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By: Russell Hsiao

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A little over a month after Taiwan's national elections, a senior Kuomintang (KMT, 國民黨) leader traveled once again to China for talks. Andrew Hsia (夏立言), the party's vice chairman, visited the People's Republic of China (PRC) from February 26 – March 3—making this his seventh trip since becoming KMT Chairman Eric Chu's (朱立倫) second-in-command in 2021. [1] In an interview with the local press on the day of his departure, Hsia explained that his visit had been planned since late 2023 and was purely intended to call upon the many Taiwan nationals who live, work, and study in the PRC. Hsia's visit comes at a particularly sensitive time in cross-Strait relations, with tensions continuing to rise as Beijing is widely expected to ratchet up [pressure on the island democracy](#) after voters elected the Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP, 民進黨) presidential candidate Lai Ching-te (賴清德), handing the DPP an unprecedented [third consecutive term](#) in the executive office.

The KMT vice chairman took pains to frame his trip as simply a "New Year Greetings, Caregiving Tour" (新春拜年、關懷交流) following the Lunar New Year holiday, while minimizing any connections to Taiwan's elections. Hsia also was careful to emphasize that he had not been asked by the DPP government to make this trip and that it was purely a routine civil engagement. This may have been an attempt to avoid the perception that the KMT could be trying to undermine the incoming government's cross-Strait policy. At the same time, [Hsia stressed](#) the need for cross-Strait dialogue and called on both sides to take steps to calm the tensions—especially following [recent confrontations](#) between Chinese and Taiwanese vessels off the coast of Kinmen.

In the long absence of senior official interactions between Taiwan's ruling government and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP, 共產黨), Hsia has been one of the most senior political figures from Taiwan to maintain regular interactions with the PRC. In a sense, Hsia has become the *de facto* interlocutor between Taiwan and the PRC. Far from being a simple constituency call, however, a closer look at [Hsia's entourage](#)

*The Global Taiwan Brief is a bi-weekly publication released every other Wednesday and provides insight into the latest news on Taiwan.*

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reveals a far more policy-oriented dimension to the trip. Indeed, Hsia brought along China policy heavyweights from within the KMT: including the party's Mainland Affairs Bureau Director Lin Chu-chia (林祖嘉) and National Policy Foundation (NPF, 國家政策基金會) Senior Adviser and China expert Zhao Chunshan (趙春山), as well as other party officials. Several of these delegates have been regular participants in Hsia's previous visits.

### ***Reinitiating and Broadening KMT Channels with the CCP***

Since the DPP came into power following President Tsai Ing-wen's (蔡英文) victory in 2016, Beijing has [cut off all high-level official interaction](#) with the Taiwanese government. Limited [party channels](#) that existed between the DPP and the CCP were also mostly shunned after the DPP regained power.

In the absence of high-level official communication between the two ruling parties across the Taiwan Strait, tensions in the Taiwan Strait have steadily risen as the PRC ramped up its pressure on Taipei to coerce the DPP into accepting Beijing's terms for negotiation. This growing friction has raised concerns about the possibility of miscalculation on either side leading to a military conflict.

### ***Fringe Voices Dominated Senior Cross-Strait Interactions***

The freezing of official interaction, however, did not mean that no interaction has taken place between the two sides since 2016. Immediately following the KMT's electoral defeat in 2016, then-KMT Chairwoman Hung Shiu-chu (洪秀柱), the party's initial presidential candidate for the 2016 election, made a [landmark visit](#) in November 2016 to the PRC, where she met with Xi Jinping (習近平) during the 11<sup>th</sup> KMT-CCP Forum (國共論壇).

Even after her short tenure as KMT chair (which only lasted a little over a year), Hung has been a frequent traveler to Beijing and has held multiple meetings with senior CCP officials, even though she no longer held any formal party roles. [2] The former chairwoman, as well as fringe political parties in the Pan-Blue coalition like the leaders of the New Party (NP, 新黨)—which splintered off from the KMT in the early 1990s—have also been recurrent faces at CCP united front forums. During these events, they have appeared alongside Chinese officials, who have lambasted the DPP government and its so-called “Taiwan independence” positions. Notably, before Hsia began his China tours, these were the voices who senior CCP leaders—including Xi—mostly heard from.

It is worth noting that during a previous period of mounting cross-Strait tensions in the early- to mid-2000s under the first DPP government of President Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) (2000-

2008), the KMT and the CCP established formal party-to-party talks that allowed the two parties to bypass official channels. These talks were widely seen as having undermined the effectiveness of Taiwan's central government in negotiating with Beijing, and also further muddied the waters in its relations with Washington. The first KMT-CCP Forum was held in 2006 (during Chen's second term). These talks became more formal and regular following the KMT's victory in the 2008 elections, with the two parties [establishing further channels](#) in the following years.

### ***A KMT in Flux after 2016, Attempts to Reform***

When the DPP returned to power in 2016, the CCP expected that it could rely on the robust party channels that it had built up with the KMT through more than a decade of careful cultivation to build a united front (統一戰綫) to once again isolate and undermine the new DPP government. To its surprise and chagrin, the internal discord exacerbated by the power vacuum left by former President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九)—as well as the changed geopolitical context brought about by the revival of great power competition, and increased public and private scrutiny on united front exchanges—made such efforts considerably more difficult.

The KMT's dismal performances in both the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections contributed to—and were caused by—a state of near paralysis within the party for years as it struggled to find a viable political pathway back to power. During this period, Taiwanese views of the PRC deteriorated significantly, especially following Beijing's 2019 crackdown on Hong Kong, presenting challenges for both the KMT and the CCP. The Taiwanese public also began to cool to the sort of backroom negotiations that typified these engagements. For both parties, it became clear that a new model was needed.

### ***KMT-CCP Forum on Hold Since 2016***

For various reasons, the KMT-CCP Forum has effectively been on hold since 2016 while the KMT [debated](#) internal reforms and its cross-Strait policy, and as various factions within the party wrestled for control.

A former deputy director of the KMT Mainland Affairs Department, [Edward Chen](#) (陳一新), highlighted this growing distance between the KMT and the CCP. In 2020, Chen argued that the KMT and Beijing were essentially at a stalemate, citing the stalled exchanges between the two sides. In particular, Chen [noted](#) that then-Chairman Johnny Chiang (江啟臣), who was trying to initiate substantial reforms within the KMT at the time, appeared to be signaling to Beijing that the KMT does not have

to cooperate with the PRC, especially since China showed little interest in cooperating with the KMT.

It is also in this context that the significance of the resumption of more authoritative, party-to-party dialogue in 2022 snaps into clearer view. The KMT's renewed interest in party exchanges reflected through the vice chairman's many visits to China and interactions with the CCP, may indicate a desire to broaden the current channels of communication with the CCP. In effect, the KMT seems determined to ensure that the CCP does not only engage with fringe voices like Hung and former NP Chairman Yok Mu-ming (郝慕明), who have both been frequent visitors to the mainland.

#### **Chairman Chu Returns**

Following Eric Chu's return to the party's helm in 2021, he decisively embarked on a two-pronged strategy of unifying the factions within the party and reconstituting its relationships with the United States and the PRC. [3] The returning chairman perhaps realized that he would need to win elections to build up his political support before he could start implementing meaningful reforms. At the same time, he would need to manage critical policy differences between the various factions, while also making up lost ground in the two most important capitals: Washington and Beijing.

While Chu focused on helping the KMT win elections, he entrusted Andrew Hsia and Alexander Huang (黃介正) to engage with Beijing and Washington, respectively. Tellingly, he made the decision to finally re-establish the [KMT's representative office in DC](#) in June 2022 (two months before Hsia made his maiden China visit). On the electoral side, Chu banked on proving his worth in the 2022 local and 2024 national elections.

#### **The Biden Administration's Re-Engagement with China**

The resumption of KMT-CCP dialogue also comes at a time when the United States has been attempting to reestablish regular communication channels with the PRC. After a rocky start in US-China relations, the Biden Administration began emphasizing the need for reimposing "guardrails" on the relationship. In pursuit of this objective, the Biden Administration began re-establishing senior-level contacts with Beijing. Indeed, following a [tense first meeting](#) between Biden Administration officials and their Chinese counterparts in Anchorage in March 2021, the two sides resumed high-level dialogue in November 2022 after the Chinese side cut off [more than a dozen dialogues](#), ranging from climate issues to military disputes. Biden and Xi [met in Bali](#), which led to a series of summits, wherein [multiple](#)

[cabinet officials](#) in the Biden Administration visited their counterparts in China. The two sides also held the [Biden-Xi Summit](#) in November 2023. As Hsia's visits make clear, the KMT appears to be resuming its engagement with the CCP after a brief cold spell as well.

KMT Vice Chairman Andrew Hsia's (夏立言) China Trips		
Dates	Context	Official Meetings
<a href="#">August 10-27, 2022</a>	Then-Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan and massive PLA drills  Ahead of 9-in-1 local elections	Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits (ARATS, 海協會) Chairman Zhang Zhijun (張志軍) and Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO, 國台辦) Deputy Director Chen Yuanfeng (陳元豐), among other provincial/local party leaders
February 8-17, 2023	The period following CCP's 20th Party Congress; new PBSC, and newly appointed TAO Director	Wang Huning (王滄寧), PBSC member; Song Tao (宋濤), the new head of Beijing's Taiwan Affairs Office; Chen Yuanfeng; and <a href="#">Yin Li</a> (尹力), the party secretary of Beijing, as well as other provincial/local party leaders from Beijing, <a href="#">Hubei</a> , <a href="#">Jiangsu</a> , and <a href="#">Chongqing</a>

<a href="#">June 16-25, 2023</a>	2023 Straits Forum in Fujian, Xiamen (廈門論壇)	<a href="#">Wang Huning</a> , Song Tao, and other provincial/local party leaders from <a href="#">Yunnan Sichuan</a> , among other provincial/local party leaders	December 13-20, 2023	Right before Jan 2024 presidential and legislative elections	There was no publicly disclosed information on Hsia's meetings. The central government of Taiwan has <a href="#">requested</a> for Hsia to explain his schedule.
<a href="#">August 28-September 5, 2023</a>	Shaanxi Taiwan Business Forum; Shandong Economic Forum,	Song Tao, Lin Wu (林武), party secretary of Shandong Province, and officials Deng Yunfeng (鄧雲鋒), vice governor of Shandong, Pan Xianzhang (潘賢掌), deputy director of the Taiwan Affairs Office, and other provincial/local party leaders from Shanxi, Shandong	<a href="#">February 26-March 3 2024</a>	Post-January Presidential & Legislative Elections	Song Tao, as well as provincial/local party leaders from <a href="#">Guangdong</a> , <a href="#">Jiangxi</a> , and <a href="#">Zhejiang</a> , among others
Locations: Fujian, Zhejiang, Beijing, Nanjing, Shanghai, Xiamen, Shanxi, Shandong, Chengdu, Nanchang, Zhongshan, Xiamen, Chongqing, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Kunshan [4]					

#### ***DPP Floating Trial Ballons to Communicate with CCP?***

What is perhaps even more interesting than the Biden Administration and the KMT's outreach to the PRC is that the DPP may also be modulating its approach to the CCP. Ahead of President-elect Lai's inauguration on May 20, the DPP appears to be trying to reach out to the other side, with multiple officials calling for [dialogue with the CCP](#). Notably, these statements have been accompanied by attempts to deemphasize the independence clause of the DPP's charter. Most notably, during a recent [virtual address](#) at a non-governmental cross-Strait forum hosted in Xiamen attended by mainland experts, DPP China Affairs Department Director Wu Jun-zhi (吳峻誌) stated that the DPP's "Taiwan independence clause" is a "historical document" that has been superseded by the "1999 Resolution of Taiwan's Future" (台灣前途決議文). [5] This claim may have been a trial balloon intended for Beijing. [6]

Notwithstanding its intended audience, the DPP official's statement sent a tremor through Taipei's political circuits and even elicited a terse but neutral [response](#) from the PRC's Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO, 國台辦). In the lead-up to Lai's inauguration in May, the statement suggests that Lai and the DPP could be sending off some trial balloons in a possible effort to [establish](#)



[some contact](#) with the other side (perhaps in the hope that Beijing may reciprocate).

### Conclusion

The KMT's renewed efforts under Eric Chu to reestablish regular communications with Beijing in recent years should be considered in the proper context. While the sensitive timing of some of these visits—including during the Chinese military's massive August 2022 exercises and immediately before the 2024 elections—were ill-advised and lacked political delicacy, the importance of having proper regular channels of communication between the two sides could nevertheless help to mitigate the risk of the miscommunication and miscalculation at a time of increased tensions.

In the context of the KMT-CCP dialogue, it would also be preferable to have more mainstream party voices engaging with senior Chinese officials while minimizing the impact of fringe figures. If Beijing truly wanted to understand Taiwan's political situation, then it should seek out channels other than those created by fringe, pro-unification politicians such as Hung and Yok, who represent a small minority in Taiwan. However, if Beijing continues to insist on a "[One Country, Two Systems](#)" formula for Taiwan (「一國兩制」台灣方案), then no amount of exchanges will increase the people of Taiwan's willingness to peacefully unify with the PRC—no matter the party in charge.

Hsia's visits are also a far cry from the KMT-CCP Forums of the past, with that platform effectively on hold since 2016. It is noteworthy that Chu has not yet made an official visit to the PRC since he became chairman in October 2021 (the last time he [met with Xi was in](#) 2015, during Chu's first tenure as chairman). In fact, Chu appears to have adopted a relatively more cautious approach than some of his predecessors. Nevertheless, it is worth watching whether a Chu-Xi meeting will materialize in the coming year, as the KMT chairman serves for a term of four years. Unless he steps down, Chu has until late 2025 to make such a meeting happen.

In general, the KMT maintaining an open and regular line of communication with Beijing is likely a welcome sight in Washington, which is also attempting to re-establish similar communication channels while simultaneously competing with the PRC. However, if such engagements allow Beijing to exert undue and malign [influence on the legislative process](#) within Taiwan, then it could result in a very disruptive situation like in the early 2000s.

At the same time, President-elect Lai has on several occasions

noted his desire to reopen dialogue with China. "Our door will always be open to engagement with Beijing under the principles of equality and dignity. We are ready and willing to engage to show more for the people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. Peace is priceless and war has no winners," [Lai](#) stated recently. What we are seeing now may be the first sign of those openings.

After all, as the English statesman [Winston Churchill](#) once noted: "Meeting jaw to jaw is better than war."

**The main point:** KMT Vice-Chairman Andrew Hsia undertook a visit to China from February 26-March 3—his seventh visit since becoming party vice-chairman in 2021. Hsia's trips represent a continuing effort by the KMT to maintain party-to-party contacts with the PRC's ruling Communist Party. The DPP, the party of Taiwan President-elect William Lai, has also shown recent indications of potential efforts to open dialogue with the Chinese government.

*The author would like to thank GTI Spring 2024 Intern William Hung for his research assistance.*

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[1] The KMT has three vice chairmen; the others are Sean Lien (連勝文) and Huang Min-hui (黃敏惠).

[2] For instances of Hung's visits to the PRC, see [http://lib.taiwan.cn/2018wenxian/202101/t20210120\\_12319339.htm](http://lib.taiwan.cn/2018wenxian/202101/t20210120_12319339.htm); [http://www.gwytb.gov.cn/m/speech/201905/t20190515\\_12165198.htm](http://www.gwytb.gov.cn/m/speech/201905/t20190515_12165198.htm); [http://lib.taiwan.cn/2020wenxian/202101/t20210120\\_12319612.htm](http://lib.taiwan.cn/2020wenxian/202101/t20210120_12319612.htm); [http://www.xinhuanet.com/2021-07/23/c\\_1127686321.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/2021-07/23/c_1127686321.htm); [http://www.gwytb.gov.cn/m/headline/202202/t20220205\\_12405561.htm](http://www.gwytb.gov.cn/m/headline/202202/t20220205_12405561.htm)

[3] Chu stepped down in 2016 after being drafted at the eleventh hour to replace Hung as the party's candidate for the 2016 presidential election, which he lost to Tsai.

[4] <https://news.ltn.com.tw/news/politics/paper/1632727>; <https://news.ltn.com.tw/news/politics/breakingnews/4588974>; <https://www.baike.com/wiki/id/7271818912021856308?anchor=lluyrn641rk8>

[5] For instance, Zhu Lei (朱磊), former Economics Department director of CASS-Taiwan Studies Center (affiliated with MSS), transferred to Nankai University in 2015. No record of his affiliation with Xiamen University was found.

[6] The [conference](#) was hosted by the Global Society of Cross-Taiwan Strait Studies (環球兩岸關係研究會), Global Forum of Chinese Political Scientists (全球華人政治學家論壇), and sup-

ported by the Taiwan Chinese Current Cultural and Education Foundation (台灣中流文教基金會) and the Shanghai East Asia Institute (上海東亞所). (See, e.g., <https://www.chinatimes.com/newspapers/20240226000378-260118?chdtv>).

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## The Philippines' Renewed "Hard Balancing" Policy toward China: Has the Time Come for De Facto Philippine-Taiwan Security Relations?

By: Renato Cruz De Castro

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During US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin's second [visit to the Philippines](#) on February 2, 2023, Filipino and US security officials announced that additional Philippine military facilities would host US forces under the auspices of the [2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement \(EDCA\)](#). This announcement enhanced the Biden Administration's moves to increase American strategic presence in the "First Island Chain," and to counter China's coercive actions against Taiwan and expansionist efforts against the Philippines in the South China Sea. On April 3, 2023, Philippine government officials disclosed the additional joint locations available for US troop deployments in northern Luzon and Palawan, confirming their positions near Taiwan and the South China Sea. These locations would provide US forces with a strategic vantage point from which they could mount rapid military operations in the event of an armed confrontation between the United States and China over Taiwan, which is just 250 miles north of Luzon.

Along with his commitment to fund an amended—and more robust—version of the "third horizon" of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) [modernization program](#), [1] President Ferdinand "Bong Bong" Marcos Jr.'s efforts to increase the United States' strategic presence in his country are emblematic of the Philippines' renewed policy of hard balancing in response to China's maritime expansion. This is reminiscent of the early 2010s, when the late President Benigno Aquino III pursued a [similar policy](#) in an effort to counter China's expansive maritime claims in the South China Sea. Ultimately, the Aquino Administration's hard balancing policy toward China had a relatively

modest objective: to establish a credible posture for territorial defense and maritime security by building a competent force capable of safeguarding the country's interests and securing the land features it occupies in the South China Sea. Nevertheless, aware of the AFP's limited military capabilities *vis-à-vis* China, the Aquino Administration simultaneously strengthened its security ties with the United States and forged a [security partnership with Japan](#).

By contrast, the Marcos Administration's renewed balancing policy toward China is more vigorous and ambitious than that of the Aquino Administration. The goal is to develop the Philippine military's archipelagic defense capabilities by acquiring modern ships, submarines, aircraft, and radar systems and fostering security relations with allies, partners, and other like-minded countries. Specifically, the Philippines' renewed balancing policy involves building up the Philippine military's external defense capabilities, maintaining its alliance with the United States, increasing the American strategic presence in the Philippines, fostering security arrangements with other middle powers—including South Korea, Japan, and Australia—and more recently, adopting a national defense strategy of active archipelagic defense. This new defense concept aims to project the country's military power across the country's 200-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ). All these efforts are directed at strengthening the Philippines' diplomatic and strategic posture *vis-à-vis* Chinese maritime expansion in the South China Sea. However, it is becoming apparent that the Philippines is also preparing for another potential flashpoint in its immediate neighborhood: Taiwan.

### ***From a Balanced to a "Hard Balancing" Policy***

At the beginning of his six-year term, President Marcos proposed a balanced foreign policy, marked by moves to foster economic cooperation with China simultaneously leveraging the alliance with the United States. His diplomatic gambit centered around creating a division of labor, in which China would provide public investment for Philippine infrastructure development and a market of Philippine exports, while simultaneously ensuring that the Philippines remains secure within the US extended security umbrella in the Indo-Pacific region. In doing so, the Philippines could gain practical benefits from its triangular relationship with the United States and China. It also involved creating a strategic/diplomatic space between the two great powers for the Philippines through a calculated balance of power strategy.

Unfortunately, President Marcos' endeavor to involve these two major powers in his diplomatic gambit of balancing one power

against another has proven inimical to China’s long-term strategic objective of maritime expansion into the South China Sea. To assert its expansive sovereignty claims in the South China Sea, China must possess the capabilities to control a vast maritime domain. It must maintain a persistent naval presence in the vicinity in order to obtain this control. Accordingly, China’s maritime strategy requires the People’s Liberation Army’s Navy (PLAN), the China Coast Guard (CCG), and its Maritime Militia to pressure foreign vessels in disputed waters—and force regional countries, such as the Philippines, to abide by and accept Chinese jurisdiction and privileges in the South China Sea. China’s uncompromising posture and coercive moves in the South China Sea, marked by the increase in the number of CCG patrols in the disputed waters, has resulted in the frequent harassment of Philippine fishermen and Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) ships. [2] These developments pushed the Marcos Administration to renew the Philippines’ policy of hard balancing toward China’s expansion in the South China Sea.



*Image: Chinese Coast Guard Vessel 5305 fires a water cannon at Philippines Coast Guard ship BRP Malabrigo in the vicinity of Second Thomas Shoal (August 5, 2023). This incident is one of many examples of at-sea harassment carried out as the PRC attempts to assert sovereignty over the South China Sea, and which have raised tensions between Beijing and Manila. (Image source: [Philippines Coast Guard/Wikimedia Commons](#))*

### **A Renewed Hard Balancing Policy Toward China**

On December 21, 2022, President Marcos [committed to the AFP’s acquisition of more equipment for external defense](#). He declared, “We will be partners towards your vision of a strong, credible, world-class armed force that is a source of national pride or national security.” President Marcos [reiterated](#) the need to modernize the Philippine military during the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Philippine Navy on May 29, 2023. In his [keynote speech](#), he stated: “Considering the changing tides of our national security and the significant gains that we have made in

national security, our armed forces are working to recalibrate its focus more towards the external defense of our borders.” Finally, he said that he expects the completion of “horizon 3” of the AFP modernization, which is primarily aimed at developing the Philippines’ naval capabilities. [3]

The Philippines has also sought to strengthen its alliance with the United States. In the first four months of 2023, Washington and Manila raised the level of their diplomatic activities, leading to five significant developments:

1. The formal [announcement](#) of four new EDCA sites;
2. The revival of the [Two Plus Two Bilateral Security Dialogue](#);
3. The holding of the largest-ever [Balikatan](#) joint military exercise;
4. The public release of the May 2023 [Defense Security Guidelines](#) that clarified under what conditions the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) could be invoked by each party; and
5. The enhancement of interoperability between the two allies’ armed forces through additional equipment transfers, training, and joint naval patrols.

In late 2023, the Philippine government announced the adoption of a “[Forward Archipelagic Defense Concept](#).” This new defense strategy aims to project the Philippine military capabilities throughout the country’s EEZ, and thus enhance the defense of its maritime territory. The AFP plans to acquire more ships, aircraft, surveillance capabilities, and radar systems to enable it to control the Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC) and maritime avenues of approach from the mainland Philippines to its outlying islands and land features within its archipelagic waters and throughout its EEZ.

On February 6, 2024, Philippine Department of National Defense (DND) Secretary [Gilberto Teodoro](#) surveyed the construction underway at the Philippine Navy’s (PN) Naval Forward Operating Base Mahatao on Mavulis, the northernmost island of the Batanes group of islands south of Taiwan. He then ordered the military to increase the number of Filipino troops stationed on the isolated island to strengthen the Philippines’ territorial defense posture. Upon returning to Manila, Secretary Teodoro immediately advocated for expanding the island’s defensive infrastructure. These developments indicate the Marcos Administration’s resolve to return to a hard balancing policy as it strengthens the Philippines’ overall security capability to defend the country’s interests against a particular threat: China’s expansion in the South China Sea and its irredentist agenda against

Taiwan.

### ***Earning the Dragon's Ire***

The Philippines' efforts at renewing its hard balancing policy toward China's maritime expansion in the South China Sea naturally caught Beijing's attention, and earned its fury. In 2023, Chinese officials and media outlets expressed grave concern with the steady deterioration in Philippine-China bilateral relations, while President Marcos strengthened the Philippines' alliance with the United States and its security partnerships with Japan and Australia. [4] Early on, Chinese criticism of the Philippines' efforts to expand its partnership with the United States was primarily directed against the latter. However, the Chinese government has increasingly portrayed Manila as aligning itself with "anti-China" coalitions for selfish reasons.

China's protests against the Philippines grew in intensity following the announcement of the locations of new US bases in the northern regions of the Philippines—facilities that, notably, are in proximity to Taiwan and the South China Sea. Immediately after the reveal, the Chinese embassy in Manila expressed its strong opposition to American strategic access to these bases. Former Chinese foreign minister and Politburo member Wang Yi (王毅) also [warned](#) President Marcos Jr. not to "lose the momentum" of his agreement with President Xi Jinping (习近平) regarding the "appropriate management of the South China Sea differences." In May 2023, Beijing [criticized](#) the [Biden-Marcos Joint Statement](#), in which the Philippines aligned more closely with US positions in opposing China's aggressive moves against Taiwan, the war in Ukraine, and support of the US-Australia-India-Japan Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (also known as the "Quad"). Beijing's adverse reaction to the Philippines' decision to increase the number of EDCA sites stems from the fact that American access to these Philippine bases in Northern Luzon could potentially hamper Chinese military operations within the "first island chain." These bases would also enable the United States to support naval and air operations in the region, effectively upholding the maritime order and assisting Taiwan's defense strategically.

Eventually, official Chinese commentary began portraying President Marcos and his administration as determined to challenge China in the South China Sea, as Manila seeks diplomatic and strategic leverages by working more closely with the United States in efforts to contain China in the region. [5]

To express Beijing's exasperation with the Philippines, CCG vessels, with the support of the Maritime Militia boats, have frequently [harassed](#) Philippine resupply missions to Second

Thomas Shoal, where a small garrison of Philippine marines are stationed onboard the *BRP Sierra Madre*. Chinese officials and media consistently warned that the Philippines risked pushing its relationship with China over the precipice into a possible full-blown conflict. [6] The most recent of these types of warnings occurred after Secretary Teodoro [ordered](#) an increased military presence in the Philippines' northern province of Batanes, which is only 88 miles from the southern tip of Taiwan. Immediately, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson [Wang Wenbin](#) (王文斌) warned the Philippines to "Tread carefully and don't play with fire on this [Taiwan] question to avoid being manipulated and eventually hurt." He added that cordial discussions have historically characterized China-Philippine relations, and that both nations should respect one another's territorial integrity and refrain from meddling in one another's affairs. This warning came at the zenith of tensions between China and the Philippines, with standoffs between Chinese and Philippine vessels occurring with concerning regularity.

### ***Is it Time for Manila and Taipei to Hold Informal Track-Two Talks?***

Taiwan and the Philippines are both on the receiving end of China's anger and coercive efforts. Since 2016, China has worked to diplomatically isolate Taiwan by employing its playbook of economic and diplomatic coercion, largely in response to the Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) Administration's refusal to accept the "[1992 Consensus](#)." More recently, the Philippines became China's primary target of coercion and threats due to its decision to renew its hard balancing policy toward China's maritime expansion, and its irredentist moves against its nearest neighbor, Taiwan. To be clear, the Philippines does not have official diplomatic ties with Taiwan, as it recognizes Beijing as the sole legitimate government of China. Furthermore, the Philippines maintains a stringent and legalistic "One-China Policy" while acknowledging Taiwan's diplomatic status as a self-ruled island. However, current developments in the region should convince both Manila and Taipei to consider holding informal or track-two discussions about their approaches to China, the South China Sea dispute, Taiwan Strait tensions, the role of the United States and Japan in the defense of the "first island chain," and how these two island democracies can assist each other if armed conflicts break out in the South China Sea, or over Taiwan.

**The main point:** Under the leadership of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., the Philippines has returned to a policy of "hard balancing" against the People's Republic of China. While Manila maintains a firm "One-China Policy," recent coercive efforts on the part of Beijing could compel the Philippines to engage in en-



hanced dialogue with Taiwan.

[1] The 18-Year Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) Modernization Program is divided into three stages, or “horizons.” The First Horizon (2013-2017) aimed to transform the AFP to be fully capable for internal security operations. The Second Horizon (2018-2022) is directed in the AFP transitioning from internal security to territorial defense. The Third Horizon (2022-2027) aims to make the AFP fully capable of assuming the territorial defense of whole Philippine territory.

[2] “Philippines Says Chinese Coast Guard Clashed With Its Vessels For Second Day,” *Associated Press* (December 10, 2023), <https://www.voanews.com/a/philippines-says-chinese-coast-guard-assaulted-its-vessels-with-water-cannons-for-second-day/7391663.html>; and John Dotson, “Rising Tensions Over Taiwan Prompt Defense Policy Changes throughout the Indo-Pacific Region,” *GTI Quarterly Connections*, 2023 Quarter 1 (pp. 12-21), [https://globaltaiwan.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/QuarterlyConnections\\_2023Q1.pdf](https://globaltaiwan.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/QuarterlyConnections_2023Q1.pdf)

[4] Catharin Dalpino, “Washington Doubles Down on Key Partners,” *Comparative Connections: A Triannual E-Journal of Bilateral Relations in the Indo-Pacific*, 25, 3, pp. 75-84.

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## Media Literacy Education: Taiwan’s Key to Combating Disinformation

By: Willian Hung

*Willian Wei Hung (ng Ui), a Taiwanese native, is a Spring 2024 intern at the Global Taiwan Institute.*

As Taiwan grapples with the outcome of its 2024 election, its diverse media ecosystem has become something of a double-edged sword. While it offers a rich tapestry of perspectives, the diversity risks forming echo chambers and creating openings for manipulation by foreign actors, particularly the People’s Republic of China (PRC). More than just an election, 2024 has become a crucial test of democratic resilience in the face of potential fragmentation and manipulation, forcing voters to navigate a media maelstrom and to critically evaluate the narratives shaping their choices.

In Taiwan, the digital landscape is currently undergoing a remarkable transformation, with a staggering 90 percent of the population (20.20 million) actively [participating on one or more](#)

[social media platforms](#), averaging six and a half platforms per individual. Such widespread online engagement is emblematic of a seismic shift in how Taiwanese individuals navigate the digital realm, blending real-life interactions with online activities, as highlighted in [Taiwan Network Information Center’s](#) (TWNIC, 財團法人臺灣網路資訊中心) [Taiwan Internet Report 2023](#). Of particular note is the increasing reliance on social media by government agencies, including the [Ministry of Health and Welfare](#) (MOHW, 衛福部) and the [Ministry of Economic Affairs](#) (MOEA, 經濟部), particularly during critical periods such as crises or discussions on contentious policies.

As Taiwan embraces this digital surge, it has increasingly encountered the challenge of echo chambers fueled by [media polarization](#). Within these environments, actors amplify extreme content in pursuit of engagement, raising concerns about constructive discourse. Negative and inflammatory content can shape virtual communities, fostering ideological alignment and “[Warmth-Seeking](#)” (取暖) behaviors that shield users from dissenting views. This phenomenon can have the effect of stifling diverse perspectives and undermining informed decision-making. Consequently, tackling this issue has become crucial for preserving robust public dialogue and ensuring a well-informed citizenry in the digital age.

### **Taiwan’s Media Reception & Trust**

Data from [Freedom House’s 2023 Freedom on the Net report](#) has revealed a concerning trend in Taiwan’s online landscape. While a significant percentage (23 percent) of internet users report that they actively combat misinformation, a much larger group (63 percent) remains silent. This hesitancy might be linked to the growing online political divide, acknowledged by 80 percent of users (Up from 77.65 percent in 2022). In response, a resounding [83 percent of respondents](#) expressed a desire for the government to develop regulations to combat the spread of misinformation.

### **Echo Chambers**

The phenomenon of echo chambers, known locally as *tongwen-ceng* (同溫層), has become a defining feature of Taiwan’s digital arena. Rooted in the natural inclination of modern internet users to seek interaction with like-minded individuals, these virtual communities go beyond mere online engagement. As described by [Cass Sunstein](#) in 2017, “freedom of choice can produce self-sorting, in which people enter echo chambers or information cocoons.” More specifically, internet users are drawn to those with similar opinions and values, forming virtual communities characterized by commonality, cohesion, and a distinct

sense of identity and safety. Despite the internet's promise of connectivity, the "[separation](#)" (分離感) feature persists, posing significant challenges to users and governments alike.

These insular online communities reinforce pre-existing beliefs by exposing users only to curated content that aligns with their perspectives. This phenomenon, known as the "[Echo Chamber Effect](#)" (ECE), exacerbates media polarization by restricting exposure to diverse viewpoints and encouraging limited critical thinking. In the context of Taiwan's vibrant democracy, ECE raises concerns about the potential erosion of constructive idea exchanges, which could lead to more severe societal divisions. Consequently, addressing the ECE will be crucial, not only for promoting a more informed and engaged citizenry, but also for safeguarding the democratic foundations of Taiwanese society.

### **Existing Government Responses**

The Taiwanese government has proactively responded to the challenges posed by echo chambers and the imperative for enhanced media literacy by introducing the [Digital Era Media Literacy Education White Paper](#) (數位時代媒體素養教育白皮書), unveiled by the Ministry of Education (MOE, 教育部) on March 30, 2023. Originating from the 2018 [False Information Prevention Project](#) (防制假訊息危害專案), the initiative is intricately woven into the [108 Curriculum Guidelines](#) (108 課綱), incorporating "Information & Media Literacy" as one of the nine core values in the educational curriculum. (For a more in-depth overview of the 108 Curriculum Guidelines, see [Adrienne Wu's January 2024 article in the Global Taiwan Brief](#).)

As a comprehensive update of the 2002 [Media Literacy Education White Paper](#) (媒體素養教育白皮書), the [Digital Era Media Literacy Education White Paper](#) outlines crucial steps to encourage a media-literate populace. These include educating individuals of all ages on how to discern misinformation and disinformation, providing targeted guidance for teenagers on the proper use of short videos, and emphasizing the importance of cyber safety, mainly concerning personal information.

At the heart of the new *White Paper* is the ambition to cultivate an informed and responsible population of digital citizens. Critical thinking is positioned as the central theme, unpacked into five key components: accessibility (近用), analysis (分析), creation (創造), reflection (反思), and activity (行動). This strategic approach involves:

- Comprehensive integration across disciplines;
- Fostering collaboration between the public and private sectors;

- Strengthening interpersonal connections;
- Bridging the gap between the digital world and reality.

This multifaceted approach places particular emphasis on education, including the stabilization of school education, the promotion of lifelong learning, and the enrichment of media education resources. Through these meticulous efforts, the Taiwanese government aspires to equip its citizens with the skills and values necessary to navigate the digital landscape adeptly, nurturing a society of digital citizens who engage critically, responsibly, and ethically both online and offline.

The Taiwanese government's approach to tackling echo chambers and promoting media literacy through the *Digital Era Media Literacy Education White Paper* is commendable. However, navigating this complex issue requires acknowledging potential challenges and exploring further avenues for improvement.

### **Challenges to Consider**

While the 2023 White Paper outlines ambitious plans for [media literacy education in Taiwan](#), successfully implementing them will require overcoming several challenges. Integrating media literacy skills across diverse educational levels and fostering widespread awareness will necessitate innovative approaches, including equipping educators with the necessary knowledge and resources to combat potential implementation gaps.

In addition, the ever-evolving online landscape demands agility and adaptation. Current approaches for media literacy education would improve and benefit from continuous refinement by collaboration with individuals, professionals, and policymakers. Taiwan can build a resilient media literacy ecosystem by leveraging technology and fostering integrative approaches.

Addressing existing biases—including confirmation bias, groupthink, and the echo chamber effect—will also be crucial. [Encouraging open dialogue and diverse perspectives](#) will become central to challenging these biases and fostering a culture of intellectual curiosity and openness. By weaving such practices into the overall approach, media literacy can become a dynamic force for broadening individual perspectives and promoting a healthier information ecosystem.

### **Potential Avenues for Exploration**

#### 1) Promoting [Media Creation Literacy](#):

Moving beyond the realm of fact-checking, the government should expand its focus to empower individuals to navigate the digital landscape critically, and create content ethically. This

would entail training citizens to not just identify [fake news](#) (假新聞), but to contribute thoughtfully and ethically to online discourse.

Such efforts will necessitate more than mere debunking; they will involve responsibly harnessing the power of media creation. By integrating strategies for crafting educational and practical content while highlighting media ethics, an updated white paper could empower individuals to transition from passive consumers to active, responsible creators and viewers. This shift could potentially initiate a more informed and engaged online community where critical voices rise above the noise, and positive narratives naturally counter the deceptive allure of misinformation.

Moreover, embracing and promoting media creation literacy could provide dividends for Taiwan on the international stage. In other words, Taiwan could position itself as a leader in building a more discerning, resilient, and cohesive society by cultivating a population adept at crafting ethical and impactful content. By strategically investing in media creation literacy, Taiwan can safeguard against misinformation and lay the foundation for a positive digital future.

## 2) Engaging with Social Media Companies

Establishing a more responsible online environment will also require a collaborative effort [involving governments and significant social media platforms](#) like [PTT](#) (批踢踢實業坊), [Dcard](#), [Instagram](#), [Facebook](#), [X](#) (Formerly Twitter), and [YouTube](#). While governments play a crucial role in creating ethical frameworks and regulations, their effectiveness relies on coordinating with these platforms.

Rather than simply using these platforms to amplify government efforts, the government should attempt to collaborate directly with them in order to reshape the online ecosystem. Such coordination could contribute to a system in which algorithms act as discerning curators, prioritizing factual information over sensationalized content. [Transparency and fairness](#) would form the foundation of content moderation practices, ensuring consistent and responsible treatment of all online content. Additionally, joint initiatives for user education, empowered by both governments and platforms, could equip individuals with critical thinking skills, transforming them from passive consumers into active participants in online discourse. To incentivize proactive participation from platforms, governments could explore various measures, such as tax breaks, grants for the development of responsible AI tools, or public recognition for platforms demonstrating exceptional commitment to ethical content cu-

ration. This collective endeavor, in which governments establish the ethical framework and platforms ensure its harmonious implementation, could potentially cultivate a trustworthy and responsible online environment, benefiting both citizens and platforms alike.

## 3) Participating in Global Collaborations

Sharing best practices and collaborating with [other nations grappling with similar media literacy challenges](#) is not merely beneficial, but strategically critical. In pursuit of this, Taiwan should work to build a global network comprising educators, policymakers, and tech experts committed to combating misinformation and disinformation. Such a [collaborative effort](#) would not simply amplify individual initiatives; it would create a unified response by fostering the exchange of successful strategies, identifying emerging threats, and developing innovative solutions.

This could serve as a collective levee against the rising tide of misinformation. No single nation can effectively stand alone against this digital deluge. However, by joining forces, sharing resources, and leveraging expertise, Taiwan can collectively build a more robust and resilient defense. In turn, this could facilitate the development of standardized best practices, the creation of multilingual educational materials, and the implementation of cross-border initiatives designed to dismantle misinformation campaigns.

By critically examining potential challenges and exploring solutions, the Taiwanese government can continuously refine and strengthen its media literacy initiatives: ensuring their effectiveness in transforming a generation of engaged, responsible, and informed digital citizens equipped to navigate the complexities of the echo chamber effect and misinformation in the ever-evolving digital landscape.

## Looking Forward

Taiwan's robust social media landscape, while undoubtedly beneficial as a means of fostering connectivity and political engagement, also presents challenges in navigating the complexities of online information. The exponential rise of echo chambers and disinformation threatens the foundations of democratic discourse and informed decision-making. While the Taiwanese government's *Digital Era Media Literacy Education White Paper* offers a commendable and proactive response, addressing potential implementation gaps, the ever-evolving information environment, and existing biases will be crucial for maximizing its impact. Furthermore, exploring initiatives like promoting

media creation literacy, engaging with social media platforms, and fostering global collaboration can solidify Taiwan's position as a frontrunner in responsible digital engagement and media literacy.

**The main point:** While fostering engagement, Taiwan's social media landscape is rife with misinformation and echo chambers, which threaten democracy. In response, the government's recent *Digital Era Media Literacy Education White Paper* has proposed a range of measures to promote media literacy education.

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## TSMC Opens Its First Production Facility in Kumamoto, Japan

By: Erik M. Jacobs

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On February 24, Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC, 台灣積體電路製造股份有限公司), [opened its first semiconductor production plant](#) in Kumamoto, Japan. The plant opening was the first of several major planned semiconductor manufacturing investments by TSMC in Japan as Tokyo seeks to bolster its domestic semiconductor industry. The plant's inaugural ceremony included TSMC Chairman Mark Liu (劉德音), CEO C.C. Wei (魏哲家), founder Morris Chang (張忠謀), Japanese Minister of Economy, Trade, and Industry (METI) Ken Saito, and video remarks from Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida.

In his remarks at the plant's opening ceremony, Saito identified TSMC as the most important partner for Japan to realize its goal of digital transformation. He also called TSMC's factory an important contributor in the production of cutting-edge logic chips that are essential for future Japanese industry. Japan's lavish praise for TSMC and its willingness to spend billions of dollars to invest in companies like TSMC show how large of a role TSMC may play in Japan's future semiconductor and leading-edge technological landscape.

### **Several TSMC Plants Possible for Kumamoto?**

As a part of its strategy to enhance economic security, secure and stabilize domestic supply chains, revitalize domestic semiconductor capabilities, and pursue chip technologies that can be used for future applications such as artificial intelligence, the Japanese government has encouraged foreign companies like TSMC to invest in manufacturing facilities by approving billions

of dollars in subsidies for new manufacturing facilities. TSMC was one of the first companies to win Japanese government subsidies, and the new Kumamoto plant represents the first of what the Japanese government hopes will be many new production facilities to bolster its national ambitions.

TSMC's first plant in Kumamoto is led by [TSMC-led joint venture](#) Japan Advanced Semiconductor Manufacturing (JASM), and will produce chips that range in size from 12 nanometers to 28 nanometers for various applications. JASM's facility is operated in conjunction with Japanese member companies [Sony, Denso, and Toyota Motor Corporation](#), and is expected to produce chips that will be used across several important Japanese economic sectors, including consumer electronics and automobiles.

At the February 24 launch event, Japanese Prime Minister Kishida also announced that the Japanese government would provide an additional USD \$4.86 billion to TSMC to build a second, more advanced plant in Kumamoto. If completed on time, this plant is expected to be operational by the end of 2027 and would be capable of producing more advanced chips ranging in size from six to seven nanometers for use in applications such as high-performance computing.

By the time both Kumamoto projects are completed, the Japanese government will be expected to have [spent in excess of USD \\$8 billion](#) to subsidize TSMC's facilities, with the aim of achieving a monthly production capacity of more than 10,000 12-inch wafers. In an important boost for the emerging high-technology economy in Kumamoto, [other Taiwanese companies](#) like Materials Analysis Technology (MA-tek) have also opened up offices in Japan to be a part of the supply chain, a move that could have further downstream impacts on Japan's domestic semiconductor sector.

TSMC's investments in Japan may not be limited to these two multi-billion-dollar manufacturing facilities. As of late February 2024, there are preliminary reports that TSMC is [considering building a third plant in Japan](#). This facility could potentially cost more than USD \$20 billion to build and would produce even more advanced three-nanometer chips, which would represent the most advanced semiconductors that TSMC can produce at the time of publication.

TSMC's new facilities in Kumamoto are not the company's first investments in Japan's semiconductor industry, and for good reason. In 2019, TSMC launched the [Japan Design Center](#) in Ibaraki Prefecture, with the aim of supporting its advanced research and development (R&D) goals in Japan. Such ongoing investment in Japan also makes sense, as Japanese custom-



ers made up six percent of TSMC's total revenue in 2023, and leading Japanese companies like Tokyo Electron and Shin-Etsu Chemicals [supply TSMC with materials](#) and other equipment that are used to produce its leading-edge chips in Taiwan.

### ***TSMC's Other Overseas Investments***

While TSMC's efforts to bolster its overseas production capabilities, strengthen its global supply chains, deepen technology relations with partners, and take advantage of semiconductor and technology-related subsidy and investment programs are most advanced in Japan, the company has engaged in similar initiatives elsewhere.

In 2020, TSMC [originally announced](#) that it would spend USD \$12 billion to build a new five-nanometer semiconductor wafer fabrication facility in Arizona, marking the company's second US-based manufacturing site. TSMC subsequently revised the plans for its first facility to produce more advanced, four-nanometer chips. In 2022, the company announced that it planned to build another facility in Arizona to produce three-nanometer chips—the most advanced capabilities available at the time of the announcement—by 2026. In 2023, [TSMC also announced](#) that it would use a TSMC-controlled joint venture with German auto parts manufacturer Bosch and semiconductor maker Infineon to build a fabrication plant near Dresden, Germany.

While news of TSMC's investments in the United States were met with great fanfare, the opening of its first Arizona facility has been [delayed until 2027 or 2028](#). This postponement was largely due to TSMC's decision to switch production from five-nanometer chips to the more advanced four-nanometer chips—as well as the Biden Administration's slow rollout of the *CHIPS Act* funding announcements, which has led other chipmakers (including Intel) to [delay their multi-billion-dollar projects](#), as well.

In this context, Taiwan's decision to continue to bolster bilateral ties with Japan makes sense, as TSMC seeks to continue to leverage its status as the world leader in semiconductor production, particularly as larger semiconductor policy efforts such as the Biden Administration's ["Chip 4 Group" have failed to materialize](#). This group was intended to facilitate semiconductor cooperation efforts between Washington, Taipei, Tokyo, and Seoul, but has been met resistance from some South Korean producers as they contend with broader economic concerns and geopolitical tensions with China.

### ***The Future of Japan-Taiwan Semiconductor Cooperation***

Japan is hopeful that TSMC-led investment will help it to revitalize its semiconductor industry, which once dominated global

production, although at a lesser scale than today's Taiwanese companies. Japanese semiconductor prowess intensified trade tensions between Washington and Tokyo in the late 1980s, ultimately leading the administration of US President Ronald Reagan to impose [USD \\$300 million of tariffs on Japanese semiconductors in 1987](#). At Japan's [semiconductor production peak in 1989](#), Japanese companies produced more than half of all semiconductors, and Japanese chipmakers NEC, Toshiba, and Hitachi led global production. Since then, Japanese global market share of the semiconductor industry has fallen to less than 10 percent, and no Japanese companies rank in the top 10 of semiconductor revenue.

Japan's investment in TSMC's capabilities in Kumamoto is undoubtedly a key pillar in the country's overall approach to developing Japan-based semiconductor capabilities. However, Tokyo has also explored other avenues to strengthen its position in the sector. For instance, it has committed billions of dollars to Rapidus, a government-backed joint venture project that is partnered with American firm IBM and European chip research group Imec, to build new production lines and facilities in Hokkaido—with grand ambitions of rivaling Silicon Valley. For TSMC, meanwhile, its efforts in Japan are a key part of its global plan to both build closer relations with important partner nations and expand commercial opportunities for the company as it seeks to remain on the cutting edge of semiconductor research, development, and manufacturing.

**The main point:** The opening of TSMC's production facility in Japan is the first step in a series of plant openings that Japan hopes will revitalize its domestic chipmaking industry and spur innovation across the country. As additional TSMC plants come online and future investments are made, Taiwanese firms like TSMC will play a major role in how Japan's future technology infrastructure looks as it pursues its goal of increasing its capabilities.

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## **China's New Civil Flight Routes: Implications for Cross-Strait Stability**

By: Thomas Shattuck

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In the aftermath of Taiwan's January presidential and legislative elections, the world wondered what sorts of responses Beijing would have to another victory by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民進黨) after Lai Ching-te (賴清德) was elected president. Predictably, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials quickly condemned the election, and issued warnings against "[Taiwan independence](#)" and "separatist" forces. At the same time, observers drew attention to Chinese military aircraft flying across the median line of the Taiwan Strait, which was an expected response since these incursions occur on a near-daily basis. Another major development was [Nauru's decision to sever ties with Taipei](#) in favor of Beijing, which was announced just two days after the elections. While undoubtedly painful for Taiwan, the switch was not particularly shocking, as Beijing has been poaching Taiwan's remaining diplomatic allies ever since Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) was elected president in 2016. Though each of these developments upset the delicate cross-Strait status quo in varying ways and to different degrees, anyone following cross-Strait relations could have predicted these post-election responses to a DPP presidential victory.

The one post-election, cross-Strait development that received less of a spotlight was the Civil Aviation Administration of China's (CAAC, 中國民用航空局) unilateral [announcement of new civil aviation flight paths](#) within the Taiwan Strait. Taipei immediately condemned the announcement after it was revealed that the CAAC moved one route to [under five miles from the median](#) line of the Taiwan Strait, while others are close to Taiwan's own civil flight routes for its outlying islands of Kinmen and Matsu. The decision to further expand and relocate these flight routes should not come as a major surprise, as the CAAC has gradually expanded these routes since 2015, when they were first established.

This development is more important—and likely more detrimental to the cross-Strait status quo—than the previously mentioned post-election incidents, as the expansion of [flight routes M503, W122, and W123](#) will result in a significant increase in Chinese civilian aviation in the Taiwan Strait. Such a move diminishes Taiwan's ability to assert its own sovereignty in the area, and normalizes the civil element of Beijing's salami-slicing tactics against Taiwan.



*Image: A graphic from Taiwan's Civil Aeronautics Administration showing flight routes around Taiwan: including the W122 and W123 routes, and the path of the M503 route (pink line). The new M503 route announced by the PRC in early February shifts the de facto M503 flight path further eastwards, 6 nautical miles closer to the Taiwan Strait center line. (Image source: [ROC Civil Aeronautics Administration](#))*

### **What Exactly Did Beijing Do?**

In late January, the [CAAC made two key changes](#) to the flight routes in the Taiwan Strait. [Focus Taiwan](#) explained these changes in depth in the aftermath of the announcement. First, flight route M503, which operates north-south on China's side of the Taiwan Strait, was moved six nautical miles east, bringing it considerably closer to the median line of the Taiwan Strait. This flight path was first created in [January 2015](#) (but not utilized until March of that year), with the six-nautical-mile offset included in order to provide an additional buffer from the median line of Taiwan Strait. The addition of the buffer was a conscious decision by Beijing to try to make the creation of the new routes less controversial. That decision provided a concrete example of the greater regard Beijing once showed for the tacit division of the Taiwan Strait. Notably, in March 2015, the route only allowed for northbound flights; there were no [southbound flights](#). Then, in January 2018, the CAAC opened up the route to southbound flights, making it fully functional. Now, with the flight path moved closer to the median line, Beijing has signaled

another dimension of its desire to erase the median line.

Second, flight routes W122 and W123, which operate east-west connecting to the north-south M503, opened up to eastbound flights. These routes have a similar history to M503 as they connect to each other. Before the January 2024 announcement, the W122 and W123 routes were limited to [only westbound flights](#) (i.e., flights heading into China). The opening of these westbound routes occurred in 2018 after the paths were established in 2015 but never utilized. Now, the route allows for flights heading from the cities of Xiamen and Fuzhou into the Taiwan Strait.

To put it simply, a mere 10 years ago, no planes flew on these flight paths. However, after nearly a decade of incremental growth, China's civil flight paths in the Taiwan Strait have become a permanent feature of the cross-Strait status quo.

### **Why Does This Matter?**

To the average reader, these developments may not seem like a big deal: who cares about civilian flight paths over a waterway? For Taiwan, however, there are a number of reasons to find this news troubling.

First, the addition of the eastbound flights to the [W122 and W123 paths](#) increases traffic close to previously existing Taiwanese civilian flight routes—specifically, flight routes W2, W6, and W8—that connect the outlying islands of Kinmen and Matsu to Taiwan. Having increased traffic making turns so close to Taiwanese flight routes—especially close to airports—significantly increases the potential for an accident or miscommunication. These airspaces are already fraught with the constant incursions by Chinese military aircraft in the same areas. Adding more civilian aircraft into the mix complicates an already tense situation.

Second, Taiwan lacks the ability to voice its concerns about China's unilateral moves in the relevant international forum: the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). The ICAO is a United Nations-affiliated organization that is the global authority for aviation matters. Since Taiwan lacks membership or even observer status in the UN, it has no guaranteed seat at the table. Under the presidency of Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九), Taipei sat in on ICAO meetings as a part of Beijing's efforts to maintain a higher level of cross-Strait dialogue. However, Beijing put an end to this practice when Tsai was elected, and the doors to ICAO were shut to Taiwan despite having its own [Flight Information Region \(FIR\)](#), which is [one of the busiest in the world](#). In 2023, [Hong Kong-to-Taipei flights](#) represented the third-busiest international flight route in the world.

Lack of access to the ICAO proved to be an issue in in the aftermath of then-US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's August 2022 visit to Taiwan, when the People's Liberation Army (PLA) conducted large-scale exercises and announced [no-fly-zones for civilian aircraft](#) in the vicinity of Taiwan. Consequently, Taiwan's Civil Aeronautics Administration (CAA, 民用航空局) had to rely on its [Japanese and Filipino counterparts](#) to divert and reroute flights [since ICAO was not an option](#). In this instance, Taiwan's exclusion from the UN system created—and will continue to create—issues for aviation safety as cross-Strait tensions continue to deteriorate.

Third, it continues a pattern of leaders in Beijing making unilateral decisions that are not dangerous in and of themselves, but increase the possibility for danger to occur. In this instance, China's actions heighten the risk of accidents or miscommunications. In 2015, after CAAC announced the creation of these routes, officials from Beijing and Taipei were able to have discussions about the paths, which resulted in Beijing moving route M503 six nautical miles to the west. Those channels no longer exist, and such discussions no longer occur. As a result, there is no prior warning when such unilateral decisions are made: Taiwan finds out about these developments when the relevant Chinese agency makes an announcement.

Given recent issues regarding aviation safety, such as the January 2024 incidents when a [Boeing 737 Max 9](#) "plug" blew off during takeoff and a [Japanese aircraft crashed](#) into a coast guard plane during landing, it is deeply concerning when a country makes unilateral decisions related to international aviation safety. In this regard, China's effort to limit Taiwan's sovereignty by expanding civil aviation activity in the Taiwan Strait could have major ramifications. Already, the growing lack of clarity in the region has resulted in violence, as demonstrated by the deaths of [two Chinese fishermen](#) who were chased off by Taiwan's coast guard after illegally fishing in Taiwan's waters. At sea, the costs were somewhat limited, but in the air, the toll could be much, much higher.

### **Moving Forward**

After eight years of essentially spurning all forms of high-level cross-Strait communication, leaders in Beijing find themselves having to deal with another DPP president—one that they distrust even more than Tsai. And since Lai's election in January, it appears that Beijing has no intention of changing course in its dealings with Taipei. Under Tsai, Beijing worked to squeeze Taiwan on the economic, military, and political fronts in order to limit its international space. These efforts are likely to continue

to escalate during Lai's presidency.

In the air, China's campaign to place pressure on Taiwan has manifested in the regular [aviation incursions](#) into the defense identification zone (ADIZ) near Pratas/Dongsha Island, and the Taiwan Strait itself. The opening up of flight routes in 2018 was also another element on this front. Keeping Taipei out of ICAO meetings complemented these efforts.

For Beijing, increasing civil aviation in the Taiwan Strait likely appears to be a relatively low-risk decision. Expanding the W122 and W123 routes and moving M503 are all fairly unobtrusive, low-profile behaviors that lack the immediacy or bombast of military exercises. The average person will likely not care too much about this—because on the surface, it does not seem like a big deal. However, things like this are not a big deal until they become one. Ultimately, the way that Beijing's expansion of these civilian flight paths could rise to greater attention is through tragedy, and no one wants that outcome. Furthermore, these new flight paths could set the stage for the CAAC to unilaterally create additional new civilian flights near and around Taiwan as well.

If Beijing ever wants to lower the temperature in cross-Strait relations, it has plenty of small issue areas that it could address with Taipei at a technical level. Senior-level politicians and government officials do not need to get involved in issues like moving or deconflicting flight paths in the Taiwan Strait. Such technocratic conversations among mid-level officials could provide a new beginning for confidence-building mechanisms in a more transparent cross-Strait environment. However, while more dialogue would certainly be welcome, it is unlikely to occur until a real tragedy happens—and that is why Beijing's unilateral decision to move and expand these flight paths should be of major concern to international actors.

**The main point:** The recent decision by the Civil Aviation Administration of China to move the M503 flight path closer to the median line of the Taiwan Strait, and to open up eastbound traffic on the W122 and W123 routes, represents another move by Beijing to diminish Taiwan's sovereignty. Given Taiwan's exclusion from the United Nations system, it is very limited in its ability to lodge official complaints at the international level. Until Beijing and Taipei can address even these low-level issues, cross-Strait tensions will continue to spiral into the overall approach, media literacy can become a dynamic force for broadening individual perspectives and promoting a healthier information ecosystem.