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# COMPARATIVE

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CHINA - TAIWAN RELATIONS

## CORONAVIRUS EMBITTERS CROSS- STRAIT RELATIONS

DAVID G. BROWN, JOHNS HOPKINS SCHOOL OF ADVANCED INTERNATIONAL STUDIES  
KYLE CHURCHMAN, JOHNS HOPKINS SCHOOL OF ADVANCED INTERNATIONAL  
STUDIES

After President Tsai Ing-wen won re-election and her Democratic Progressive Party retained its legislative majority, the COVID-19 dominated the news, further embittered cross-strait relations, while provoking a sharp confrontation over Taiwan's involvement in the World Health Organization. Beijing conducted further military operations near the island in response to concern that Taiwan is pushing independence, and the Trump and Tsai administrations strengthened ties. The opposition Kuomintang chose a younger, reform-minded leader following the latest in a series of defeats.

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President Tsai Ing-wen won re-election and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) retained its majority in the Legislative Yuan (LY) in the January election—a result that represents a challenge for Beijing. COVID-19 has dominated news and embittered cross-strait relations. It has also provoked a sharp confrontation over Taiwan's involvement with the World Health Organization (WHO). Concerned that Taiwan is taking advantage of the virus to promote independence, Beijing has conducted military operations around the island to signal its resolve. In response, the Trump and Tsai administrations have strengthened ties, and the US has increased military activity near Taiwan to signal its support. After a serious electoral defeat, the opposition Kuomintang (KMT) has elected a younger leader committed to reform.

### Election Results

Tsai scored a stunning victory in the January 11 election, winning 57% of the vote and becoming the first presidential candidate to win over 8 million votes.



Figure 1 President Tsai Ing-wen and vice-president-elect Lai Ching-te wave to supporters on the night of their election victory. Photo: Financial Times

In addition, the DPP retained its majority in the LY, winning 61 of 113 seats. The opposition KMT increased its share, however, winning 38 seats. Two small parties that share the “green” (progressive) side of the political spectrum also won seats in the LY. None of the other “blue” (conservative) parties won seats. The new Taiwan People's Party (TPP) associated with Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je won five seats.

Tsai's win and the DPP's retention of its LY majority represented a worst-case outcome for Beijing and a significant challenge for General Secretary Xi Jinping's policy. The extent of Tsai's victory appears to have taken Beijing by surprise. The initial reaction in the official

media and from the Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) was simply to take note of the outcome and [to reiterate](#) Beijing's commitment to peaceful reunification. The following day, *Xinhua* carried a [commentary](#) blaming the outcome on campaign corruption and foreign interference, by implication that of the United States. What was not mentioned was the fear underlying the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership's view of the election: that the election would give Tsai freedom in her final term to pursue an independence agenda without any constraint from the LY.

Within a month, events appeared to embody those fears: Vice President-elect Lai Ching-te [arrived](#) in Washington on February 3. Lai is a “red flag” personality for the CCP because, even after becoming Tsai's running mate, he reiterated that he was a “political worker for Taiwan independence.” Lai's visit had been proposed by a Christian leader in Taiwan so that Lai could participate in the annual Prayer Breakfast in Washington. While Lai is VP-elect, he does not hold a current official position and therefore his visit was not technically inconsistent with Washington's policy. During a week in Washington Lai had a busy schedule, including calls at the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT), the NSC, Congress, and think tanks, as well as participating in the Prayer Breakfast, which was attended by the president and other Washington leaders.

Beijing's initial response was to reiterate that its diplomatic partners, meaning the US, should not have any official contact with Taiwan officials. In the middle of the visit, the TAO published a brief commentary saying that Lai was exploiting his visit to engage in “vicious tricks” to promote Taiwan independence. On February 9 and 10, People's Liberation Army fighters, bombers, and surveillance air craft [conducted exercises](#) around Taiwan. A six-month hiatus in such exercises during the campaign had ended in January. The TAO stated that the exercises in early February were a warning that the Tsai administration was playing with fire, by making “two states” statements, promoting Taiwan independence, and dispatching Lai to Washington.

### A Brief Glimmer of Cooperation

News of a coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan first appeared publicly December 31 based on WeChat posts from doctors in Wuhan. Soon thereafter,

Taiwan asked to send medical experts to Wuhan. On January 13 and 14, two Taiwan CDC medical personnel made an [unpublicized visit](#) to Wuhan at the invitation of the Wuhan Health Department. This was a welcome sign that Beijing might use the outbreak as an opportunity for cooperation with Taiwan. As medical experts from Hong Kong and Macau were visiting at the same time, it appears the invitation to Taiwan was extended based on Beijing's one-China principle. Taipei ignored this. Their visit occurred while the CCP was still clamping down on news concerning the outbreak. After Beijing announced Wuhan was being locked down, President Tsai offered to provide assistance.

The CDC experts' early access convinced Taipei to institute a level-two alert requiring all passengers arriving from Wuhan to submit health forms and conduct 14 days of self-monitoring. These and other early actions contributed to Taiwan's remarkably [successful response](#) to COVID-19. Unfortunately, Beijing did not follow-up on this early cooperation.

### Covid-19 Embitters Cross-Strait Relations

The novel coronavirus (SARS CoV-2) and its disease (COVID-19) have dominated the news on both sides of the Strait and embittered cross-strait relations. This story has several interrelated elements. One has been Beijing's pressure on the WHO to sideline Taiwan. The WHO [did not allow](#) Taiwan medical experts to attend its first meeting on the coronavirus on January 22. This provoked a wave of anger in Taiwan against Beijing and the WHO. The WHO chose to include information on the outbreak in Taiwan on its website under China and compounded this by using inaccurate statistics about Taiwan obtained from China and using names offensive to Taiwan. International pressure during the WHO Executive Board meeting in early February led to the WHO allowing Taiwan experts to participate in a second WHO meeting on COVID-19 testing, therapeutics, and vaccines in mid-February. However, the Taiwan experts were only allowed to join the meeting online.

In April, Taiwan complained that the WHO was denying Taiwan the ability to share its successful experience in containing COVID-19 because it was too accommodating to China. WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom [accused Taiwan](#) of orchestrating a campaign against him

and of using "racist slurs." President Tsai rejected this criticism and invited Tedros to Taiwan. The TAO in Beijing joined the fray, defending Tedros and accusing Taipei of exploiting COVID-19 to pursue its independence agenda. The WHO secretariat released a statement describing how it worked with Taiwan. Taipei in turn released a statement indicating that it had been denied participation in over 70% of the WHO technical meetings it had asked to join over the previous decade. On April 16, a WHO epidemiologist belatedly held an hour-long discussion with officials in Taiwan's Central Epidemic Control Center to learn in detail about Taiwan's COVID-19 response. The following day, WHO Executive Director Michael Ryan [praised Taiwan's response](#) at a press conference. Ryan said that on technical matters there are a range of ways that the WHO can work with Taiwan on the pandemic and other issues.

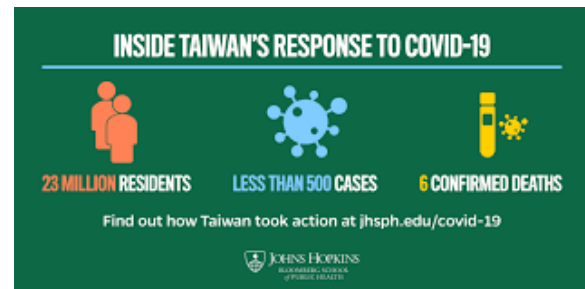


Figure 2 Overview of Taiwan's response to COVID-19. Photo: Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

A second element grew out of Taiwan's request in late January to send a plane to evacuate Taiwanese locked down in Wuhan. Beijing responded by arranging an evacuation flight using China Eastern Airlines without adequate coordination with the Tsai administration. Beijing apparently did not want to allow a Taiwan plane because it might be interpreted as implying Taiwan was a country if Taiwan evacuated its citizens in the same way foreign countries repatriated theirs. To further limit the Tsai administration's ability to claim credit for the evacuation, the Wuhan TAO office gave a KMT businessman a role in arranging the manifest. When the China Eastern flight arrived on February 2, some of the passengers were not Taiwan citizens and one proved to be infected with the virus. This caused another outburst of anger against Beijing. Nevertheless, shortly thereafter, Beijing announced that it would send three additional flights with evacuees. The Tsai administration rejected this offer, stating that flights could not occur until it was agreed to give

priority to the most vulnerable and on rigorous health procedures to avoid infected people being sent to Taiwan. It was not until a month later after difficult negotiation that it was agreed that China Eastern and Taiwan's China Airlines (CAL) would each conduct evacuation flights on March 10 and 11. That agreement was reached was itself a positive development. However, Taiwan's offer to send medical supplies on the CAL flight to Wuhan was not accepted.

Third, the pandemic response developed as the WHO is preparing for its annual general meeting, the World Health Assembly (WHA), scheduled for May 17-21. The pandemic has highlighted the global health rationale for Taipei's desire to join the WHA meeting as an observer. On February 2, the TAO reiterated that Taiwan cannot participate unless the Tsai administration accepts the 1992 consensus on one China, which Tsai is not willing to do. At the WHO executive board meeting on February 6, the US and 14 other countries [voiced support](#) for Taiwan's participation. Taiwan, with US support, has been marshalling international support for its position; Beijing has been working diplomatically to block Taiwan, while repeatedly criticizing Taipei for exploiting the issue to promote independence. In late April, US Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar held a half-hour telephone [conference meeting](#) with Taiwan's Health Minister Chen Shih-chung and used the occasion to express the administration's full support for Taiwan's participation in the WHA.

Beijing's efforts to sideline Taiwan during the pandemic have damaged cross-strait relations. Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) has been polling public attitudes toward the mainland for a quarter century, including whether people view Beijing as being hostile toward the people or government of Taiwan. The share of those viewing Beijing as hostile toward Taiwan's people, which had seldom reached 50% in the past, [registered](#) 61% in the poll conducted in March. Those viewing Beijing as hostile toward the Taiwan government, which has not reached 70% in the past, registered 76% in March.

Finally, the pandemic has prompted a debate about whether authoritarian states like China are better able to contain epidemics. Taipei has accused Beijing of covering up the initial outbreak in Wuhan. Statements in Taiwan, continue to refer to the virus as the "Wuhan virus," though some government statements

use "virus originating in Wuhan" and occasionally "COVID-19." In late March, the Tsai administration began actively explaining how its open, transparent democratic society has been remarkably successful in containing the pandemic. Foreign Minister Jaushieh Wu made this case effectively in a teleconference on April 9 with the Hudson Institute in Washington. For its part, Beijing has been diverting attention from the virus's outbreak by highlighting the CCP's dramatic mitigation actions that quite quickly brought the virus under control, arguing that this was only possible because of the CCP leadership. It seems clear on Taiwan that the pandemic has for the time being strengthened many people's determination to maintain Taiwan's democratic way of life and its autonomy from China.

### PLA Exercises

Since resuming exercises in January, Beijing has continued conducting air and naval activities around Taiwan. A week after the lockdown of Wuhan, the PLA air force conducted a couple of exercises near Taiwan. One purpose of these exercises may have been to demonstrate that even in the midst of the virus outbreak the military was vigilant and capable. On March 16, the PLA conducted its first [night-time exercise](#) near Taiwan, involving H-6 bombers, accompanying fighters, and a KJ-500 Electronic Warfare plane. In mid-April the *Liaoning* carrier group sailed through the Miyako Strait, then around Taiwan and through the Bashi Strait toward the South China Sea. At about the same time, the PLA air force flew through the Bashi Strait to conduct exercises in the western Pacific. The MND commented that the *Liaoning* was conducting routine exercises, which would continue. These exercises represented a continuation of the pattern of gradually increasing military activity around Taiwan that has occurred since November 2016, with the exception of two long pauses during the Taiwan election campaigns. Twice this year, PLA aircraft engaged in particularly dangerous actions when they briefly crossed the mid-line in the Taiwan Strait.

### Strong US-Taiwan Ties

Relations between Washington and Taipei remain excellent as Tsai begins her second term in May. Vice President-elect Lai's visit to Washington in February underscored the high level of trust between the two sides, as well as



the importance the Trump administration attaches to its partnership with Taiwan.

Washington promptly responded to increased Chinese military activity around Taiwan at the beginning of this year, not allowing itself to be distracted by the COVID-19 epidemic within its own borders. In response to PLA exercises occurring soon after Lai Ching-te's visit to Washington in early February, two US B-52 bombers flew near Taiwan's coastline facing China on February 12 and a US destroyer transited the Taiwan Strait on February 15. Another [US destroyer](#) sailed through the Taiwan Strait on March 25, a week after the PLA's nighttime training exercises southwest of Taiwan. Yet another US destroyer transited the Taiwan Strait one day after the PLA's April 10 air drills over the Bashi Strait. Since late March, US reconnaissance aircraft have also increased the frequency of their operations around Taiwan, especially as the *Liaoning* sailed past Taiwan in early April in route to its South China Sea training mission.

As Washington and Beijing traded accusations over the origins of COVID-19 and their respective handling of the outbreak, the US and Taiwan issued a [joint statement](#) on March 18 to share medical supplies and scientific expertise. On April 1, Taiwan announced it would donate 2 million surgical masks to the United States, with 400,000 masks having already been delivered by mid-April. In a tweet, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo thanked Taiwan for its donation, praising Taiwan as a model of "openness and generosity" in the global battle against the virus.

On March 28, US President Donald Trump signed into law the [Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative \(TAIPEI\) Act](#), which advises the executive branch to leverage US influence to help Taiwan retain its remaining diplomatic partners. Earlier in March, the House of Representatives had unanimously passed the Senate-initiated bill. The law also makes clear it is US policy to support Taiwan's participation in international organizations where statehood is not a requirement. As most of the law's provisions are nonbinding and with the Trump administration already making efforts to support Taiwan's international relations, the TAIPEI Act is mostly a symbolic affirmation of broad US support for Taiwan's international role. Still, the law's passage came at an opportune time as Beijing

strategizes how to poach additional Taiwan diplomatic partners in Tsai's second term.

While Taiwan has emerged relatively unscathed from the US-China trade war, intensifying US efforts to undermine China's Huawei Technologies Co. could harm TSMC, the island's dominant chip manufacturer. The Trump administration is considering revisions to the Direct Product Rule that would restrict the ability of foreign companies to employ US technology in manufacturing chips for HiSilicon, Huawei's chip-making arm. TSMC has hitherto been the principal supplier of chips to HiSilicon. Cognizant of looming US export controls, Huawei has already begun to shift procurement of some of its chip technology from TSMC to a domestic Chinese supplier.

In early April, the US Federal Communications Commission (FCC) [approved](#) Google's request to operate an undersea fiber-optic cable between Los Angeles and Taiwan that was completed late last year. Backed by Google and Facebook, the Pacific Light Cable Network initially sought to connect data centers in Hong Kong with those in the United States, with Taiwan as a traffic node. But upon revelation that a Chinese businessman had provided financial backing to the project, and given Justice Department concerns over Hong Kong's ability to protect US data, the FCC did not approve the link-up with Hong Kong. The cable will buttress US-Taiwan technological links, building upon Google's existing data centers in central Taiwan.

An unusual example of the Trump administration not supporting Taipei occurred on February 5, when Taiwan was not included in the inaugural meeting of the International Religious Freedom Alliance in Washington. *The Washington Post* [reported](#) on February 11 that Beijing had pressured some participants to threaten not to join if Taiwan attended. On February 13, Taipei's Foreign Ministry stated that before that story was published, the State Department had invited Taipei to be an observer in the Religious Freedom Alliance.

### International Developments

Having lost six diplomatic partners to China in her first term, Tsai seek to retain Taipei's 15 remaining allies over the next four years, even as Beijing has earlier threatened to slash that number to zero. Taipei switched out its ambassadors in Haiti and Paraguay in March

and April, respectively, giving rise to speculation in Taiwan that relations with the two nations were tenuous. Foreign Minister Wu said the diplomatic “rotations” were normal, and that Taipei’s relations with Port-au-Prince and Asuncion remain stable. Meanwhile, Taiwan has allocated 1 million face masks for donation to its diplomatic allies as they confront COVID-19.

In late January, the International Civil Aviation Organization aroused controversy when it banned from its Twitter page US users calling for Taiwan’s meaningful participation in the UN agency. The US State Department issued a [statement](#) on February 1, calling ICAO’s action “outrageous, unacceptable, and not befitting of a UN agency” and demanded that it reverse its practice of blocking discussion about Taiwan on its Twitter page.

Taipei and Prague became [sister cities](#) in mid-January, with Mayor Ko Wen-je attending the signing ceremony in the Czech capital. Prague’s mayor is a known critic of Beijing, having also spent time in Taiwan in his youth. The Shanghai municipal government severed its sister-city relationship with Prague last year after Mayor Hrib excised from the agreement language affirming the one-China principle.

### Reform in the KMT

On election night, KMT presidential candidate Han Kuo-yu apologized for his loss, and Chairman Wu Dun-yih indicated he would resign to assume responsibility. Despite the setback, the KMT’s results in the LY election were respectable. In the LY party list vote, the KMT secured 33% vs. the DPP’s 34%. In the LY district races taken together, the KMT won nearly 41% of votes to the DPP’s 45%. Calls for a generational change in leadership and for reforming both KMT policy and policymaking came from many quarters, as was the case four years earlier following the KMT defeat in 2016—which ultimately had no effect. Would things be different this time?

The KMT Central Standing Committee (CSC) accepted Wu’s resignation and appointed an interim leadership tasked with holding a party by-election to fill the remaining portion of Wu Dun-yih’s term as chairman. The CSC scheduled the election for March 7. None of the older generation leaders joined the contest. In the end, two candidates stood: Hau Long-bin (age

67), the former mayor of Taipei, and Johnny Chiang Chi-chen (age 48), a LY member from Taichung.

Debate and discussion within the party focused primarily on two issues: how to change the tradition within the KMT of top-down leadership by a dominant chairman and on whether and how to adjust policy toward the mainland. Opinion within the party is divided on whether to continue basing party policy on the 1992 Consensus on One China. Proponents of adhering to the 1992 consensus include: Su Chi, former President Ma Ying-jeou’s NSC director, Chang Ya-chung, an advisor to former Chairman Hung Hsiu-chu, and Professor Chao Chien-min, who had advised Han Kuo-yu on cross-strait policy. Members of the party’s youth wing, including Legislator Chiang Wan-an, and Taipei City Councilor Lo Chih-chiang have advocated scrapping the ‘92 Consensus. The two candidates avoided taking clear positions on this issue in their formal debates. Hau Long-bin said policy should be based on defending the Republic of China (ROC) and opposing independence. Chiang Chi-chen simply emphasized the necessity of reform.

The KMT went ahead with its by-election despite the COVID-19 risks. Chiang Chi-chen won with 69% of the vote.



Figure 3 Chiang Chi-chen’s swearing in as the new KMT chairman. Photo: China Times

At his swearing in, Chiang emphasized again the imperative of reform, saying that his role was to listen, collect opinions, and to turn people’s expectations into visions. On mainland policy [he said](#), “My basic principle is to stick to the values of the Republic of China’s free and democratic system and strive for cross-strait peace and common well-being.” It has long been the practice for the CCP general secretary to send a congratulatory message to a new KMT Chairman, but Xi [did not](#) send a message to

Chiang. The TAO issued a statement urging Chiang to adhere to the 1992 consensus, a clear indication of Beijing's doubts about Chiang on this core point.

Chiang moved expeditiously to appoint a completely new roster of officials to the KMT Headquarters. He chose a veteran KMT organizer, Lee Chien-lung, former head of the KMT organization in New Taipei City, as secretary general. In addition, he established a new 11-member "decision-making platform" advisory committee symbolizing his intention to consult widely. He appointed a widely representative group of younger generation office holders to this committee. Chiang appointed Taipei Council member Lo Chih-chiang as new head of the KMT training center, the Revolutionary Practice Institute, and tasked him with training young leaders for the party. Finally, Chiang appointed a 62-member reform committee to review policy in four areas. The cross-strait policy group consists of 16 members, representing the full range of opinion within the party and therefore it will have difficulty in forging consensus.

Chiang has been careful in speaking about cross-strait relations in part because the policy review process lies ahead. Chiang has avoided mentioning the 1992 Consensus, which the TAO continues to insist is the basis for cross-strait relations. He has said that ROC territory is defined in the constitution and this should be respected—an indirect reference to one China. With respect to identity, Chiang has said that he is Taiwanese, and also Chinese. He has spoken of listening to voices on Taiwan and also of the need to rebuild trust with the mainland. His cross-strait policy is yet to be developed.

The January election represents a challenge for the CCP not only because of Tsai's re-election but also because it has led to the KMT choosing a younger generation of leadership that may well adopt policies more clearly at odds with those [enunciated](#) by Xi Jinping in January 2019, when he called Taiwan's unification with China "the great trend of history."

## Looking Ahead

Although Tsai has decided against holding the usual inaugural events with invited guests from abroad, her May 20 address will set the tone for her handling of cross-strait relations during her second term. It appears that the WHO is

planning to conduct its annual WHA as a short virtual meeting rather than the week-long conference originally scheduled for May 17–21. This may make it easier for the US and like-minded countries to overcome Beijing's objections to Taipei being an observer at a virtual meeting, but that still seems unlikely. This year's meeting also provides an opportunity for the WHA to loosen the restrictions that Beijing imposes on the WHO's technical level engagement with Taiwan. As time passes, it will become clearer what the long-term impact of the COVID-19 outbreak will be on cross-strait relations.

# CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-TAIWAN RELATIONS

## JANUARY – MAY 2020

**Dec. 30, 2019:** Rumors on WeChat of a SARS-like pneumonia in Wuhan.

**Jan. 1, 2020:** President Tsai Ing-wen defends Anti-Infiltration Law (AIL) in New Year's Address.

**Jan 2, 2020:** Chief of General Staff Gen. Shen Yi-ming dies in *Black Hawk* helicopter crash.

**Jan 5, 2020:** Taiwan CDC: Eight passengers on flights from Wuhan have developed fevers.

**Jan. 11, 2020:** Tsai wins reelection; DPP retains majority in Legislative Yuan (LY).

**Jan. 13, 2020:** Two Taiwan CDC experts visit Wuhan to investigate new virus.

**Jan. 22, 2020:** Taiwan is excluded from WHO experts meeting on novel coronavirus.

**Jan. 29, 2020:** Taipei asks Beijing to permit evacuation of citizens from Wuhan.

**Feb. 3, 2020:** China sends first flight of Taiwanese from Wuhan to Taipei without coordination.

**Feb. 3, 2020:** Vice President-elect Lai Ching-te begins visit to Washington.

**Feb. 6, 2020:** Lai attends National Prayer Breakfast

**Feb. 6, 2020:** WHO Executive Board meets; US and 14 others urge including Taiwan in COVID-19 response.

**Feb. 11, 2020:** Taiwan experts join two-day WHO coronavirus research meeting via online.

**Feb. 21, 2020:** LY issues nonpartisan resolution concerning Taiwan's exclusion from WHA.

**March 5, 2020:** AIT Chairman James Moriarty visits Taiwan; meets President Tsai.

**March 7, 2020:** Kuomintang (KMT) elects Johnny Chiang Chi-chen as its chairman.

**March 10, 2020:** Taiwan's China Airlines (CAL) evacuates Taiwan citizens from Wuhan.

**March 11, 2020:** China Eastern Airlines evacuates Taiwan citizens from Wuhan.

**March 16, 2020:** People's Liberation Army KJ-500 AEW aircraft and fighters conduct first night exercise south of Taiwan.

**March 26, 2020:** US President Donald Trump signs TAIPEI Act.

**March 29, 2020:** Taiwan citizens in Hubei return on a designated CAL flight from Shanghai.

**March 31, 2020:** US and Taiwan officials hold virtual meeting on Taiwan's international space.

**April 8, 2020:** WHO Secretary General Tedros Adhanom accuses Taiwan of organizing a campaign against him and making racists slurs.

**April 9, 2020:** Tsai rejects Tedros' allegations and invites him to visit Taiwan.

**April 11, 2020:** *Liaoning* carrier group sails east of Taiwan toward South China Sea.

**April 18, 2020:** Hong Kong government arrests 14 prominent democracy activists.

**April 20, 2020:** 231 Taiwanese from Hubei fly home on designated CAL flight from Shanghai.

**April 22, 2020:** *Liaoning* carrier group sails east thru Bashi Strait.

**April 25, 2020:** Former Hong Kong publisher Lam Wing-kee opens Causeway Bay bookstore in Taipei.

**April 27, 2020:** The Dutch government changes its office name in Taipei from the Netherlands Trade and Investment Office to "Netherlands Office Taipei."



**April 27, 2020:** US Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar holds teleconference with Health Minister Chen Shih-chung.

**April 30, 2020:** Ingrid Larson appointed managing director of the American Institute in Taiwan's Washington office.

