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Indictment Of New York State Official Demonstrates the Need for Taiwan to Conduct Renewed Subnational Diplomacy

By: Sasha B. Chhabra

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The [recent indictment](#) of a former New York State official, Linda Sun (孫雯), for allegedly using her official position to benefit the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) has shed light on the vulnerability of US state governments to foreign influence. [According to the allegations](#), chief among Sun's priorities were derailing New York's relationship with Taiwan, and furthering China's propaganda about Taiwan. Sun's alleged activities included preventing high-level meetings from taking place between New York and Taiwanese officials (and in some cases replacing them with Chinese-sponsored activities), removing Taiwan from being listed as a country on official travel guidance documentation, removing references to Taiwan and the Republic of China (ROC) from Governor Andrew Cuomo's speeches, and canceling Taiwanese American Heritage Week, among other activities aimed at promoting PRC interests.

The Knowledge Asymmetry of Ethnic Politics

That a single mid-ranking official was able to wreak so much havoc in New York's relationship with Taiwan exposes vulnerabilities stemming from the widespread lack of knowledge within New York's state government about Taiwan and the US-Taiwan relationship, along with a longtime reliance in New York on ethnic identity politics. Sun allegedly was able to declare herself "in charge of all Asian affairs," and summarily dismiss requests related to Taiwan, while promoting Chinese interests that enriched herself and her family members.

Organizations aligned with the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP, 中國共產黨) [United Front Work Department](#) have long [dominated Asian American and Pacific Islander \(AAPI\) "com-](#)

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munity” [groups in New York](#) and across the country. Often working in close coordination with PRC missions in the United States, they work to further Chinese foreign policy goals under the guise of representing ethnic constituencies, and have even exported the CCP’s [state repression into American cities](#). It is important to note that the primary targets and victims of such repression are fellow Asian Americans: including Taiwanese, Hongkongers, Tibetans, Uyghurs, and Chinese dissidents. The state’s indictment reveals that Sun allegedly exploited her colleagues’ deference to her supposed cultural expertise to seize on all matters relating to Taiwan, even when they did not relate to the Asian American community. In fact, when Taiwan’s representative office in New York realized that Sun was not passing along their invitations, and reached out to other officials in the governor’s office, Sun was still able to steamroll over her colleagues by claiming “Asian” expertise.

The state’s reliance on an all-encompassing “AAPI” community was a key vulnerability—instead of increasing the government’s connections with Asian American constituents, it flattened them, allowing Chinese agents to dominate the perceived identity group. Sun allegedly further made a mockery of Asian American community outreach by appointing her corrupt business cronies to the governor’s “Asian American Advisory Council,” and secretly inviting Chinese officials to join internal government conference calls on policy responses to alleged rising hate crimes against Asian Americans.

Sun’s ability to exploit her role to seize control of New York’s relations with Taiwan were a result of not just her colleagues’ deference to Asian American ethnic politics, but also a lack of knowledge on Taiwan, its current status, US-Taiwan relations, and tensions within the supposed AAPI community. As New York state officials are primarily concerned with local affairs, it is not fair to blame them for lacking knowledge that even foreign policy experts fail to grasp, or for trusting their fellow sworn public servants to not be Chinese spies. But we live in times when these concerns have become local, and failing to adapt leaves all Americans vulnerable to China’s ever-increasing efforts within our borders.

There is a clear and straightforward solution to address this problem. Over the past few years, there has been a [resurgence of US states opening business](#) and trade offices in Taiwan. In addition to promoting trade and investment between Taiwan and US states, these offices are staffed by state officials and work closely with

counterparts across state government, forming a key source of knowledge and exchange with Taiwan. A New York state representation office in Taiwan would have been an alternative source of information and expertise that could have inoculated the state government’s operations against the efforts of a lone, albeit committed, Chinese spy.

US State Offices in Taiwan

[Once numbering 22 in the early 2000s](#), the number of US state offices in Taiwan dwindled to six in 2020, as states reoriented towards the Chinese market—in some cases due to [Chinese pressure or incentives](#). As Marshall Reid has previously highlighted for *Global Taiwan Brief*, 2023 was a [“banner year” for Taiwan’s relations with US states](#), and 2024 has continued apace with several prominent state office openings—including [Texas](#), which Governor Greg Abbott officially opened during a high profile July visit to the country. As of September 2024, 21 states (including the US territory of Guam) have some form of representation in Taiwan, according to the Taipei-based [American State Offices Association](#).

Originally geared to [promoting US exports](#), many of these offices now focus on attracting Taiwanese investment in the United States, along with promoting tourism and facilitating cultural and educational exchanges. Offices are variously administered by a state’s international trade office, economic development corporation, or department of agriculture, depending on the focus and budgetary source of each state.

Regardless of the specific economic focus, the deployed personnel and exchanges incumbent to a permanent office in Taiwan provide the state government with direct sources of information and expertise on Taiwan, bypassing stateside ethnic lobbies and community organizations.

The lack of a New York representative office in Taiwan allowed Sun to allegedly exploit her position within Global NY, the state agency charged with promoting foreign investment, in order to promote corrupt deals with Chinese provincial officials and to marginalize Taiwan. Without alternative internal knowledge or resources on Taiwan, Sun filled the void and colleagues had no grounds to challenge her. Only at the [end of December 2023](#) did New York hire a Taiwan-based consultant as Global NY’s Taiwan Director, and New York still lacks a full office with official representation commensurate with other US states’ official offices.

In fact, New York contracted the same company it uses for its China representation, [Tractus Asia](#), to represent New York in Taiwan. Outsourcing New York's engagement with Taiwan to a foreign corporation that is primarily concerned with a much larger China practice presents obvious conflicts of interest. Tractus cannot be trusted to provide adequate representation for the state of New York in Taiwan, nor can it be trusted to provide guidance simultaneously on engagement with both China and Taiwan at a time of heightened geopolitical tension that calls for friendshoring and [resilient supply chains](#).

A corporation's ultimate fiduciary duty is to its shareholders—not the people of New York, nor the people of Taiwan. The only way to ensure New York's representation in Taiwan is working towards the ultimate benefit of both Americans and Taiwanese is for its staff to be directly employed by the State of New York, not a private corporation with extensive Chinese business interests.



Image: Then-TECRO Director Hsiao Bi-khim (now Taiwan's vice president) appears with members of the West Virginia legislature on the occasion of the founding of the "Taiwan Friendship Caucus" (February 2023). (Image source: [TECRO](#))

What the United States Should Do

A major reason for the closure of so many US state offices in Taiwan over the past few decades has been declining state budgets. Shortfalls in funding have presented the [main challenge to states opening offices in Taiwan](#), leading to scrambles to find a department

that is able to fund the office (often the Department of Agriculture), a reliance on external consultants, and uncertainty over the longevity and sustainability of Taiwan-based offices.

Recognizing their importance, Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA, 外交部) has [subsidized office costs](#) to promote opening new state offices. While these contributions are commendable, the United States is a wealthy nation that should not be dependent on foreign subsidies. Furthermore, as the New York case demonstrates, these offices are of importance to US national security. The federal government should make funding available to every state to open an office in Taiwan, with the goal of representation for all 50 states.

The federal government should also provide clear guidance for state government officials on engagement with Taiwan, and explain clearly that there are no prohibitions against US states from engaging with, or even mentioning, Taiwan. Security briefings and trainings should be expanded to include the role of the CCP's United Front Work Department in coopting community organizations to advocate for Chinese foreign policy goals. Local officials in state governments should not be left alone in combatting extensive Chinese espionage efforts.

Taiwanese Americans and their advocates should prioritize the opening of state offices in Taiwan, lobbying their state legislatures and raising the issue throughout each state. It is critical that they not rely on offices relating to Asian American or AAPI outreach, which are dominated by pro-China interests. After all, while the Taiwanese American diaspora is critically important, issues relating to Taiwan are not merely an "ethnic concern"—rather, they involve one of America's most important economic partners, and a critical ally for peace in the Indo-Pacific.

What Taiwan Should Do

Key to the story have been the admirable efforts of Taiwan's *de facto* consulates, usually designated as a "Taipei Economic and Cultural Office" (TECO), to engage far and wide across the United States. This is a critical endeavor—addressing decision-makers in Washington is important too, but efforts need to be truly national to reach the American people where they are. In addition to the head mission in Washington, there are 10 TECOs across the continental United States, each overseeing a region of several states.

TECO missions should expand their regional engage-

ment to include robust engagement with each state, ensuring that all 50 states have direct engagement from Taiwan. MOFA should make available additional funds for exchanges, which provide valuable opportunities to educate state officials about Taiwan, and enable them to develop robust connections with Taiwanese counterparts.

The Ministry of Education should also increase funding opportunities for scholarships such as the [Huayu Enrichment Scholarship](#), which funds US students to study Mandarin Chinese in Taiwan. Nurturing a new generation of promising young Americans from every state through such scholarships and exchanges will provide a wide distribution of Americans who are educated about, and familiar with, Taiwan.

TECOs should be more visible and host more public events throughout the country. Currently, most events are for the Taiwanese diaspora, or else are private functions aimed at elites. While these constituencies are important, more needs to be done to reach every day Americans who are unfamiliar with Taiwan, or whose knowledge of Taiwan is mediated by Chinese propaganda. More visible Taiwanese outreach can also draw stark contrasts with China's covert and shadowy influence activities.

Taiwan is a staunch US ally, a free and democratic society that is aligned with American values. An open and public strategy of engagement, rather than more discrete subterranean efforts to influence policymakers and elites, will build trust and confidence in Taiwan. Some might view Taiwanese outreach efforts as similar to China's own efforts to influence the United States, but the comparison misses a key difference: while Chinese influence activities aim to cover up the truth about the Chinese regime and distort key facts, Taiwan merely needs to show people the truth about Taiwan and its thriving democratic and free society.

The main point: Chinese influence efforts have taken advantage of a lack of knowledge about Taiwan within state governments to influence policy. State governments can remediate this vulnerability by establishing representation offices in Taiwan, and the federal government should support such efforts with a goal of establishing 50 state offices in Taiwan. Taiwan should engage in wider and more public outreach across the United States.

Why Taiwan Needs a Proactive Legal Warfare Framework to Defend Against China

By: Kai-Chieh Hsu

KJ Hsu is a judge of the National Security Court in Taipei District Court, and a previous visiting fellow of the Global Taiwan Institute.

In recent years, Taiwanese people have almost become accustomed to Chinese military aircraft and naval vessels operating around Taiwan. In addition, there have been more incidents such as the [Kinmen boat accident on February 14](#) and a [Chinese speedboat entering Taipei Harbor on June 10](#). Facing China's increasingly aggressive tactics aimed at undermining peace across the Taiwan Strait, both Taiwan and its allies should shift from a reactive stance to a proactive one. Otherwise, they risk being disadvantaged as a result of China's legal and strategic pressures—and the actions by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP, 中國共產黨) in the “gray zone” might soon become actions in the “red-zone.” This article argues that there are at least three reasons why Taiwan and its allies should establish a specialized legal national security framework and team to address China's aggressive legal warfare (or law warfare) and gray zone activities. [1]

China Has Intensified Its Legal Warfare Efforts in Recent Years

Since the introduction of the *Anti-Secession Law* in 2005, and with the enactment of the People's Republic of China's (PRC) new rules in 2024 [targeting Taiwan's “diehard independence” activists](#), China has strengthened its legal narrative that Taiwan is part of China. Additionally, China has [increasingly emphasized](#) that United Nations Resolution 2758 asserts that “China” includes all Chinese territory, including Taiwan, and reaffirms the “One-China Principle.” These actions indicate China's ongoing use of domestic systems and international organizations to establish and reinforce the narrative that Taiwan belongs to China, and to persuade the international community of this claim.

In recent years, China has also taken various actions to bolster its legal warfare strategy. At sea, China often uses [the activities of research vessels](#) to conceal aggressive military actions, or employs [civilian ships](#) to intrude into Taiwan's territorial waters, thereby obscuring its intentions. In the air, China uses aircraft, ships, and emerging technologies to conduct gray zone operations in the Taiwan Strait, such as [missile flights](#)

over Taiwanese airspace, [aircraft crossing the Taiwan Strait median line](#), and [spy balloons](#) or [drones](#) flying into Taiwanese airspace.

In the face of these dual threats, Taiwan and its allies should adopt a more proactive stance. Balancing the need to defend Taiwan without provoking the CCP is challenging. Too much unilateral support for Taiwan increases the risk of conflict, while too little undermines Taiwan's ability to exercise autonomy. [2] Finding an appropriate strategy is crucial, as the long-term consequences could be profound.

Taiwan and Its Allies Have Compelling Reasons to Establish a Legal Warfare Framework and Team

The Taiwanese government should prioritize the importance of legal warfare for at least three key objectives:

(1) **Avoiding Legal Missteps:** In the face of China's numerous gray zone tactics, Taiwan must be vigilant to avoid making errors that could give China a pretext to start a conflict, which would undermine Taiwan's legitimacy in seeking support from its allies.

(2) **Deterring China:** Taiwan should seek to strengthen its policies by aligning them with international legal principles. This would not only bolster Taiwan's position but also attract greater assistance from its allies, thereby deterring Chinese aggression.

(3) **Guiding Defense Actions:** By establishing clear legal standards, Taiwan's defense agencies would be better equipped to take necessary actions when needed, thus preventing China from exploiting any perceived weaknesses or ambiguities.

1. Avoiding Mistakes Under International Law

Although Taiwan is not a member of the United Nations, it actively participates in numerous international collaborations and upholds universal values. Taiwan has demonstrated its commitment by [incorporating international conventions into domestic law](#), and showcasing its determination to "voluntarily comply" with international standards. This approach has garnered praise and support from UN human rights experts, who have been invited to Taiwan to conduct reviews based on UN standards and processes. Taiwan's "[local international review](#)" model, where national reports on human rights conventions are examined in Taiwan, further highlights its role as a model member of the international community. Given this exemplary status,

Taiwan must be cautious not to give China a pretext for war by making a legal misstep. A single error at a crucial moment could result in Taiwan being isolated internationally, losing the support of other countries, and becoming vulnerable to Chinese aggression.

2. Deterring China

Beyond avoiding mistakes, Taiwan must actively create favorable conditions to ensure its security. The most effective way to prevent China from initiating a conflict is to make Beijing fear the consequences of a military action that fails. If China believes that a military defeat could lead to the permanent loss of Taiwan and any possibility of peaceful unification through legal means, it might hesitate to take aggressive actions.

For example, in Taiwan's context, it is possible to collaborate with the United States under the framework of the [Taiwan Relations Act \(TRA\)](#) to jointly lead the discourse. The common Chinese rhetoric is that "if Taiwan declares independence, China will attack." Taiwan could counter the argument with "if China attacks Taiwan, Taiwan will declare independence." This reframing removes the concern that Taiwan's declaration of independence would make Taiwan be seen as a troublemaker and instead positions the declaration as a response to aggression. Following this reframing, if China were to directly use force against Taiwan, Taiwan could consider declaring independence based on the justification of responding to the invasion.

Additionally, under these circumstances there might be opportunities for Taiwan to gain diplomatic recognition from other countries, allowing it to seek collective self-defense with third countries based on its status as a victim state in the international arena. [2] This option might also serve to make China wary of not only the military consequences but also the risk of permanently losing Taiwan via international law. In the event of a conflict, Taiwan could declare a new international legal status, potentially gaining further diplomatic recognition from other countries by extending an olive branch, even if this declaration does not ultimately succeed. The primary concern—the outbreak of war—would already have occurred, leaving little to lose. This approach, while addressing the sensitive issue of Taiwanese independence, also aligns with the positions of various political actors:

(1) For the US government, according to the *TRA*, US policy toward Taiwan is based on the premise that Taiwan's future should be decided through peaceful means, which was a condition for establishing diplo-

matic relations with the PRC. Therefore, for the United States, maintaining the status quo has been the policy in recent years. However, this does not mean that if the status quo were changed, the United States would not have other options. After all, under the framework of the *Taiwan Relations Act*, Taiwan's future has not yet been determined.

(2) [According to President Lai Ching-te \(賴清德\)](#) of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民進黨), Taiwan currently does not need to declare independence, nor does it wish for a conflict in the Taiwan Strait. However, this does not mean that if the peaceful status quo is altered, the Taiwan government would not consider seeking a new international legal status within the framework of international law. For its part, the Kuomintang (KMT, 國民黨) adheres to the past policy of “[no independence, no war](#),” a policy that rejects Taiwan's independence and aims to maintain peace in the Taiwan Strait.

(3) For the CCP, this strategy reinforces that Taiwan seeks peace rather than independence, as Taiwan would only declare independence in response to the Chinese invasion. By managing the narrative effectively and aligning international and domestic strategies, Taiwan can better navigate the complexities of its relationship with China and its quest for international support.

On top of that, from the US perspective, the principles outlined in the three [US-China Joint Communiqués](#) and [Section 2 of the TRA](#) emphasize three core concepts in US policy toward Taiwan. These are: (1) The United States maintains diplomatic relations with the PRC, but holds that Taiwan's sovereignty remains undecided; (2) Taiwan's sovereignty must be resolved peacefully; and (3) The United States is committed to maintaining the security, social and economic system, and welfare of the Taiwanese people.

If China uses force to disrupt Taiwan's peace, the United States would be compelled to intervene. By reiterating this stance to China, the United States could cause Beijing to hesitate between maintaining the status quo, which allows for strategic ambiguity, and taking military action, which would result in definitive and severe consequences.

3. Guiding Defense Actions to Prevent China from Exploiting Weaknesses

[The Sanremo Handbook on the Rules of Engagement](#), published in 2009, provides practical explanations of

the complex procedures and methodologies for implementing rules of engagement in conflict conditions. This handbook offers criteria for using the right of self-defense, and helps prevent adversaries like China from establishing new *de facto* legal conditions through incremental actions.

Taiwan's “Standing Rules of Engagement,” issued by the Ministry of National Defense (MND, 國防部) in 2017 and [revised in 2023](#), represent a positive step. However, practical implementation still faces challenges. Under the current system, frontline soldiers often struggle with the ambiguous nature of gray zone operations, leading them to seek approval from higher authorities, which can result in delays and potential misjudgments. Unlike the US system, where the inherent authority of commanders is well-established by US law and military regulations, Taiwan lacks a similar source of authority. Without clear legal authorization from the Legislative Yuan (LY, 立法院), rules of engagement become ambiguous. This ambiguity can lead to responsible agencies being hesitant to take responsibility and frequently seeking instructions from higher authorities.

To address these issues, Taiwan needs to establish a robust legal framework for its rules of engagement. This framework should involve legislative authorization, clear legal status, and defined responsibilities. The rules of engagement should be explicitly authorized through legislation enacted by the LY, ensuring that the MND is legally obligated to implement them. Additionally, the rules of engagement should be given a clear legal status by the legislative branch, with sensitive details defined at different levels—from national security decision-makers to individual military units (battalions, companies, platoons, squads, and soldiers). Lastly, establishing a clear legal system will help define the duties of military personnel at all levels, ensuring they have full authorization and clear divisions of labor for effective execution. In addition, Taiwan can follow the example of the United States' [Rules of Engagement \(ROE\) planning cell](#), which includes judge advocate general attorneys participating in discussions with high-ranking officers, such as those from the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The entire ROE planning cell should establish an information exchange mechanism with Taiwan's allies to ensure that these rules of engagement form a consensus among Taiwan and its allies, thereby creating a protective network to ensure the security of the Taiwan Strait.

The main point: At this critical juncture, Taiwan needs

to establish a national security framework and joint staff with expertise in international law to effectively address China's aggressive legal warfare. This will ensure that Taiwan can respond decisively and legally to any attempts by China to exploit weaknesses or create new *de facto* legal conditions.

[1] For a discussion of lawfare, gray zone operations, and other forms of CCP political warfare, see: John Dotson, *The Chinese Communist Party's Political Warfare Directed Against Taiwan: Overview and Analysis*, Global Taiwan Institute, May 2024, https://globaltaiwan.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/OR_CCP-Political-Warfare.pdf.

[2] Michael E. O'Hanlon, Ivan Kanapathy, Rorry Daniels, and Thomas Hanson. Should the United States change its policies toward Taiwan? Brookings, April 2024, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/should-the-united-states-change-its-policies-toward-taiwan/>

[3] Major Ryan M. Fisher, "Defending Taiwan: Collective Self-Defense of a Contested State," *Florida Journal of International Law* 32, no. 1 (2020).

Taiwan's Underworld, Part 2: The Chinese Communist Party and United Front Work

By: Benjamin Sando

Ben Sando is a research fellow at the Global Taiwan Institute.

This article is the second in a series on Taiwan's underworld. Part one is available [here](#).

Cheng Ming-kun (鄭銘坤), vice chairman of Jenn Lann Temple (鎮瀾宮) in Taiwan's Taichung County, stood before an offering table on a frigid February day in Tianjin, in the north of China. It was 2023, and Cheng was leading a delegation of 39 Taiwanese to Tianjin Tianhou Temple (天津天后宮), which celebrates the sea goddess Mazu. He praised the local Tianjin Chinese Communist Party (CCP, 中國共產黨) officials for their support of cross-strait exchanges and met with Ji Guoqiang (冀國強), the head of the Tianjin Municipal United Front Work Department. [1] Cheng is not merely a Mazu devotee, but also the leader of the Taiwan Mazu Fellowship (台灣媽祖聯誼會) and [closely associated](#) with a reputed gang boss in Taiwan. During Cheng's visit to Tianjin, his delegation stopped at the Mazu Cultural Park (媽祖文化園). The elaborate site had been developed a few years earlier by a subsidiary of Redco,

a Chinese construction company that employs Cheng Ming-kun as a director. [2]

Cheng's engagement is representative of the tangled network of relationships that Taiwan's underworld maintains with CCP actors in China. CCP officials make frequent use of gangs and gang-controlled temples to execute [political warfare](#) against Taiwan. [United front work](#) (統戰工作)—a key component of the CCP's political warfare efforts—involves the channeling of incentives to influential actors within communities whose support or acquiescence the CCP needs. [In the words](#) of Chen Deming (陳德銘) of the united front-affiliated Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits (ARATS, 海峽兩岸關係協會), the Taiwanese who are friendly to Beijing are due a "special form of compensation." Organized crime is an excellent conduit for united front work against Taiwan. It has offered the CCP plausible deniability for its political warfare, access to illegal services, and influence within grassroots and religious communities in Taiwan. Taiwan's gangs [do not work for free](#), and rarely out of ideological conviction. The gangs that participate in united front work do so for personal profit, prestige, and the promise of safe haven in China. This article will survey two such influence networks connected to Taiwan's organized crime organizations: the China Unification Promotion Party (CUPP, 中華統一促進黨) under Chang An-lo (張安樂), and the Taiwan Mazu Fellowship led by the Jenn Lann Temple board.

Incipient Cross-Strait Ties

Even though Taiwan's gangs [originate from the disparate ethnic groups](#) of Chinese provinces, it was not until the tail-end of the Kuomintang's (KMT, 國民黨) martial law era that Taiwanese organized crime re-established a foothold in Chinese society. Several crackdowns on gang activity in the eighties and nineties by the KMT government [forced Taiwanese fugitives](#) to enter the People's Republic of China (PRC), the Philippines, and continental Southeast Asian states. High-profile Taiwanese fugitives, such as [Lo Fu Chu](#) (羅福助) of the Celestial Alliance (天道盟) and Chang An-lo of the Bamboo Union (竹聯幫), found a surprisingly permissive environment in the PRC. As Ko-Lin Chin (陳國霖) documents in the authoritative [Heijin](#), local CCP officials did not consider Taiwanese gangsters to be a threat to public order as long as they avoided serious criminal activity in the PRC. Crimes directed at Taiwan were, and are, permitted.

The Bamboo Union, reportedly Taiwan's largest gang, [operates major scam operations](#) directed at Taiwan

from locations in the PRC. These scam operations utilize young Taiwanese who emigrate to the PRC under the guise of gainful employment. CCP local officials have regarded Taiwanese gangsters as useful sources of investment, and benefited from kickbacks. [In the words of Chang An-lo](#)—a “mastermind” of the Bamboo Union gang who resided in Shenzhen, China, for many years as a fugitive—Taiwan’s gangsters spent most of their money on “two types of people: *xiaojie* [小姐, sex workers] and *lingdao* [領導, local officials].” Moreover, local CCP officials defer to the PRC central government on policy related to Taiwanese gangsters. A Fuzhou Public Security Bureau official [shared that](#) “Generally, we wait for orders from Beijing on how to handle the brothers [兄弟, gangsters].” Unfettered by law enforcement, Taiwanese gangs—and in particular the Bamboo Union—have [grown into](#) the most powerful criminal organizations in China and wider East Asia.

The White Wolf and the China Unification Promotion Party



Image: Chang An-lo (right in blue jacket) poses with a supporter (Image source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

Chang An-lo, also known as the “White Wolf” (白狼), is one of the most well-known reputed gang bosses in Taiwan. Chang An-lo was an early leader in the Bamboo Union—which is dominated by mainlanders (外省) Taiwanese—before his [10-year incarceration](#) in the United States on a drug smuggling conviction. Chang returned to Taiwan in the 1990s before escaping to China after another criminal charge. He lived comfortably in Shenzhen [alongside fellow fugitives](#) between 1996 and 2013. As J. Michael Cole has written in a [2021 paper](#), Chang cultivated relationships with important CCP officials during his time in China, including Hu Shiyong (胡石英)—the son of former CCP propaganda chief

Hu Qiaomu (胡喬木) and a reported “member of CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping’s ‘close circle.’”

Chang founded the China Unification Promotion Party (CUPP, 中華統一促進黨) (also known as the Unionist Party), in 2005 while residing in the PRC. The CUPP’s activity expanded when Chang returned to Taiwan in 2013. After an immediate detention, Chang was released on bail and [registered the CUPP](#) as an official political party in Taiwan. Widely suspected to be a front organization for the Bamboo Union, the CUPP has [organized events](#) hosting criminal leaders in Taiwan. The CUPP has never seriously pursued electoral success—instead, it has focused on engagement with grassroots communities in Taiwan, including Daoist temples. The CUPP has provided three essential functions on behalf of CCP political warfare: (1) facilitating clandestine visits of CCP officials to Taiwan; (2) illegally channeling donations from the PRC to Taiwanese grassroots communities; and (3) intimidating and assaulting activists and opponents of unification policy in Taiwan.

Michael Cole has [documented](#) how Taiwanese prosecutors have questioned Chang An-lo and his son, Chang Wei (張瑋), in relation to a scheme that forged travel documents for CCP officials to enter Taiwan disguised as tourists. The investigation covered 30 travel agencies, including the Huaxi Dadi Travel Service operated by Chang Wei. The Taiwanese investigators counted between 2,000 and 5,000 illegal visits by CCP officials between January 2017 and June 2019 on travel documents forged by these tourism agencies. Additionally, investigators linked some of these visitors to China’s intelligence agencies and the United Front Work Department.

Even before this investigation, the Hauxi Dadi Travel Service had been the subject of an August 2019 criminal charge against Chang An-lo and CUPP associates. At that time, prosecutors uncovered irregular money transfers from a sports apparel company—owned by Chang—based in Guangdong Province, China, to Hauxi Dadi Travel Services accounts. Hauxi Dadi Travel Services also transferred money several times to Chang family personal accounts. Prosecutors charged Chang and CUPP associates with receiving illicit political donations, among other things.

Chang and the CUPP are well-known for [generously donating](#) food and money to grassroots communities, including local charity groups and temples. Temple donations are largely unregulated and are an [established method](#) for securing political support from devotee communities. After police raids on the CUPP

headquarters and Chang’s home, the [CUPP admitted](#) that it received funds from the PRC. It denied, however, that the PRC government was the source. Besides cash transfers to local communities, CUPP members have openly harassed and assaulted activists protesting CCP policy. In January 2017, Chang Wei—the son of Chang An-lo—[attempted to](#) physically assault dissident Hong Kong lawmakers (such as Nathan Law [羅冠聰]) at Taoyuan International Airport. In September of that year, Chang Wei also directed CUPP members in a violent assault on student protestors during the “Sing! China: Shanghai-Taipei Music Festival” at National Taiwan University. CUPP has mobilized groups to intimidate participants in major protests directed at the PRC, such as the 2014 Sunflower Movement or Taiwanese students’ [2015 occupation](#) of the Ministry of Education (MOE, 教育部).

The CUPP’s overt links to the PRC are a hindrance to its political warfare activities, given that the party is under constant scrutiny from the Taiwanese authorities. Perhaps most consequential is the party’s grassroots engagement with temple communities in Taiwan. However, the CUPP’s outreach is eclipsed by the most significant player in cross-Strait religious exchanges: the Jenn Lann Temple board.

Jenn Lann Temple and the Taiwan Mazu Fellowship

As explored in [part one](#) of this article series, the Jenn Lann Temple board—headed by the alleged gang boss Yen Ching-piao (顏清標)—is one of the most politically powerful institutions in central Taiwan. The Jenn Lann Temple board organizes Taiwan’s largest religious event, the Dajia Mazu pilgrimage (大甲媽祖遶境進香), which draws [millions of attendees each year](#). Yen, an [alleged gang leader](#) and convicted criminal, has used the platform of the Jenn Lann Temple board to establish influence over national politicians and to [springboard his own political career](#). However, Yen delegates the handling of day-to-day temple management to his close associate and [convicted smuggler](#) Cheng Ming-kun (who aided him in ascending to the chairmanship of the Jenn Lann Temple board in 1999). Cheng, the subject of the vignette at the beginning of this piece, also [serves as the chairman](#) of the Taiwan Mazu Fellowship. The Taiwan Mazu Fellowship is the largest facilitator of cross-Strait religious exchanges and in 2010 comprised 60 Mazu temples across Taiwan.

Jenn Lann Temple and the Taiwan Mazu Fellowship celebrate the sea goddess Mazu (媽祖), who is many ways the [most culturally significant deity in Taiwan](#). Mazu, however, [was born in a 10th century](#) fishing vil-



Image: The Mazu Ancestral Temple courtyard in Meizhou, China (Image source: [Wikipedia](#)).

lage in Fujian Province, China. A mystic who is credited with saving lives at sea, Mazu ascended to heaven at age 28 on the Fujianese island of Meizhou (湄洲島). Meizhou is the [site of the Meizhou Ancestral Temple](#) (天后宮湄洲祖廟), the “home” of Mazu and the most sacred place of the religious following. It is also the locus of the CCP’s efforts to translate Taiwanese religious fervor for Mazu into support for close cross-Strait ties and unification with China.

In 2004, CCP officials and the Meizhou Ancestral Temple [established the Chinese Mazu Culture Exchange Association](#) (CMCEA, 中華媽祖文化交流協會). The CMCEA [oversees 150 Mazu temples](#) and organizations in the PRC and was headed by Zhang Kehui (張克輝), the former vice chairperson of the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC, 中國人民政治協商會議). The CPPCC is the principal organization of the PRC aimed at marshaling CCP-friendly actors to conduct political warfare in both the PRC and foreign societies. The Taiwan Mazu Fellowship and the CMCEA are close partners in cross-Strait religious exchanges. The CMCEA organizes Mazu-themed exchanges to disguise CCP officials’ visits to Taiwan, to which the Taiwan Mazu Fellowship and Jenn Lann Temple [play host](#). Officials in the PRC’s Taiwan Affairs Office (中共中央臺灣工作辦公室) and ARATS personnel have entered Taiwan under the guise of religious tourism. In 2016, the ARATS chair Chen Deming visited Taiwan on such an exchange a month prior to the presidential election. In a closed door meeting with local leaders at Jenn Lann Temple, Chen [called for](#) communities to vote with “consideration on cross-Strait re-

lations and make the best choice for that matter.”

The Taiwan Mazu Fellowship also facilitates travel by Taiwanese devotee communities to Meizhou and other sites in the PRC. These tours are often tailored to attract public attention, with media in accompaniment and [live streams](#) of the proceedings. Besides Mazu-themed engagements, Taiwanese religious tour groups engage in shopping and sightseeing in the PRC. Tour participants have reported being [added to WeChat and LINE](#) chat groups that share information critical of the Democratic Progressive Party (民進黨), the Taiwanese political party favoring distance from the PRC. For the tour group leaders such as Cheng Ming-kun, the events offer opportunities to [enhance connections](#), or “guanxi” (關係), with PRC officials and to gain access to lucrative development contracts. Developers in the PRC find it [easier to win approval](#) for Mazu-related projects if they apply with Taiwanese temple partners. It is unsurprising that the Chinese development company Redco, which counts Cheng Ming-kun as a shareholder and director, boasts of its ability to land Mazu-themed construction contracts in the PRC. [3] Hsun Chang (張珣) [reports that](#) members of the Taiwan Mazu Fellowship have invested in various infrastructure projects in Meizhou and Fujian.

A common rebuttal to concerns regarding cross-Strait Mazu exchanges is that they are unsuccessful in encouraging support for closer cross-Strait relations among Taiwanese. However, a [recent study by Sher Chien-Yuan](#) (佘健源) et al. found that districts containing urban Mazu temples in Kaohsiung were more likely to support the more PRC-friendly KMT party than districts without Mazu temples. Though one may suggest that traditional religious conservatism explains this trend—rather than a desire for close relations with the PRC—the authors’ concurrent study of rural Mazu temples belies this claim. Communities around rural Mazu temples were less likely to vote for KMT candidates than urban ones. The authors argue that this is because the newer urban Mazu temples are more reliant on PRC religious exchanges to garner cash and devotees, whereas older rural temples have established streams of funding that allow them to forgo such exchanges. Meanwhile, districts containing temples to Guan Yu (關羽), another Daoist god, were no more likely to vote for the KMT. Guan Yu temples generally do not participate in religious exchanges with the PRC.

While cross-Strait Mazu exchanges may encourage Taiwanese support for closer ties with the PRC, this does not imply that the activity, and indeed the Mazu reli-

gion, erodes Taiwanese identity and elevates support for unification. Indeed, contrary to the CCP’s best efforts, many have [observed](#) that reverence for Mazu—and the splendid mass ceremonies that criss-cross the Taiwanese island—have actually incubated a sense of shared Taiwanese identity. Moreover, the actions of the Taiwan Mazu Fellowship do not implicate all Mazu temples in Taiwan in CCP united front work. Some Mazu temple networks have oriented themselves towards civic activism within the borders of Taiwan and eschewed association with PRC institutions, such as the [Taiwan Golden Orchid Association of Temples](#) (台灣寺廟金蘭會).

The main point: The CCP has effectively capitalized on certain Taiwanese gang members’ desire for prestige, personal profit, and safe havens to reach Taiwan’s grassroots and religious communities. The CUPP and the Taiwan Mazu Fellowship provide CCP actors with access to the Taiwanese population at a time when more overt engagements face growing restrictions. In return, reputed Taiwanese gangsters have benefitted from cash transfers and enhanced business opportunities in the PRC, as well as opportunities to raise their primacy within the community of Mazu temples. Because gang-related actors offer the CCP plausible deniability and religious cover for its united front work, Taiwanese government authorities [have been ineffective](#) at restricting this behavior.

[1] This reference is drawn from a news article hosted on Baidu.com. Readers are advised to use a virtual private network (VPN) if clicking on this link. <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1758312740774927484&wfr=spider&for=pc>.

[2] This reference is drawn from a company report hosted on a Hong Kong server. Readers are advised to use a virtual private network (VPN) if clicking on this link. <https://www.hkexnews.hk/listedco/listconews/sehk/2014/0121/ltn20140121031.pdf>.

[3] Ibid.

Without Punishment, China Cannot Be Deterred

By: Kevin Sun

Kevin Sun was a Summer 2024 intern at the Global Taiwan Institute

On May 23, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) launched a series of military drills around Taiwan as a response to the inauguration of Taiwan’s new president. People’s Liberation Army (PLA) naval vessels and warplanes were sent into the air and waters surrounding Taiwan. The drill, dubbed *Joint Sword—2024A*, ran for two days—and based on its name, had the potential for follow up exercises. (For further discussion of the *Joint Sword 2024A* exercises, see “[The PLA’s Inauguration Gift to President Lai: The Joint Sword 2024A Exercise](#)” by John Dotson and Jonathan Harman.) Such military force demonstrations have been the trend since August 2022, following the visit to Taiwan by then-Speaker Nancy Pelosi (see [here](#) and [here](#)); and following the meeting between then-Speaker Kevin McCarthy and former President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) in 2023 (see [here](#)).

The current Taiwan Strait situation has proven that the long-standing US strategy of deterrence by denial is not working against China, and that Beijing is now questioning the credibility of the United States. Therefore, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP, 中國共產黨) will continue to [squeeze](#) Taiwan with more military exercises and further undermine its sovereignty.

China’s military aggression against Taiwan is nothing new. However, unlike the current crisis, the previous three Taiwan Strait Crises ultimately ended with China pulling its military back and ending the crisis. The security environment of the earlier crises was different because at that time the [Chinese military was much weaker than the United States military](#). However, current circumstances are far different—and as China has consistently secured small advantages in the region that have gone unpunished, Washington needs to adjust its deterrence strategy to one of punishment instead of denial.

How the Previous Taiwan Strait Crises Came to an End

In 1954, during the first Taiwan Strait Crisis, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA, 中國人民解放軍) was able to occupy Yijiangshan (一江山島) and Dachen (大陳諸島) Islands. Yijiangshan, a nearly unnoticeable offshore island, was attacked by the PLA to probe Washington’s commitment to protecting the offshore islands. Once Yijiangshan was occupied by the PLA, the CCP leaders set their sights on Dachen. However, the US Navy Seventh Fleet’s presence in the strait caused the CCP to hesitate, as they did not wish to directly attack United States forces. Mao Zedong (毛澤東) reportedly instructed PRC Minister of Defense Peng Dehuai (彭德懷) that the Zedong Front Command should “let the

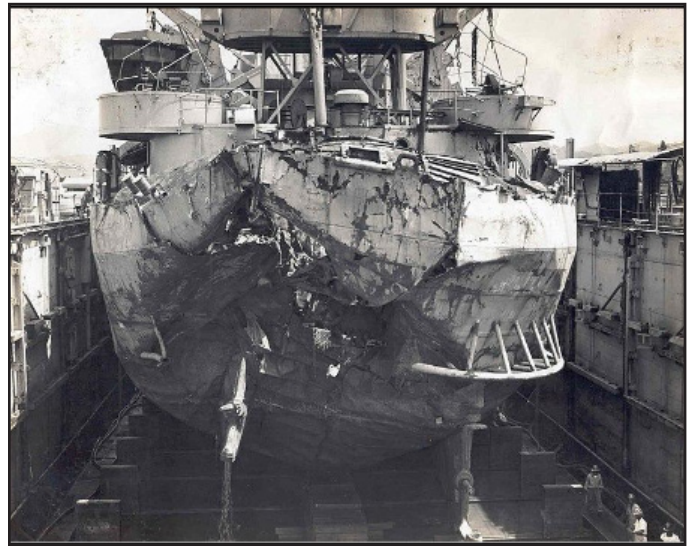


Image: The ROC Navy vessel Chung Hai (中海號) in dry-dock following damage from a torpedo hit sustained during the 1958 Taiwan Strait Crisis. (Image source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

enemy evacuate safely,” and to not involve the United States in the Yijiangshan-Dachen Campaign. [1] Once Dachen was fully evacuated, the PLA occupied the empty islands—all without attacking the United States. Still, despite these strategic gains by the PLA, due to other factors—such as the limited objective of probing Washington’s commitment, concerns of provoking a large military conflict with the United States, fear of a US nuclear counterattack, and uncertainty of Soviet support for the CCP’s campaign in the Taiwan Strait—the CCP leaders found themselves seeking a diplomatic solution to the Taiwan Strait Crisis and reducing tension in the region. [2]

During the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1958, the CCP was uncertain whether the islands of Kinmen (金門縣) and Matsu (連江縣) were included in the mutual defense treaty between the United States and the Republic of China (Taiwan). As a result, the PLA started shelling these islands to determine whether the United States was willing to hold them. Additionally, the CCP wanted to observe the international response to such an action before “deciding their next move.” [3] The United States also faced pressure when deciding how best to defend the offshore islands, and US forces weighed the dilemma of whether to sacrifice the islands, thereby losing influence and prestige—or whether to hold the islands through the limited use of nuclear weapons. US decision-makers unanimously chose the latter. Later, with President Dwight Eisenhower’s approval, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles made this following statement:

“[S]ecuring and protecting Quemoy and Matsu have increasingly become related to the defense of Taiwan. [...] Military dispositions have been made by the United States so that a Presidential determination, if made, would be followed by action both timely and effective.” [4]

This statement psychologically prepared the American public for a possible conflict involving the offshore islands, as well as acting as a deterrent for the CCP. CCP leaders knew that they could not win against the United States in a confrontation; they were also unsure of the extent of Soviet commitment, and they understood the power of nuclear weapons. This uncertainty made US threats credible, and the CCP leaders were again at the negotiating table, finally ending the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis. [5]

The Third Taiwan Strait Crisis came much later: in 1996, following the White House’s decision to approve then-President Lee Teng-hui’s (李登輝) application for a visa, and the US arms sale of 150 F-16s to Taiwan—which the CCP viewed as an act to change the military balance in Taiwan’s favor. China conducted a dramatic show of force consisting of military exercises and missile tests targeted near Taiwan. The United States responded to China’s aggression by deploying two carrier strike groups into the region—which, to CCP leaders, was a reminder of the “Century of Humiliation” they suffered under imperialist gunboats in the later 19th and early 20th centuries. CCP leaders, knowing that they couldn’t win in a direct confrontation, felt humiliated and were convinced that a mainland-Taiwan conflict would compel the United States to intervene. Once again, the United States successfully deterred the CCP from further aggression. [6]

Why Is Deterrence Not Working Now?

The previous Taiwan Strait crises were de-escalated due to Beijing perceiving Washington’s threats as credible, and believing that they could not face the United States in a direct confrontation. Nearly thirty years have passed since the last crisis, and the region’s security environment has changed drastically. The CCP has a [modernized military](#) and has assumed many small advantages through its [salami-slicing operations](#) to control territory in the South China Sea. Moreover, the United States has become entangled with other ongoing conflicts, making CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping (習近平) believe that China cannot be deterred by denial.

After Xi stepped into power, all branches of the Chinese

military saw rapid modernization. The PLA Air Force (PLAAF, 中國人民解放軍空軍) put in service both the [Chengdu J20 Mighty Dragon](#) and the [Wing Loong II](#) (in 2017 and 2018, respectively). The People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN, 中國人民解放軍海軍) now possesses the [largest navy in the world](#) based on numbers of ships. In the recent Department of Defense (DoD) report to Congress, China operates the world’s largest navy, army, rocket force, civilian fleet, and industrial base, [7] making deterrence by denial ever more unrealistic as China’s military develops.

The major weakness of deterrence by denial is that determining its effectiveness is difficult, and it is up to the intended target to decide whether it is deterred. Even if the desired effect is achieved, it is also difficult to tell whether the measures implemented have deterred the unwanted action, or if another factor prevented the undesirable action. Therefore, a significant amount of time and resources can be spent on an ineffective measure that will fail in the long run. In the situation regarding the CCP’s ambitions for Taiwan, previous deterrence efforts worked because China could not face the United States in a confrontation. However, now—with its modernized military and a determined political leader—China can refuse to be deterred.

Since the United States’ commitment to defending Taiwan is ambiguous, it leaves room for Beijing to doubt US credibility. US strategic ambiguity does not communicate commitment to China: the *Taiwan Relations Act (TRA)* did not explicitly declare that the United States would come to Taiwan’s defense, and was also intended to act as a [double deterrence for both China and Taiwan](#). However, the security environment has changed since 1979, and China has become a more competent adversary. For the United States to successfully deter China, it needs to be unambiguous in its commitment to defending Taiwan. To show commitment to Taiwan’s defense, the United States should advise and assist Taiwan in [creating a genuine asymmetric defense posture](#), clear the [arms backlog of USD \\$19.7 billion](#), and leverage its regional allies to also participate in the defense of Taiwan—all while dissuading Taiwan from pursuing capabilities that are ill-suited for the island’s defense.

Furthermore, where the United States draws the red line for China is also problematic. Washington signals to China that they will intervene if Taiwan were to be invaded, but it leaves a lot of gray area in which the CCP can operate. This allows the CCP to salami slice and [inch closer to the red line without facing any consequences](#), while Washington and Taipei continue to downplay the CCP’s actions. The CCP becomes more

prepared and more dangerous after every slice it takes, while the situation does not improve for Taiwan. If the United States does not punish the CCP for every slice, then it cannot deliver a credible threat.

Lastly, the perception of the United States' efforts being spread too thin also makes Beijing question US ability to aid Taiwan in case of an invasion. Currently, with the United States' continued support of Ukraine in the struggle against Russia, the United States has provided Ukraine with [USD \\$175 billion](#) in weapons, training, humanitarian aid, and budget support. Two years have passed, and that war is still dragging on. With the addition of the Israel-Hamas conflict, Washington is engaged in seeking an end to two conflicts—which signals to Beijing that Washington is unable to quickly end a conflict. The CCP's perception of a weakening US military, when paired with the policy of strategic ambiguity that the United States is trying to maintain, has resulted in a security environment where the United States can no longer deliver a credible threat to deter China as it has in the previous three Taiwan Strait Crises.

The main point: China is no longer deterred by the denial strategy the United States is implementing. CCP leaders have found a way to operate in the gray zone, becoming better prepared while the United States continues to downplay the looming threat. Washington needs to pursue a strategy in which the United States can punish the CCP every time it tries to inch closer to the redline of attacking Taiwan.

[1] Zhang, Shu Guang. *Deterrence and Strategic Culture: Chinese-American Confrontations, 1949–1958*. Cornell University Press, 1992. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctvv415k7>.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Felix Belair, Jr., “U. S. DECIDES TO USE FORCE IF REDS INVADE QUEMOY; DULLES SEES EISENHOWER; PEIPING IS WARNED LeMay Begins Flight to Far East -- Stops Include Taiwan U. S. TO USE FORCE TO SAVE QUEMOY,” *The New York Times*, September 5, 1958.

[4] Zhao, Xuegong. “The Limits of Confrontation: Nuclear Weapons, the 1958 Taiwan Strait Crisis, and China-U.S. Relations.” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 25, no. 2 (2023): 118. muse.jhu.edu/article/900750.

[5] Ibid., p. 112-149.

[6] Ross, Robert S. 2000. “The 1995–96 Taiwan Strait Confrontation: Coercion, Credibility, and the Use of

Force.” *International Security* 25 (2): 87–123. <https://doi.org/10.1162/016228800560462>.

[7] Department of Defense. 2023. “Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China.” October 19, 2023. <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Oct/19/2003323409/-1/-1/1/2023-MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA.PDF>.

Boys Do Not Dream of War: The Impacts of Extending Compulsory Military Service on Levels of Patriotism in Taiwan

By: Shery Tang

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No mother wants to say goodbye to their child. However, with the looming threat of an attack from China, this fear threatens to become a reality for many Taiwanese mothers. There has been [widespread speculation](#) that People’s Republic of China (PRC) President Xi Jinping (習近平) has directed the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) to be prepared to invade the island by 2027. Amid such predictions, Taiwan has completed numerous actions to increase its capabilities to resist a Chinese attack. Arguably, the island’s most notable single measure—and the most politically controversial—has been the extension of conscripted service for young men from four months to one year of training and military duty. [1]

Current Party Stances

When then-President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) [announced the extension of conscripted service](#) in December 2022, public opinion was divided regarding the presidential decision. In the January 2024 presidential election, the three contenders differed on their proposed policies for housing and economic issues, as well as relations with China, but all three—Lai Ching-te (賴清德) of the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民進黨), Hou Yu-ih (侯友宜) of the Kuomintang (KMT, 國民黨), and Ko Wen-je (柯文哲) of the Taiwan People’s Party (TPP, 台民黨)—supported expanding conscripted military service. According to Dr. Shen Ming-shih (沈明室), acting deputy chief executive of the Institute of National Defense and Security Research (INDSR, 國防安全研究院), [a government fund-](#)

[ed think-tank in Taipei](#), the rare agreement reached by the three men reflects how the issue involves national security interests that transcend party politics.



Image: ROC Army conscripts conduct hand-to-hand combat training at a basic training facility near Hsinchu, February 2024. (Image source: [ROC Overseas Community Affairs Council](#))

In Taiwan, [the conscription age is 18](#); however, deferments for higher education are very common. All males must serve in the military by age 36, when they can retire from the reserves. Conscription length has varied throughout administrations. It used to last between two and three years, until being shortened to one year in 2008. This was further [cut to four months](#) in 2012 under KMT President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九), who came to power in 2008 and followed a policy of pursuing warmer ties with China. In the years that followed, Taiwan's conscripted service system has been [widely criticized](#) by commentators both inside Taiwan and abroad as ineffective in providing for Taiwan's defense, leading the Tsai Administration to implement the one-year program.

Public Opinion and the Impacts of Conscription

Former conscripts have frequently expressed disappointment with their training and equipment. [In a study conducted](#) in September 2023, participants regarded military service as “useless” and a “waste of time.” Citing as evidence the lack of equipment and the long permitted periods of leisure time, past participants have complained about the military training camps. One participant who trained in the Taiwanese military between 2023 and 2024 stated that “I just sat under the AC with my phone, they [military personnel] didn't train us with any specific weapons because they said to not waste bullets, so my friends and I just sat on a field most of the time.” The researchers similarly [conducted an interview](#) with Jack Huang, a 30 year old

male who completed his four months of service over two semester breaks in university. According to this news report, Huang “felt [that] his shooting practice was outdated, like a holdover from the 1950s, and did not see how it would help him in modern warfare.”

These examples support what Dr. Su Tzu-yun (蘇紫雲), a research fellow and director of INDSR has found: namely, that [psychological defense and troop morale](#) are the top concerns regarding Taiwan's ability to defend itself. If troop morale and confidence are down, how is a sovereign island supposed to maintain its basic defense capacity against China?

Polling data and public sentiment reflect a mix of opinions regarding the conscription extension. According to a survey by the National Chengchi University (國立政治大學), 58 percent of Taiwanese citizens support the extension of conscription to one year, [viewing it as a necessary measure](#) for national defense. However, 35 percent oppose the extension, citing particular concerns about its impact on young men's educational and career prospects. This division in opinion is evident across different demographics, with younger generations expressing more resistance to the policy compared to older generations.

There is indeed research that points to a one year conscription policy as being an impediment to educational and job prospects. In 2015, *The IZA Journal of Labor Economics* published a [study on the long-term effects of peace-time military conscription](#) on educational attainment and earnings in the Netherlands. Researchers found that compulsory military service decreased the proportion of Dutch university graduates by 1.5 percentage points (from a baseline of 12.3 per cent). Furthermore, the study found that being a conscript diminished the likelihood of earning a university degree by about four percentage points. The impact of military service on wages is also detrimental and long-term. The research concluded that “approximately 18 years after military service, we still find a negative effect of 3 to 4 per cent.” This quantifies some of the negative economic impacts of prolonged military conscription.

Flexibility in Service and Better Compensation for Conscripted Soldiers

Amid public reservations about the new policy, Taiwan's government has implemented measures aimed to provide benefits after conscription. These include considering service time when calculating future benefits, and providing “flexible” educational options to

facilitate the move into the economy for all conscripts. The [Taipei Times reported](#) in June 2023 that the Ministry of Education (教育部) has implemented a “3+1” program in which conscripts can complete college in three years and military duty in one year, allowing them to graduate alongside those who do not have to serve. To do this, institutions must raise the limit on the amount of credits that draftee students may obtain each semester. They should also provide summer courses and allow drafted individuals to attend classes at other universities. However, some have criticized the program: for example, KMT members of the legislature have stated that it would jeopardize students’ educational rights, and that conscripts would be “[burning the candle at both ends](#)” by balancing studies and conscription.

Conscription programs have also traditionally been known for the very low levels of pay given to junior conscripts—another point that has made the service period unpopular. The return to one-year service is part of a package of conscription reforms that includes [increased pay for conscripted soldiers](#), in which the monthly compensation for a private will increase from NTD \$6,510 to NTD \$26,307 (USD \$203 to USD \$850)—still not a huge sum, but a four-fold increase over the standard pay level of the past.

Personal Interviews with Taiwanese Americans Affected by the Conscription Policy

Another issue of concern regarding conscription may be identified in the current attitudes of future Taiwanese-Americans conscripts residing in Taiwan. To investigate the trend, the author conducted a limited study in Taiwan in May 2024, in which interviews were conducted with five teen participants who have to serve upon turning 18. [2] In the interviews, the participants were asked about their views towards the policy. For the first subject pool, four of the five teen participants (Teens 1, 3, 4, and 5) stated that period of the prolonged military service caused concerns regarding future career plans. This concern contributed to a decrease in national pride and connection to their Taiwanese identity. For example, when asked about his opinion regarding the conscription policy, Teen 3 stated in his interview, “Especially because the job market is so tight right now... Having to serve would make getting a job harder. I know I’m supposed to be mad at China, but I’m mad at Taiwan.”

This correlates to the fluctuation of public confidence in Taiwan’s military, according to data found by NCCU’s Election Study Center. [In September of 2021](#), about 58

percent of respondents were confident or very confident in the military’s ability to defend Taiwan. However, confidence dropped to 54 percent in March 2022 and to 43 percent in March 2023—possibly due in part to negative news and cognitive warfare. [Cognitive warfare](#) and negative news covers many areas: ranging from naval exercises in the waters surrounding Taiwan and military aviation flights that steadily advance closer to Taiwan’s airspace, to bans of Taiwanese agricultural products, and the [use of fringe political parties employed to spread pro-CCP \(and anti-American\) narratives](#).

Another theme commonly cited as a reason for their decreased level of patriotism was the effect of military service on plans for higher education. Three out of the five teen participants (Teens 1, 3, and 4) stated that the prolonged military service caused concerns regarding future education plans. This concern contributed to a decrease in national pride and connection to their Taiwanese identity. For example, when asked about his opinion regarding the conscription policy, Teen 1 stated in his interview, “I’m just trying to live my life and go off to college abroad and never have to think about this problem or Taiwan ever again.” The frustration expressed corresponds to a decrease in patriotic connection: as Teen 4 stated in his interview, “I don’t like it. It inconveniences me and my plans for college. Plus, Taiwan doesn’t have anything to offer to my education.”

In a second subject pool, four parent participants (Parents 2, 3, 4, and 5) stated that the prolonged military service for boys born after 2005 caused concerns regarding future career plans. Many parent participants believed that prolonged service duration would harm a child’s employment opportunities, and cause them to lose valuable work experience. For example, Parent 2 stated in their interview, “We have to think about what the youth needs. A one-year training with weapons they will never be able to use or use well in their entire life is useless and bad for job prospects. I am disappointed in Taiwan and perhaps even a bit ashamed of my country.”

Many parent participants believed that prolonged service duration would harm a child’s educational development and cause them to lose valuable academic learning. This connects to [March 2023 research in the publication Voice Tank](#), which found that “respondents’ confidence had dropped, for the first time below 50 percent (to 43 percent), and the proportion of those not confident exceeded that of those confident. While such a drop could be attributed to various factors and may only be temporary, we think it may be a result of

cognitive warfare and negative news coverage of the ROC armed forces.” [3] This links to Parent 4’s questioning of Taiwan, asking, “What is wrong with Taiwan? Don’t they understand our future generation needs to study abroad for a better chance?” Parent 4 believes that the government is directly hindering her son’s academic development and future by implementing the policy, a reason for her declining level of patriotism.

Conclusion

The prolonged military conscription for males born after 2005 has caused clashing public opinions—and a decline in patriotic sentiment for Taiwanese Americans currently residing in Taiwan, including future conscripts and their parents. The ruling DPP must consider the unforeseen impacts of its policy amid the looming Chinese threat. It becomes imperative for the ruling party to acknowledge that while conscription may appear on the surface to be cost-effective, simple budgetary accounting does not consider the potentially high opportunity cost that young people face when forced to serve, leading to long-term earnings losses and educational disruptions. [These factors combine to reduce national income and economic growth](#). Additionally, for Taiwanese Americans and expatriates, conscription does little to foster unity; instead, it risks further weakening the relationship between overseas citizens and the state, [whose voices still influence Taiwan’s future](#).

The main point: The prolonged military conscription for boys born after 2005 has caused public controversy and a decline in patriotism for Taiwanese Americans currently residing in Taiwan, including future conscripts and their parents. The ruling Democratic Progressive Party must consider the unforeseen impacts of its policy amid the looming Chinese threat.

[1] For previous discussions of the issues surrounding the extension of service to one year, see: John Dotson, “Taiwan’s ‘Military Force Restructuring Plan’ and the Extension of Conscripted Military Service,” *Global Taiwan Brief*, February 8, 2023, <https://global-taiwan.org/2023/02/taiwan-military-force-restructuring-plan-and-the-extension-of-conscripted-military-service/>; and John Dotson, “Taiwan Initiates Its New One-Year Military Conscription Program,” *Global Taiwan Brief*, February 7, 2024, <https://globaltaiwan.org/2024/02/taiwan-initiates-its-new-one-year-military-conscription-program/>.

[2] The research was conducted for a duration of one year, under the supervision of Dr. Irish Farley. The study utilized a two-part, mixed methods approach that sur-

veyed boys between of 14 and 17 living in Taiwan who are eligible for military conscription upon turning of age; followed by small group interviews with the teen participants, and parents of boys aged 14 through 17 living in Taiwan.

[3] For example, a report in *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* in February 2023 claimed that 90 percent of retired Taiwanese spies have worked with China. In early March, soldiers stationed in Kinmen defected to Xiamen, which led to the circulation of negative news about Taiwan’s military. See: Lee, Kuan-chen, Christina Chen, and Ying-Hsuan Chen. 2024. “Core Public Attitudes toward Defense and Security in Taiwan.” *Taiwan Politics*, January 2024, <https://doi.org/10.58570/WRON8266>.
