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Taiwan, International Trade

Taiwan's Relations

“It’s very important for Taiwan to maintain its international contact.” This quote was said by Ma Ying-jeou, a former president of Taiwan, and he said it very well. Taiwan is heavily reliant on China for imports of food for the population of Taiwan. Taiwan needs to keep these international contacts going because they would be unable to sustain themselves, if relations with the mainland sour. Taiwan needs other trade agreements with other nations to keep the food supply steady and stable.

Taiwan is an island off the coast of China in the East China Sea. Taiwan is small, sitting at just under 14,000 square miles. A comparison to the size is just slightly smaller than the states Maryland and Delaware combined. According to the CIA World Factbook, the population of Taiwan is 23,603,049 people, and of those people, just a little under 80% of the population live in urban areas (CIA, 2021). The eastern part of the country is mountains, which cover about two-thirds of the whole country. The western side is rolling plains (CIA, 2021). This is the physical description of the island, however, one must also understand the ability for this country to feed themselves.

The CIA World Factbook states that the climate of Taiwan is tropical, with a rainy season during the monsoon season, which is around July and August. It also says that only 16.9% of the country’s land is arable. The average farm size in Taiwan is 1.1 hectares, which is just a little under 3 acres (CIA, 2021). In the little area of land that farmers have to grow crops, they grow mostly rice and vegetables. These two crops are largely exported out of the country along with poultry and machinery parts (CIA, 2021). Now that we know what the agricultural capabilities of Taiwan are, let’s look at daily life for the Taiwanese.

Life in Taiwan is different from life in America. A typical family in Taiwan is about 3 people (Textor, 2020). According to Jimmy Huang, most families live in what are called “townhouses” that are built up with many floors instead of just one (2019). He explains that in the houses, at the road level, they have a garage to park their car in, and then the living areas are on the floors above. The houses on the street are built right next to each other, with neighbors often sharing walls (Huang, 2019). When they’re not at their house, they’re most likely at work. According to the CIA World Factbook, just a little over half of the population works in services (2021). The CIA World Factbook also provides that 35% of the population works in the industry, and under 5% work in agriculture (2021). Of the Taiwanese population, only 1.5% is below the poverty line, and for comparison, the United States is right around 15% (CIA, 2021). Unemployment is hardly an issue, so they’re able to afford to buy food for themselves or their family.

Since the families are not struggling with poverty, food is not out of reach. Locals in Taiwan eat many different kinds of food. A local will typically eat rice, vegetables, tofu, and some type of

meat all bought from one of their local supermarkets. (McEneaney, 2017). McEneaney also says that a famous dish from Taiwan is beef noodles. As he goes on to explain, beef noodles are a lot like what we would know as chicken noodle soup but instead with beef, filled with broth, noodles, vegetables, all put together to eat for a meal. Other Taiwanese dishes are along the same lines, most of them with noodles and some type of meat like a chicken leg or pork chop, usually cooked by stewing, braising, steamed, or grilled (McEneaney, 2017). Taiwan has food readily available to them and people have access to electricity to cook their food. With 42,993 kilometers, which is about 26,715 miles, of roads paved, food can be accessed by going to one of the local supermarkets (CIA, 2021). The CIA World Factbook also says that there are 29 million subscriptions to mobile phones and about 92.78% of the population can use the internet. Although that's a good sign, the tap water in Taiwan has been contaminated for decades, most likely due to the leaking pipelines from recent earthquakes (Chang, 2018). The Taiwan News article also says that there is clean sanitation in the cities. However, the more rural areas aren't as developed as the urban areas and so they're not as readily available to food as they would be in the urban areas (Chang, 2021). All in all, Taiwan is a country doing well.

There is only one thing hindering the Taiwanese from having food security. Since the population is 23 million people on a small island, there isn't a lot of farmland. Most of the land is filled with cities; only about 17% of the land is arable. Big cities also cause there to be less land available to grow crops on. These cities are located more towards the coast because that is where the ports are, where they receive trade. Because of the coastal ports, those areas are more developed. The rural areas aren't as connected as the urban areas but still have availability to food. Taiwan relies entirely on imports from neighboring countries, like China, to get their food. This isn't sustainable because if one day, China decides to cut off their exports to Taiwan, Taiwan will have no food since they can't grow their own.

China would decide to do this if Taiwan continues to express democratic views of free press, "Pro-western sentiments", and "Anti-communist" sentiments. Currently, China sees Taiwan as "their" property and land (*What's behind the China-Taiwan divide?*). Many Taiwanese citizens see themselves as free and independent people (Devlin and Huang). China could cut off trade using their navy and create a blockade, or by more formal means of a paper proclamation. Taiwan relies on international and oceanic trade very heavily, as they are an island nation. They grow little to almost none of their own food because they are a highly populated island with most of the arable land covered by roads or cities. Because Taiwan completely relies on other neighboring countries, like China, to give them food, the situation would be severe if China chose to cut off their trade.

If China were to cut off Taiwan from trade, then rural areas would suffer more. However, the urban populations on the coast could still catch fish to eat from the waters around the island, unlike the inland rural populations who would have to grow their own food or move to the coast. Consequently, if there are more people growing their own food, this would affect the environment, most likely causing it to change. If food shortages were to happen, it would affect the elderly and children more because they can't survive as well without proper nutrition. Also, minorities, immigrants, or refugees may be affected because it could be harder for them to get a hold of food than others. As of right now, the situation has been staying the same because they're still importing food to Taiwan steadily.

Taiwan needs a solution to this issue because if it became a reality, the situation would be dire. If China were to cut off Taiwan from their trade deal, Taiwan would be in a similar situation as Cuba was in when the United States passed a trade embargo against them. The United States cut Cuba off because they were a Communist country and the U.S. is a Democracy. This left Cuba being unable to sustain themselves on their own. The Soviet Union was able to help Cuba and support them because they supported the Communist government on the Caribbean island. They set up trade agreements and treaties to support both nations (*United States embargo against Cuba*, 2021). Like Cuba, Taiwan would need another nation to trade with to keep their population from starving if they were to be cut off from trade from China. And, like Cuba, the disagreements will come based on political views.

So, to save their economy if they were to be cut off, Taiwan would need to be able to look to another nation for support. Although, the biggest reason Taiwan would be cut off from China is because they would start supporting Democracy instead of Communism. So that would possibly rule out the other Communist nations but encourage the Democratic nations to help. However, if a Democratic nation were to step up and help Taiwan, that would possibly cause a strain on that nation's agreements with China. Very few countries are willing to get into a fight with China because of the consequences that would occur. For example, in America, the decision to help Taiwan would risk angering China. But, doing nothing and letting Taiwan starve would not bode well for the goodwill image of the United States. In theory, Taiwan could start building relationships with other nations now so that they have something to fall back on if China were to cut them off eventually. The closest country to Taiwan (apart from China) is actually the Philippines, but relations with that island nation have not been great since the election of President Duterte (Everington). As Keoni Everington's Taiwan News article points out, a spokesperson for the Philippines recently mentioned Taiwan as being "part of China", which greatly troubled the Taiwanese officials (Everington). Local countries to Taiwan that are more friendly and also have good relations with the United States include Japan, South Korea, and Vietnam. Taiwan could build the framework with these other nations and possibly make some treaties so they're able to keep their food supply stable and consistent.

Taiwan building trade agreements with other nations could solve the needs of the entire population. The Taiwanese government would be leading this project without the need of funding by going through the necessary steps to build trade agreements which would be: visiting the country, discussing the agreements, and then signing a deal. This would require a cultural shift because instead of relying completely on China, Taiwan would try to build other trade agreements. This would change their culture, because not everything being imported into Taiwan would be from China. However, Taiwan is in good hands with political leadership. Tsai Ing-wen is currently serving her second term as President of the Republic of China (Taiwan) (*President Tsai*). This means she has the experience of being the leader in charge and has already forged many good relationships. However, to be successful in diplomacy, everyone needs to be involved.

A role citizens could possibly play is to be involved on trade missions. While the government will be running the big trade agreements, the lay people could go on trade missions to try and convince other countries to trade with them. For example, local Nebraska farmers went on a trade mission to Germany, and now the state of Nebraska has a trade agreement about popcorn

(Batie, 2019). Nebraska State Department of Agriculture director Steve Wellman was quoted on the importance of trade missions, “Trade missions like this one [to Germany] allow us the opportunity to create new and strengthen existing relationships that have the potential to lead to mutually beneficial future partnerships”. If Taiwanese farmers went on trade missions as well, this could help them get more trade agreements so they can be more successful in building a sustainable food supply.

Taiwan needs other sources of food in case their relations with China go south, just as former president of Taiwan, Ma Ying-jeou warned. Taiwan completely relies on China to bring in a steady food supply for the population, so if this were to be cut off, the people would starve due to the island’s inability to sustain the large population. This project to help create new trade agreements will help Taiwan from getting cut off from their main food supply and will keep the country more sustainable because of their reliance on multiple nations for food.

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