

## Prospects & Perspectives



Lithuania has crafted an impressive success story by resisting China’s economic and diplomatic pressure, demonstrating that even a small state can take a bold stance against China without suffering too much. It would be a significant risk to dismantle all the trust and partnership that has developed between Lithuania and Taiwan just to “get back to normal” with China. Picture source: Gitanas Nausėda, April 11, 2024, X, <<https://twitter.com/GitanasNauseda/status/1778420269213774098>>.

### Lithuania’s Presidential Elections: Impact on Relations with Taiwan and China

By *Tomas Janeliūnas*

**L**ike many countries, Lithuania is also holding presidential elections this year, a political event that, admittedly, lacks the drama and tensions seen in the



U.S. and other countries. In the lead-up to the election, Lithuanian experts unanimously agreed that the incumbent president, Gitanas Nausėda, should have little to worry about in securing a second term. In the first round of the presidential election, Nausėda already garnered nearly 45 percent of the votes, advancing to the second round alongside the current Prime Minister, Ingrida Šimonytė, who trailed by a significant 20 percentage points. As Lithuanian experts predicted, the second round of the presidential elections would be more a formality than a riveting competition.

### **The President's Role in Lithuania's Foreign Policy**

Lithuania is a semi-presidential republic, where the president is elected by popular vote for a five-year term, with the possibility of serving no more than two consecutive terms. The president's main powers lie within foreign and security politics, as well as the appointment of judges and other judicial system officials. Although the Constitution of Lithuania states that the president must “decide on the major issues of foreign policy together with the government,” he or she often seeks to dominate foreign policy matters. However, coordination between the president and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs can sometimes become an issue and ignite political tension. A recent example of such poor coordination was Lithuania's decision to open a Taiwanese representative office in Vilnius in 2021.

In 2021, the Lithuanian government boldly invited Taiwan to open a representative office in Vilnius using the name “Taiwanese,” which deviating from the typical “Taipei trade office” used in other countries. This decision surprised Lithuanian foreign policy experts and businesses trading with China, as economic and diplomatic sanctions by Beijing followed almost immediately. At that time, Lithuanian society did not fully understand why Lithuania was entering into an open political conflict with China over Taiwan. A poll result showed that at the end of 2021, almost 65 percent of respondents negatively assessed Lithuanian diplomacy toward China and Taiwan.

Lithuanian President Nausėda was not shy in criticizing the actions of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stating that “the decision to open the representative office was right, but labeling it ‘Taiwanese’ was a mistake.” At that point, tensions between the president and Minister of Foreign Affairs Gabrielius Landsbergis, were at their peak. The president even requested a plan from the



minister on how to resolve the “Taiwanese issue” without escalating the situation and easing tensions with China. However, the war in Ukraine, which started on February 24, 2022, completely diverted the attention and energy of Lithuanian diplomats and politicians. Eventually, China gradually eased its economic sanctions on Lithuania. The EU case against China at the WTO may also have contributed to this outcome. At the same time, the intensified economic and political relationship between Lithuania and Taiwan provided more and more arguments that Lithuania’s choice to support Taiwan was the right one. Nevertheless, the “Taiwanese question” is still an open one.

### **The ‘Taiwanese Question’ and Lithuania’s Presidential Campaign**

This year’s presidential campaign in Lithuania was more focused on the security situation than ever before. It revolved around implementing a total defense concept, reforming conscription rules, exploring the possibilities of increasing defense spending, and maintaining economic growth simultaneously. Topics such as Russia’s deterrence, NATO unity, and population resistance were among the most discussed. Debates on foreign policy issues often included questions related to China and Taiwan. A common question during the presidential candidates’ debates was, “Should the title of the Taiwanese representative office in Vilnius be changed?”

President Nausėda, while appreciating the establishment of the representative office in Vilnius, reiterated that “the typical international practice is to establish a Taipei office” and that the name of the representative office in Vilnius should therefore be changed. According to him, “this correction would be a sign for a normalization of [our] relationship with China.” This stance starkly contrasted with that of Lithuanian Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė, who insisted on retaining the current name of the Taiwanese representative office and frequently emphasized the need to resist China’s influence.

President Nausėda could hardly be called a China supporter. He clearly understands the risks posed by Communist China. He generally supports the idea of aligning with the U.S. in its competition with Beijing. However, he has criticized the way the Lithuanian government implemented the so-called “decoupling from China” after 2021.

Nausėda believes that the decision to establish a “Taiwanese” office in



Vilnius was tactically reckless and resulted in economic losses for Lithuania. He explained his position by saying, “In a political sense, Lithuania’s international visibility has increased, and we had the opportunity to see the support of the international community, but the cost is too high.”

During the presidential debates, Nausėda insisted that there is a need to restore a proper diplomatic representation level between Vilnius and Beijing. After 2021, China recalled its ambassador to Lithuania and expelled the Lithuanian ambassador in Beijing, downgrading the diplomatic representation to the level of chargé d’affaires, a rank below that of ambassador.

### **The Peril of Surrendering a Symbolic Victory Over China**

Even if Nausėda secures his second presidential term, we should anticipate the Lithuanian parliamentary elections in October. Only after the formation of a new government can we expect a shift towards a softer stance on China — if any. It is the prerogative of the government, more specifically the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to handle issues such as diplomatic representation with other states. It is still uncertain whether the next government would risk undermining the credibility of Lithuanian diplomacy and urge Taiwan to change the name of its representative office in Vilnius. Taiwan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs has already responded to Nausėda’s musings, stating that there is no intention to change the title of the Vilnius office.

Lithuania has crafted an impressive success story by resisting China’s economic and diplomatic pressure, demonstrating that even a small state can take a bold stance against China without suffering too much. The economic losses for Lithuania were minimal, but the political resonance and benefits were substantial. It would be a significant risk to dismantle all the trust and partnership that has developed between Lithuania and Taiwan just to “get back to normal” with China. Political parties in Lithuania have varying views on how to deal with China, but they should carefully assess the costs of retreating, especially when a symbolic victory over China has already been achieved.

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