

# A R T Y K U Ł Y

## Holy See-China-Taiwan: A Cross-Strait Triangle

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The Holy See, with territorial residence in the Vatican City State, is the only sovereign European entity with diplomatic ties to the Republic of China (ROC), the official name for Taiwan, which presently has fifteen diplomatic allies in total. Holy See – ROC relations were established in 1942. In 1971, when the ROC lost its seat in the UN, the position of the Pontifical representative in Taiwan was downgraded from ambassador to *chargé d'affaires*, and it has remained so ever after. The Holy See and relations with it are unlike those with other sovereign entities, which are often influenced by geopolitical or commercial considerations. The Apostolic Palace is not interested in receiving foreign aid or signing trade agreements, but in securing religious freedom for the Catholic flock and respecting human rights. This can play in favour of Taiwan when it comes to preserving its formal relations with the Holy See. The People's Republic of China (PRC) demands that the Vatican conforms to the one-China policy by severing its diplomatic ties with Taiwan, as one of the two conditions for normalizing relations with Beijing. The 2018 *Provisional Agreement between the Holy See and the People's Republic of China on the Appointment of Bishops* marked a turning point in the Sino-Vatican dynamics. Yet, as long as there is no actual religious freedom for the Catholic Church in China, the Holy See remains very reluctant to switch diplomatic allegiance to the PRC. However, the 2018 agreement and the élan of the Papal policy towards China perhaps indicate that, for the Chair of St. Peter, diplomatic relations with Beijing may be 'well worth a mass'.

*Keywords:* Holy See, People's Republic of China, Republic of China, Taiwan, Pope Francis

### **The Holy See: 'Between the ROC and a hard place (China)'**

'The Roman Catholic Church is the only religious confession which has access to full diplomatic relations'.<sup>1</sup> This is due, in the first instance, to its centralized and

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transnational hierocratic organization;<sup>2</sup> the fact that its supreme government, the Holy See, has international legal personality; and its role in international affairs over centuries of venerable history.<sup>3</sup> The Holy See, based in the Vatican City State (VCS), maintains diplomatic relations with 183 sovereign states (The European Union and the Sovereign Military Order of Malta are to be added to this number) and permanent representatives in thirty-three international organizations.<sup>4</sup>

At present, only a handful of countries – seven – do not bestow diplomatic recognition upon the Apostolic See, as the Holy See is also known. Among those polities, one stands apart from the rest for its size, population, economy, geopolitical importance and outward foreign policy orientation. That country is the People’s Republic of China (PRC), a state that is unquestionably to bestride the 21<sup>st</sup> century scene as a leading world power. However, it would not be entirely correct to state that the Holy See has not diplomatic representation in China. In fact, the Apostolic See is the only sovereign European entity with diplomatic ties to the Republic of China (ROC), the official name for Taiwan, which currently has fifteen diplomatic allies in total.<sup>5</sup>

The ROC, which was established in 1912 replacing the last Chinese dynasty (Qing), was formerly the national government of all China. However, it lost control of the mainland to the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as a result of the Chinese Civil War in 1949, and since then its administration has been restricted to the island groups of Taiwan (Formosa), the Pescadores, Kinmen, and Matsu.<sup>6</sup> Over the ensuing decades, the ROC has been commonly referred to as ‘Taiwan’, and since the mid-1970s the name ‘China’ has been increasingly used to identify the PRC.<sup>7</sup> Holy See-ROC relations have been continuing since 1942. In 1971, when the ROC lost its seat

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<sup>1</sup> J. L. Tauran, ‘Is the Holy See a Political Power?’, magisterial lecture, Providence University, Taichung (Taiwan), 23 November 2005, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> In Max Weber’s words, a hierocratic organization is ‘an organization, which enforces its order through psychic coercion by sanctioning religious benefits. A compulsory hierocratic organization will be called a “church” insofar as its administrative staff claims a monopoly of the legitimate use of hierocratic coercion’. See: M. Weber, *Economy and Society. An Outline of Interpretative Sociology*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978, p. 212.

<sup>3</sup> R. J. Araujo, ‘The Holy See: International Person and Sovereign’, *Ave Maria International Law Journal*, 2011, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 1–3.

<sup>4</sup> Holy See Press Office, ‘Informative Note on the Diplomatic Relations of the Holy See’, 07.01.2019, 7 January 2019, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2019/01/07/190107a.html> (accessed on 6 October 2019).

<sup>5</sup> R. Jennings, ‘Kiribati cuts ties with Taiwan, presaging switch to China’, *Seattle Times*, 19 September 2019, <https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation/kiribati-cuts-ties-with-taiwan-presaging-switch-to-china/> (accessed on 6 October 2019).

<sup>6</sup> C. Sui, ‘Legacy debate as Republic of China marks 100 years’, *BBC News*, 10 October 2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-15218596> (accessed on 7 October 2019).

<sup>7</sup> J. M., ‘Why China and Taiwan are divided’, *The Economist*, 26 August 2014, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2014/08/economist-explains-16> (accessed on 6 October 2019).

at the UN, the position of the Pontifical representative in Taiwan was downgraded from Pronuncio (ambassador) to Chargé d’Affaires<sup>8</sup> and has remained so since then. The political status of the ROC is a contentious issue. The PRC claims that the ROC government is illegitimate, calls it the ‘Taiwan Authority’,<sup>9</sup> and considers Taiwan a renegade province which diplomatically ‘has no future’.<sup>10</sup> Both the PRC and the ROC (the latter at least formally) claim to be the sole legitimate government of China.<sup>11</sup>

The PRC government is adamant that any effort to formally abolish the ROC and replace it with an explicitly Taiwanese state would result in a strong and possibly military reaction.<sup>12</sup> Signally, Beijing requires all countries having or seeking diplomatic relations with it to adhere to the principle that there is just ‘one China’ including Taiwan and that the PRC government is the sole legitimate government of China and, thus, to give no recognition to the ROC.<sup>13</sup> This applies to the Holy See as well. One of Beijing’s two conditions for the establishment of formal relations is that the Apostolic Palace adheres to the One-China principle and severs its diplomatic ties with Taipei.<sup>14</sup>

Normalization of relations between the Holy See and the PRC might then come at the expense of the approximately 300,000 Catholics in Taiwan (1.3 percent of the population), where the Church can operate freely.<sup>15</sup> After successfully transitioning from authoritarianism to democratic system in the 1990s, Taiwan is now a consolidated democracy where ‘the constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the authorities generally respect religious freedom.’<sup>16</sup> Quoting Pope Benedict XVI’s address to the ROC ambassador to the Holy See: ‘Your Government’s firm commitment to freedom of religion has made it possible for the Church to carry

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<sup>8</sup> H. Chiu, ‘The International Legal Status of Taiwan’, in J. M. Henckaerts (ed.), *The International Status of Taiwan in the New World Order: Legal And Political Considerations*, The Hague, London and Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1996, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council PRC, ‘China reaffirms firm opposition to “Taiwan independence”’, *Spokesperson Remarks*, 12 March 2017, [http://www.gwytb.gov.cn/en/CrossstraitInteractionsandExchanges/201608/t20160823\\_11546647.htm](http://www.gwytb.gov.cn/en/CrossstraitInteractionsandExchanges/201608/t20160823_11546647.htm) (accessed on 8 October 2019).

<sup>10</sup> B. Blanchard, ‘China says Taiwan has “no future” diplomatically’, *Reuters*, 8 March 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-parliament-taiwan-idUSKBN16F0IF> (accessed on 8 October 2019).

<sup>11</sup> E. Albert, ‘China-Taiwan Relations’, *Council of Foreign Relations Backgrounders*, 7 December 2016, <http://www.cfr.org/china/china-taiwan-relations/p9223> (accessed on 8 October 2019).

<sup>12</sup> H. Yang, ‘China’s 3 Options for “Unifying” Taiwan’, *The Diplomat*, 15 April 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/04/chinas-3-options-for-unifying-taiwan/> (accessed on 8 October 2019).

<sup>13</sup> Anonymous, ‘What is the “One China” policy?’, 10 February 2017, *BBC News*, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-38285354> (accessed on 8 October 2019).

<sup>14</sup> L. Jucca, Benjamin Kang Lim and Greg Torode, ‘After decades of mistrust, Pope pushes for diplomatic breakthrough with China’, *Reuters*, 14 July 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/china-vatican/> (accessed on 9 October 2019).

<sup>15</sup> I. M. Sala and I. Steger, ‘Some Catholics are deeply disturbed that the Vatican is cozying up to China’s repressive regime’, *Quartz*, 25 August 2016, <https://qz.com/766171/as-the-vatican-moves-to-embrace-china-even-pope-francis-loyalists-are-concerned/> (accessed on 9 October 2019).

<sup>16</sup> American Institute in Taiwan, ‘Taiwan 2013 International Religious Freedom Report’, AIT Report OT-1407E, 29 July 2014, <https://kaohsiung.ait.org.tw/official-texts-ot1407.html> (accessed on 9 October 2019).

out her mission of love and service, and to express herself openly through worship and the proclamation of the Gospel. On behalf of all the Catholics in Taiwan, I would like to express my appreciation of this freedom that the Church enjoys'.<sup>17</sup>

On the other side of the Taiwan Strait the situation is markedly different. China's Communist regime expelled the Papal representatives in 1951 and in 1957, formed the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association (CPCA), a state-controlled entity that does not recognize the Pope's supreme ecclesial authority and strives to institutionally and organizationally govern China's Catholics.<sup>18</sup> The clergy and faithful rejecting this arrangement have gone underground, suffering persecution and imprisonment. As a result, the Catholic Church in China for a long time has been bifurcated into two segments: 'underground' and 'official'.<sup>19</sup> This dichotomy was, in theory, bridged on 22 September 2018 through the inking of the *Provisional Agreement between the Holy See and the People's Republic of China on the Appointment of Bishops* (from here onwards – 'the Provisional Agreement').<sup>20</sup>

The text of the Provisional Agreement remains secret, but it reportedly gives the officially atheist Chinese government the right to nominate bishops and grants the Pope veto power.<sup>21</sup> As explained by Greg Burke, the Director of the Holy See Press Office, the Holy See considers 'the objective of the accord [...] not political but pastoral, allowing the faithful to have bishops that are in communion with Rome but at the same time recognized by the Chinese authorities'.<sup>22</sup> The Vatican believes that the agreement 'creates the conditions for greater collaboration at the bilateral level' and stipulates that the Holy See and China have 'the shared hope this agreement may favor a fruitful and forward-looking process of institutional dialogue and may contribute positively to the life of the Catholic Church in China, to the common good of the Chinese people and to peace in the world'.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the Provisional Agreement is a turning point in the history of relations between the two sides, and represents

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<sup>17</sup> Pope Benedict XVI as quoted in P. Russell, 'Address of Msgr. Russell, Chargé d'Affaires to Taipei', Taipei, 16 January 2012, <http://www.catholic.org.tw/en/latest003Add.html> (accessed on 9 October 2019).

<sup>18</sup> Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University, 'China Patriotic Catholic Association', <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/organizations/china-patriotic-catholic-association> (accessed on 9 October 2019).

<sup>19</sup> T. McGregor, 'Catholicism in China Today', *Crisis Magazine*, 15 August 2013, <http://www.crisismagazine.com/2013/catholicism-in-china-today> (accessed on 10 October 2019).

<sup>20</sup> Anonymous, 'Provisional Agreement between Holy See and China', *Vatican News*, 22 September 2018, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2018-09/china-holy-see-agreement-appointment-bishops.html> (accessed on 10 October 2019).

<sup>21</sup> N. Shea, 'The Vatican's Agreement With China Looks Even Worse Now', *Hudson Institute*, 26 November 2018, <https://www.hudson.org/research/14711-the-vatican-s-agreement-with-china-looks-even-worse-now> (accessed on 10 October 2019).

<sup>22</sup> Greg Burke, as quoted in G. O'Connell, 'Vatican and China sign agreement on the appointment of bishops', *America – The Jesuit Review*, 22 September 2018, <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2018/09/22/vatican-and-china-sign-agreement-appointment-bishops> (accessed on 10 October 2019).

<sup>23</sup> Holy See Press Office, 'Communiqué concerning signing of a Provisional Agreement between the Holy See and the People's Republic of China on the appointment of Bishops', 22 September 2018, <https://press>.

a watershed for the Catholic Church in China. Actually, the door was opened to a path that may lead either to speedier inculturation of Catholicism into the Chinese society, or to a scenario of suffocating control of Chinese Catholics by the Party-State.

Will the agreement make Chinese Catholics ‘be fruitful and increase in number’, as the Bible says? Speaking of numbers, how many Catholics do live in the PRC? According to China’s State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), in 2017 there were more than 5.3 million Catholics worshipping in sites registered with the CPCA. The Holy Spirit Study Centre in Hong Kong puts the total number of Catholics in China at 12 million.<sup>24</sup> Official sources reported that the Patriotic Association in 2017 had more than 70 bishops, nearly 3,000 priests and nuns, 6,000 churches and meeting places, and 12 seminaries.<sup>25</sup> Consistently with the wishes of the Holy See, mutual assistance and osmosis between the ‘underground’ and ‘official’ groups are gradually augmenting,<sup>26</sup> especially since the 2018 Provisional Agreement has created an avenue for the merging of the two declensions of Roman Catholicism in China.

For the Holy See, establishing formal relations with the PRC would bring forth some long-sought achievements. Internationally, it would enable the Vatican to functionally interact with and have the ear of the world’s second most powerful government.<sup>27</sup> Within the Great Wall, diplomatic normalization would hopefully bring ‘underground Catholics’ more into legality, contribute to further mend the hiatus between the segments of the Chinese flock, expectedly limit the CPCA’s influence over ecclesial life and, most importantly, open wide the previously ajar door for the evangelization of the Chinese people.<sup>28</sup> For Beijing, repairing relations with the Vatican would be a resounding success, as the Apostolic See would join the vast number of states recognizing the PRC rather than the ROC, which would suffer a severe diplomatic blow.<sup>29</sup> It is hardly debatable

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vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2018/09/22/180922d.html (accessed on 10 October 2019).

<sup>24</sup> C. Coonan, ‘China’s Catholics pray as Communist Party and Holy See lock horns’, *Irish Times*, 22 August 2018, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/asia-pacific/china-s-catholics-pray-as-communist-party-and-holy-see-lock-horns-1.3603606> (accessed on 10 October 2019).

<sup>25</sup> C. E. Olson, ‘In 2030, the country with the most Christians will be...’, *Catholic World Report*, 21 April 2014, [http://www.catholicworldreport.com/Blog/3084/in\\_2030\\_the\\_country\\_with\\_the\\_most\\_christians\\_will\\_be.aspx](http://www.catholicworldreport.com/Blog/3084/in_2030_the_country_with_the_most_christians_will_be.aspx) (accessed on 10 October 2019).

<sup>26</sup> G. Valente, ‘Reconciliation among China’s Catholics is close to Pope’s heart’, *La Stampa*, 24 August 2016, <http://www.lastampa.it/2016/08/24/vaticaninsider/eng/inquiries-and-interviews/reconciliation-among-chinas-catholics-is-close-to-popes-heart-fls1fKn7F4LLWnGAHou09J/pagina.html> (accessed on 10 October 2019).

<sup>27</sup> V. Gaetan, ‘The Pope and the Politburo: The Vatican’s Chinese Diplomacy’, *Foreign Affairs*, 24 March 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2016-03-24/pope-and-politburo> (accessed on 10 October 2019).

<sup>28</sup> C. Buckley, ‘Talks to Heal Catholic Rift in China Gain Momentum Under Francis’, *New York Times*, 26 November 2016, [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/26/world/asia/catholics-china-francis.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/26/world/asia/catholics-china-francis.html?_r=0) (accessed on 11 October 2019).

<sup>29</sup> R. Jennings, ‘China’s Contacts with Vatican Could Be Big Loss for Taiwan’, *Voice of America*, 7 January 2017, <http://learningenglish.voanews.com/a/chinese-ties-with-the-vatican-could-be-a-big-loss-for-taiwan/3666215.html> (accessed on 11 October 2019).

that Beijing's rapprochement with the Holy See – ideally sealed by a Papal visit to China – would enhance the PRC government's international perception and credibility, especially when it purports to ensure freedom of religion.<sup>30</sup>

Even though the two venerable members of the international community have strong incentives for normalizing relations, such historic achievement has remained elusive until 2014, when the Holy See, under the pontificate of Pope Francis – whose secular name is Jorge Mario Bergoglio – the first Jesuit and Latin American to lead the Catholic Church,<sup>31</sup> inaugurated an unprecedented charm offensive toward Beijing and started intense contacts with the PRC aimed at giving a fresh impetus to the dialogue between the Holy See and China, and put it on the road to reconciliation.<sup>32</sup> The Pope has made himself a primary vector of amity by 'personalizing' and making the Vatican diplomacy toward China 'in his image, according to his likeness'.<sup>33</sup>

In 2014 and 2015, Pope Francis repeatedly expressed his desire to visit China.<sup>34</sup> Then, in February 2016, he gave an interview to a Beijing-based Italian journalist. In that conversation the Pope expressed his admiration for the Chinese nation, extended his Lunar New Year greetings to President Xi and the Chinese people, and cited Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci (a late 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian Jesuit priest who was one of the founding figures of Catholicism in China) as an inspiration.<sup>35</sup> Beijing's acknowledgement of the Papal utterances was remarkably cordial.<sup>36</sup> Since the beginning of 2017, prominent Catholic officials and clergy, as well as sources with ties to the leadership in Beijing, had been foreshadowing and revealing details of an agreement that, though falling short of full diplomatic ties, would nonetheless address key issues at

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<sup>30</sup> C. Wong, 'China and the Vatican Are a Step Closer to Mending Ties', *The Diplomat*, 10 February 2017, <http://thediplomat.com/2017/02/china-and-the-vatican-are-a-step-closer-to-mending-ties/> (accessed on 11 October 2019).

<sup>31</sup> Anonymous, 'Biography of the Holy Father Francis', *L'Osservatore Romano*, Year LXIII, No. 12, <http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/biography/documents/papa-francesco-biografia-bergoglio.html> (accessed on 11 October 2019).

<sup>32</sup> M. Day, 'Pope Francis sends New Year greeting to China in latest bid to increase the Vatican's influence on the world stage', *The Independent*, 3 February 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/pope-francis-sends-new-year-greeting-to-china-in-latest-bid-to-increase-the-vatican-s-influence-on-a6851721.html> (accessed on 11 October 2019).

<sup>33</sup> S. Magister, 'Francis: or, the Diplomacy of the Impossible', *www.chiesa*, 20 June 2014, <http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/1350819bdc4.html?eng=y> (accessed on 11 October 2019).

<sup>34</sup> J. Frawley Desmond, 'Pope Francis on China: "I Am Ready to Go There"', *National Catholic Register*, 22 January 2017, <http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/pope-francis-on-china-i-am-ready-to-go-there> (accessed on 11 October 2019).

<sup>35</sup> Anonymous, 'Pope Francis gives interview about China to Asia Times', *Vatican Radio*, 2 February 2016, [http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2016/02/02/pope\\_francis\\_gives\\_interview\\_about\\_china\\_to\\_asia\\_times/1205393](http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2016/02/02/pope_francis_gives_interview_about_china_to_asia_times/1205393) (accessed on 12 October 2019).

<sup>36</sup> B. Blanchard, 'Beijing's overture to Pope likely to signal thaw in diplomatic relations', *Independent.ie*, 4 February 2016, <http://www.independent.ie/world-news/asia-pacific/beijings-overture-to-pope-likely-to-signal-thaw-in-diplomatic-relations-34422538.html> (accessed on 12 October 2019).

the heart of the Sino-Vatican divide.<sup>37</sup> Their predictions about the agreement eventuated a year later. Yet, their assumptions about the fruitfulness of such an agreement are still unfulfilled.

As noted by former ROC ambassador to the Holy See Wang Yu-yuan, relations between the Apostolic See and the PRC ‘have never been better as now’.<sup>38</sup> As a result, attention to the issue is increasingly tempered with the anxiety in Taiwan, especially after the Provisional Agreement was announced in 2018. Moreover, Catholics all over the world are closely watching it, either with positive or negative expectations. While the dialogue was previously focusing on the appointment of bishops, now it continues on a broader agenda and might ultimately precipitate diplomatic change. Thus, two questions require investigation: is the relocation of the Apostolic Nunciature<sup>39</sup> to China to Beijing imminent? Is Taiwan ineluctably bound to lose its key Roman ally in the near future? In order to address the questions above, the analysis will proceed as follows: first, it will examine the significance and implications of the two conditions Beijing poses to the Holy See for diplomatic normalization, secondly, it will subsequently draw conclusions about the present situation and its possible developments.

### **The Critical Issue: ‘Non-interference in China’s internal affairs’**

The greatest impediment to the normalization of Sino-Vatican relations is Beijing’s demand that the Holy See refrains from ‘interfering in China’s internal affairs in the name of religion’.<sup>40</sup> This formula means mainly that Rome should accept governmental control over the Church in China, in particular, over the selection of Chinese clergy – especially bishops. As Richard Madsen remarked: ‘The big issue for normalizing relations

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<sup>37</sup> L. Zhen and T. Ng, ‘Vatican and Beijing near deal on appointment of bishops, Hong Kong cardinal says’, *South China Morning Post*, 9 February 2017, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2069589/vatican-and-beijing-near-deal-appointment-bishops-hong> (accessed on 12 October 2019).

<sup>38</sup> Y. Y. Wang as quoted in Anonymous, ‘Taiwan “can be the bridge” between Vatican and Beijing’, *UCA News*, 12 December 2016, <http://www.uca-news.com/news/taiwan-can-be-the-bridge-between-vatican-and-beijing/77857> (accessed on 12 October 2019).

<sup>39</sup> An Apostolic Nunciature is a top-level diplomatic mission of the Holy See, equivalent to an embassy, however, it does not issue visas nor does it have consulates. The head of the Apostolic Nunciature is called a nuncio, an ecclesiastical diplomatic title. A papal nuncio (officially known as an Apostolic nuncio) is a permanent diplomatic representative (head of diplomatic mission) of the Holy See to a state – or to one of two international intergovernmental organizations, the European Union or ASEAN – having the rank of an ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary, and the ecclesiastical rank of titular archbishop. Papal representatives to other intergovernmental organizations are known as ‘permanent observers’ or ‘delegates’. In several countries that have diplomatic relations with the Holy See, the Apostolic Nuncio is *ipso facto* the Dean of the Diplomatic Corps. Most countries that concede priority to the nuncio are officially Catholic, but some are not. In addition, the nuncio serves as the liaison between the Holy See and the Church in that particular nation, supervising the diocesan episcopate. See: Anonymous, ‘Vatican Diplomacy’, *Catholic Pages*, 11 April 1997, <http://www.catholic-pages.com/vatican/diplomacy.asp> (accessed on 13 October 2019).

<sup>40</sup> Anonymous, ‘China urges the Vatican to pave way for improved ties’, *People’s Daily Online*, 21 January 2015, <http://en.people.cn/n/2015/0121/c90883-8839230.html> (accessed on 13 October 2019).

between the Vatican and the Chinese Government has to do with who gets control of the appointment of bishops'.<sup>41</sup> The Nicene Creed, the fundamental statement of belief of the Roman Catholic faith, reads: 'We believe in One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church'.<sup>42</sup> For Catholics, Jesus is only truly preached and proclaimed within the bosom of the Universal Church. As Saint Ignatius of Antioch wrote in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, 'wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church'.<sup>43</sup> This implies that the Pope and Catholic bishops perceive their loyalty to the (pneumatic and) institutional unity of the Church as an integral part of their religious faith.<sup>44</sup> Borrowing the words of Eric O. Hanson: 'Just as they take their faith seriously, they take their institution seriously'.<sup>45</sup>

In terms of political analysis, this means that the Catholic Church's point of strength is the union of organization and ideology. The Church can be truly Catholic as long as its members publicly profess ecclesiastical unity and loyalty to the institution and its leaders uphold and protect its doctrinal and institutional integrity. Consequently, when certain circumstances impel the Pope or the bishops to choose between what they regard as the doctrinal and institutional unity of their religious organization and external political or societal goals, a strong expectation exists that they will decide for the former. In other words, they are supposed to give priority to the institutional survival of the Church, rather than to its institutional interest.<sup>46</sup>

The CPCA's policy of 'democratic' election of bishops, by repudiating the institutional authority of the Apostolic See over the Church in China,<sup>47</sup> denies the 'unrenounceable principles of faith and of ecclesiastical communion'<sup>48</sup> and gravely

<sup>41</sup> R. Madsen, 'The Chinese Catholic Church as Part of Civil Society', in D. L. Overmyer (ed.), *Religion in China Today*, Cambridge (UK), New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 169.

<sup>42</sup> Holy See, 'Catechism of the Catholic Church', [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc\\_css/archive/catechism/credo.htm](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/credo.htm) (accessed on 13 October 2019). The Nicene Creed is an ecumenical Christian statement of faith accepted in the Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, Oriental Orthodoxy, the Assyrian, the Anglican Communion, Lutheranism, the Reformed churches, Methodism, and many other forms of Protestantism. As all Catholics profess that their Church was founded by Jesus Christ on the apostle Peter, bishops not in union with the successor to Peter are illicit pastors of the Catholic Church.

<sup>43</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, 'Epistle to the Smyrnaeans', *Early Christian Writings*, 110, <http://www.early-christianwritings.com/srawley/smyrnaeans.html> (accessed on 13 October 2019).

<sup>44</sup> The unity with the Pope symbolizes the unity with the Universal Catholic Church, an essential tenet of Catholic doctrine. See: G. Criveller, 'The smoke screen of China's preconditions for relations with the Holy See', *Asianews.it*, 21 April 2005, <http://www.asianews.it/index.php?l=en&art=3108> (accessed on 13 October 2019).

<sup>45</sup> E. O. Hanson, *The Catholic Church in World Politics*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987, p. 43.

<sup>46</sup> F. Bozzato, 'The Conflict of Authority between China's Party-State and the Catholic Church: Confucian Obedience versus *Libertas Ecclesiae*', *Tamkang Journal of International Affairs*, 2014, Vol. 18, No. 2, pp. 114–115.

<sup>47</sup> 'In the rite of ordination, the Apostolic Pontifical mandate still appeared to be replaced by the consent of the state-sanctioned Chinese Bishops' College'. See: G. Valente, 'The long road and "accidents along the way"' (op. cit.).

<sup>48</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, 'Letter of the Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI to the Bishops, Priests, Consecrated Persons and Lay Faithful of the Catholic Church in the People's Republic of China', Vatican City, 27 May



undermines the organizational integrity of the Universal Church. From the Apostolic Palace's point of view. What is at stake is not the organizational structure of the Church in one country but the spiritual unity of the whole Catholic Church. As previously noted, the Church believes that 'the political community and the Church are autonomous and independent of each other in their own fields'.<sup>49</sup> 'Therefore, in the Holy See's perspective, asserting that the CPCA cannot claim the right to appoint bishops for itself is not 'meddling' in China's internal affairs'.<sup>50</sup>

In contrast, in the eyes of the Chinese Communists, allowing the Holy See to select Chinese bishops would substantially contravene the constitutional norm stating that 'Religious bodies and religious affairs are not subject to any foreign domination'.<sup>51</sup> Thus, in the view of the PRC authorities the controversy on the right to nominate bishop is a matter of national sovereignty. For this reason, the Holy See's acceptance of 'the will of the Chinese Church' would be regarded in Beijing as a sign of respect for China's sovereignty and thus 'create a good atmosphere for the improvement of Sino-Vatican ties'.<sup>52</sup>

The two parties had been facing this quandary for a long time, until the 2018 breakthrough. Indeed, Pope Francis' new policy toward China<sup>53</sup> represents the crucial factor in the equation. Since 2016, there had been continual parleying between China and the Holy See. A working group was set up, through which both sides tried to identify consensuses and divergences, redefine problems and find mutually acceptable solutions. In the words of Pope Francis: 'There is a commission that is working with China and that meets every three months, one time here and another in Beijing. There is a lot of dialogue with China'.<sup>54</sup> In truth, the Provisional Agreement reflects and consolidates a practice – or *modus operandi* – already in existence for the appointment of a number of new Chinese bishops, who 'were all ordained with the well-known, preliminary (prior, rearranged) approval of the Pope'.<sup>55</sup>

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2007, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/letters/2007/documents/hf\\_benxvi\\_let\\_20070527\\_china\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/letters/2007/documents/hf_benxvi_let_20070527_china_en.html) (accessed on 13 October 2019).

<sup>49</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>50</sup> F. Bozzato, *Heavenly Powers: Holy See Diplomacy toward China*, master's thesis, Hobart: University of Tasmania, 2009, p. 180.

<sup>51</sup> National People's Congress, *Constitution of the People's Republic of China*, official English translation, Beijing, First Session of the Thirteenth National People's Congress, 11 March 2018, Article 36.

<sup>52</sup> Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China as quoted in A. Olesen, 'China's Church Defies Vatican Objections', *AssociatedPress*, 30 April 2006, [http://missionxp.webblogg.se/300406202907\\_chinas\\_church\\_defies\\_vatican\\_obj.html](http://missionxp.webblogg.se/300406202907_chinas_church_defies_vatican_obj.html) (accessed on 14 October 2019).

<sup>53</sup> Sinopolitik, in this instance, means the political and diplomatic policy of the Holy See towards the People's Republic of China, seeking dialogue and eventual diplomatic normalization with Beijing.

<sup>54</sup> Pope Francis, as quoted in S. Magister, 'Parolin Curbs the Enthusiasm. From Rome To Beijing There is Still "a Long Way" To Go', *Settimo Cielo*, 23 January 2017, <http://magister.blogautore.espresso.repubblica.it/2017/01/23/parolin-curbs-the-enthusiasm-from-rome-to-beijing-there-is-still-%E2%80%99Ca-long-way%E2%80%9D-to-go/> (accessed on 14 October 2019).

<sup>55</sup> G. Valente, 'The real „news“ from China: New bishops are ordained with the well-known approval of the Pope', *La Stampa*, <http://www.lastampa.it/2016/12/14/vaticaninsider/eng/comment/>

Yet, numerous dissenting voices within the Church argue that Rome's depiction of the agreement sounds artificially rosy.<sup>56</sup> PRC-wary ecclesiastics surmise that Pope Francis has reached accommodation with Beijing even at the cost of the Church's subservience to secular authority and hollowing out of the Catholic doctrine.<sup>57</sup> The statements that many Catholic priests and scholars continue to give to the media indicate that even some of Pope Francis's most loyal supporters are profoundly disturbed by the prospect of a grand pact with China's Communist government and are second-guessing the Apostolic Palace's approach.<sup>58</sup> The debate on the agreement 'underscores the divergence of opinion within the Church',<sup>59</sup> said Wang Meixiu, a Catholicism specialist at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

Pope Francis' diplomatic élan toward China was even labelled 'kow-tow diplomacy',<sup>60</sup> implying that too much accommodation could exact an unacceptable price and the Vatican's historic deal with the Chinese Communist leadership may soon turn into nothing short of a Pyrrhic victory.<sup>61</sup> History will tell whether the closing of the agreement on episcopal appointment was a diplomacy masterpiece or an example of heterogenesis of ends due to a Roman Pontiff's naivety. In any case, signing of the Provisional Agreement has made the specific weight of the Holy See's diplomatic recognition of the ROC grow much higher than before, to the extent that it is sometimes characterized as the sole major obstacle to normalization of relations with Beijing.<sup>62</sup> The 'Taiwan problem', thus, needs close examination.

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the-real-news-from-china-new-bishops-are-ordained-with-the-wellknown-approval-of-the-pope-YDBX1PhFByP0iLcPK3OeEN/pagina.html (accessed on 14 October 2019).

<sup>56</sup> See: M. Yu, 'Chinese Cardinal Skeptical About Reputed Vatican-Beijing Agreement', *Voice of America*, 3 March 2017, <http://www.voanews.com/a/chinese-cardinal-vatican-beijing-agreement/3749428.html> (accessed on 14 October 2019).

<sup>57</sup> Anonymous, 'Vatican deal with China would 'betray Christ', says cardinal', *Catholic Herald*, 28 November 2016, <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2016/11/28/vatican-deal-with-china-would-betray-christ-says-cardinal/> (accessed on 14 October 2019).

<sup>58</sup> I. M. Sala and I. Steger, 'Some Catholics are deeply disturbed that the Vatican is cozying up to China's repressive regime', op. cit.

<sup>59</sup> M. Wang, as quoted in C.H. Wong, 'China and Vatican Near Pivotal Deal on Bishops', *Wall Street Journal*, 9 February 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-and-vatican-near-pivotal-deal-on-bishops-1486725649> (accessed on 14 March 2019).

<sup>60</sup> P. E. Gobry, 'The Manchurian Pope: Francis' deal with China is an ignominy', *Chinh's News*, 3 November 2016, <https://chinhdangvu1.blogspot.tw/2016/11/the-manchurian-pope.html> (accessed on 15 October 2019).

<sup>61</sup> E. Pentin, 'Sino-Vatican Relations: Will the Road to Reconciliation Endanger China's Underground Church?', *National Catholic Register*, 11 March 2016, <http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/sino-vatican-relations-will-the-long-road-to-reconciliation-endanger-chinas> (accessed on 15 October 2019).

<sup>62</sup> G. Sands, 'What the China-Vatican Deal Means for Taiwan', *The Diplomat*, 21 September 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/09/what-the-china-vatican-deal-means-for-taiwan/> (accessed on 16 October 2019).

### Taiwan: An ancillary (but not secondary) issue

To this day, Chinese officials continue to point at the Holy See's diplomatic recognition of Taiwan as one of the two hurdles to normalization of Sino-Pontifical relations. As previously mentioned, the Holy See has kept its mission to China in Taiwan since the early 1950s. However, since 1972, the Apostolic Nunciature in Taipei has been entrusted to a *chargé d'affaires ad interim* rather than to a *nuncio*.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, in the last decade, Rome has repeatedly and publicly indicated through various prominent ecclesiastics that the Apostolic See is ready to downgrade its relations with Taiwan to a sub-diplomatic level.<sup>64</sup> Thirdly, history shows that, for the PRC, a country's recognition of Taipei was never an insurmountable obstacle for negotiating the establishment of formal relations. For instance, although the United States had full diplomatic relations with the ROC,<sup>65</sup> Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai gladly received President Nixon in 1972. More recently, South Korea's (1992) and South Africa's (1998) shift of recognition from Taiwan to the PRC came after the conclusion of laborious negotiations with Beijing for which severing ties with Taipei was not a pre-condition.<sup>66</sup>

For these reasons, what has been so far presented by Beijing as one of the two main obstacles to the normalization of relations is actually a secondary problem in the face of the Chinese government's policy of pervasive control over religious groups and bodies. Oslo-based analyst Magda Hornemann encapsulated the ancillary nature of the 'Taiwan problem' in one sentence: 'it would seem that the issue of Taiwan is a public relations point more than a substantive one'.<sup>67</sup> In 2005, Dr. Tou Chou-seng, the then ROC Ambassador to the Holy See, was even more forthright when he declared: 'China uses Taiwan as a pretext, while the real problem is that of religious freedom'.<sup>68</sup>

However, the weight of the Taiwan issue in the Sino-Pontifical interaction should not be underestimated. The fact that the Holy See's recognition of Taipei is an ancillary question, does not necessarily imply that it is unimportant. In fact, if it is true that Taiwan now appears to stand on the sidelines of the debate on the Apostolic See's ties

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<sup>63</sup> Apostolic Nunciature to China, 'In Celebration of the 60 Years of ROC/Holy See: Diplomatic Relations, op. cit., p. 1.

<sup>64</sup> 'Relevant Chinese authorities have been informed for many years that, with a comprehensive agreement, the Holy See is ready to solve the Taiwan issue in a proper manner'. See: G. Criveller, 'The smoke screen of China's preconditions for relations with the Holy See', *Asianews.it*, 21 April 2005, <http://www.asianews.it/index.php?l=en&art=3108> (accessed on 16 October 2019).

<sup>65</sup> Not to mention the American military assistance to, and collaboration with, the Kuomintang government.

<sup>66</sup> G. Criveller, 'The smoke screen of China's preconditions for relations with the Holy See', op. cit.

<sup>67</sup> M. Hornemann, 'China's Catholics, the Holy See and religious freedom', *Forum 18 News Service*, 12 April 2007, [http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article\\_id=942](http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=942) (accessed on 16 October 2019).

<sup>68</sup> C. S. Tou, as quoted in Anonymous, 'Taiwan Remains a Question as Vatican-China Relations Progress', 19 May 2005, [www.christiantoday.co.uk/article/taiwan.remains.a.question.as.vatican.china.relations.progress./2922.htm](http://www.christiantoday.co.uk/article/taiwan.remains.a.question.as.vatican.china.relations.progress./2922.htm) (accessed on 16 October 2019). Dr. Tou served as ROC ambassador to the Holy See from January 2004 to May 2008.

with China,<sup>69</sup> it is equally true that isolating Taiwan is one of Beijing's main motivations for exchanging ambassadors with the Holy See. As a Taiwanese scholar pointed out, if Taiwan loses the Holy See, there can be only one winner in the cross-Strait diplomatic strife.<sup>70</sup>

Indeed, the Holy See has been crystal clear on its readiness to relocate its nunciature to mainland China. Past statements like Cardinal Tauran's – 'If they [the PRC authorities] give us the possibility, we're ready tomorrow'<sup>71</sup> – are anything but ambiguous. However, Taiwan is a democracy that guarantees actual religious freedom to its 300,000 Catholics.<sup>72</sup> Although the Holy See has important reasons for seeking formal relations with the PRC,<sup>73</sup> it cannot give the impression that its diplomatic choices – like those of other states' – are dictated by political calculus or opportunism (realpolitik). For an international actor that claims to be a 'moral authority' rather than 'a political power',<sup>74</sup> the price in terms of image would be too high.

Over the past decade, Taiwan's government has repeatedly issued statements gently reminding the Holy See that Taipei, unlike Beijing, upholds religious freedom. Such appeals are little more than public relations declarations with little practical import.<sup>75</sup> Apparently, Taiwan can exert little leverage over the Holy See.<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, the fact that the usual cross-Strait rivalry paradigm does not apply to the Apostolic See might

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<sup>69</sup> R. J. Fong, 'Holy See offers new paradigm for Taiwan', *Taipei Times*, 5 July 2007, p. 8.

<sup>70</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>71</sup> J. L. Tauran as quoted in R. Spencer, 'Vatican ready to sacrifice Taiwan for China', *Telegraph*, 16 May 2005, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2005/05/16/wvati16.xml&sSheet=/portal/2005/05/16/ixportal.html> (accessed on 20 October 2019).

<sup>72</sup> As Dr. Tou pointed out, 'the issue of Taiwan is not addressed in the [Pope Benedict XVI's] letter. But all the negative things he mentions have positive counterexamples in Taiwan: religious freedom, episcopal ordinations, no persecution. All the difficulties that the Pontiff listed and that the Church encounters in the mainland do not exist on Taiwan'. C.S. Tou, as quoted in: 'China needs the Catholic Church, says Taiwan's Ambassador Tou', *Asianews.it*, 5 July 2007, [www.asianews.it/index.php?l=en&art=9744](http://www.asianews.it/index.php?l=en&art=9744) (accessed on 20 October 2019).

<sup>73</sup> There are some 300,000 Catholics in Taiwan, but an estimated 12 million in the PRC where the Catholic Church reckons there's a spiritual hunger without an established religious system to serve it. 'Missionary experts believe that, if the government were to loosen its control, those 12 million Catholics on the mainland could become 120 million within a generation'. See: J. Allen, 'China, Taiwan and the Vatican', *National Catholic Reporter*, 25 November 2005, <http://www.nationalcatholicreporter.org/word/word112505.htm> (accessed on 21 October 2019).

<sup>74</sup> 'But does the Holy See have a political influence? If one understands "political" to mean a strategy aimed at imposing one's interests, the answer is no. [...] I would not speak of "the Holy See as a political power" but rather of "the Holy See as a moral authority"'. (J. L. Tauran, 'Is the Holy See a Political Power?', op. cit., p. 2).

<sup>75</sup> C. Wooden, 'Taiwan's president asks pope to support bid to join United Nations', *Catholic News Service*, 10 January 2008, <http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/0800157.htm> (accessed on 21 October 2019).

<sup>76</sup> As Dr. Raymond Tai – a former Taiwanese ambassador to the Holy See – said back in 1999: 'In reality, there is little we can do if the Holy See seeks normalized relations with Peking'. (R. Tai, as quoted in M. Lu, 'Holy See urged to respect ties', *Taiwan Journal*, 26 March 1999, <http://taiwanjournal.nat.gov.tw/site/Tj/ct.asp?xItem=17034&CtNode=122> (accessed on October 21 2017)).

play in favour of Taipei. If it is true that Taiwan cannot engage in cheque-book diplomacy with the Holy See, it is equally true nor can China.<sup>77</sup> The Apostolic Palace is not interested in receiving foreign aid or signing trade agreements but in obtaining religious freedom for the Chinese Catholic flock.

The Holy See is ready to change the nature of relations with Taiwan, provided that ‘religious freedom is realized in China’.<sup>78</sup> Therefore, as long as there is no actual religious freedom for Catholics in the PRC, the Provisional Agreement notwithstanding, the Holy See will be very reluctant to shift recognition to Beijing.<sup>79</sup> Therein lie Taipei’s hopes to maintain its Roman ally. In other words, Taiwan counts on its diplomatic rival’s intransigence on religious freedom and it nourishes the hope that the moment of a major change in Sino-Pontifical relations is not nigh. In Dr. Tou’s words: ‘When I entered the Foreign Service thirty years ago, my first job was to track affairs in Europe, including the Vatican. I remember people telling me, “Look out, something is about to happen, the Vatican is going to move its embassy to Beijing.” It’s thirty years later, and we’re still waiting. I don’t believe this is going to happen anytime soon’.<sup>80</sup> It was 2005. To date, the Apostolic Nunciature to China continues to be located in Taipei.

Taiwanese hopes might not be in vain. Both the Apostolic Palace and Taipei are aware that ending diplomatic ties with Taiwan before having secured effectual religious freedom for the Church in China would leave the Holy See in a substantially weaker position. The Vatican, in fact, could not continue to offer the severing of relations with the ROC as a *quid pro quo* for the improvement of the condition of Chinese Catholics. Moreover, in the interregnum between the denouement of diplomatic relations with Taipei and the exchange of ambassadors with the PRC, the Holy See would remain without any nunciature on Chinese (China and Taiwan) soil.<sup>81</sup> This is a scenario that Rome cannot even contemplate, especially because negotiations with Beijing’s government might drag on – with little results – for years. Last but not least, once relations with Taipei were severed, for the Holy See it would certainly be more

<sup>77</sup> R. J. Fong, ‘Holy See offers new paradigm for Taiwan’, op. cit.

<sup>78</sup> J. L. Tauran, as quoted in anonymous, ‘Vatican envoy vows support’, op. cit. The same position was restated in 2006 by Monsignor Ambrose Madtha, the then Holy See’s Chargé d’Affaires ad interim in Taiwan. The Pontifical diplomat said: ‘If religious freedom in China is guaranteed, it is okay to move the embassy from Taipei to Beijing.’ (A. Madtha, as quoted in Y.P. Chang, ‘Top envoy says Vatican ready to relocate embassy’, *Taipei Times*, 30 March 2006, p. 3).

<sup>79</sup> S. Castelfranco, ‘Vatican, China Seek Closer Diplomatic Ties’, *Voice of America*, 22 January 2008, <http://www.voanews.com/english/archive/2008-01/2008-01-22-voa34.cfm?CFID=277811054&CFTOKEN=46626151> (accessed on 21 October 2019).

<sup>80</sup> C. S. Tou, as quoted in Allen, ‘China, Taiwan and the Vatican’, *National Catholic Reporter*, op. cit.

<sup>81</sup> The Holy See considers the nunciature in Taipei as its embassy to whole China, not to Taiwan only. As declared by Cardinal Sodano – the then Secretary of State of the Holy See – in 1999: ‘The Taipei nunciature is the nunciature in China’. (A. Sodano, as quoted in E. Eckholm ‘In Bid to Court China, Pope Weighs Visit To Hong Kong’, *New York Times*, 12 February 1999, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9504E4D8163AF931A25751C0A96F958260> (accessed on 21 October 2019)).

difficult to use Taiwan as ‘a bridge between mainland Catholic communities and the Vatican’.<sup>82</sup>

The following statement, pronounced in March 2006 by Monsignor Madtha, the then Papal Chargé d’Affaires ad interim in Taipei, is valid even today: ‘So far, relations between the Vatican and Taiwan (have) remained stable’.<sup>83</sup> At the same time, the dialogue between the Apostolic Palace and China is gaining momentum. At the end of his 19–26 November 2019 Apostolic Journey to Thailand and Japan, on his return flight from Tokyo to Rome, Pope Francis said that he ‘loves China’ and ‘would like to go to Beijing’.<sup>84</sup> Two days later, China’s foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang stated: ‘We appreciate the goodwill and friendship expressed by the Pope. [...] We have maintained good communications with the Vatican and are pleased about the improvement and progress of Sino-Vatican relations. [...] China is sincere and active in promoting Sino-Vatican relations, and is open to and welcomes the development of relations.’<sup>85</sup>

## Conclusion

Holy See-China relations are one of the most intricate diplomatic conundra on the world scene. Numerous factors and variables contribute to the complexity of the equation, including cross-Strait affairs. The analysis of the Holy See’s Sinopolitik conducted in this paper has brought to the fore at least four important elements characterizing the current state and evolution of the Holy See-ROC-PRC relations triangle.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> J. L. Tauran, as quoted in L. Chung, ‘Vatican official vows to back Taipei links’, *South China Morning Post*, 26 November 2005, <http://www.scmp.com/portal/site/SCMP/menuitem.06f0b401397a029733492d9253a0a0a0/?vgnnextoid=b66961b086b21110VgnVCM100000360a0a0aRCRD&s=Archive> (accessed on 22 October 2019). Apparently, this view of Taiwan as a bridgehead for engaging mainland China was endorsed by Benedict XVI even before his election to Pontificate. As Dr. Tou revealed, when he paid a visit to the then Cardinal Ratzinger in 2004, ‘Cardinal Ratzinger told me at that time that he hoped the people of Taiwan could help people in China gain freedom’. C.S. Tou, as quoted in M. Chen, ‘Envoy to the Vatican reveals secret weapon’, *Taipei Times*, 27 May 2005, p. 2.

<sup>83</sup> A. Madtha, as quoted in Y.P. Chang, ‘Top envoy says Vatican ready to relocate embassy’, op. cit.

<sup>84</sup> Pope Francis as quoted in: L. Chen, ‘China open to closer relationship with Vatican, Beijing says after Pope Francis’ words of peace’, *South China Morning Post*, 29 November 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3039815/china-open-closer-relationship-vatican-beijing-says-after-pope> (accessed on 30 October 2019).

<sup>85</sup> S. Geng, as quoted in L. Chen, ‘China open to closer relationship with Vatican, Beijing says after Pope Francis’ words of peace’, op. cit.

<sup>86</sup> Despite the increasing attention being paid to empirical cases of triangular interaction, on the one hand, the interactions between three states – or triangular interactions- have been far neglected in International Relations (IR) theories and also there still lack suitable methodological instruments for their evaluation. On the other hand, there is not enough empirical evidence currently available that can explain how and to what degree states in triangular interactions may be synchronized. See: A. Soliz de Stange, ‘Synchronization in International Relations: Triangular interactions between China, Latin American and the United States’, *Política, Globalidad y Ciudadanía*, 2015, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 24–52.

Firstly, the issue of ‘Vatican interference in China’s internal affairs, including in the name of religion’,<sup>87</sup> which condensed into the dispute over the appointment of bishops, has been for a long time the real stumbling block on the road to diplomatic normalization between the Apostolic See and Beijing. It appears that the 2018 agreement removed it to a significant extent. On the other hand, the Chinese demand that ‘the Vatican must sever the so-called “diplomatic relations” with Taiwan, recognize that the Government of the People’s Republic of China is the sole legal government representing the whole China, and Taiwan is an inalienable part of China’,<sup>88</sup> continues to stand as an obstacle to Holy See-China formal relations.

Secondly, after decades of a gruelling Sino-Vatican game - ‘a confrontation made by alternating openings and sudden denials, optimistic expectations and cold showers’<sup>89</sup> – the Holy See, under Bergoglio’s Pontificate, has shown firm determination to step up dialogue with the PRC in order to break the enduring diplomatic deadlock. To this aim, Papal diplomacy has, with a notable degree of success, intensified its efforts to engage with Beijing purposefully.

Thirdly, PRC government, has reacted positively the Holy See’s invitation to dialogue, by signalling its will to discuss the matter of governmental control over the ecclesial life of the Church in China, especially over the ‘democratic election’ of the Chinese Catholic hierarchy. Even though Beijing’s fundamental principles in handling relations with the Apostolic See, ‘remain consistent, clear and unchanged’,<sup>90</sup> the Communist leadership accepted to pragmatically exceed the dispute through preliminary talks leading to a mutually agreed system for appointing Catholic bishops.

Fourthly, on the surface, the relations between the ROC and the Holy See do not seem to be perturbed by the positive phase in Sino-Vatican interaction. The relationship between the Vatican and Taipei officially remain cordial and stable. The ROC has even proactively fostered its cultural exchanges and humanitarian cooperation with the Catholic Church. However, such activism could be revealing of Taiwan’s concern about impending developments and scenarios in which the ROC would lose its most prestigious diplomatic ally to the Mainland.

Despite insistent predictions about an imminent Vatican cross-Strait hopping by analysts, politicians and media – as well as allegations about Pope Francis’ conviction that Beijing is ‘well worth a mass’<sup>91</sup> – making a quick switch of allegiance across

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<sup>87</sup> J. Liu, as quoted in Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, ‘Foreign Ministry Spokesman Liu Jianchao’s Regular Press Conference on 9 May 2006’, <http://www.chinaembassy.org.nz/eng/zt/mfast/t251459.htm> (accessed on 22October 2019).

<sup>88</sup> J. Liu, as quoted in F. Ching, ‘Sino-Vatican Relations after Pope John Paul II’, op. cit.

<sup>89</sup> S. Pelaggi, ‘The Sino-Vatican negotiations and the role of Taipei’, op. cit.

<sup>90</sup> J. Liu, as quoted in Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, ‘Foreign Ministry Spokesman Liu Jianchao’s Regular Press Conference on 9 May 2006’, op. cit.

<sup>91</sup> The quote ‘Paris is well worth a Mass’ – attributed to King Henry IV of France – is commonly used to talk about sacrifices which are worth doing, because the expected compensation is worthwhile.

the Taiwan Strait would actually prove an arduous undertaking for the Holy See for a series of reasons. If the analytical focus is circumscribed to the Apostolic Palace, then at least one important ‘endogenous factor’ limiting the Vatican’s freedom of diplomatic action and choice toward China emerges.

In fact, the Holy See’s nature as a non-state ‘moral power’ has weighty implications for its relations with the PRC. The Holy See is a sovereign religious force which attempts to implement a moral diplomacy. Thus, according to the Pontifical diplomats, while the state actors’ foreign policy essentially consists of the defence and expansion of power, the Apostolic See’s ‘national interest’ coincides with evangelization and defence of human rights. In substance, this means that the Holy See founds its claim to moral eminence in the international community on its rejection of realpolitik logics and practices. Consequently, the moral prestige of the Holy See would be gravely undermined should the Apostolic Palace shift recognition from Taipei to Beijing out of manifestly political calculus. While Taiwan assures religious freedom for Catholics, the PRC, in many respects, does not. Therefore, the Holy See could hardly justify its change of allegiance in terms of other than realist reasons, unless China makes some significant concessions on religious freedom. Thus, the Holy See’s status as moral power represents a considerable restraint on its freedom of diplomatic action toward China.

Finally, the Holy See’s diplomacy is historically informed and characterized by prudence and patience as well as proverbial risk aversion. Therefore, ‘one hopes that the Vatican’s diplomats, with nearly two millennia of institutional experience behind them, are a match for Chinese negotiators with their own two millennia history of barbarian handling’.<sup>92</sup> The Apostolic Palace has most likely given due consideration to the possibility that Beijing might be showing ‘flexibility’ regarding the modes of apostolic succession in the Chinese church for the purpose of luring the Holy See into breaking diplomatic ties with the ROC. ‘Once that’s accomplished, there is no further Vatican leverage in the talks and no further incentive for Chinese “flexibility”’. The Chinese state will pocket the winnings and walk away from the table’.<sup>93</sup> The fact that, in 2016, the Apostolic Nunciature in Taipei moved to the new quarters it had commissioned to build, may speak volumes about the Vatican’s unrivalled perspicacity. And also assuage the concerns of the Taiwanese. Secretary of State Cardinal Parolin’s assessment that a ‘normalization’ of relations between Rome and Beijing ‘is not easy’ and ‘needs a lot of patience and perseverance’<sup>94</sup> – given at the January 2017 World Economic Forum in Davos – should be of further reassurance to Taipei. As for the Provisional Agreement of 2018, it addresses a key issue between the two sides,

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<sup>92</sup> J.J. Tkacik, ‘Breaking with Taiwan is Chinese Precondition for Vatican Thaw’, *China Business Intelligence*, 21 March 2017, <http://chinabusinessintelligence.com/content/breaking-taiwan-chinese-precondition-vatican-thaw> (accessed on 24 October 2019).

<sup>93</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>94</sup> P. Parolin, as quoted in S. Magister, ‘Parolin Curbs the Enthusiasm’, *op. cit.*



the appointment of bishops, but many other problems have to be resolved before there occurs the full normalization of relations between the Holy See and the PRC. Greg Burke, speaking at the Holy See Press Office, put it with succinct clarity: ‘This is not the end of a process. It’s the beginning’.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Greg Burke, as quoted in G. O’Connell, ‘Vatican and China sign agreement on the appointment of bishops’, *op. cit.*