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Silent Exercises, Escalating Tactics: How the CCP's Evolving Strategy Shapes Taiwan's Public Sentiment

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Following the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP, 中國共產黨) failed attempts to use military intimidation to influence the political orientation of Taiwanese people from 2022 to 2023, the CCP has now switched to "silent exercises" that more subtly undermine the Taiwanese government. Once the CCP realized that their military exercises might boost Taiwanese public support for the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民進黨), the CCP has now shifted to conducting low-profile drills to create the narrative that the DPP itself is fabricating a climate of fear. An analysis of online engagement patterns indicates that when People's Liberation Army (PLA) warplanes and vessels encircle Taiwan, they inadvertently amplify the DPP's digital presence and reinforce Taiwanese national identity. However, the CCP's recent shift to low-profile military activities, often relayed through third-party sources or announced by Taiwanese authorities themselves, has indirectly fueled the spread of conspiracy theories online.

Online Presence Analysis and the Distribution of Internet Usage among Taiwanese Citizens

Online presence analysis refers to the use of artificial intelligence-based (AI) semantic analysis technology to measure online discussion levels regarding specific issues while simultaneously conducting sentiment analysis to evaluate positive and negative emotions in content. This technology can be used to measure various aspects of a person, an event, or an issue's online presence, including exposure level, discussion frequency, and public favorability.

According to Digital 2023 statistics, 95 percent of Taiwanese people regularly access the internet via mobile phones. The entire island has approximately 20.2 million social media platform users—representing 84.5 percent of the total population and ranking 10th globally in usage rate. Among the social media platforms, the messaging application LINE leads with 90.7 percent usage, followed by Facebook at 85.3 percent, Instagram at 65.3 percent, Messenger at 60.3 percent, and TikTok at 36 percent.

Due to the anonymous nature of the internet, people's expressions online tend to be unfiltered,

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especially in direct responses to newsworthy social events. The emotions revealed through these responses are often more authentic than those obtained through traditional interviews. Big data text analysis tools can help researchers conduct real-time sentiment analysis on social media or news platforms, effectively exploring public attitudes toward specific issues. While the demographic distribution of internet users tends to skew toward younger populations, online sentiment analysis has become an indispensable reference tool for both business promotion and election strategy analysis in Taiwanese society. Overall, online sentiment analysis can be used to gauge the direction of public opinion in Taiwan.

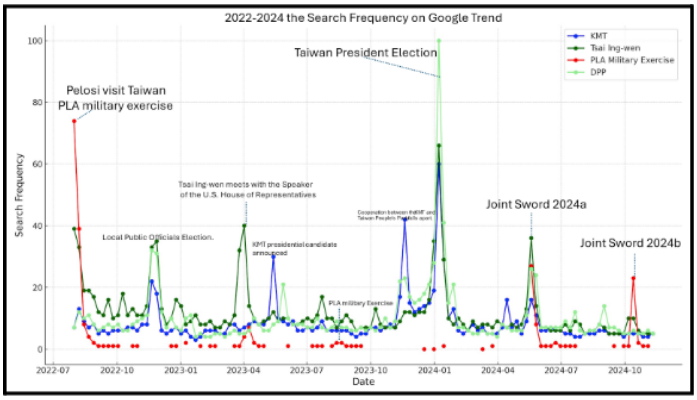

Figure: The search frequency of terms related to PLA military exercises and the DPP from 2022-2021 (Figure source: Google Trend)

The Correlation Between PLA Military Exercises and Online Presence During the Tsai Administration

During President Tsai Ing-wen's (蔡英文) second term, US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan and declared "we will not abandon our commitments to Taiwan." In response, China announced week-long military exercises and established no-fly zones around Taiwan. During this time, when global attention was focused on both Pelosi and the CCP's military response, the narrative shifted significantly. On April 6, 2023, President Tsai met with House Speaker Kevin McCarthy at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library as part of her "Democratic Partners for Common Prosperity Journey." By invoking Reagan's famous quote—"We Are Stronger When We Are Together"—Tsai captured headlines across major US media outlets. In the end, Tsai's diplomatic engagement contributed to the domestic image of her being "tough on China."

The Relationship Between PLA Military Exercises and Online Presence During the Lai Administration

During the administration of President Lai Ching-te (賴清德), the Lai Administration was able to leverage statements that were deemed controversial by the CPP for media coverage and PLA military exercises actually helped the DPP generate online attention and stimulate nationalist sentiment. During the CCP's *Joint Sword-2024A* and *Joint Sword-2024B* exercises directed against Taiwan, Taiwanese government broadcasts of Taiwan's military defense status helped strengthen public support for national security policies. However, the two military exercises generated distinctly different online responses.

The May 23-24 *Joint Sword-2024A* (聯合利劍2024A) military exercises followed Republic of China (ROC) President Lai's inauguration speech and were conducted in response to rhetoric used by Lai that was consistent to the concept of "Two Sides, Two Constitutions." After President Lai's inauguration, the Chinese Communist Party pressured Taiwan with the rapid implementation of *Joint Sword-2024A* and diplomatic suppression. Subsequently, the CCP announced sanctions on 12 US military companies and ten executives involved in arms sales to Taiwan. It then publicly characterized President Lai's statements as dangerous signals threatening cross-Strait peace and stability. According to online search statistics, Lai's speech overshadowed Beijing's military exercises and Lai's favorability among the Taiwanese public also increased. Taken together, the data shows that the inauguration speech and exercises sparked Taiwanese nationalist emotions and boosted the DPP's online presence.

The *Joint Sword-2024B* (聯合利劍2024B) military exercises followed Lai's National Day speech, which reiterated the non-subordination relationship between Taiwan and China and China's lack of authority when it comes to representing Taiwan. Despite considerable discussion about the exercises online, the CCP did not conduct the exercises right away and officially announced that they would last only one day. (Still, the PLA Navy stayed in nearby waters, and it took three days for the situation to normalize.) As a consequence, the DPP failed to generate the expected online attention regarding the *Joint Sword-2024B* exercises, and both the resulting nationalist sentiment and negative emotions toward the CCP were not as high as during *Joint Sword-2024A*. Ultimately, public support for the DPP dropped 5 percentage points in October polls in comparison to May.

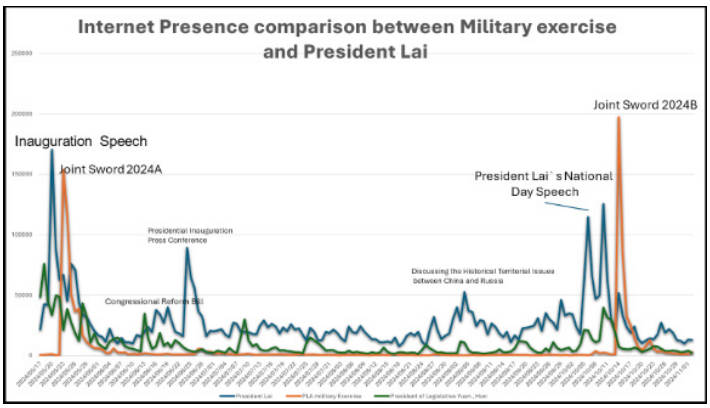

Figure: Internet presence of terms related to PLA military exercises and President Lai. (Figure source: Opview)

The differences in scale and timeframe between the first

and second *Joint Sword* exercises are the main reasons behind their differing online impact. This time gap allowed public passion for the speech to cool and created uncertainty about a PRC military response, which also likely caused people to view the exercises as an isolated event. The delay of the PRC's response reduced attention on the Taiwanese authorities, effectively "silencing" their presence.

Silent Exercises and Cognitive Warfare: China's Evolving Strategy Against Taiwan

After the *Joint Sword 2024B* exercise, China shifted its cognitive warfare strategy by restricting information releases and selectively leaking genuine and fabricated details through third parties. This approach has created more uncertainty for the Taiwanese government, which has struggled to anticipate Beijing's next move. According to theories of power and communication, silence is often used as a tool of control: one party's act of withholding information (remaining silent) can influence the other side's behavior by regulating what and when information flows.

In December 2024, a *Reuters* report mentioned the possibility of a *Joint Sword-2024C* exercise taking place during President Lai's visit to Taiwan's diplomatic allies. However, until December 14, the only official notice from Beijing concerning a response was an announcement reserving seven zones of airspace near Taiwan. Meanwhile, it was Taiwan's government that claimed that large-scale PLA drills were under way in the Western Pacific. Many observers cross-checked publicly available data from the United States and Japan, which raised doubts about the accuracy of the Taiwanese government's claim. Under these uncertain circumstances, unfavorable rumors spread and undermined public confidence in the government.

On February 26 of this year, the PLA conducted an unannounced live-fire drill off the coast of southwestern Taiwan. The drill coincided with the severing of a Taiwanese undersea cable by a Chinese vessel earlier that month. These incidents highlight China's evolving tactic of "silent exercises," which, although more opaque, pose a tangible and escalating threat.

Conclusion

From the above analysis, it can be concluded that the CCP has shifted its cognitive warfare strategy against Taiwan—from direct military intimidation to using silence as a psychological warfare tactic. It can be surmised that the CCP seeks to deprive Taiwan of clear information, creating anxiety and pressure that lead to misjudgments and foster skepticism about the accuracy of government-released information.

The main point: China's cognitive warfare approach has shifted from overt military intimidation to "silent exercises" and selective information leaks, fueling uncertainty and rumors in Taiwan. This tactic leverages silence as a tool of control—undermining public confidence, heightening anxiety, and causing doubts about official information—and thereby advancing the CCP's strategic aims.

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PRC ID Cards and Hybrid Warfare: The Accumulated Impact on Taiwan and Potential Countermeasures

By: Sze-Fung Lee

Sze-Fung Lee is an independent researcher specializing in Chinese hybrid warfare, including foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), grand strategy, nuclear proliferation, gray zone tactics, and cognitive warfare.

Following the Taiwanese government's announcement that any nationals holding a People's Republic of China (PRC)-issued identity (ID) card or settlement certificate will have their citizenship revoked, some Taiwanese appear to be continuing to quietly pursue these documents with the help of intermediaries and other unofficial channels. According to Pa Chiung (八炯), a Taiwanese YouTuber who revealed this united front work in his December 2024 documentary, there are approximately 200,000 Taiwanese who have already obtained PRC passports. In the Chinese-language information space, an informal network—composed of various accounts with similar messaging and cross-platform presence—includes actors who provide free consultation services and detailed information on application procedures for Taiwanese who are interested in obtaining PRC ID cards and passports. Not only are these gray zone activities potentially illegal under Taiwanese law, but they also support PRC influence operations and hybrid warfare strategies that aim to drive Taiwanese people toward the PRC's goal of social integration and eventual "reunification." In essence, Beijing could utilize Taiwanese acquisition of PRC IDs as the legal basis and proof of "evidence" that the majority of the Taiwanese population supports Beijing's narrative of cross-strait unity—conceivably, justifying its coercive actions and even potential invasion of the island as part of its hybrid warfare strategies, which includes lawfare and public opinion warfare.

An Accumulated Result of the PRC's Long-Term Hybrid Warfare Targeting Taiwan

Regardless of its precise accuracy, Pa Chiung's revelation that 200,000 Taiwanese have obtained PRC passports reflects the alarming fact that the current situation is not constituted by a single operation or isolated incident—rather, it is an accumulated result of the PRC's long-term hybrid warfare strategies targeting the Taiwanese people. First of all, PRC influence operations seek to gradually shape a more favorable image of China, which motivates not only leisure travel but also the pursuit of career development

and other business opportunities across the strait. For instance, a recent study conducted by the Taiwan Information Environment Research Center (IORG), found that Taiwanese who are TikTok users have a more favorable opinion of China and are more pessimistic regarding Taiwan's economic prospects compared to non-TikTok users.

Secondly, this behavior is further exacerbated by the perception of gaining travel benefits linked to various PRC residential statuses, and financial incentives such as the PRC government's generous subsidies and monetary rewards for entrepreneurs starting up businesses in China. Stating the obvious, these political and economic policies—accompanied and reinforced by online and offline influence operations—serve as a part of Beijing's broader hybrid warfare strategies for cross-Strait "integration," and ultimately "reunification."

PRC Strategies: A "Tier System" for PRC-issued IDs for Taiwanese

Under Taiwan's *Cross-Strait Act*, Taiwanese nationals are prohibited from establishing household registration in mainland China. The following figure illustrates the progression of PRC-issued identity documents for Taiwan residents: how certain documents serve as prerequisites for obtaining subsequent ones, and which stages are considered in violation of Taiwan's legal framework.

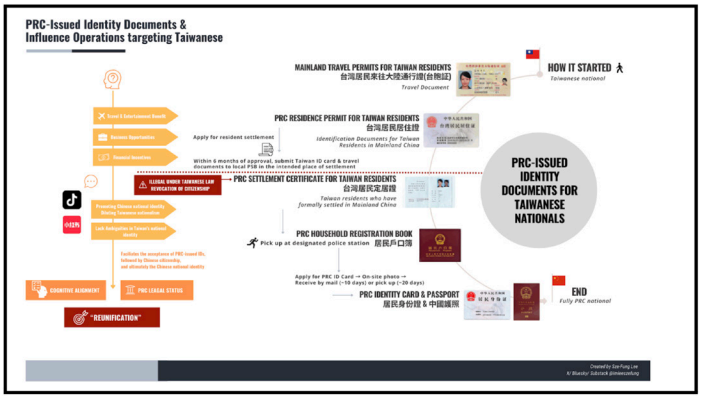


Figure: How PRC influence operations target Taiwanese to drive them closer to its "reunification" goal in terms of legal status and cognitive alignment. (Figure source: Created by the author.)

In the political sphere, PRC policies targeting Taiwanese citizens deliberately create gaps between different PRC-issued identification holders. This asymmetry can be conceptualized into a "tier system"—from PRC travel permits and residential permits, to settlement certificates and PRC ID cards. Higher tier level holders enjoy greater access to travel, entertainment, socio-economic benefits, and legal status in China.

For instance, a PRC Residence Permit for Taiwan Residents (台灣居民居住證) allows enhanced access to entertainment, including identity verification for opening social media accounts like Douyin, while allowing fewer restrictions when travelling within mainland China, such as fast track boarding of high-speed rail and eligibility to stay at hotels accepting residents from Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. In contrast, those holding a Mainland Travel Permit for Taiwan Residents (台灣居民來往大陸通行證) can only pass through the manually-operated ticket counters and stay in hotels officially designated for foreign guests (涉外旅館). Moreover, a PRC ID card holder enjoys advanced access and more simplified bureaucratic procedures when opening banking accounts, applying for loans, establishing certain types of companies, and purchasing property.

In addition to verifiable benefits, there is also no lack of disinformation and unverifiable claims on social media regarding the benefits of certain PRC ID documents, such as posts stating that a PRC settlement certificate can enable individuals to "borrow amounts of up to several million from the bank and purchase property without restrictions." Regardless of the authenticity of these claims, a Taiwanese citizen's level of convenience in China increases as holders obtain higher "tiers" of PRC identity documents. Such differential treatment motivates Taiwanese to obtain higher-tier identification documents—gradually progressing to a more integrated residential status in the PRC.

Some local government policies, such as those implemented by Fujian Province in December 2023, have even relaxed eligibility requirements and now allow Taiwanese to apply for permanent settlement ("PRC Settlement Certificate for Taiwan Residents" [台灣居民定居證]) without renouncing their citizenship. Reinforced by influence operations on social media, these policy initiatives constitute a comprehensive approach to inducing Taiwanese to move closer towards a pro-China stance.

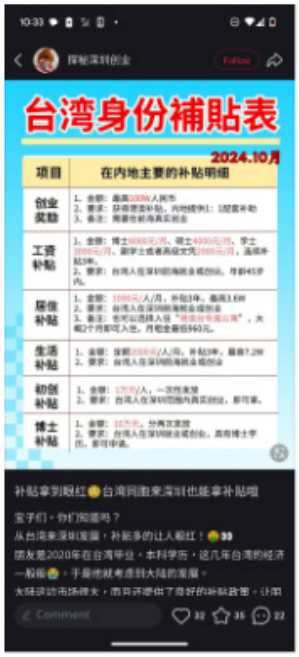
PRC Economic Policies Promote Cross-Strait Unity and Reinforce its Social Integration Goal

On the economic front, Beijing has evolved its united front strategies targeting Taiwan with the launch of "One Generation, One Stratum" (一代一線) in 2017. By specifically targeting Taiwanese youth and those at the grassroots stratum with the "resident treatment" (居民待遇)—special treatments similar to those enjoyed by Chinese citizens—Beijing attempts to transform pre-existing cultural and business exchanges into real "social integration."

In particular, coastal provinces with a large Taiwanese community presence have implemented various subsidy programs that target Taiwanese youth (by their definition, those aged between 18 to 45). The Fujian provincial government, for instance, claims that it awarded a total of RMB 4.5 million (roughly USD 625,000) for start-ups since the launch

of its "101 Taiwan Youth Entrepreneurship Support Program" (101台湾青年创业扶持计划) in 2015. PRC municipal governments also provide active support for such policy initiatives, with the Xiamen municipal government offering subsidies for business start-ups, office and housing rentals, as well as financial rewards for Taiwanese youth businesses who meet certain conditions for up to RMB 200,000 (about USD 27,600). Taiwanese youth are also encouraged to participate in PRC internships—merely after being in an internship position for over a month will they be qualified to receive an additional monthly subsidy during their subsequent internship, while first-time applicants are also eligible for another RMB 1,000 (about USD 140) as a "transportation subsidy."

These generous government subsidies and monetary rewards for Taiwanese entrepreneurs in China are often featured in the Chinese-language information space along with posts and videos stressing the convenience of obtaining PRC-issued identity documents—thus further motivating Taiwanese entrepreneurs and youth to integrate into the PRC goals—both in terms of legal status and cognitive alignment.



Images: (Left): Screenshot of a March 2025 Xiaohongshu post titled "Maximum reward RMB 100,000 (about USD 13,900)! Don't miss it!" which provides information on provincial-level entrepreneurship funding programs for Taiwanese. (Right): Screenshot of a November 2024 Xiaohongshu post listing "Subsidies for individuals with Taiwanese national status." (Images source: Xiaohongshu)

PRC Influence Operations that Exploit the Taiwan Identity Question & Low Public Awareness

In the information space, many PRC influence operations (IOs) also leverage shared elements of ethnicity, history, and culture to promote Chinese national identity while suppressing and diluting Taiwanese nationalism. By emphasizing the perks of gaining the documents that qualify one as a "Chinese national," this propaganda portrays a more positive image of China with its "compassionate support" for Taiwanese people—likely aiming to increase Taiwanese citizens' sense of belonging to China. From the perspective of influence operations, the greatest problem lies in the amplification of PRC narratives by Taiwanese individuals themselves. This PRC strategy—namely, "using Taiwanese to influence Taiwanese" (以台引台)—relies on local actors to influence Taiwanese perceptions of China. In fact, key opinion leaders (KOLs), particularly those with ties to Taiwan, dissidents, and Taiwanese collaborators, are among the primary actors leveraged to promote PRC identification documents on social media.

For instance, Taiwanese citizen Xu Chen-rui (許辰瑞) published a video on Douyin featuring the process of obtaining the PRC Residence Permit on October 31, 2020. He also emphasized "Taiwan is a part of China" and that "Taiwanese is Chinese." Xu regularly publishes videos that align with PRC narratives and has worked with PRC state media *Kantaihai (*看台海*)* and *China Central Television* (CCTV), including participating in a documentary filmed by the latter.

Another Taiwanese influencer, Lee Yi-hsiu (李易修), published a TikTok video to his account, *Historybro*, illustrating "the benefits of obtaining the PRC ID card." Lee listed benefits including eligibility to apply for a PRC passport (allowing costless, visa-free access to certain destinations). Lee's use of traditional characters implies that he is likely targeting Taiwanese users. It is also noteworthy that Lee maintains ties with the PRC-affiliated state media channel *Phoenix Television* (鳳凰衛視), serving as the host for their program *Taiwan Bandeng Kuan* (台灣板凳寬) in 2022.

Image: A Screenshot of Lee Yi-hsiu's January 2025 TikTok video titled "Why can Taiwanese people obtain a 'Chinese (Mainland) ID card'? Are there many benefits?" (Image source: Tiktok)

These IOs, which promote Chinese nationalism while diluting Taiwan's national identity, facilitate the acceptance of PRC-issued identification documents, followed by Chinese citizenship, and ultimately contribute to the consolidation of a Chinese national identity.

The Effectiveness of Taiwan's Latest Countermeasures – Policy Gaps & Vulnerabilities

Following Taiwan President Lai Ching-te's (賴清德) designation of China as a "hostile external force" (境外敵對勢力), the National Immigration Agency (NIA, 內政部移民署) initiated a third round of crackdowns on Taiwanese who illegally hold PRC identity documents in early April. The major targets of this effort are Chinese spouses of Taiwanese nationals who obtained Taiwanese citizenship before 2004 and their PRC-born children. Under this crackdown, the NIA has asked approximately 12,000 individuals to submit proof of their renunciation of household registration in China. The agency warned that failure to comply within three months would result in the revocation of these individuals' Taiwanese household registration.

While the policy seeks to identify Taiwanese nationals holding Chinese citizenship, its implementation has brought about considerable challenges that may undermine its effectiveness. Reports from the local media, such as *The Reporter*, have highlighted targeted individuals' difficulties in obtaining official proof of household deregistration from the PRC. In some cases, applicants were informed that such proof cannot be reissued as their deregistration process had been completed years ago.

The Taiwanese government's simultaneous failures in strategic communication generate confusion and controversies amongst the Taiwan population. These are vulnerabilities that can be exploited by the PRC via its influence operations to further induce distrust and magnify division in democratic societies—such as framing the policy as discriminatory and politically-motivated, or an example of "green terror" (綠色恐怖) from the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民進黨) administration.

In particular, this verification crackdown includes second-generation citizens who were born in China but had returned to Taiwan before the age of seven. Many of these individuals may have never registered in China and grew up in Taiwan, while maintaining a strong sense of belonging to the island. Reinforced by Beijing's disinformation campaigns, the Taiwanese government's imperfect measures and inadequate strategic communication could foster a feeling of alienation amongst these groups, leaving them more vulnerable to PRC integration and influence operation efforts. Meanwhile, if those currently holding Taiwanese citizenship are indeed colluding with or serving as intelligence operatives for the PRC Ministry of State Security (MSS, 國家安全部), Ministry of Public Security (MPS, 國安部), or People's Liberation Army (PLA), it would be a cake walk for them to obtain that piece of paper to "prove" their deregistered status.

Those who have already obtained Chinese citizenship, but have not yet declared it, could also become the next targets for exploitation by the PRC. Given that the data is in the hands of the Chinese authorities, the PRC could use it to induce or coerce individuals into conducting influence operations on behalf of Beijing. The PRC authorities could threaten to expose these dual-registered Taiwanese citizens, which would trigger the revocation of their Taiwanese citizenship under current Taiwanese law.

Policy Recommendations

As the real problem of PRC IDs lies in its relationships to cross-domain operations directed at Taiwanese, Taipei needs a more comprehensive framework to provide clear

definitions and standards for investigation, as well as to foster better strategic communication. For instance, the current and past behaviors of Taiwanese investigative targets would be good indications for assessment. This includes but is not limited to: (i) alleged ties with the PRC state and state-affiliated entities, (ii) participation in Cross-Strait Forums and/or Cross-Strait Youth Summits, (iii) involvement in assisting or coordinating Beijing's online and offline influence operations, and (iv) other suspicious behaviors such as photo shooting at key infrastructure and military bases.

Another recommendation is to establish a more robust reporting mechanism. Currently, the public is able to report Taiwanese nationals possessing PRC ID cards to the NIA. According to the Ministry of Justice Investigation Bureau (MJIB, 法務部調查局), one can also report these individuals to the MJIB or the police. However, information regarding the reporting procedures is often unclear and fragmented—complicated by disinformation and rumors including incorrect phone numbers and false claims such as "a NT$200,000 reward for informants."

As a part of its countermeasures, the Taiwanese government could utilize the power of crowdsourcing and open source intelligence (OSINT) to formulate a collaborative social media platform where ordinary citizens can easily report illegal activities and united front operations in real-time. Such a platform would resemble Cofacts' LINE chatbot, which collects crowdsourced fact checks for online media. Indeed, the author was able to personally uncover several Taiwanese nationals who had obtained PRC settlement certificates along with the research for this article. This initiative, if successfully established, may be particularly effective in Taiwan—given that the island already possesses a strong decentralized network of OSINT researchers.

The PRC leverages a variety of state and non-state actors for its cross-domain operations. In response, a whole-of-society approach to countering PRC infiltration efforts will enhance Taiwan's resilience while safeguarding its democratic norms.

The main point: Despite being illegal for Taiwanese citizens to obtain a PRC ID card or settlement certificate, Beijing's cross-domain operations that advertise the political benefits of holding higher "tiers" of PRC-identification, economic programs that target Taiwanese youth and entrepreneurs, and Taiwanese influencers that parrot CCP narratives continue to entice Taiwanese people to become more socially integrated into the PRC and legally and cognitively align with its "reunification" goals. To counter this, Taipei should adopt a more comprehensive framework, foster better strategic communication, and establish a more robust reporting mechanism that could also utilize Taiwan's open-source intelligence community.

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Taiwan's Enduring Controversies Over Abortion Laws

By: Hope Ngo

Hope Ngo has worked for over two decades as a journalist covering regional politics and business for organizations including Bloomberg Television, CNN International, and NBC Asia. She obtained her Master of Social Sciences in Media, Culture, & Creative Cities (with Distinction) from The University of Hong Kong, and is a Salzburg Global Fellow. Ms. Ngo is currently a news anchor at International Community Radio Taipei and is host of the program "Taiwan Talk."

We have quantum theory to thank for "Schröedinger's Cat," a thought experiment involving a box that is said to contain a radioactive atom, a container of poison, and a cat. In the experiment, the animal is said to be both alive and dead until the box is opened and the cat's condition is confirmed one way or the other. Unfortunately, the same can be said of the status of abortion rights in Taiwan—that it is both legal and illegal because the procedure is governed by two very different, contradicting laws. So, while Taiwan has staked out a progressive position regarding LGBTQ+ rights, it cannot say the same about its more complex social attitudes and laws regarding women's reproductive rights.

In Taiwan, abortion is allowed under specific conditions specified by the *Genetic Health Act* (優生保健法), but it is penalized under Articles 288, 290, and 292 of the *Criminal Code* (中華民國刑法). Under the *Genetic Health Act*, legal abortions can be performed under six conditions. These conditions include:

- If a pregnant woman is diagnosed with a genetic, infectious, or psychiatric disease;
- If the pregnancy threatens the life of the mother;
- If the fetus might be exposed to toxic substances that could cause birth abnormalities;
- If the pregnancy is a result of rape or sexual abuse;
- Or, if the pregnancy has the potential to affect a woman's mental health.

However, at the same time the *Criminal Code* makes it illegal for a woman to perform an abortion, for a doctor to give one, or for a partner to instigate one—with current penalties ranging from NTD 3,000 to 15,000 (roughly USD 100 to 500), depending on severity of the offense. Article 292 even makes it illegal for anyone to advertise abortion services—

warning of both jail time and a fine as penalties.

Taiwan's conflicted relationship with abortion is a long-standing one. Chen Chao-Ju (陳昭如), distinguished professor at the National Taiwan University (國立臺灣大學) and director of its Center for Human Rights and Jurisprudence (國立臺灣大學法律學院法理學與人權研究中心), points out that even as far back as the 1890s, the procedure was outlawed by the Japanese colonial government (which had modeled its legal system under existing French and German systems of the time). There were penalties not just for the women who got abortions, but also for those who performed them (although Chen believes the penalties were not strictly enforced, since available records show that just 16 abortions were reported between 1908 and 1943).

That ban survived Japan's retrocession of Taiwan to the Kuomintang (KMT, 國民黨) government in 1945 at the close of World War II, and it remained in place until 1969—a year that marked a turning point in Taiwan's reproductive legal framework. That year, a population control-related policy enacted under the Executive Yuan (行政院) allowed for abortions to be performed—but only when a pregnant woman was at risk of passing on any "genetic diseases, hereditary insanity, or infectious diseases" to her fetus. Abortions were also made available to women who already had three children. In short, it could be carried out "to control the quality and quantity of (Taiwan's) population," which had experienced exponential growth in the 1950s. This particular law remained in place until the passage of the *Genetic Health Act* (優生保健法) in 1984 and its promulgation one year later. The *Act* was first known in English as the *Eugenics and Health Protection Law*, and its Chinese name still contains the word "eugenics" (優生).

Given the traditional, patriarchal nature of Taiwan society, abortion's primary usage as a population control tool should not be surprising. Well before 1949, Taiwan's attitudes toward women were shaped by Confucianism, and then by Japanese norms, which characterized women as the family's primary caregivers. Even though World War II opened doors for women in the workforce, women were still largely viewed as being beneath men in status. As a result, women were restricted largely to lower-paying job fields such as education, factory and transport work, and food service.

While many civil rights were restricted by the KMT regime after the declaration of martial law in 1949, Yang Chia-Ling (楊佳羚) of the Graduate Institute of Gender Education at National Kaohsiung Normal University (國立高雄師範大學 性別教育研究所) points out that it was after this that women were allowed to vote and given compulsory access to education. That, in turn, raised literacy levels for women and gave them access to better jobs—even though they experienced workplace discrimination and inferior pay in comparison to their male counterparts. The greatest advancements in women's rights in Taiwan occurred after 1987, when laws protecting women against domestic violence, sexual assault, and workplace harassment were enacted, and these laws remain in place today.

Unfortunately, even as women's civil rights have progressed, their reproductive rights have remained largely static. Since 1987, the *Genetic Health Act* has been amended just once. This occurred in 2009, when women were finally "allowed" to obtain abortions without prior consultation—and the consent of—a husband or a male relative. Before that, a married woman looking to get an abortion needed to obtain her spouse's "consent"—unless the man in question was unconscious or not of sound mind. In 2019, Christian groups tried to push for a referendum on abortion rights which would have banned abortions for a fetus of eight weeks or older. A year later, in 2020, conservative groups also tried to call for a mandatory six day "consideration period" before an abortion could be performed. Most recently, the Ministry of Justice (MOJ, 法務部) came under fire in 2024 for proposing larger fines for "illegal abortions"—i.e., those performed under the circumstances laid out in the *Criminal Code*. Instead of looking to abolish the controversial articles, Ministry of Justice officials indicated that they wanted to raise monetary penalties involving abortions to between NTD 500,000 and 1 million (USD 17,000-33,000). The proposals were eventually withdrawn just days after they were made public, following intense opposition from women's advocacy groups including the Awakening Foundation (婦女新知基金會).

Another one of the groups opposing the proposals is Taiwan Women's Link (台灣女人連線), which has also accused the Ministry of Justice of violating the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Because Taiwan is not a member of the United Nations, it has not signed CEDAW, but it still upholds it. Moreover, CEDAW calls for abortion to be decriminalized altogether. In a social media statement, Taiwan Women's Link questioned the Ministry of Justice's ability to respect women's bodily autonomy, and accused the government of using the *Genetic Health Act* to pretend that abortion had been decriminalised—when that was in fact, not the case. The women's advocacy group also pointed out that there are only four countries which have tightened anti-abortion laws: Nicaragua, Poland, El Salvador, and the United States.

The presence of laws restricting abortion in the Criminal Code also does not sit well with lawyer and abortion rights activist Audrey Lu (陸詩薇), who explained that the law

sends a very disturbing message to women. In my conversation with Lu for International Community Radio Taipei, the women's rights lawyer surmised that while the law might have been intended to protect the rights of the fetus and the pregnant woman, the message conveyed by the MOJ is that abortion is a crime. Instead of passing amendments, Lu pointed out that the Ministry of Justice should have decriminalized abortion altogether: "These abortion related laws, are very seldom used these days… so what is the whole point [of their existence]?"

Because of Taiwan's rapidly declining birth rate, the abortion issue has unfortunately become linked to a bigger social concern: falling birth rates means fewer young people entering into the workforce, filling classrooms, building up the country's social safety net—and enlisting in the army. This makes issues surrounding the birth rate and abortion into national security concerns.

Tying childbearing to national security will not incentivize women to have more children. Instead, Lu encouraged Taiwan's lawmakers to view the issue of abortion and birth rate as part of a greater issue—one related to outdated norms regarding patriarchy. "One key issue that lawmakers and policymakers need to understand is that for many women in Taiwan today, it is almost a consensus that marriage—especially after having children—leads to a decline in their quality of life," she said. "This is largely due to deep-rooted social and cultural expectations that place the burden of caring for not only children but also husbands and even in-laws primarily on women. This fundamental issue is why more and more women choose not to have children."

Lu added: "If the government wants to increase birth rates, cultural and societal paradigm shifts are essential. Simply restricting abortion rights is unlikely to achieve this goal. Instead, policies should focus on creating a social environment where women do not feel that having children will automatically lead to a significant loss of personal freedom, career opportunities, and overall well-being."

Additionally, Lu stated: "If Taiwan truly wants to encourage childbirth, the key is not restricting abortion but ensuring that having children does not mean sacrificing a woman's quality of life." This is a call echoed by women's groups like Taiwan Women's Link, which again used social media to point out that "The choice of abortion is an exercise of women's physical autonomy, which can be regulated or restricted, but should not be criminalized. The crime of artificial abortion only punishes women who have an unwanted pregnancy, but not men who have sex with this woman and cause an unwanted pregnancy. This is clearly a difference in the treatment of women, which is one of the reasons why CEDAW…pointed out that national criminal laws should no longer cover women who have abortions."

Unless and until abortion ceases to be a part of population policy and is treated as part of women's rights to bodily autonomy, Taiwan's women are not likely to be convinced that the state has their best interests in mind. As Lu pointed out, until women are treated with dignity and not merely as vessels for childbearing, the bigger problem involving birth rates is unlikely to be resolved.

The main point: Taiwan's current abortion laws are contradictory and originate out of patriarchal systems that view abortion as a tool of population control. While Taiwan's low birth rate is admittedly a national security concern, criminalizing abortion will not help motivate Taiwanese women to have more children. Instead, the Taiwanese government should prioritize policies that treat women with respect and ensure that a woman's quality of life does not decrease after giving birth.

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China's Undersea Cable Sabotage and Taiwan's Digital Vulnerabilities

By: Jaime Ocon and Jonathan Walberg

Jaime Ocon is an experienced journalist and served as the lead defense reporter for TaiwanPlus, the premier English-language news channel in Taiwan. He has covered pivotal events, including Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, China's military drills around the Taiwan Strait, and former President Tsai Ing-Wen's meeting with U.S. Speaker McCarthy. Currently, Jaime is a master's candidate in the Security Studies Program at Georgetown University and plans to specialize in military operations.

Jonathan Walberg is a Ph.D. student in international relations and psychology at the University of Virginia, studying China's use of AI in disinformation and narrative warfare. Jonathan is also the associate director of the Taiwan Security Monitor, a research initiative to improve the understanding of security dynamics in the Taiwan Strait, as well as a fellow for both the Center for Security Policy Studies and the Center for Advancing Human Machine Partnership. Jonathan has published numerous times in The Diplomat, as well as the Center for Maritime Security, and has been interviewed in Taiwan on China's cable sabotage.

The Achilles' heel of the digital age lies beneath our oceans:

fragile undersea cables that, when severed, can plunge entire regions into digital darkness. Undersea cables are the lifelines of modern economies: they carry over 95 percent of the world's internet traffic, making them one of the most critical—yet vulnerable—pieces of infrastructure in the 21st century. When these cables go dark, everything from banking transactions to emergency response systems can grind to a halt. These fiber-optic lines stretch across the seafloor, making them ideal targets for sabotage with minimal resources, while creating just enough plausible deniability for malicious actors to dodge any consequences.

To date, Taiwan's limited response to China's cable cutting *(see discussion below)* has not conveyed a desire to deter further action. Taipei should increase its response capabilities to monitor and intercept ships loitering near cables, develop domestic cable repair capabilities, and invest in alternative connection platforms such as satellite-based internet.

Chinese Sabotage Directed at Taiwan's Undersea Communications Cables

In early 2023, Chinese-registered vessels severed two undersea cables, knocking Taiwan's Matsu Islands offline. China's preferred explanation is that these incidents are just unfortunate maritime accidents. Beijing claimed that the 2023 incidents were a coincidence, and even blamed Taiwan for manipulating the facts. Given that the Taiwan Strait is one of the world's busiest waterways, with more than 1,000 cargo ships passing through weekly, accidental damage by anchors or fishing nets is not impossible. However, more recent disruptions, and Chinese-flagged vessels lingering near key cable locations, suggest a more disturbing pattern.

For Taiwan, an island dependent on just 24 cables (14 international and 10 domestic) for global connectivity, this is far more than a nuisance: it is a significant national security risk, and Beijing knows it. Through such disruptive measures, China can paralyze Taiwan's ability to communicate with the outside world—undermining its economy, military coordination, and capacity for emergency response, all before firing a single shot.

China has been involved in multiple malicious actions directed at Taiwan's cables:

- February 2023: China severed two cables supplying the Matsu Islands, cutting residents off from internet services for weeks.
- January 2025: Another Chinese vessel, the Shunxin 39, allegedly damaged the TPE cable north of Taipei.
- February 2025: The Chinese-crewed Hong Tai 58 damaged the TPKM-3 undersea cable connecting the Penghu Islands with Taiwan.

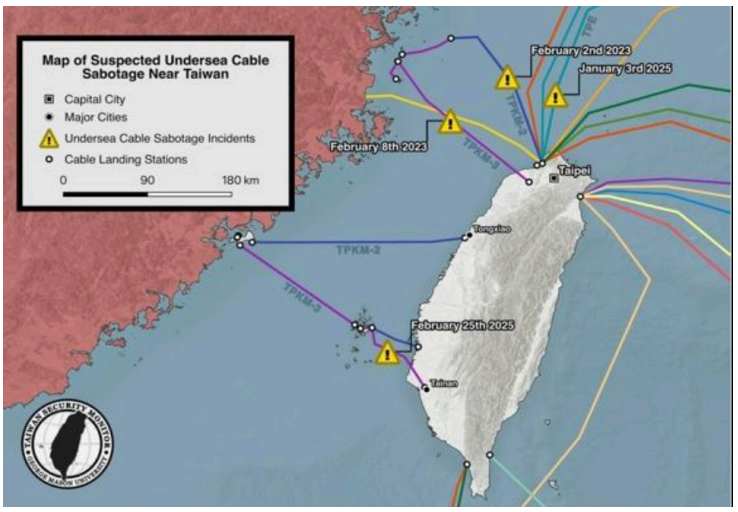

Image: A graphic depicting incidents of suspected undersea cable sabotage around Taiwan from early 2023 to early 2025. (Image source: Taiwan Security Monitor / George Mason University)

Larger Suspicious Evidence of Chinese Cable Sabotage

Beijing would have you believe that these ships are uniquely unlucky, hitting Taiwanese cables (and in the Western Pacific, only Taiwanese cables) by accident. In addition, Taiwan's Coast Guard intercepted Chinese research vessels allegedly gathering seabed data that could help locate these cables with precision. Furthermore, these sabotage incidents match incidents in the Baltic: in November 2024, a Chinese vessel, Yi Peng 3, reportedly cut cables between Finland, Germany, Lithuania, and Sweden using similar tactics (and as part of a wider pattern of Baltic sabotage suggestive of collusion with Russia).

Suspicions are also raised by China's active development of cable-cutting tools. Researchers at China's Lishui University have designed an anchor-like device explicitly intended to sever submarine cables. Maritime security experts have reviewed the cable-cutting device's specifications. It is optimized for operations at depths beyond typical fishing activity, and designed with features that clearly indicate a sabotage purpose. While the technology may have dual-use applications (e.g., cable repair), legitimate repair ships follow international protocols, including advance notification and transparent operations. By contrast, the vessels involved in these incidents have no history of cable maintenance, and operate with secrecy and unpredictability.

The economic impact of undersea cable disruptions is sub-

stantial. According to Taiwan's Ministry of Economic Affairs, the 2023 incidents alone cost millions of US dollars to repair. Further, each major cable outage disrupted internet traffic, delayed financial transactions, and required emergency rerouting.

Compounding the issue is Taiwan's dependence on foreign cable repair ships, primarily based in Japan, Singapore, and the Philippines. Repair delays can stretch from six to eight weeks, or longer, especially in bad weather or during regional demand spikes. Taiwan is vulnerable, and every prolonged delay aligns with a message from Beijing: that Taiwan's digital lifeline can be disrupted, and that its recovery is uncertain.

Beijing's Unconvincing Denials

Beijing and its media mouthpieces have pivoted from denial to disinformation, suggesting that Taiwan is orchestrating these disruptions to stoke international sympathy or escalate tensions. In a written statement to Reuters, China's Taiwan Affairs Office (國務院臺灣事務辦公室) claimed that more than 100 cable incidents occur globally each year, dismissing them as "common maritime accidents." It accused Taiwan of fabricating the threat and hyping the "so-called gray zone."

The Taiwanese Coast Guard isn't convinced. It has blacklisted 96 suspicious vessels, mostly Chinese-owned and flying flags of convenience from countries like Mongolia, Cameroon, and Sierra Leone, for close monitoring.

Taiwan depends on these cables for critical functions, from military communications to financial systems. The 2023 Matsu incident didn't give Taiwan political leverage; it disrupted banking, commerce, and emergency services. It is not logical for Taiwan to cripple itself to fabricate a crisis. More importantly, the pattern of incidents consistently overlaps with the presence of Chinese vessels.

This fits neatly into China's long-running gray-zone warfare strategy, using non-military means to apply pressure while avoiding open conflict. From ship harassment to daily incursions by Chinese jets, the goal remains the same: erode Taiwan's stability. Cutting cables is just the latest addition to this growing toolkit.

Recognizing the seriousness of these threats, Taiwan's Defense Minister announced in March 2025 that cooperation between the Navy and Coast Guard is underway. This marks a strategic shift from viewing cable protection as a bureaucratic afterthought to treating it as a national defense priority.

The next time another cable goes dark, we should skip the diplomatic hedging and call it what it is: an attack on Taiwan's infrastructure under the guise of plausible deniability.

Image: The Shunxin-39 *(AKA* Xing Shun 39*), a Hong Kong-registered vessel suspected of damaging undersea telecommunications cables off the northern coast of Taiwan in January 2025. (Image source: Lloyd's List / ROC Coast Guard)*

The Way Forward: Building Digital Resilience

Taiwan doesn't just need more ships; it needs better information. Requiring more vessels to use automatic identification systems would improve maritime domain awareness, and give the Coast Guard cause to stop suspicious ships (i.e., those not transmitting) before they approach cables. Investments in radar, satellite imaging, and electronic intelligence should also be prioritized. Doing this would decrease response times and allow Taiwanese vessels to intervene before sabotage takes place. Current defense priorities such as large purchases of conventional power like F-16s do not solve this, and are less useful in countering gray zone operations. Amendments for this kind of legislation are already being proposed.

Additionally, Taiwan needs more cables. But with system inspections taking roughly 29 months to complete, Taiwan must streamline this process by expanding international partnerships. Chunghwa Telecom is already taking steps, recently joining the E2A undersea cable project with partners in the United States, Japan, and South Korea aiming to improve connectivity across the Pacific. These partnerships are key to allocating resources, internationalizing infrastructure, and bringing more global attention to Taiwan's vulnerability.

Taiwan also urgently needs its own dedicated cable repair ship. Delays can cost tens of millions in economic losses. Domestic repair vessels could reduce downtime from months to days. While refitting existing ships, or developing new ones, are major investments, the strategic payoff is clear. Taiwan should explore creating a maritime infrastructure security fund, pooling resources from government and telecom firms alike.

Finally, Taiwan must diversify beyond seabed infrastructure. Satellite-based internet won't replace the capacity of undersea bandwidth, but it can preserve essential services, such as government communications, financial transactions, and emergency coordination, during outages. Recent expansion into low-Earth orbit (LEO) satellite constellations provides a viable backup network that is harder for China to disrupt. Unlike undersea cables, LEO systems are less vulnerable to physical sabotage and can be deployed quickly in response to crises. Taiwan is also exploring partnerships with Amazon's Project Kuiper and other LEO providers.

The undersea cable conflict may seem obscure next to warplanes and missile drills, but it's no less dangerous. What happens to Taiwan today could happen to other democracies tomorrow. It's time to treat this for what it is—a frontline in the shadow war over digital infrastructure—and act accordingly.

The main point: Taiwan is facing an intentional and sustained campaign of undersea cable sabotage by China—part of Beijing's broader campaign to undermine Taiwan's sovereignty through shaping the narrative on how the world sees these issues. To combat this, Taiwan should invest more in cable installation and repair, as well as digital resilience measures to maintain telecommunications connectivity.

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What Taiwan Needs in Pope Leo XIV: A Test of Moral Courage

By: Y. Tony Yang

Y. Tony Yang is an endowed professor and an associate dean at the George Washington University.

The election of Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost as Pope Leo XIV on May 8, 2025 marks a pivotal moment not just for the Catholic Church, but also for Taiwan›s precarious position in global diplomacy. As the first American-born pope, who leads one of Taiwan's last remaining formal diplomatic allies in the world, Leo XIV›s papacy arrives at a time when the Vatican›s relationship with Beijing threatens to overshadow its historic commitment to the democratic island.

The early signals from the new pontificate are troubling for Taiwan. Despite weeks of lobbying by Taipei to secure an invitation for President Lai Ching-te (賴清德) to attend Leo's papal installation on May 18, it was former Vice President Chen Chien-jen (陳建仁) who ultimately represented Taiwan at the ceremony. While neither the Vatican nor Taiwan confirmed whether Lai received an invitation, the diplomatic slight echoes a familiar pattern of the Holy See›s careful calibration to avoid offending Beijing.

This papal brush-off represents more than ceremonial protocol—it reveals the Vatican's continued pursuit of warmer ties with China at Taiwan's expense. The Holy See has declined to station an ambassador in Taiwan since 1971 and notably refused to join Taiwan›s other diplomatic allies in their annual effort to secure observer status for the island at the World Health Assembly. These symbolic snubs, as Vatican observers note, are intended to signal to Beijing that the Holy See remains open to switching diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing.

The Francis Legacy: Accommodation at What Cost?

Pope Leo XIV inherits a complex China policy shaped by his predecessor's controversial 2018 agreement with Beijing. The secret deal, renewed for four years in November 2024, ostensibly allows the Vatican and Chinese authorities to share responsibility for appointing bishops in China›s state-controlled Catholic Church. Pope Francis and his supporters viewed this as a pragmatic step toward protecting China›s estimated 12 million Catholics and healing the painful divide between the state-recognized church and the underground church loyal to Rome.

Yet, the agreement's track record tells a different story. Beijing has violated the pact repeatedly, appointing bishops without Vatican consultation. Notably, in the weeks between Pope Francis's death in April and Leo's selection in early May, Chinese authorities confirmed two new bishops without Vatican approval—a clear signal to the new pope about Beijing›s true intentions. Meanwhile, Catholic persecution has intensified under Xi Jinping›s (習近平) regime: with bishops detained or disappeared, underground churches shuttered, and new regulations issued that severely restrict religious activities.

The symbolic nadir for the Vatican's policy came in July 2021, when Bishop Paul Lei Shiyin celebrated the Chinese Communist Party›s centenary in the cathedral of Leshan in Sichuan—a stark illustration of how Beijing seeks to co-opt rather than accommodate the Catholic Church. Despite such provocations, Vatican representatives under Francis consistently argued that an imperfect deal was better than no engagement at all.

Leo XIV: A Pope Caught Between Superpowers

Pope Leo XIV's unique position as both an American citizen and Taiwan ally places him at the center of intensifying US-China strategic competition. President Donald Trump, who has already pressured the Vatican to abandon its China agreement during his first term, will undoubtedly scrutinize the first American pontiff›s handling of Beijing—particularly given Leo›s apparent lack of sympathy for Trump›s political movement, as evidenced by his past social media criticism of Trump Administration policies.

Trump's nominee for US ambassador to the Holy See, Brian Burch, has already signaled the administration's position, stating at his Senate confirmation hearing that he would push the Vatican «to resist the idea that a foreign government has any role whatsoever in choosing the leadership of a private religious institution.» This sets up a potential clash between the pope›s desire for church unity and American foreign policy priorities.

The Taiwan question adds another layer of complexity. The Holy See remains one of only twelve states maintaining formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan, making it Beijing›s most prized diplomatic target in Europe. China views pressuring international actors to derecognize Taiwan as central to its foreign policy, and the Vatican represents a particularly attractive prize given its global moral authority.

Former Taiwanese ambassador to the Holy See Matthew Lee (李世明) offered a glimmer of hope, revealing that during a 2023 meeting then-Cardinal Prevost demonstrated clear understanding of the difference between democratic Taiwan and communist China. However, understanding and action are different things, and the early diplomatic signals suggest that caution may override conviction.

The Moral Clarity Taiwan Deserves

Taiwan's relationship with the Vatican transcends mere diplomatic convenience—it represents a profound alignment of values. Taiwan's democratic system, grounded in the rule of law and religious freedom, embodies the very ideals the Catholic Church claims to champion. The island's peaceful transition to democracy, its vibrant civil society, and its protection of minority rights all stand in stark contrast to Beijing's authoritarian system.

The Holy See's loyalty to Taiwan through decades of Chinese pressure has served as a rare beacon of moral steadfastness in international relations. Yet this principled stance now faces its greatest test under a pope who has chosen the name Leo in honor of Pope Leo XIII, who developed modern Catholic social teaching during the Second Industrial Revolution. Leo XIV has explicitly stated his concern about the Fourth Industrial Revolution›s challenges to «human dignity, justice, and labor»—values that Taiwan upholds, and China systematically violates.

The temptation to prioritize access to China's massive Catholic population over fidelity to a small democratic ally will be immense. Beijing's growing global influence offers immediate diplomatic opportunities, while Taiwan provides little beyond moral witness. Yet, true leadership requires seeing beyond expedient calculations to eternal principles.

Image: Former ROC Vice President Chen Chien-jen (陳建仁) greets Pope Leo XIV on the day of the latter's inauguration ceremony in the Vatican (May 18). (Image source: ROC Embassy to the Holy See)

Historical Lessons and Contemporary Warnings

History offers sobering lessons about religious institutions that bend too readily to authoritarian pressure. Pope John Paul II's unwavering support for religious freedom behind the Iron Curtain helped galvanize democratic movements across Eastern Europe, demonstrating that moral resilience can reshape history. Taiwan today, like Eastern Europe then, represents not a threat to peace but a testament to what principled perseverance can achieve.

Cardinal Joseph Zen of Hong Kong, now in his nineties, has repeatedly warned that excessive compromise risks hollowing out the Church›s witness from within. Chinese Catholic voices are increasingly critical of the Vatican›s approach, noting that local bishops, priests, and senior religious figures were never consulted on the bishop agreement. Their exclusion from dialogue about their own fate speaks volumes about Beijing›s true intentions.

Moreover, any future dialogue with China must be grounded in non-negotiable commitments to religious liberty, the dignity of believers, and freedom of conscience. The current agreement has achieved none of these goals while providing Beijing with international legitimacy it has not earned.

A Pivotal Choice for Pope Leo XIV

The early months of Leo XIV's papacy will reveal whether he sees his role as primarily pastoral or prophetic. The decision facing him is stark: to continue the accommodation policies that have yielded minimal gains while legitimizing an increasingly repressive regime, or to chart a new course grounded in the Church's fundamental commitment to human dignity.

Taiwan's importance extends beyond bilateral Vatican-Taipei relations. In Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia—regions with large Catholic populations—the Holy See's

continued recognition of Taiwan signals that principles still matter in global diplomacy. If the Vatican were to abandon Taiwan, it would trigger a cascade of diplomatic losses and diminish the Church's credibility in advocating for human rights elsewhere.

The timing is particularly crucial as Pope Leo XIV inherits a Church facing declining influence in Europe and North America while growing in the Global South. These emerging Catholic communities are watching to see whether the Church will stand with democracy and human rights, or accommodate authoritarian power for the sake of access.

The Path Forward

Pope Leo XIV has an opportunity to demonstrate that the Catholic Church's future lies not in chasing influence but in reaffirming eternal truths. Supporting Taiwan is not about choosing sides in a political dispute—it is about affirming a community that has upheld human dignity, religious freedom, and peaceful coexistence despite enormous external pressure.

The pope's response to the Taiwan question will test whether moral witness remains central to Catholic identity or whether pragmatic calculation has replaced prophetic courage. As a world facing deepening authoritarianism desperately needs institutions that stand for something beyond immediate interests, Taiwan represents a choice: to affirm that democratic communities matter, that freedom can thrive even under siege, and that human dignity is worth defending even when the cost is high.

Taiwan will continue to stand firm and free regardless of Vatican policy. The question is whether Pope Leo XIV will choose to stand with Taiwan—not for political gain, but because it is the right thing to do. His choice will define not only his papacy, but the Catholic Church's moral authority for generations to come.

In choosing the name Leo, the new pope honored a predecessor who navigated the challenges of industrial revolution while maintaining the Church's social mission. Today's revolution in artificial intelligence and global governance presents even greater challenges to human dignity. The test of Pope Leo XIV's legacy will be whether he applies his predecessor's courage to defend the vulnerable against the powerful—starting with Taiwan's right to exist as a free and democratic society.

The main point: The newly elected Pope Leo XIV, the first American pope, must decide whether to maintain the Vatican's diplomatic ties with democratic Taiwan or switch recognition to authoritarian China. Early signs are troubling: Taiwan's president wasn't invited to the papal installation, while Beijing continues violating a 2018 Vatican agreement on bishop appointments and persecuting Catholics. As one of Taiwan's last diplomatic allies globally, the Vatican's choice will test whether the Catholic Church prioritizes moral principles or political pragmatism. Pope Leo's decision could determine Taiwan's international standing and the Church's credibility in defending human rights worldwide.

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