

Prospects & Perspectives



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Picture source: Depositphotos.

The Foreign Affairs Committee of the UK Parliament Report and Taiwan: Has Anything Changed?

By Michael Reilly

On August 30, the Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC) of the United Kingdom’s parliament published its report on the British government’s policy towards East Asia, or “Indo-Pacific Tilt.” The report was more than two years



in preparation, the original “Tilt” strategy having been pronounced in March 2021 and as part of their investigation, committee members visited Taiwan in late 2022, the first such visit in sixteen years.

Against a souring of bilateral relations, which among other things has seen the British parliament ban the Chinese ambassador from its premises, the report was predictably critical of the British government’s policy towards China. Almost as predictable was its support for Taiwan, although this went considerably further than most observers might have expected, not just in calling for the British government to build on existing co-operation with Taiwan and help it strengthen its resilience but in stating that “Taiwan is...an independent country...possessing all the qualifications for statehood.” This is almost certainly the first time an official British body has said as much, certainly since the upgrading of British-Chinese diplomatic relations in 1972, since when British policy has been to “acknowledge” the PRC’s claim that Taiwan is part of China.

Cause for celebration?

Taiwanese policy makers and officials will no doubt be delighted. But before getting too carried away, they should look carefully at the Chinese reaction to the report. For while such an explicit statement of recognition would normally provoke an angry denunciation from Beijing, the FAC report went unremarked by all the mainstream Chinese media, failing to merit a mention by *Xinhua*, the *Global Times* and *People’s Daily*.

Cause for celebration or not worth noticing? These two seemingly extreme and contradictory positions are very much a reflection of the nature of the report, from which both sides can draw positive conclusions, irrespective of the report’s actual recommendations.

The first and foremost point to bear in mind is that this was not a British government report but one from a parliamentary select committee. In common with most European parliaments, that in Britain has grown increasingly critical of China over the last decade, driven by reaction to oppression of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, Chinese policy in Hong Kong and Tibet, Chinese trade policy, fears of spying and more. China’s increasingly intimidatory attitude towards Taiwan is but one aspect of a much bigger overall concern and statements of



support for Taiwan should be seen in this context, rather than as a coherent strategy of support for Taiwan. In this case, both the current and previous chairs of the FAC have been outspoken in their criticism of China and this doubtless helped influence the overall tone of the report.

Second, while such reports carry weight, the influence of parliament in the British democratic system, as in most European democracies, is not of the same level as that of Congress in the United States, and nowhere near as much as parliamentarians might like. It is for the government of the day to decide what, if any, of the committee's recommendations it chooses to implement. Its only obligation is to produce a formal reply to the report in due course. If past experience is any guide, this is likely to claim that many of the recommendations already reflect government policy and simply to "take note" of others. Explicit commitments to change policy in response to select committee reports are rare.

'Boringly predictable'

British foreign secretary James Cleverly has already signaled the likely impact of the report on policy towards Taiwan in giving evidence to the committee on 12 June. His statement on this was clear: *Our position on Taiwan is longstanding and boringly predictable. It has not changed. We have a relationship with Taiwan. We have a strong trading relationship with Taiwan.* This was almost a word for word repetition of the standard formula used by British ministers and officials to describe relations with Taiwan ever since diplomatic relations with China were upgraded in 1972 and the clearest possible signal that no change should be expected.

While the mantra may not have changed, however, UK-Taiwan relations have evolved steadily since 1972, more especially since the return of Hong Kong to China in 1997. The UK was slower to open a trade office in Taipei than many other European countries, and for most of the 1990s its attitude to Taiwan could best be described as "gratuitously disagreeable." But in 2009, it led the way among western countries in lifting the visa requirement for Taiwanese and there has been a steady trickle of bilateral agreements signed, in areas as varied as double taxation, air services, prisoner transfers and working holiday-makers. Today, officials in the British Office in Taipei work with their Taiwanese counterparts in areas that would have been considered inconceivable



20 years ago and day to day cooperation is probably more developed than that between Taiwan and any other European country.

But the relationship remains low profile, at least as far as the United Kingdom is concerned. British ministerial visits to Taiwan are rare despite common interests in areas such as wind power, semiconductors (Taiwanese companies dominate their manufacture but a British company, Arm Holdings, dominates their design) and education, or the scope to learn from Taiwan in areas such as the use of blockchain technology in healthcare and agriculture. The British government agreed more than 25 years ago that a Cabinet-level minister should visit Taiwan “when the time was right.” It has yet to happen.

Need for a coherent, consistent strategy

Taiwanese may feel frustrated by this low profile approach, but it would be unrealistic to expect significant change. British policy towards China has fluctuated hugely over the last decade, from a “golden era” in 2015 following a state visit by Xi Jinping, to an “epoch-defining challenge” today. Whether China is in or out of favor in policy making circles, however, it is too big to ignore, a fact the current British foreign secretary has made clear. The weakness in British policy towards Taiwan is that it continues to be an adjunct of policy towards China and is therefore too often seen as a “zero sum game,” despite decades of evidence showing that it is perfectly possible to engage with Taiwan without arousing China’s ire.

Welcome though it is, the FAC’s report could have made this clearer. Although the current policy of “cautious incrementalism” has served both Taiwan and the UK well since displacing “gratuitous disagreeability,” it needs to be framed in a coherent, consistent strategy towards Taiwan and not be victim to the vicissitudes in UK-China relations.

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