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A Preliminary Assessment of CCP Political Warfare in Taiwan's 2024 Elections

By: Russell Hsiao

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While the international community is fixed on the nightmare scenario that could occur in the Taiwan Strait—a full-scale invasion of Taiwan by the People's Republic of China (PRC)—a persistent and insidious campaign has been unfolding to influence and interfere with Taiwan's democratic political processes. Indeed, Beijing has been engaged in a campaign of political warfare—means to expand Chinese influence and power below the threshold of armed conflict—directed at influencing, both overtly and covertly, and interfering with Taiwan's upcoming elections. [1]

While the PRC's has engaged in this pressure campaign against Taiwan for decades, its efforts have grown increasingly aggressive since the 2016 election of President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文). These activities have noticeably ramped up in the lead-up to Taiwan's seventh presidential and legislative elections, set to take place on January 13. As Taiwan's Foreign Minister Joseph Wu (吳釗燮) has clearly warned in a piece for *The Economist* published just 10 days before the elections: "[T]he PRC has been making unprecedented efforts to meddle in the democratic process in Taiwan." [2]

Election Interference and Beijing's Longstanding Political Warfare Campaign

According to a Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) study published in August 2023, Chinese political warfare covers six broad areas: (1) intelligence operations; (2) cyber operations; (3) information and disinformation operations; (4) United Front work; (5) irregular military actions; and (6) economic coercion. The study, entitled *Competing without Fighting: China's Strategy of Political Warfare*, did not examine the case of Taiwan, but the tactics and techniques analyzed by the researchers were notably deployed and honed with Taiwan in mind. It is no exaggeration to describe Taiwan as standing on the frontline of China's authoritarian "sharp power" operations. As such, Taiwan's 2024 elections will likely serve as a test bed for Chinese Communist Party (CCP, 中國共產黨) influence and interference opera-

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tions, making them a critical case study for other democracies to closely examine and share.

In short, this preliminary analysis provides a survey of observable instances of PRC political warfare activities aimed at influencing and interfering in Taiwan's 2024 elections, which include a mix of both overt and covert instruments. Based on an analysis of open-source materials and disclosures, there are several key tools that Beijing has employed thus far: (1) fake online opinion polls; (2) United Front operations targeting village chiefs; (3) use of artificial intelligence (AI) for online propaganda and disinformation; (4) economic enticements and coercion; and (5) intensified gray zone tactics.

To be sure, analysts who may have focused only on the last few months of the 2024 elections to identify election influence and interference are likely to have missed the forest for the trees. While PRC election interference in Taiwan's elections has been persistent and commonplace since 1996 (when Taiwan held its first direct presidential election), CCP United Front operations go back much further. Though, indeed, such activities often intensify in the lead-up to elections, they have long been a ubiquitous feature of cross-Strait dynamics, shaping many of the economic, societal, and political interactions between the PRC and Taiwan.

As Chinese aggression has risen since the beginning of Xi Jinping's (習近平) reign in 2012, concerns over PRC political warfare against Taiwan and its interference in the island democracy's elections have reached new heights in recent years. Indeed, the issue has even been discussed at the highest levels of diplomacy, when US President Joseph Biden reportedly raised it in November 2023 during his summit with Xi in San Francisco. Yet, despite President Biden's caution to Xi to refrain from interfering in Taiwan's upcoming elections, Beijing has clearly not heeded the US warning. In fact, Xi's top official for United Front work, Wang Huning (王滬寧), reportedly convened a meeting in late 2023 to ramp up these efforts—while attempting to deliberately mask the PRC's interference in Taiwan's democratic processes.

According to the Ministry of Justice Investigation Bureau's (MJIB, 法務部調查局) report to the Legislative Yuan in November, Taiwan has been targeted by three major forms of election interference by foreign forces, including: "overseas financial investment interference" (境外資金介選), "online election betting" (網路選舉賭盤), and "spreading false information to interfere (cognitive operations)" (散布假訊息干擾[認知作戰]). Despite the persistent nature of CCP political warfare, there are still some notable features of this year's election interference efforts (*see table below*) that are worthy of highlighting for further study.

To illustrate this point, what follows is a table of the various components of CCP political warfare and some of the major incidents and brief descriptions observed in this election cycle:

Political Warfare Components	Specific Examples and Descriptions
Info/Disinformation Operations	• At least two known cases of the PRC recruiting Taiwanese citizens (Hsu Shao-tung [徐少東], Lin Hsien-yuan [林獻元], Su Yu-an-hwa [蘇雲華] et al.) to fabricate and disseminate fake online opinion polls on the presidential elections to misled voters • The use of illegal online election gambling sites to incentivize people to vote for certain candidates for potential monetary gain • Information campaign to disseminate "American Skepticism" narrative in Taiwan's political discourse. [3] • The use of artificial intelligence (AI) for online propaganda and disinformation, including the manipulation of online content of statements by political candidates • Partisan attacks on Ko Wen-je (柯文哲) after the failure of Blue-White unity ticket, as well attempts to undermine Taiwanese support for Japanese earthquake victims
Intelligence	• Chinese officially charges activist Yang Chih-yuan (楊智淵) • Taiwanese arrests of an attempted military defector and other suspected agents

United Front	• United Front operations targeting village chiefs and grassroots organizations, in which voters are brought to China and rallied to vote for certain political parties and candidates (e.g., the Union of Chinese Nationalists, 中華泛藍協會; new immigrant associations) • CCP infiltration of Taiwanese politics via proxies like the Chinese Unification Promotion Party (CUPP, 中華統一促進黨) through illegal financing schemes that are used to support the candidacy of certain politicians [4] • Pressuring Taiwanese businesses to refrain from supporting Taiwan government initiatives to reinvest in Taiwan
Military Gray Zone Tactics	• Chinese tugboats reportedly operating within four nautical miles of Taiwan's coastline • Persistent military flights within Taiwan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ) and crossings of the median line of the Taiwan Strait • Weather/surveillance balloons flying over Taiwan
Economic Enticements and Coercion	• Proposal of Cross-Strait Integrated Development Demonstration Zone (兩岸融合發展示範區) and associated two tranches of preferential measures for businesses and people from Taiwan to promote economic integration • Sidelining Terry Gou's (郭台銘) presidential bid through the use of a deliberately timed tax audit • The PRC's determination that alleged trade barriers are determined to constitute a restrictive trade barrier, which led it to suspend tariff relief on imports of 12 Taiwanese petrochemical products

Foreign Minister Wu put an even finer point on this warning in his piece for *The Economist*, stating that:

> *"The most flagrant, and yet not at all surprising, abuses are conducted by PRC surrogates in Taiwan who set up fake organizations and fake news websites, conduct fake polls and use thousands of fake social-media accounts to manipulate public debate and opinion. The PRC has invited Taiwanese grassroots elected officials on tours of China that include indoctrination on who to support in the elections. Taking advantage of Taiwan's openness, China has flooded Taiwan with disinformation and stepped up its cyber-warfare activities to try to dupe the Taiwanese people into accepting its narrative.* Its plan is to win over a critical minority of swing voters. *In a tight race like this one, and with the concerted effort the PRC is making, it might just get its way."* (Emphasis added)

Key Feature: Economic Coercion

While many of these influence and interference activities have not varied dramatically from Beijing's past practices, the most notable feature of PRC interference in this election cycle—and what could be expected to intensify in the years to come—is the use of economic coercion against Taiwan.

Indeed, the 2024 elections demonstrated a textbook case of how the PRC utilizes both economic enticements and coercive measures in a two-pronged approach to influence Taiwan's electorate. On December 15—just a little less than a month away from the elections—the PRC's Ministry of Commerce (MoC, 中華人民共和國商務部) announced the results of its trade barrier investigation into some 2,455 Taiwanese products, which it launched in April 2023.

The findings of the investigation were as expected—and, in all likelihood, predetermined. According to Beijing, Taiwan's trade barriers violated the rules of both the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA, 海峽兩岸經濟合作架構協議), a trade deal struck in 2010 between Taiwan and China. On December 21, only a few days later after the announcement of the determination, the Chinese government further announced that it would suspend tariff relief on imports of 12 Taiwanese petrochemical products beginning on January 1, 2024. According to Taiwan's Ministry of Economic Affairs (MOEA, 經濟部): "[A]round USD $1.8 billion of the 12 products affected by the policy were exported to China from January through November this year [2023], accounting for 1.3 percent of Taiwan's total exports to China." While it remains unclear what further specific actions the PRC will take, the aforementioned measures are likely only the beginning.

At the same time that Beijing was wielding the stick, the PRC was also preparing to hand out more carrots. In September, it announced a set of measures directed at Fujian province designed to create a demonstration zone for integrated development (兩岸融合發展示範區), followed soon after by the announcement of two tranches of measures intended to entice more businesses and people into Fujian.

The decision to announce the result of the investigation concurrently with the measures for the integrated development demonstration zone in Fujian province follows the PRC's long-established pattern of employing a mix of economic enticements and punishments to influence Taiwan's politics and elections. The measures taken by the PRC in this election, including announcing that it was auditing Foxconn (富士康) after Terry Gou announced that he was running for president, are both more subtle and tougher. These characteristics could potentially make these efforts more effective than previous tactics, as they could make Chinese economic leverage and coercion a semi-permanent fixture in Taiwanese electoral politics in the years to come.

Conclusion

PRC influence and interference in Taiwan's democracy are matters of importance, not only for Taiwan, but for the United States as well. [5] For Americans and citizens of other democratic nations, understanding what happens in Taiwan is vital, as it helps inform our own experience with foreign interference in elections. Indeed, Taiwan is the canary in the coalmine for CCP political warfare. As was highlighted in the recently declassified report *Intelligence Community Assessment of Foreign Threats to the 2022 US Elections*, published by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence: "Since 2020, PRC senior leaders have issued broad directives to intensify efforts to influence US policy and public opinion in China's favor." As the intelligence assessment made clear, "During the 2022 US elections, China intensified efforts to heighten sociopolitical divisions [...] it focused more on efforts to support or undermine a small number of specific candidates based on their policy positions." Furthermore, it noted "China's greater willingness to conduct election influence activities than in past cycles."

A comparison of methods used by Beijing to interfere in Taiwan's past elections reveals that while most of the measures that the CCP employed in the past are still being used, they have become more sophisticated with technological advancements. However, so have the responses of the Taiwanese government and civil society organizations. [6] Yet as Taiwan's top national security official, Wellington Koo (顧立雄), the secretary-general of the National Security Council (NSC, 國家安全會議), warned: "[The CCP's] overhead costs are, indeed, very low. But we must sufficiently defend against the proliferation of controversial information and endow our people with a sufficient, genuine ability to discern true from false, so our costs will conversely be quite high." Ultimately, whether the CCP's political warfare operations succeed will not be determined by one election, but by how long Taiwan's leaders and population can withstand this persistent and intensifying campaign.

The main point: Once again, the PRC has significantly intensified its political warfare operations in the lead-up to Taiwan's 2024 national elections. While these efforts have been largely consistent with previous campaigns, their increased subtlety and sophistication could pose substantial challenges for Taiwan.

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[1] This assessment adopts the definitions of "election interference," "election influence," and "foreign malign influence" as provided in the Director of National Intelligence (DNI) report *Foreign Threats to the 2022 Elections* (declassified December 11, 2023). https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/NIC-Declassified-ICA-Foreign-Threats-to-the-2022-US-Elections-Dec2023.pdf

[2] With polls just a week before the election showing a tight race, it may ultimately come down to the undecided voters—who still represent around 2 to 15 percent of the voting public according to various polls—and the 40 percent or so self-identified independents, who will form the decisive bloc of votes in these consequential elections.

[3] "Whether these narratives may originate in Taiwan, or whether they are generated by the state propaganda architecture of the PRC, they are heavily promoted and amplified by the latter system." See, e.g., https://globaltaiwan.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/OR_ASTAW0807FINAL.pdf.

[4] The reported agents/handlers in this case reportedly worked in the PRC Guangdong Province Meizhou City People's Government (中國廣東省梅州市人民政府等單位), as well as the Guangdong Province Maoming City Party Committee's United Front Work Department (廣東省茂名市委會統戰部).

[5] As a matter of Taiwan policy, the *Taiwan Relations Act* (1979) states unequivocally, "It is the policy of the United States [...] to consider any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means [...] a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of gave concern to the United States."

[6] The MJIB management and organizational enhancement should be a permanent fixture. It sets a good example about how counter-intelligence and law enforcement units need to be beefed up to address the type of election interference from the PRC. https://udn.com/news/story/6656/7563976.

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The Romanians Pushing for Enhanced Ties with Taiwan

By: James Baron

James Baron is a Taipei-based journalist, whose writing is focused on Taiwan's history, culture, and foreign relations.

Several years ago—he didn't recall exactly when—Constantin Damov received a call from the Taiwan Representative Office in Bratislava. A Taiwanese tourist had suffered a stroke while visiting the city of Timișoara in western Romania. With no official representation in Romania, the nearest port of call for Taiwanese visitors is Slovakia's capital, over 1,000 kilometers northwest of Bucharest.

Yet, even this *de facto* embassy is limited in the assistance it can provide. With the tourist critically ill, Taiwanese diplomats turned to Damov as a last resort.

"We helped with hospital arrangements and found a cook from a Chinese restaurant to translate," said Damov, cofounder and chairman of Green Group, the largest recycler in Southeast Europe. "Unfortunately she passed away after three days."

Things got worse, as Bucharest balked at having the body repatriated for want of a relevant agreement with Taiwan. Finally, thanks to Damov's efforts, a compromise was reached. "The body was cremated and sent back in a bottle," says Damov. "This is something Romanians cannot be proud of as a society." [1]

A Limited Relationship

Evoking scenes from the absurdist works of Romania's great dramatist Eugène Ionesco, the incident highlighted the woeful state of the Taiwan-Romania relationship, in which businessmen must press vacillating officials into action. Romania is unique among European Union members in demanding that Taiwanese visitors addend a piece of paper to their passports, which must be stamped instead of the actual pages of the document. Without the page, Taiwanese can be denied entry.

Even senior diplomats are not exempt: A senior Taiwanese trade official I spoke to recounted a recent example of the (*de facto*) ambassador to another European country being forced to comply with the practice. "It was really embarrassing," he said. "He complained, but there was nothing we could do." [2]

While these incidents are often attributed to a lack of official protocol between the two countries, the rules are clear: as a party to the EU's visa waiver program, Romania should offer 90-day visa exemptions to Taiwanese visitors. There are cases in which China, which itself requires Taiwanese to present a "compatriots" ID, has pressured countries into emulating the charade. For example, at Beijing's behest, Laos previously required Taiwanese visitors to affix a separate document to their passports. In Romania, however, no such directive has been issued by Beijing; even if it had, it would bear little weight. There simply is no reason for this extra layer of bureaucracy.

"It's an antiquated thing to show China, 'look, we are your servants,'" stated Damov. "You need this paper to get in and out; they stamp it, then take it when you're leaving, and your passport looks like you've never been in Romania."

Other inexplicable procedures include Taiwanese students being required to get their diplomas authorized by Beijing, and Romanian visitors to Taiwan being told to consult the Embassy of Romania in Beijing for emergency and consular issues.

Growing Taiwan-Romania Interactions

To address such frustrations, the Bratislava office called on Damov to help establish the Association for the Promotion of Economic and Cultural Exchanges with Taiwan (ROTA). This NGO provides a lifeline for Taiwanese in Romania, while striving to promote ties and exchanges between the two countries. Through ROTA and other agencies, Taiwan donated ambulances to Ukraine and supplies to Ukrainian refugees in Romania's Black Sea port city of Constanța.

Damov's connection with Taiwan runs deep. Green Group began life in 2002 as an offshoot of Romcarbon, a plastics processing company, which had been acquired by Taiwanese entrepreneur Clement Hung. Having identified serious waste disposal issues in Romania, Hung saw an opportunity to, in his own words, "restore to the economy the lost value of waste." Through extensive technology transfer from Taiwan to Romania, Green Group helped to kickstart a new, circular economy-focused industry in Romania.

After Hung died in 2017, the remaining Taiwanese investors sold their shares. However, Damov has worked to explore opportunities for further cooperation with Taiwanese firms, particularly in the green energy sector. "I was in Taiwan for two weeks this year [2023], talking to major companies about a new joint venture," he said.

Despite his affinity for Taiwan, he distances himself from cross-Strait tensions. "I've never had in mind to enter into or understand the politics deeply," he stated. "I just see Taiwan as a very

good potential partner for the Romanian economy." This, he believes, is partly because of a "superiority complex" that Western European firms sometimes bring to their dealings with Romania.

"For those big boys, it's mainly about creating a branch or production facilities, and real technology transfer is difficult," he said. "With Taiwan, it's much easier. The people are very fair and very hard working. They're the perfect partner for developing new business from advanced technology."

Trade representatives are also optimistic in this regard. Speaking on condition of anonymity, a Taiwanese official with experience in Romania echoed Damov's view of smart agriculture as one potential area for cooperation.

"I think there are opportunities there," she said. "Romania has been increasing exports to global markets in the last few years, especially since the shortfall from Ukraine, and Taiwanese chips and tech could improve yields."

She also pointed to Taiwanese know-how in establishing vertically integrated agricultural supply chains to facilitate seamless post-harvest operations, from packaging through to marketing. "They have the raw materials, but haven't developed the production lines to create added value," she said. "This is something Taiwan can assist with." [3]

Rising Distrust of China

Others are less certain. "We've touched base with Romania over solar panels and investment in industrial parks," said Chin Gialung, (陳啟順), a consulting partner for PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) in Taiwan. "But for political reasons, things haven't moved forward – they're still worried about China," he stated. [4]

"It's very strange," said Damov. "Among Romanian politicians, everyone individually thinks it would be good to make [ties] with Taiwan, but when we ask for changes, they're afraid to make any step in the direction of normalizing the situation."

This reticence is puzzling, given Bucharest's distancing from Beijing in recent years. Like most members of the Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries (China-CEEC) initiative—informally known as the "17+1" and now the "14+1" after the Baltic states dropped out—Romania long ago lost enthusiasm for the agreement. In the Balkans and elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe, the grouping is widely viewed as a soft-power stunt that has yielded few substantive benefits. While some members, such as the Czech Republic, have been particularly vocal in their criticisms, Romania, in the words of academic Horia Ciurtin, is a "foremost example" among "an ample bloc of inertial actors" within the group.

"It has been a failure – just hot air for 10 years," said Sorin Ioniță, president of Expert Forum (EFOR), a Bucharest-based think-tank that has monitored China's influence in the Balkans. The impact of the initiative was negligible, as "the Chinese weren't that interested to invest much," said Ioniță, who in 2021 organized an online EFOR event in Bucharest on prospects for cooperation between Taiwan and Eastern Europe. "They have a grain terminal in the harbor at Constanța, but I wouldn't call that critical infrastructure because these are competitive businesses, so they [China] don't create chokeholds." [5]

In 2021, President Klaus Iohannis joined five other CEEC leaders in declining to participate in the China-CEEC virtual summit. According to Romanian sources, Chinese threats to downgrade bilateral relations should Iohannis not attend had backfired. With Chinese President Xi Jinping (習近平) joining the event for the first time, the snub must have stung: Romania was an eager host of the second summit in 2013, which featured the banner "Win-Win Cooperation and Common Development." As for Xi's flagship geopolitical strategy, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, also known as "One Belt, One Road" 一帶一路)—of which the "14+1" is essentially an arm—Romania has for years sent no more than ministerial-level representation to the annual gathering in Beijing.

The reality of foundering Bucharest-Beijing relations has been reinforced by the passage of legislation targeting Chinese investments in Romania. In 2019, Romania became the first country to sign a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the United States on foreign investment in 5G. This agreement served as a precursor to the 2020 launch of the Clean Network Initiative, the Trump Administration's alliance to prevent the involvement of "authoritarian malign actors" in communications infrastructure development. A year later, Iohannis signed a bill into law that effectively banned Huawei (華為) and other Chinese telecom firms from investing in Romania's 5G network.

Again, Beijing had reportedly employed coercion to sway Bucharest—and again, the heavy-handed tactics had failed. Further legislation followed, as an amendment to Romania's Foreign Direct Investment mechanism was passed in April 2022, aligning domestic laws with European Union regulations. "In fact, this an area where we're more advanced than the average European Union state," said Cătălin Teniță, a member of parliament (MP) for Bucharest who represents the Renewing Romania's Europe-

an Project (REPER) party. "Where we're not so vocal and active is on human rights infringements." [6]

He noted that, unlike many EU member states, Romania did not implement a ruling by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) to suspend extradition treaties with China last year. This followed a resolution by the EU Foreign Affairs Council to suspend extradition to Hong Kong in 2020 in light of the draconian National Security Law (香港國家安全法), passed by Beijing that same year. Interestingly, the ECHR edict was triggered by the case of Liu Hung-tao (劉宏濤), a Taiwanese national who faced extradition from Poland to China on charges of online fraud. (Cases of cyber-crime against Chinese citizens are routinely used by Beijing to have Taiwanese nationals "repatriated.")

"We don't take a political stance on such cases, nor on rights abuses in Tibet or Xinjiang," said Teniță, who is also a co-chair of the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China, an international cross-party group of legislators that focuses on coordinated approaches to relations with China among democracies.

Parliamentary Diplomacy

In March, Teniță was part of a delegation of parliamentarians from the Balkans to Taiwan. The group, which met Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) and other high-ranking Taiwanese officials, also participated in the Parliamentary Openness and Monitoring Forum, co-sponsored by the Washington-based National Democratic Institute.

Outspoken in his support of Taiwan, Teniță opened a speech to the Chamber of Deputies—Romania's lower house of parliament—in June with greetings in both Mandarin and Hokkien (commonly known as Taiwanese). During the address, Teniță referred to his recent participation in the inaugural meeting of the Formosa Club, a platform for cross-party legislators from Europe and Canada working to bolster relations with Taiwan, and emphasized "the urgent need to strengthen our cooperation with Taiwan [...] through the establishment of trade, investment, and sectoral agreements, to enhance the resilience of our supply chains and our democracies." He also reiterated his intention to "to stand with Taiwan and do everything possible to ensure its democracy," and called for Taiwan's meaningful participation in international organizations.

While Teniță is an anomaly among Romanian MPs in speaking out on Taiwan, he balks at the suggestion that his standpoint is controversial. "From my point of view, I'm not a rebel," he said. "It's Romania that is the outlier – having a very strange stance while most European countries have a totally different approach on Taiwan and China."

With Romania's decoupling from China now seeming more inevitable than ever, Teniță expressed his belief that economic engagement with Taiwan should follow. "It's important to get know-how from Taiwan in manufacturing, agriculture and services," he stated. "At the same time we should be supporting their vibrant, dedicated, European-compatible democracy."

For Andreea Brinza, vice president of the Romanian Institute for the Study of the Asia-Pacific, however, the potential for closer ties remains dim. "In the near future, on the political level, I don't see a U-turn regarding Taiwan, by taking a path similar to the Baltics or the Czech Republic," said Brinza, who has written extensively about Central and Eastern Europe's relations with China and Taiwan. "And, without a political framework, economic relations will also be affected, as it is difficult for Taiwanese companies to invest in a country that perceives Taiwan as being part of China and places a variety of limits on cooperation." [7]

While Ioniță largely agrees with this assessment of political prospects, he was more optimistic on economic cooperation. "It's a much more Byzantine policy than the Czechs and the Baltics," he said. "The state and its institutions are reluctant to engage visibly. Right now, they won't touch Taiwan," he added. However, Ioniță argued that "there are obvious complementarities with Taiwan" that do not exist with China. He cited renewable energy and waste management as two such areas. With Romania second only to Portugal in bicycle manufacturing among European countries, Ioniță also thinks local firms could leverage the expertise of world-class Taiwanese brands such as Giant (巨大機械工業股份有限公司) and Merida (美利達工業).

At Green Group's office in Bucharest, Damov expressed confidence that, while it may take time, changes are inevitable. "When globalization, exchanges, and travel are at their highest levels in history, the [current] way of speaking about a 'One-China policy' is becoming obsolete and has to be reevaluated for the good of the people," said Damov. "We can't sacrifice people's rights for a political fight. It's inhumane."

The main point: Despite considerable Chinese pressure, economic and political ties between Romania and Taiwan are steadily growing. Bolstered by private sector investment and parliamentary engagement, the relationship between the two is moving in a positive direction.

[1] Author's interview, conducted in Bucharest on May 4, 2023.

[2] Author's interview, conducted in Bucharest on May 5, 2023.

[3] Author's interview, conducted in Bucharest on May 5, 2023.

[4] Author's interview, conducted online via Google Meet on November 23, 2023.

[5] Author's interview, conducted online via Zoom on April 23, 2023.

[6] Author's interview, conducted online via Zoom on April 7, 2023.

[7] Author's interview, conducted in Bucharest on May 4, 2023.

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Wang Huning's First Year Supervising the United Front System: Taiwan Policy and Discourse

By: John Dotson

John Dotson is the deputy director of the Global Taiwan Institute and associate editor of the Global Taiwan Brief.

At the 20th Party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP, 中國共產黨) convened in October 2022, Wang Huning (王滬寧)—a longtime behind-the-scenes *majordomo* for CCP leaders, and the figure long regarded as the party's lead ideologist—was promoted to the fourth-ranked position in the CCP Politburo Standing Committee (PSC, 中央政治局常委會). Wang thereby leapfrogged over many other potential candidates whose experience in either provincial leadership posts or the senior ranks of the party's functional bureaucracies would traditionally have made them more promising contenders for the CCP's inner circle of power. Wang's fourth-ranked position in the CCP hierarchy conveys with it responsibility for the CCP's united front policy portfolio, as well as chairmanship of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC, 中國人民政治協商會議). This, as well as Wang's reported position as deputy chair of the CCP Central Leading Small Group for Taiwan Work (中央對台工作領導小組), makes Wang the party's senior figure for directing Taiwan policy—ranking behind only CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping (習近平). [1]

Early in 2023, there was speculative analysis to the effect that Wang had been tasked with formulating a new ideological framework for unification with Taiwan: one that would supersede the "One Country, Two Systems" (OCTS, 一國兩制) framework first articulated under Deng Xiaoping (鄧小平) in the late 1970s, and more firmly place the stamp of the current leadership on Taiwan-related policy. So, after Wang's first full year acting as the party's point man for united front policy—and therefore Taiwan policy—where do the CCP's official policies stand?

The May "Taiwan Work Conference"

At the annual "Taiwan Work Conference" held in May 2023, the OCTS framework was noticeably absent from Wang's keynote address. Instead, Wang invoked the "Party's Comprehensive Plan for Resolving the Taiwan Problem in the New Era" (新時代黨解決台灣問題總體方略) (*hereafter, "Comprehensive Plan"*). The "Comprehensive Plan" is a set of broad (and vague) ideas that double down on the current orientation of CCP policy: rejecting engagement with Taiwan's current "separatist" Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民進黨)-led government; expanding united front "people-to-people" (民間交流) exchanges; and offering economic inducements to selected persons and groups in Taiwan, especially those who accede to (or at least do not oppose) PRC claims of sovereignty over Taiwan.

In the May conference, Wang reasserted the PRC's insistence on the "92 Consensus" (九二共識) as a prerequisite for any cross-Strait negotiations. Although subject to hair-splitting (and often muddled) definitions, this term encapsulates the idea that the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Republic of China (ROC) governments could each maintain the existence of "one China," while maintaining different interpretations as to what that means. [2] Since summer 2022, the CCP propaganda apparatus has renewed efforts to assert the concept, but with a significant shift in emphasis and interpretation: specifically, that acceptance of the "92 Consensus" conveys acceptance of the PRC's "One-China Principle" (一個中國原則)—which maintains that the "One China" is the PRC, of which Taiwan is a constituent (and subordinate) province. [3]

The 15th Straits Forum in June

Wang was the senior CCP figure present for the 15th iteration of the Straits Forum (海峽論壇), a carefully stage-managed annual event organized by the united front system to promote the softer side of the CCP's narratives on Taiwan policy. Wang's address to the event on June 17 took the form of reading before the attendees a laudatory letter (賀信) nominally written by Xi Jinping. The address emphasized familiar themes, under the rubric of the CCP's "'the two sides of the Strait are one family' concept" ("兩岸一家親"理念). The broad (and vague) measures to be emphasized included the need to further promote economic

and cultural exchanges, and to "deepen integrated development across the Strait in varied domains" in ways that would benefit "Taiwan compatriots" (臺灣同胞). Of note, Kuomintang (KMT, 國民黨) Vice-Chairman Hsia Li-yan (夏立言)—a regular fixture at such united front events—was also present, seconding Wang's support for the "92 Consensus" and enhanced economic and cultural exchanges between the two sides.

Two themes of particular note emerge upon close examination of the Xi/Wang comments. The first is found in the repeated emphasis on "people-to-people exchanges" (民間交流), as in the assertion that "the development of cross-Strait relations has its foundation among the people, its energy is with the people, [and] the achievements of exchange cooperation should be extended to compatriots on both sides of the Strait" (兩岸關係發展根基在民間、動力在人民，交流合作成果惠及兩岸同胞). The CCP has emphasized his theme with increasing repetition since it cut off any negotiations with Taiwan's current DPP-led government following the election of Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) in 2016. This is intended to create a dynamic in which Taiwan's government is frozen out, and exchanges are conducted under the auspices of the CCP's carefully controlled and stage-managed united front system. Put another way, this means that the CCP's formula for "people-to-people exchanges" is one characterized by the fundamental asymmetry of private citizens on one side (Taiwan), and a government on the other (the PRC).

The other noteworthy theme from Xi's letter is found in the introductory assertion that "Only when the country is well, and the nation is well, can cross-Strait compatriots be well" (國家好，民族好，兩岸同胞會好). Although this and other CCP messages ostensibly convey paternalistic concern for the welfare of Taiwan's people, this phrasing conveys a clear position of superiority for the PRC in relation to Taiwan—and further carries with it an undertone of menace, if the actions of "Taiwan compatriots" are deemed to be unsatisfactory. [4]

Image: Wang Huning delivers an address to the "Sixth Taiwan Compatriots Social Organizations Forum" (October 12, 2023). Such stage-managed united front events are a keystone of the CCP's Taiwan policy. (Image source: CCP Taiwan Work Office)

Wang Huning's Events in Late 2023

In the final months of 2023, Wang also made public appearances presiding over at least two other public events related to the CCP's official policies for Taiwan—and perhaps of greater significance, a third event connected to the CCP's more covert, subversive practices.

The Sixth Taiwan Compatriots Social Organizations Forum

On October 12, Wang presided over the "Sixth Taiwan Compatriots Social Organizations Forum" (第六屆台胞社團論壇) in Beijing, an event attended by approximately 300 people drawn from the CCP United Front Work Department's (UFWD, 統一戰線工作部) network of Taiwan-oriented front organizations. (The attendees reportedly included Wu Ch'eng-tian [吳成典], the chairman of Taiwan's New Party [NP, 新黨] and a longtime fixture in CCP united front efforts.) The event was held under the official theme of "Serving Villagers [or "*local folk*"], Communicating Across the Strait—Advancing Cross-Strait Relations and Peaceful Development, Sharing Promotion of the Great Enterprise of National Revival" (服務鄉親，溝通兩岸 - 推動兩岸關係和平發展，共促進民族復興偉業). [5] The event reiterated the focus on "people-to-people exchanges" as the professed focus of PRC policy, as well as a longstanding goal of encouraging Taiwanese to live and work in the PRC, so that "Taiwan compatriots may share in the broad opportunities and development achievements of the mainland's modernization." Notably, the official summary of the event made repeated use of language emphasizing the need to encourage "cross-Strait compatriots" to develop a "convergence of spirit" (心靈契合)—perhaps a nod to the intense focus of Xi/Wang on correct ideology as the key to resolving China's problems.

The 10th Anniversary Cross-Strait Entrepreneurs Summit

On November 14, Wang presided over the 10th anniversary meeting of the "Cross-Strait Entrepreneurs Summit" (兩岸企業家高峰會) in Nanjing, another example of the CCP's longstanding efforts to cultivate and leverage Taiwanese businesspeople operating enterprises in the PRC. Before a reported audience of "members of 25 organizations and 126 individual entrepreneurs," Wang read another "congratulatory letter" from Xi. (Xi's cult of personality has become so pervasive that the public appearances of other senior officials now often take the form of reading out a statement nominally written by Xi.) The letter promised to "deepen cross-Strait integrated development" (深化兩岸融合發展)—a touchstone of CCP discourse, which argues that enhanced economic ties will bind Taiwan more closely to China—and to "promote the welfare of compatriots, and produce new accomplishments in the great enterprise of promoting unification of the motherland" (增進同胞福祉、促進祖國統一大業作出新的貢獻).

In his own comments, Wang promised: "We will, from beginning to end, respect, show concern for, and bring benefits to Taiwan compatriots; allowing for the broadest number of Taiwan compatriots and Taiwan enterprises who wish to come and stay [in China], to enter smoothly, develop well, [and] better share together in the mainland's development achievements and glories of national revival." This latter statement represents a further reinforcement of a central CCP theme of encouraging Taiwanese to invest and work in the PRC—even as many Taiwan-based companies have been shifting production out of China in response to the business and political environment.

The December Conference on Taiwan Election Interference

While such public meetings serve to illustrate the CCP's overt propaganda directed towards Taiwan, the more subversive (and arguably, more substantive) elements of CCP policy were reportedly hashed out at a closed-door meeting convened by Wang in early December. According to media reports based on Taiwan intelligence information, Wang presided over a meeting of various agencies of the CCP party-state—including the CCP Propaganda Department (also known as the State Council Information Office, 國務院新聞辦公室), the Ministry of State Security (MSS, 國家安全部), the United Front Work Department, and the CCP Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO, 國台辦)—to coordinate efforts to influence Taiwan's upcoming presidential and legislative elections. Such measures reportedly included cultivating Taiwan political figures, arranging travel for Taiwanese living in the PRC to return to Taiwan to vote, and promoting a narrative that the election is a "choice between peace and war." (*Note: For a more detailed discussion of PRC measures directed against Taiwan's January 13 elections, see "A Preliminary Assessment of CCP Political Warfare Targeting Taiwan's 2024 Elections" by Russell Hsiao, elsewhere in this issue.*)

Conclusion

Overall, Wang's first year managing Taiwan policy—at least to the extent he can manage it, under the overbearing Xi Jinping—has been characterized by what might be called "intensified continuity." In terms of discourse, as of yet there has been no formal abandonment of the legacy "One Country, Two Systems" policy, and the PRC continues to demand Taiwan's adherence to the largely fictitious "92 Consensus" framework. The "Party's Comprehensive Plan for Resolving the Taiwan Problem" has continued to receive steady emphasis, and its rather vague points of emphasis appear to be supported by the other statements made by Wang and other CCP officials this year. However, these propaganda messages have clearly not had the intended effect of convincing Taiwan's citizens of the goodwill of the ruling authorities across the Taiwan Strait. Matters of public messaging aside, the real core of the CCP's policies for "reunification" continue to lie not in persuasion, but rather in overt coercion and covert subversion.

The main point: Since his promotion to the fourth-ranked position in the Politburo Standing Committee a year ago, Wang Huning has made a range of appearances at official CCP events, in which he has outlined policies towards Taiwan consistent with the CCP's vague "Comprehensive Plan" for unification with the island. Under Wang, the CCP is likely to continue pursuing intensified overt coercion and covert subversive measures directed against the island and its democratic society.

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[1] Liang Shu-yuan (梁書瑗), "The Communist Party's Taiwan Work and Personnel at the Outset of the Year" (中共開局之年的對台工作與人事), Institute of National Defense and Security Research, undated (2023), https://indsr.org.tw/uploads/indsr/files/202305/3ff7d877-a00f-4dca-87a1-c5f5364a0f8b.pdf. See Figure 1 (p. 15) for the assessed membership of the CCP Taiwan Work Leading Small Group.

[2] The "92 Consensus" has also featured as an issue in Taiwan's ongoing presidential election campaign, in which it has been rejected by the DPP, but affirmed by KMT candidate Hou Yu-ih (侯友宜) (at least in the KMT's interpretation, as compared to the interpretation offered by the PRC government). In 2021, then-KMT Chairman Johnny Chiang (江啟臣) attempted to update the concept to better fit Taiwan's current circumstances.

(See: Russell Hsiao, "Fault Line Widens Between KMT and CCP over the '1992 Consensus'," *Global Taiwan Brief*, April 7, 2021, https://globaltaiwan.org/2021/04/fault-line-widens-between-kmt-and-ccp-over-the-1992-consensus/). However, these efforts reportedly encountered resistance from KMT power brokers like former President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九), and were abandoned.

[3] The PRC's effort to shift the meaning of this framework is analyzed in further detail in: John Dotson, "The CCP Commemorates the 30thAnniversary of the "1992 Consensus"—and Seeks to Change Its Meaning," *Global Taiwan Brief*, April 7, 2021, https://globaltaiwan.org/2022/09/the-ccp-commemorates-the-30th-anniversary-of-the-1992-consensus-and-seeks-to-change-its-meaning/.

[4] The English translation "nation" does not adequately convey how the word *minzu* (民族) is very much linked to ethnic/cultural identity. In this context, the intended meaning is likely something closer to: "[…] only when the Chinese [*people/nation*] are well [*or satisfied*], can cross-Strait compatriots be well […]"

[5] Of note, this theme follows on other recent attempts by the CCP united front system to emphasize attention to the concerns of rural residents in Taiwan, and/or exchanges between Taiwan and PRC officials from rural areas, as with the "Sixth Grassroots Administration Forum" convened in Xiamen in June 2023.

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Beyond Degrees: Taiwan's Youth Unemployment Crisis

By: Ben Levine

Ben Levine is a current graduate student at the George Washington University, and was a fall 2023 intern at the Global Taiwan Institute

Taiwan is currently facing a problem with high youth unemployment. While most advanced economies are facing similar challenges, the issue is considerably more severe for Taiwan. As the global community grapples with the repercussions of a shifting job market and technological evolution, Taiwan's unique circumstances make its efforts to combat youth unemployment a topic worthy of discussion. This intersection of broad economic trends and Taiwan's specific challenges underscores the critical need for targeted strategies and innovative solutions to unleash the untapped potential of its youth workforce—thereby ensuring not only individual prosperity but also safeguarding the resilience and competitiveness of Taiwan's economy on the world stage.

At the heart of Taiwan's struggle with youth unemployment is a complex set of factors that have contributed to college graduates consistently struggling to find jobs that either relate to their field of study, or else pay the equivalent of the average wage in Taiwan. These factors include educational structures, industry demands, and Taiwan's place in the broader global economy. The growing mismatch between the skills of college-educated workers and the needs of Taiwan's domestic economy have resulted in an overeducated workforce lacking the skill sets necessary to compete in the labor market. In this context, Taiwan—known for its innovation and technological expertise—faces the challenge of aligning its workforce with the demands of an ever-evolving global economy. As Taiwanese policymakers work to chart a path toward maintaining the island's sustained competitiveness and prosperity in the years ahead, it will become increasingly imperative to tackle this growing issue.

The Current Situation

For the purpose of employment statistics, Taiwan's government defines the youth demographic as workers aged 15 to 29. Currently, that group has an unemployment rate at 11.42 percent. Since the expansion of education in Taiwan to a universal system in which anyone who wants to can go to college, there has been a massive supply of graduates flooding into Taiwan's domestic labor market. Given the island's relatively small size, the labor market is simply unable to meet the needs of these incoming workers. Currently, over 95 percent of Taiwanese high school students enter the university system after graduation. To meet this skyrocketing demand, the number of universities has also increased dramatically since 1995, rising from 60 to 149 universities, colleges, and junior colleges.

Taiwan's intended goal of broadening the university system has led to an over-saturation of college-educated workers. As of 2022, nearly 82 percent of people aged 25 to 29 in Taiwan had at least a bachelor's degree. Compared with other countries such as the United States (40 percent), Canada (67 percent), or the United Kingdom (56 percent), Taiwan's educational attainment among young people is significantly higher than that of most other advanced economies. With such an oversupply of college graduates, companies in Taiwan are reluctant to offer graduates high salaries when they know that there will be a large number of applicants for any job position. In addition to this, employers also complain about the lack of suitable skills among college graduates.

Every year, the Taiwanese government sends out a survey to young people to gain insights into the labor market. Per the 2022 survey, the average salary per month was NTD $34,000 (~USD $1,051), with more than 60 percent of those surveyed receiving a raise that year. Although more than half have participated in education training and 60 percent have certificates—which are essential to showcase one's skill set—the average salary for young people is barely enough to scrape by in Taiwan. Notably, the average salary of young people is significantly lower than that of the general population, which stood at NTD $57,718 (~USD $1,785) in 2022. In addition, about two thirds of young people are continuing their job while planning to switch jobs in the near future, due to their salaries and benefits not being up to their expectations.

Compounding this problem is the fact that most Taiwanese—around 80.37 percent—work for small and medium enterprises (SMEs). In Taiwan, SMEs generally have lower profit margins than large enterprises, averaging 5.01 percent for the former versus 6.63 percent for the latter. This suggests that, on average, these SMEs have less capital to invest the needed resources into their employees. In addition, with SMEs deriving a larger share of their revenue from the domestic economy than large enterprises—87.37 percent and 60.19 percent respectively, SMEs tend to be much more reliant on Taiwan's domestic economy. However, Taiwan's economy is highly dependent on the global economy, with a trade-to-GDP ratio of 71.64 percent. This high ratio highlights Taiwan's reliance on export oriented growth rather than on domestic growth. Due to SMEs being the backbone of the Taiwanese economy, the government should help direct more investment into the domestic economy to make it less reliant on the global economy. This would allow Taiwan to have a more reliable source of growth coming from domestic consumption and be less dependent on ebbs and flows of the global economy.

Image: Young job seekers attend the "2023 South Taiwan Job Fair" at National Cheng Kung University in Tainan (March 12, 2023). (Image source: Cheng Kung University)

What is the Taiwanese Government Doing to Help Solve This Problem?

In response to this crisis, the Taiwanese government has implemented various strategies. While previous efforts have involved providing subsidies in order to encourage Taiwanese youth to seek employment, the latest initiative—dubbed the Youth Employment Investment Program (投資青年就業方案) —is a whole-of-government approach. Started in 2019, the aim of the program is to increase youth employment, provide industry-specific job training, and help young people make a smooth transition into the workforce. The first phase, lasting from 2019 to 2022, had three main goals: increase employment ability in response to industry trends; strengthen career foundations and thorough development of career services; and integrate service resources to assist young people obtain employment.

To achieve the first goal of the program, the National Development Council (NDC, 國家發展委員會) was tasked with researching and publicizing the annual supply and demand for industrial talent in response to future industry trends. In order to develop a baseline understanding of these trends, the Ministry of Labor (MOL, 勞動部) was tasked with using this data to build a functional benchmark to evaluate whether this policy is achieving its stated goals. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Education (MOE, 教育部) worked to promote career exploration and preparation by having high schools organize workplace visits. The goal of this program was to allow high school students to gain greater understanding of the employment environment and begin career preparation.

The second goal of the first phase centered around skill development. Various government ministries, such as the MOL, MOE, and the Ministry of Economic Affairs (MOEA, 經濟部) collaborated to give Taiwanese high school students access to workplaces across different industries, where they could see for themselves what types of skills are in-demand. Finally, the third part of the program was intended to provide employment services. Just as in the last part of the program, various government ministries worked together to expand job opportunities, strengthen employment matching services, and eliminate employment barriers.

The second phase of the Youth Employment Investment Program began in 2023 and will run for the next three years. The program addresses five areas: career development, the gap between the supply and demand of industrial talents, youth unemployment, low youth salaries, and atypical youth employment. The first part of the program will help high school students with

career preparation, with the MOL and MOE encouraging high schools to host events during which students can visit workplaces. This would allow students to see what kind of careers they would be interested in and also begin to make preparations for building a career.

Building upon that, the government will also encourage students to pursue career paths that are related to in-demand professions, particularly those included in the "Six Core Strategic Industries." (六大核心戰略產業) These industries, which were first laid out during President Tsai Ing-wen's (蔡英文) first inaugural address, consist of: information and digital services, cybersecurity, health, green and sustainable energy, national defense, and strategic stockpiles. The government is keen to promote these industries to high school and college students to facilitate their future development. The third part of the program focuses on promoting youth employment. In pursuit of this, government agencies are encouraging young people to obtain employment and strengthening employment services. The next part of the program centers around efforts to increase young people's salaries. As mentioned earlier, there is a considerable gap between the average salary of young people and the general population in Taiwan. The government's response to this challenge is to have young people strengthen their skill sets and implement vocational development programs.

The last part of the program is intended to help young people find steady, full-time employment. A recent survey by 104 Job Bank, a Taiwanese staffing company, found that the average age of delivery drivers is 26 and that 45 percent of them have a university degree or higher. The Taiwanese government wants to reverse the trend of young people working for delivery companies such as Foodpanda or Uber Eats and transition them to professional employment. By promoting industries that have a high demand for full-time employment and providing young people with the opportunity to learn and readapt to the workplace, the Taiwanese government hopes to provide more meaningful employment opportunities for young people.

Conclusion

Taiwan's struggle with high youth unemployment is not unusual compared to other advanced economies. However, Taiwan's youth unemployment rate is significantly higher than that of most other countries. Taiwan's unique economic and geopolitical position underscores the urgency and complexity of finding effective solutions. The Taiwanese government's commitment to solve this issue is evident through its whole-of-government approach and complementary policy initiatives. These policy initiatives include strengthening vocational education, promoting industry-academia collaboration, and encouraging a mindset shift toward entrepreneurship. While all of these are crucial components, solving such a complex, multifaceted issue will likely need complementary initiatives coming from the private sector that will add value to the government's policies. Taiwan's challenging demographics and universal college system will need to be addressed as well. By combining policy measures with a collective commitment to adaptability and innovation, Taiwan has the potential to not only conquer the current challenges of youth unemployment, but to emerge as a model for sustainable economic development in the years to come.

The main point: Taiwan's youth unemployment rate is significantly higher than that of most other advanced economies. While the government is taking steps to address this problem, it remains to be seen whether the structural and cultural factors causing this problem can be fixed.

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South Korean Views on Cross-Strait Tensions

By: Timothy Rich and Carolyn Brueggemann

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Any cross-Strait military conflict would have clear implications for other countries in the region, yet little attention has focused on public opinion regarding the issue outside of Taiwan. Our survey work on South Korean perceptions highlights the potential challenges in coordinating a regional response to such a contingency: finding broad acknowledgment of the potential ramifications, yet a hesitancy to take actions that would likely worsen relations with China.

Cross-Strait tensions have increased since the election of Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) in 2016. Such antipathy could escalate further if presidential frontrunner Lai Ching-te (賴清德) is victorious in Taiwan's 2024 national elections, as China aims to coerce Taiwan's government into actions consistent with its demands for eventual unification. Frequent Chinese military drills after Nancy Pelosi and other US officials visited Taiwan in 2022 suggest the possibility of the further intensifi-

cation of such exercises in the future. Many have likened Taiwan's situation to that of Ukraine—a comparison that survey evidence suggests has been made by Taiwanese citizens as well. Specifically, the conflict has influenced perceptions about Taiwan's ability to defend itself, though many Taiwanese remain divided as to whether the United States will defend them. In general, any cross-Strait military conflict would have serious ramifications globally, as it would adversely affect international trade—particularly the worldwide distribution of semiconductors, of which Taiwan is a leading exporter.

Despite the widespread concern over potential conflict, remarkably little attention has been given to public opinion in other regional democracies. In a hypothetical Chinese invasion scenario, US military assistance to Taiwan likely would depend on Japan allowing US forces to conduct military operations from Japanese soil. Furthermore, many expect that South Korea would also play a role in Taiwan's defense, given its previous assistance to US campaigns in Vietnam and Iraq. An August 2022 survey found a majority (64.5 percent) of South Koreans supported providing direct or indirect support for US efforts to defend Taiwan. However, this does not give any indication what this support would entail, or if the public fully grasps the political and economic costs of such an action, which could potentially result in direct Chinese retaliation against South Korea. Such a conflict, even without South Korea's direct involvement, would likely halt much of the international trade in Northeast Asia and damage crucial submarine cables. Such disruptions could cost Japan and China 3.7 percent and 7.6 percent, respectively, of their nominal GDP.

Understanding South Korean Perceptions of Taiwan

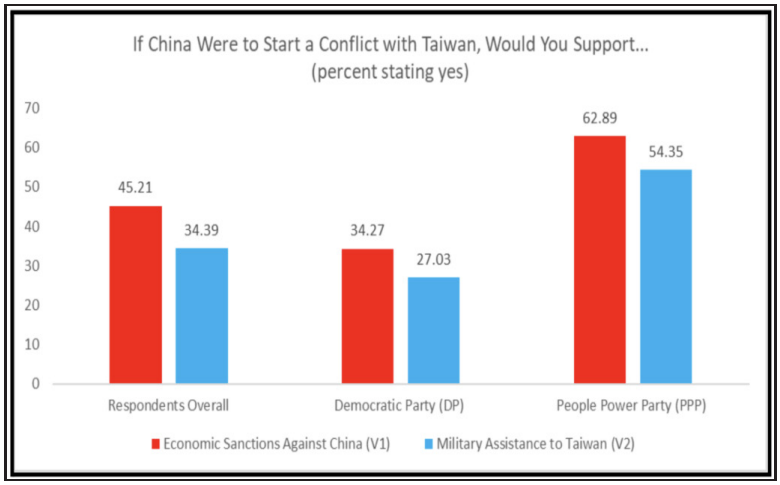
South Korea shares many historical and political similarities with Taiwan, with both experiencing Japanese colonization, post-war rapid economic development and democratization, and security relationships with the United States. These factors could contribute to South Korean affinity for Taiwan, conceivably resulting in increased Korean support for the island democracy. However, such assistance could also lead to Chinese retaliation, potentially including encouraging North Korea to instigate conflict to thwart such efforts.

To understand Korean perceptions of Taiwan and cross-Strait relations, we conducted a national web survey of 1,300 South Koreans (conducted from September 27-October 11, 2023) via quota sampling on gender, age, and region, administered via the survey company Macromill Embrain. We randomly assigned respondents to one of two questions about cross-Strait conflict as a means to identify whether the public may be more supportive of economic versus military intervention:

Version 1: If China were to start a conflict with Taiwan, would you support South Korea enacting economic sanctions against China?

Version 2: If China were to start a conflict with Taiwan, would you support South Korea providing military assistance to Taiwan?

The results suggest a public hesitant to respond against China, with more willingness to engage in economic sanctions (45.21 percent) than to provide military assistance to Taiwan (34.39 percent), despite South Korea's clear abilities to manufacture relevant equipment in a timely manner. This likely points to perceived risks with each option, with the latter more likely to be viewed as an escalation by China. Broken down by political party support, we see a stark difference: with supporters of the center-left Democratic Party (DP) showing little support for either option (V1: 34.27 percent; V2: 27.03 percent), while a majority of supporters of the center-right People Power Party (PPP) supported both options (V1: 62.89 percent; V2: 54.35 percent).

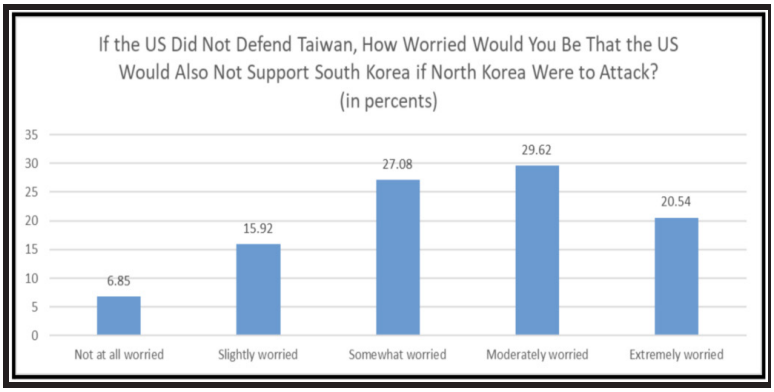


Graphic: South Korean public support for involvement in a Taiwan Strait contingency in response to queries about economic sanctions and military assistance, broken down by party affiliation. (Source: research by authors.)

Predictably, views of China and Taiwan also influence willingness to act. We asked respondents to rate both countries on a 1-10 scale, with 10 being most favorable. We find those scoring China at 5 or below were more supportive of both measures (V1: 46.26 percent, V2: 34.69 percent), as compared to those scoring 6 and above (V1: 35.48 percent; 31.94 percent). Conversely, more positive evaluations of Taiwan corresponded with greater willingness to act. Using the same metrics, those scoring

Taiwan at 5 or lower were less supportive of action (V1: 38.87 percent, V2: 30.54 percent) compared to those with more positive views of Taiwan (V1: 52.53 percent; V2: 39.25 percent). Of note, views of the two countries seem to have a far bigger impact on support for sanctions.

After this, we asked several related questions. First, when asked "If China were to attack Taiwan, do you believe that it would have very serious implications for South Korea?," 89.15 percent of respondents said yes, with little difference between DP supporters (88.15 percent) and PPP supporters (91.92 percent). Similarly, when asked "If the US did not defend Taiwan, do you believe that it would have very serious implications for South Korea?," 85.85 percent said yes, with slightly more variation by party (DP: 83.75 percent; PPP: 89.56 percent). Finally, when asked "If the US did not defend Taiwan in the case of an attack by China, how worried would you be that the US would also not support South Korea if North Korea were to attack?" Here, a slight majority (50.16 percent) stated that they were moderately to extremely worried, although this varies notably by partisan identification (DP: 45.18 percent; PPP: 62.29 percent).



Graphic: South Korean public perceptions of US support for Taiwan and South Korea. (Source: research by authors.)

Taken as a whole, our results suggest a South Korean public clearly aware of the potential ramifications of a cross-Strait conflict, yet hesitant to commit to efforts to respond to China in the case of an invasion of Taiwan, suggesting broader fears about the consequences of an invasion for South Korea. With China as South Korea's top trading partner, the thought of imposing economic sanctions may create fears of counter-sanctions. Likewise, providing military assistance to Taiwan would not only likely worsen relations with China, but could also potentially incentivize China to use its influence with North Korea to heighten security concerns on the peninsula.

Admittedly, responding to hypothetical situations—even ones that receive considerable media attention—cannot fully capture how South Koreans may feel in the event of an actual invasion. However, the results suggest that if such an invasion were to occur in the short term, President Yoon Suk Yeol—already facing very low public approval ratings within a deeply polarized South Korea—would likely struggle to garner broad support for retaliatory actions.

Whereas previous studies have demonstrated high support among Koreans for the US military to provide aid to Taiwan, our survey did not explicitly mention US support (other than in the context of continued support for bases in South Korea). Taken together, this result demonstrates that South Koreans may be supportive of US efforts to defend Taiwan and simultaneously concerned that a US failure to do so could portend diminishing US support for South Korea. However, they remain cautious about how their actions to aid Taiwan could risk their own economic and security interests. Accordingly, the challenge for both US and South Korean administrations will be in coordinating potential responses that secure their own interests while also effectively limiting Chinese aggression.

The main point: While South Koreans are undoubtedly aware of the potential ramifications of a Chinese attack on Taiwan for South Korea, survey data suggests that many are reluctant to support direct Korean involvement in such a conflict. These results could pose challenges to the United States, South Korea, and Taiwan.