwan does in practice" (Alexander 2025, 596). Adhering to the One China Policy also explains why Taipei has rather conducted a defensive (and not offensive) soft power diplomacy (Chan 2023, 237).

Taiwan projects three narratives: 1) as a universal economic success and supreme producer of topnotch technologies. 2) as a democratic success, now abiding the rule of

law, human rights and respecting international law and norms, and 3) as a progressive society, respecting LGBTQ+ rights and save haven for diverse people. The first narrative appeals in principle to everyone, while no. 2 may raise sympathy and support in other “like-minded” countries. The progressive narrative targets more friendly societies in North America, Europe and Oceania than democratic countries with conservative mindsets in Asia and LAC (Interviews Taipei, 2024).

Soft power diplomacy since Ma’s presidency

Unlike the more confrontational and miscalculated approach of his predecessor Chen-Shui-bian (DPP) (Huang 2024, 495), President Ma Ying-jeou (2008-16) from the more China-friendly KMT, pursued a “viable diplomacy” – improving cross-Strait relations (Lee 2023). The Ma government elevated soft power, established the “Taiwan Academy” (*Taiwan Shuyuan*) and provided more resources for cultural diplomacy and exchange programmes (Huang 2024, 497). Ma located Taiwanese soft power within the Sinitic culture and cooperation with the PRC in the areas of culture and economy, which was well received in the PRC that endorsed this “Chinese approach” (Lee 2023, 235).

In 2012, the previous Council on Cultural Affairs was upgraded to a ministry and took over the international communication tasks that the Government Information Office (GIO) had implemented. Such Office was abolished with the creation of the new Ministry of Culture (MOC). At the inauguration of the ministry, Ma held that if politics constitute “a ‘fence’, then culture is ‘the pair of wings that fly over the fence’ hoping that the MOC distribute “Chinese culture with Taiwanese characteristics” internationally (*Taipei Times* 2012). The inclusion of the GIO into the Foreign Ministry also led to a concentration on classic print and broadcast media instead of the new digital outlets (Rawnsley 2017, 984, 989, 995). The Public Diplomacy Coordination Council in the Foreign Ministry should signal a change from “political warfare” to public diplomacy (Rawnsley 2017, 990). Still adhering to traditional diplomatic frameworks, the Foreign Ministry reportedly still lacks stronger interest in soft power diplomacy (Otmazgin 2023, 248).

Alexander (2025, 597) and Huang (2024) hold that Taiwan’s public diplomacy shows more continuities since the DPP replaced the KMT in government since 2016. The major difference was that Tsai Ing-wen’s presidency (2016-24) aligned more clearly with the US, also as a result of the US-Chinese trade war and created more “Taiwan caucuses” and “Friendship Groups” (*lienyihui*) (Huang 2024, 502). In the Legislative Yuan, various bipartisan bilateral parliamentary diplomatic projects prospered, with respect to LAC, the Taiwan-Central and South American and Caribbean Countries Parliamentary Association, and the ROC-Argentina, Brazil and Chile Parliamentary Friendship Association.

The ROC has attempted to build on its soft power through promoting civil society projects abroad with the Taiwan-Asia Exchange Foundation (TAEF, created in

2018) and Taiwan Alliance in International Development since 2013. There was the hope that the “Civil Society Connectivity Programme” may help boost two soft power factors: “humanistic values (such as human rights, dignity and empathy) and knowledge of civil society’s development”. Taiwan reacted to the National Endowment for Democracy’s report on authoritarian states’ (like the PRC) use of “sharp power” and established the notion of “warm power” (MOFA 2018, 2).

Alexander identifies two diplomatic initiatives during Tsai’s presidency: the unsuccessful campaign to make Taiwan a member of the World Health Assembly (WHA) and the more successful “Taiwan can help, and Taiwan is helping” Programme during the Covid pandemic, when Taipei offered medical protection, consultancy on containment efforts. The WHA membership campaign was doomed as it framed Taiwan as a victim of Chinese isolation and could not raise Taiwan’s own attractiveness but merely contribute to a more critical view of the PRC. The second campaign, however, succeeded since it purveyed a positive image based on Taiwanese expertise and willingness to support others (Alexander 2025, 600).

Another soft power campaign that builds on both, the old ROC’s anticommunism and Taiwan’s democracy success began after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine: Taiwan referred to the discourse of democratic vs. authoritarian countries, in which Ukraine defended European, and Taiwan Asian democracy against autocratic aggressors: “Taiwan stands on the front line of defense against Chinese authoritarianism. The survival of democratic Taiwan is integral to maintaining a free world” (MOFA 2022). Nevertheless, North America, Europe, Japan and Australia were more receptive for this message than non-western countries, also in LAC, which did not unequivocally reject neither Russia’s nor China’s imperial rhetoric or actions.

Taiwan’s varying approaches

Besides its official embassies, Taiwan has “Economic and Cultural Offices” in Mexico City, Lima, Santiago, Brasilia and Sao Paulo. In Buenos Aires, the de-facto Embassy is called Commercial and Cultural Office. In Paraguay, Taiwan maintains also a General Consulate in Ciudad del Este. The embassy websites are designed similarly: Taiwanese involvement in the specific country and then to the right news on Taiwan’s role and activities in the world. The unofficial offices’ websites are identical to the embassy sites, only the title is different. The Office in Argentina lists an impressive number of activities. In July 2024, the director of Taiwan’s Trade and Cultural Office published an opinion piece about AI (*La Nación* 2024) and on 15 September 2024 a letter in the national newspaper *La Nación* criticising Taiwan’s isolation from the UN system. The embassy in Asunción posts pictures of the ambassador or other Taiwanese officials with graduates from the Polytechnical University, at meetings with small and medium-sized companies, cultural events, food festivals, electric buses and ambulances (donated by Taiwan), fashion shows (new brand ñaguaru), photos with recipients of scholarships, medical cooperation, an orchid exhibition, the visit of a famous Taiwanese youtuber,

donation of toys and many more events. The photos emphasize the people-to-people approach. There are links to reports and videos in English, which reflects the international approach of Taiwan's soft power diplomacy. Taiwan maintains two online news portals in Spanish, *Taiwán Hoy* and *Noticias de Taiwán*, that inform on positive news from the island state and on actions and collaboration in the western hemisphere. It addresses, for instance, how Taiwan provides natural disaster help or how safe Taipei is. Today, only two Spanish-speaking diplomatic partners make the language less important than previously, even though many in the diplomatic corps have Spanish skills (sometimes better than English) (Interviews Taipei, 2024).

Taipei's ambassadors in the seven countries of the hemisphere that recognise Taipei are top diplomats (Interviews Taipei and Asunción, 2024). However, China also sends its best ambassadors to the Caribbean to fight Taiwan's backing there (Zuppello 2024, 247). While the PRC has employed a more neutral tone in its diplomatic approach, as Zuppello states, Taiwan depicts the PRC more critically in LAC. Knowledge about the manipulative and coercive strategies and practices of PRC in LAC are widely unknown to media journalists in the region (Zuppello 2024, 247, 250).

Taiwan has been disseminating entertainment media in LAC to foster cross-cultural communication and to establish a favourable reputation to improve Taiwan's attraction in the cultural sector. The filmmaking tradition in Taiwan is also presented in the region: film festivals, screenings and cultural exchanges are noteworthy in this regard. Likewise, Taiwanese music (traditional, folk and modern) is promoted. Nevertheless, limited resources, cultural differences between Taiwan and LAC and corresponding linguistic challenges prove to be problematic (Zreik 2024a, 127-128). In the interviews with diplomats in Asunción and Taipei (April and May 2024), these cultural activities were appreciated, but the limitations of these "very different cultures" also seemed a reason of concern as to whether these initiatives actually promoted a lasting improvement of Taiwan's image. Like the findings of Jessica Marinaccio's (2021) study based on interviews with diplomats in the Pacific, there are also some signs of a negative perception from smaller countries treated with disdain from Taiwanese counterparts that led to frustration (Interviews Taipei, 2024).

In line with same-sex legalisation in 2019, Taiwan promoted a non-state driven "Tongzhi diplomacy" (Nai-chia and Fell 2021), framing Taiwan as a LGBTQ+-friendly state, even though this effort did not become part of the official (soft power) diplomacy (Chan 2023, 209-210). According to the LGBTQ Index (Equaldex 2025) that combines legal rights with public opinion on LGBTQ+ people, Taiwan is only no. 45 out of 197 countries – ten Latin American (no Caribbean) countries are higher ranked. With a score of 60 (100 is the most progressive), Taiwan's high mark of 73 in legal recognition is contrasted by a comparatively conservative view of the public (48). None of the higher-ranked Latin American countries are Taipei's current diplomatic partners. Belize as number 62 (index of 53), Guatemala (no. 98, index: 39), and Paraguay (no. 117, index: 32) as the most conservative South American country in terms of legal and public recognition of LGBT rights are Taiwan's partners. In the Caribbean, St. Kitts

and Nevis (no. 120, index: 31), Haiti (no. 129, index: 27), St. Lucia (no. 139, index: 22), and St. Vincent and the Grenadines at the bottom (no. 173, index: 11) are even more conservative. This may help explain why Taiwan runs its Tongzhi diplomacy on a non-official track, addressing “like-minded” and “friendly” western countries that have similar views, while the more conservative diplomatic allies probably wouldn’t be won over by such a progressive agenda (Krumbein 2022, 870). Tongzhi diplomacy as a non-governmental civil society-driven soft power project, supported by the state and addressing more progressive and like-minded non-diplomatic partner countries, is a representative example of Taiwan’s hybrid (informal) soft power.

In academia, Taiwan funds and facilitates connections with Latin American institutions, including scholarships, as well as subsidies and admission to libraries and laboratories (Zreik 2024, 127). Educational exchanges at various levels can be evaluated as successful, even though Taiwanese efforts are met with competing Chinese programmes for the most talented future LAC leaders. Some LAC countries have problems recognising ROC degrees, which certainly constitutes a downside for Taipei in this competition. Academic relations between Taiwan and LAC include joint research projects, teacher-student exchanges, academic conferences and workshops. These initiatives have by and large been successful, but also encountered obstacles, again due to different academic systems, languages and cultures (Zreik 2024, 127/128). Lin and Chan (2024) analysed exchange students in Taiwan as a nexus of cultural diplomacy: Even though scholarship holders identified more with Taiwan, also due to the positively perceived self-critical reflections delivered by a “non-indoctrinated approach”, the qualifications they acquired were often considered to be not “applicable” in their home countries, as the demands there were very different. “The primary attraction for most Central and South American students to study in Taiwan was safety: ‘Taiwan makes us feel safe. Unfortunately, our country does not’” (Lin and Chan 2024, 429). As scholarship participants seemed surprised and impressed by the open critical reflection on the island’s own political history and times of repression (Lin and Chan 2024), the successful transition from authoritarian rule to a functioning democracy may offer point of reference for people from LAC (Delman 2024, 4-5).

Taiwan has until now maintained decent relations with some countries despite limited resources and China’s growing impact in LAC due to its focus on collaboration in renewable energy, healthcare and promotion of democratic values and cultural and educational exchange (Zreik 2024, 131). However, this may in the future not be sufficient as a closer relationship with China appears attractive and promises LAC countries less dependence on the US and Europe (Zreik 2024, 131, 132, 136; Keating and Kaczmarek 2019). Veney and Abidde (2024, 392), soberly conclude that essentially, Taiwan cannot compete with China in LAC and to focus on liberal soft power is also a lost cause as most countries desperately need resources to improve infrastructure, social systems and thus ensure the support from their populations. Moreover, LAC governments prefer not to receive lectures about democracy, the rule of law or human and minority rights, but rather unconditional support within the BRI (Veney and Abidde 2024, 393).

In 2023, in all Latin American countries (excluding the Caribbean) 13 % had a very favourable and 35,8 % a somewhat favourable view of China (Latinobarómetro 2023). In Guatemala (19,1% and 36,7%) and in Paraguay (17,8% and 40,7%), this positive attitude was even more accentuated. Nevertheless, the United States was still more popular in all Latin America – 24,9 % of all Latin Americans regarded their northern neighbour favourably, and 46,2% somewhat favourably. In Guatemala (37,3 % and 47, 2%) and Paraguay (16,3% and 49,7%) this more positive view of the US also dominated. Latinobarómetro does not include views on Taiwan.

Taiwan's soft power diplomacy encounters several obstacles in LAC: First of all, addressing non-diplomatic partners follows a hybrid approach, as it must engage with non-state informal means. This explains the more defensive soft power projection as Taiwan officially needs to accept the non-allied adherence to the One China Policy. Secondly, the focus on Taiwan's record considering democratic values must be formulated cautiously and more as a common historical experience with LAC, as it otherwise easily can remind of European or US American lectures on democracy and human rights. Thirdly, this is even more the case with Taiwan's purveyed image as a "queer country" and safe haven for LGBTQ+ people – in all of its diplomatic partner countries, the legal and public view on this is rather conservative (as it also is among the Taiwanese people). Progressive narratives target "like-minded partners", and not LAC countries that are more dependent on China or less receptive for progressive soft power messages.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Taiwan's soft power approach encounters four challenges in LAC: 1) non-diplomatic partners must be approached differently than diplomatic allies; 2) Taiwan's championing international law and democratic values must avoid a lecturing tone and promote a shared history of democratisation with LAC instead, 3). More progressive messages ("queer country") are considered less appropriate since LAC societies tend to be more socially conservative (as Taiwanese people), 4) The relationship of the United States with countries that still recognise Taiwan and related benefits appear to be a very decisive factor for Taiwan's standing in LAC, but while some societies are more pro-American, others tend to be critical of the US in the region and thus Taiwan needs a nuanced approach. In other words, Taiwan's soft power diplomacy in LAC needs to be differentiated according to a) the diplomatic status the country maintains with Taiwan, b) the attractiveness of common values, c) the perception of progressive narratives in the country and d) the view of the US in the country and hemisphere.

In the western hemisphere, Taiwan must cautiously balance its narrative and soft power initiatives. Regarding the US, it used to emphasise the security alliance which was once built on common interests and values. However, this closer relationship with the US since 2016 could not be highlighted too much in some LAC countries that

have been very involved with Chinese trade and investments and furthermore harbour anti-American sentiments.

It seems that the economically poorer countries of the western hemisphere tend to choose the partner that promises to provide more economic support. Taiwan was able to do this for some decades, but the PRC has become tremendously powerful and can always dwarf Taipei's investments and development programmes in the Caribbean and Central America. While in Paraguay a special relationship with the US bases on the recognition of Taiwan, this closeness to Washington may appear rather negative in other LAC countries.

All in all, Taiwan's soft power diplomacy in the western hemisphere appears old-fashioned with its diplomatic partners, but more nuanced with non-recognisers, also in terms of these countries view of the US and the PRC, respectively.

REFERENCES

- Allianz Global Wealth Report. 2024. 24 September, https://www.allianz.com/content/dam/onemarketing/azcom/Allianz_com/economic-research/publications/allianz-global-wealth-report/2024/2024-09-24-Allianz-Global-Wealth-Report.pdf (24 March 2025).
- Batto, Nathan F. 2022. "Taiwan Is Already Independent." *Foreign Affairs*, December 12.
- Bouris, Dimitris, and Irene Fernández-Molina. 2018. "Contested States, Hybrid Diplomatic Practices, and the Everyday Quest for Recognition." *International Political Sociology* 12: 306-324.
- Chao, Xie. 2024. "'All Roads Lead to South': India and China in Global South Narratives and Practices." *Strategic Analysis* 48, no. 4: 346-358.
- Chávez Rodríguez, Yovani Edgar, and Marcus Mohlin. 2023. "The Panama Canal – China's illusive chess piece: What China's presence in the Panama Canal may mean for regional and global security." *Comparative Strategy* 42, no. 4: 467-488.
- Chiao, Yuan-Ming. 2022. "Chains, Continuums, and Virtuous Cycles: Parsing Taiwan's Strategic Narratives and Soft Power Leadership in the Indo-Pacific." *Connections QJ* 21, no. 1: 89-103.
- Delman, Jørgen. 2024. "Does Soft power have any value for Taiwan?" *Focus Asia. Perspective & Analysis*. Institute for Security and Development, May 31. <https://www.isdp.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Focus-Asia-Delman.pdf> (22 March 2025).
- Department of State. 2025. *U.S. Relations With Taiwan. Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet*. February 13. <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-taiwan/> (18 March 2025).
- Dykman, Klaas, and Ole Bruun. 2021. "China's pledge to civilise 'All Under Heaven'." *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 50, no. 2: 111-136.
- Dykman, Klaas, and Nicolai H. K. Hede. 2025. "Counter-Hegemonic Challenge in the Western Hemisphere? The relations between China and CELAC (2008-2018)." *Iberoamericana* 25, no. 88: 161-183.
- Ellis, Robert Evan. 2009. *China in Latin America. The Whats and Wherefores*. Lynne Rienner Publisher.
- 2023. "El Papel Estratégico de América Latina en un Conflicto Global por Taiwán." *Revista Seguridad y Poder Terrestre* 2, no. 1, enero-marzo: 91-111.

- Erikson, Daniel P., and Janice Chen. 2007. "China, Taiwan, and the Battle for Latin America." *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 31, no. 2: 69-89.
- Equaldex. 2025. *LGBT Equality Index*. <https://www.equaldex.com/equality-index> (27 March 2025).
- Fabbro, Rocío, and Robbie Gramer. 2023. "Taiwan Isn't Playing Dollar Diplomacy Anymore." *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/04/24/taiwan-china-competition-dollar-diplomacy/> (11 April 2024).
- Fan, Felipe. 2021. "Taiwan's Relations with the Northern Triangle." In *Taiwan's Relations with Latin America*, edited by He Li and Antonio C. Hsiang. Lexington Books.
- Fonseca, Fabricio A., and Yen-Pin Su. 2024. "Taiwan's Diplomatic Instruments and Challenges in its Relations with China-Aligned Countries in Latin America and the Caribbean." In *China and Taiwan in Latin America and the Caribbean. History, Power Rivalry, and Regional Implications*, edited by Cassandra R. Veney and Sabella O. Abidde. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Garip, Patricia. 2024. "What Does Latin America Think About the Israel-Hamas War?" *Foreign Policy*, January 28. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/01/29/israel-hamas-gaza-war-latin-america-chile-argentina-colombia-mexico-genocide/> (29 March 2025).
- Grau Vila, Carmen. 2016. "Between China and Taiwan. Nicaragua and the Inter-Oceanic Canal." In *Reconfiguration of the Global South. Africa and Latin America and the 'Asian Century'*, edited by Eckart Woertz. Routledge.
- Hagström, Linus, and Astrid H.M. Nordin. 2020. "China's 'Politics of Harmony' and the Quest for Soft Power in International Politics." *International Studies Review* 22: 507-525.
- Huang, Kwei Bo. 2024. "Taiwan's Foreign Policy and International Space." In *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Taiwan*, edited by Gunter Schubert. Routledge, 2nd ed.
- Hwang, Justina. 2024. "What Can I Do for You: The Republic of China's Cold War Courtship of the Republic of Panama." In *China and Taiwan in Latin America and the Caribbean. History, Power Rivalry, and Regional Implications*, edited by Cassandra R. Veney and Sabella O. Abidde. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ji, Li. 2024. "Measuring Soft Power." In *The Routledge Handbook of Soft Power*, 2nd ed., edited by Naren J. Chitty, Li Ji, and Gary D. Rawnsley. Routledge.
- Johnson, Kavita. 2024. "The 'One China' Policy: Battleground for Recognition in the Caribbean." In *China and Taiwan in Latin America and the Caribbean. History, Power Rivalry, and Regional Implications*, edited by Cassandra R. Veney and Sabella O. Abidde. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kellner, Thierry, and Sophie Wintgens. 2021. "The Rise of China in Panama under Varela (2014-2019). A New Latin-American Pivot of the Silk Road or a Diplomatic 'tour de valse'?" In *China-Latin America and the Caribbean: Assessment and Outlook*, edited by Thierry Kellner and Sophie Wintgens. Routledge.
- La Nación* 2024. Buenos Aires, 17 July. "Taiwán: el epicentro del mundo de la Inteligencia Artificial y una gran oportunidad para la Argentina". <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/opinion/taiwan-el-epicentro-del-mundo-de-la-inteligencia-artificial-y-una-gran-oportunidad-para-la-argentina-nid17072024/> (25 August 2025).
- Latinobarómetro. 2023. <https://www.latinobarometro.org/latOnline.jsp> (4 November 2024).
- Lemus-Delgado, Daniel. 2020. "¿China y América Latina bajo el mismo cielo? Tianxia y relaciones internacionales." *Revista tempo do mundo* 24, December: 175-197.
- 2023. "Reflexiones sobre la política exterior de Taiwán: entre espacios reales e imaginados." *OASIS* 37, enero-junio: 71-91.

- Lemus-Delgado, Daniel, and Carlos Cerda Dueñas. 2021. "China or Taiwan? The Tricky Dilemma of Diplomatic Recognition: The Salvadoran Experience." *Contemporary Chinese Political Economy and Strategic Relations: An International Journal* 7, no. 1: 45-78.
- Lee, Karl Chee Leong. 2023. "Conceptualising Taiwan's Soft Power Projection in its 'New Southbound Policy'." *Asian Affairs* 54, no. 2: 231-249.
- Long, Tom, and Francisco Urdinez. 2021. "Status at the Margins: Why Paraguay Recognizes Taiwan and Shuns China." *Foreign Policy Analysis* 17, no. 1: 1-22.
- Marinaccio, Jessica. 2021. "'We're Not Indigenous. We're Just, We're Us': Pacific Perspectives on Taiwan's Austronesian Diplomacy." In *The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands*, edited by Graeme Smith and Terrence Wesley-Smith ANU Press.
- Méndez, Alvaro, and Chris Alden. 2021. "China in Panama: From Peripheral Diplomacy to Grand Strategy." *Geopolitics* 26, no. 3: 838-860.
- MOFA. 2018. "Report by Jaushieh Joseph Wu, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of China (Taiwan), at the Foreign and National Defense Committee of the Legislative Yuan on October 22, 2018." <https://ws.mofa.gov.tw/Download.ashx?u=LzAwMS9VcGxvYWQvT2xkRmlsZS9SZWxGaWxILzExMTQvMTY4NzEyL0ZvcmlpZ24gUG9saWN5IFJlcG9ydCwgOXRoIENvbmdyZXNzIG9mIHRoZSBMZWdpc2xhdG12ZSBzdWVhLCA2bmQgU2Vzc2lvbihPY3RvYmVvYDIyLCAyMDE4KS5wZGY%3D&n=Rm9yZWlnbiBQb2xpY3kgUmVwb3J0LCA5dGggQ29uZ3Jlc3Mgb2YgdGhIElZlZlZGF0aXZlIF11YW4sIDZuZCBTZXNzaW9uKE9j-dG9iZXIjMjIsIDwMTgpLnBkZg%3D%3D&icon=.pdf> (18 March 2025).
- 2022. "Report by Jaushieh Joseph Wu, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of China (Taiwan), at the Foreign and National Defense Committee of the Legislative Yuan on March 17, 2022". <https://ws.mofa.gov.tw/Download.ashx?u=LzAwMS9VcGxvYWQvNDAzL3JlbGZpbGUvMjY4Lzlk3NzZlZlZlZGF0aXZlIF11YW4sIDZuZCBTZXNzaW9uKE9j-dG9iZXIjMjIsIDwMTgpLnBkZg%3D%3D&icon=.pdf> (8 April 2025).
- 2023. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China (Taiwan), "The Republic of China (Taiwan) has terminated diplomatic relations with the Republic of Honduras with immediate effect to uphold national dignity." March 26, 2023 Statement No. 1. https://en.mofa.gov.tw/News_Content.aspx?n=1328&sms=273&s=99968 (2 July 2024).
- Nai-chia, Chen, and Dafydd Fell. 2021. "Tongzhi Diplomacy and the queer case of Taiwan." In *Taiwan's Economic and Diplomatic Challenges and Opportunities*, edited by Mariah Thornton, Robert Ash, and Dafydd Fell. Routledge.
- Nye, Joseph S. 2023. *Soft Power and Great-Power Competition. Shifting Sands in the Balance of Power Between the United States and China*. Springer.
- Otmazgin, Nissim. 2023. "A Taiwanese Soft Power? Contesting Visions of Democracy and Culture." *International Journal of Taiwan Studies* 6: 241-260.
- Pajtinka, Erik. 2017. "Between Diplomacy and Paradiplomacy: Taiwan's Foreign Relations in Current Practice." *Journal of Nationalism, Memory & Language Politics* 11, no. 1: 39-57.
- Portada Robert A. III, Steve B. Lem, and Uttam Paudel. 2020. "The Final Frontier: China, Taiwan, and the United States in Strategic Competition for Central America." *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 25: 551-573.
- Rawnsley, Gary. 2017. "Soft Power Rich, Public Diplomacy Poor: An Assessment of Taiwan's External Communications." *The China Quarterly* 232, December: 982-1001.

- Rich, Timothy S., and Andi Dahmer. 2020. "Taiwan." In *Routledge Handbook of State Recognition*, edited by Timothy S. Rich, Andi Dahmer, John Doyle, Edward Newman, and Gëzim Visoka. Routledge.
- 2022. "Should I stay or should I go? Diplomatic recognition of Taiwan, 1950-2016." *International Journal of Taiwan Studies* 5, no. 2: 353-374.
- Rofel, Lisa, and Carlos Rojas. 2022. *New World Orderings: China and the Global South*. Duke University Press.
- Romero Wimer, Fernando, and Julia Dalbosco. 2020. "El dilema de Paraguay en el siglo XXI. ¿Continuidad de relaciones diplomáticas con Taiwán o apertura a la República Popular China?" *Revista Paraguay desde las Ciencias Sociales* 11: 27-56.
- Surowiec-Capell, Pawel, and Philip Long. 2024. "Hybridity, Soft Power, and Statecraft. Ontological Mapping." In *The Routledge Handbook of Soft Power*, 2nd ed., edited by Naren J. Chitty, Li Ji, and Gary D. Rawnsley. Routledge.
- Statista. 2024. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/922574/taiwan-gini-index/> (27 March 2025).
- Taipei Times*. 2012. <https://www.taipetitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2012/05/22/2003533444> (22 March 2025).
- Taiwan Policy Database*. 2025. <https://www.taiwan-database.net/LL-M04b.htm#allies3> (25 August 2025).
- Teng, Chung-Chian. 2021a. "Republic of China in Taiwan's Relations with Latin America (1990-2020): The Role of Development Assistance." In *Taiwan's relations with Latin America*, edited by He Li and Antonio C. Hsiang. Lexington Books.
- 2021b. "Taiwan and its Latin American allies." In *External Powers in Latin America: Geopolitics between Neo-extractivism and South-South Cooperation*, edited by Gian Luca Gardini. Routledge.
- Troisi Melean, Jorge. 2024. "Taiwan and the South Atlantic: A Shared History with Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay." In *China and Taiwan in Latin America and the Caribbean. History, Power Rivalry, and Regional Implications*, edited by Cassandra R. Veney and Sabella O. Abidde. Palgrave Macmillan.
- US Department of State. 2021. <https://2021-2025.state.gov/united-states-paraguay-and-taiwan-identify-and-create-partnership-opportunities-in-renewable-energy-applications/#:~:text=The%20United%20States%20and%20Taiwan%20are%20working%20together,renewable%20energy%20and%20electric%20vehicles%20sector%20in%20Paraguay> (8 April 2025).
- Wise, Carol. 2021. "China in Latin America. Winning Hearts and Minds Pragmatically." In *External Powers in Latin America. Geopolitics between Neo-extractivism and South-South Cooperation*, edited by Gian Luca Gardini. Routledge.
- Wu, Irene S. 2024. "Tools for Measuring Soft Power. A Review of Recent Quantitative Analyses." In *The Routledge Handbook of Soft Power*, 2nd ed., edited by Naren J. Chitty, Li Ji, and Gary D. Rawnsley. Routledge.
- Wu, Chen-Huei, and Po-Hsiang Liao. 2021. "Treaty Validity After Diplomatic Cutoff: The Case of the Taiwan-Panama Free Trade Agreement." *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 28, no. 1 (winter): 293-324.
- Zreik, Mohamad. 2024a. "Soft Power and China-Taiwan Competition for Influence in Latin America." In *China and Taiwan in Latin America and the Caribbean. History, Power Rivalry, and Regional Implications*, edited by Cassandra R. Veney and Sabella O. Abidde. Palgrave Macmillan.
- 2024b. "Massive Chinese Investments in Latin America: What is Taiwan's Diplomatic Fate in That Region?" In *China and Taiwan in Latin America and the Caribbean. History, Power*

Rivalry, and Regional Implications, edited by Cassandra R. Veney and Sabella O. Abidde. Palgrave Macmillan.

Zuppello, Maria. 2024. "Strategic Communication: How China Promotes and Communicates Its Political Agenda in Latin America." In *China and Taiwan in Latin America and the Caribbean. History, Power Rivalry, and Regional Implications*, edited by Cassandra R. Veney and Sabella O. Abidde. Palgrave Macmillan.

Manuscript received: 15.04.2025

Revised manuscript: 08.09.2025

Manuscript accepted: 04.11.2025