

MASTER'S EXAMINER REPORT

GPS – Geopolitical Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University

Thesis title:	Assessing Tsai Ying-wen's Strategy in the South China Sea
Name of Student:	Lucia Gragnani
Referee (incl. titles):	Mgr. Jana Sehnáková, Ph.D.
Report Due Date:	September 7, 2022

Comments of the referee on the thesis highlights and shortcomings (following the four numbered aspects of your assessment indicated below).

1) Contribution and argument:

Lucia Gragnani selected an extremely interesting, timely, and generally understudied subject of her research - Taiwan's approach towards the contentious South China Sea and how it impacts current President Tsai's New South Bound Policy, which is aimed at outreach to countries "south of Taiwan", some of which are in fact South China Sea claimant states. Given the dispute between the People's Republic of China and Taiwan (Republic of China) over Taiwan's/ROC's sovereignty and over their mutual claims to the South China Sea, which go back to the 1947 Constitution, created by the then-Republic of China, this is definitely interesting issue to study.

As the author claims on pp. 5-6, "this research wants to investigate Taiwan's approach to the South China Sea disputes, with a focus on Tsai Ying-wen's policy, and its potential significance for the country's New Southbound Policy and relations with the ASEAN". The author is looking at the following questions (p. 6): 1/ how is the One China Principle affecting Taiwan's approach to the South China Sea disputes, 2/ what are the claims and strategies Tsai Ying-wen is utilizing in the South China Sea statecraft, in comparison with her predecessor Ma Ying-jeou, 3/ how are the Taiwanese claims and strategy in the South China Sea affecting the New Southbound policy and the relations with neighboring countries.

I appreciate Ms. Gragnani's decision to delve into this topic and take full advantage of her stay in Taiwan. Despite the research itself being challenging, as identifying respondents to Ms. Gragnani's interview requests turned out to be difficult, the interviews provided an interesting anecdotal evidence and insight into the views of Taiwanese policy makers and academia who focus on Taiwan's policy towards the South China Sea. Based on those and secondary sources, the author of the paper provided a very good analysis of President Tsai's overall approach towards the South China Sea and its impact on shaping the New South Bound Policy.

Throughout the paper, the author explains many of the peculiarities influencing Taiwan's policy-making: its lack of international recognition, the One China principle, which prevents the government of Taiwan from changing the Constitution and also constantly forces the Taiwan's political representation to take the PRC and its reactions into account - all of which has a significant impact on Taiwan's policy making and Taiwan's behavior. This is then meticulously demonstrated in the analysis of the differences between Ma Ying-jeou's and Tsai Ying-wen's policy towards the South China Sea.

At the end, the author concludes that based on her analysis, "Taiwan's approach to the South China Sea has on paper only marginally changed" (p. 97). In practice, the author points out that "Tsai Ying-wen's administration further played down Taiwan's stance in the South China Sea by trying to align the implementation of it and the phrasing of the official statements with the UNCLOS" (p. 98) while abandoning the KMT's emphasis on historical claims. President Tsai has done so, as Ms. Gragnani points out, to emphasize Taiwan's role as a responsible stakeholder and peaceful player (p. 99) and to 1. continue to receive support from the United States and to prevent antagonizing the PRC, 2./ to enhance Taiwan's legitimacy, cooperation with ASEAN, and the United States, and

most importantly, to 3./ juxtapose Taiwan, in the eyes of the world, to the PRC whose militarization of the South China Sea issue increases tensions in the region.

2) Theoretical and methodological framework:

The author relies the neorealist theoretical framework, however, constructivist approach is also taken into account, as the South China Sea has not only a material value for Beijing and Taipei, but it also has an ideational value, as claims of both are overlapping and represent a linkage between both entities - they are based on a constitution created in 1947 when the PRC and Taiwan were still part of the Republic of China, i.e. one entity.

3) Sources and literature:

The author has surveyed a significant number of both primary and secondary sources. Important information also came from interviews that Ms. Gragnani conducted while in Taiwan. These interviews provided a detailed understanding of the differences between the KMT and the DPP approach to the issue of the South China Sea. The list of resources could have been divided into primary and secondary sources - and subsequently into books, scholarly magazines, online resources.

4) Manuscript form and structure:

The thesis is divided into five chapters. In the first chapter, the author introduces the theoretical framework. The second chapter investigates how the One China Principle impacts the ability of Taiwan to carry out independent policy towards the South China Sea. The author points out to the fact that lack of recognition complicates Taiwan's role in international relations and thus limits Taiwan's maneuvering space to shape policy and to have its interest to be taken into account.

In the third - the most important - chapter, the author describes the approaches of Ma Ying-jeou and Tsai Ying-wen towards the South China Sea and identifies the differences, which are oftentimes found in great, yet significant detail. The fourth chapter provides an overview of Taiwan-ASEAN relations, with particular attention to Tsai Ying-wen's New Southbound Policy. In the final chapter, the author provides an outlook on possible future developments together with an overall evaluation of the New Southbound Policy as a means of counterbalancing the influence of the PRC, and provides some recommendations on how Taiwan could continue to build a reputation of a legitimate player in the South China Sea.

One minor note on the formal organization of the text: the chapters and subchapters are not numbered and the subchapter titles are not particularly distinguished from the text - numbering and a larger or bold font would have helped easier navigation in the text.

5) Quality of presentation

Overall, Ms. Gragnani presented a well-written thesis, which I enjoyed reading. She successfully answers all of the questions she aimed at researching.

Occasionally, the text gets a bit repetitive - e.g. the author constantly refers to the text above or previous chapters, however, this is just a minor criticism. There are only small grammar issues and typos. The thesis includes maps showcasing China's claims in the South China Sea as well as a table showcasing China's territorial disputes in the last 50 or so years.

CATEGORY	POINTS
<i>Contribution (research quality, analysis, and conclusions) (max. 40 points)</i>	39
<i>Theoretical and methodological framework (max. 25 points)</i>	25
<i>Sources and literature (max. 10 points)</i>	10
<i>Manuscript form and structure (max. 15 points)</i>	13

<i>Quality of presentation (grammar, style, coherence)</i>	<i>(max. 10 points)</i>	9
TOTAL POINTS	<i>(max. 100 points)</i>	96
The proposed grade (A-B-C-D-E-F)		A

Suggested questions for the defence are:

- What would be the dynamics in the South China Sea if Taiwan decided to sever all of its relations with the ROC?
- Do you see any changes to Taiwan's posture since Nancy Pelosi's visit? Do you envision that Taiwan could become more assertive vis-a-vis the South China Sea?

I recommend the thesis for final defence.

Referee Signature

Overall grading scheme at FSV UK:

TOTAL POINTS	GRADE	Quality standard
91 – 100	A	= outstanding (high honor)
81 – 90	B	= superior (honor)
71 – 80	C	= good
61 – 70	D	= satisfactory
51 – 60	E	= low pass at a margin of failure
0 – 50	F	= failing. The thesis is not recommended for defence.