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Taiwan's Military Shows New Areas of Focus in a More Ambitious 2025 *Han Kuang* Exercise

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From July 9-18, Taiwan's military and other supporting government agencies conducted this year's iteration of the *Han Kuang* exercise (漢光演習)—a military exercise conducted every year since 1984 to simulate the response to an invasion of Taiwan, and the largest single event on the annual calendar of the Republic of China (ROC) Ministry of National Defense (MND, 國防部). [1] Iterations of *Han Kuang* in recent years had followed a roughly similar schedule of events: often opening with ship and aircraft dispersals to simulate platform preservation operations in the face of missile attacks; followed by live-fire exercises (especially on outer islands) and simulated anti-landing defense operations; anti-terrorism / anti-infiltration drills at transportations hubs like airports and train stations; and civil defense drills to simulate sheltering against air attacks. [2]

Although *Han Kuang* represents one of the few opportunities for the ROC armed forces to conduct island-wide training for a wartime scenario, past iterations of the exercise have been criticized on the grounds of being overly-scripted, and for lacking meaningful training for the participating personnel—a series of events organized more as a public relations performance than as a serious exercise. [3] The 2024 iteration of *Han Kuang* had promised a new approach—one that would be less scripted and more decentralized. However, the abortive early end of the 2024 exercise due to a typhoon made it difficult to effectively evaluate how much had really changed.

Prior to the start of this year's exercise, MND spokespeople similarly heralded a new approach: promising an exercise that would be double the length of previous years, provide a greater role for both reservists and civil defense personnel, and be less scripted than the performance-like exercises of previous years. Speaking prior to the exercise on July 1, ROC Army Major General Tung Chi-hsing (董冀星), director of the MND's joint operations planning division, described a planned breakdown of the exercise into three phases: with the first three days (July 9-11) focused on the response to adversary gray zone opera-

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tions; a transitional "force deployment" phase on July 12; then a "full scale combat" phase (July 13-18) that would include anti-landing operations (July 13), coastal combat (July 14), defense in-depth operations (July 15-16), and then "protracted warfare" (July 17-18) to round out the exercise.

Image: ROC Army Major General Tung Chi-hsing (董冀星)*, director of the MND's joint operations planning division, speaking at an early April press conference about the upcoming 2025* Han Kuang *exercise. (Image source:* Central News Agency*)*

Building upon a trend first noted in the 2022 iteration of *Han Kuang*, the 2025 *Han Kuang* was also noteworthy for the largest number of reservists (22,000) ever called up for training. This represents an effort to address the severe weaknesses of Taiwan's reserve system—which possesses a large number of potential troops on paper, although those reserve soldiers receive little in the way of meaningful training. As one reservist reporting for duty in this year's exercise commented to media, "I haven't trained in five years, and this is the first time I've been summoned" for duty—an indictment of the lack of seriousness displayed in the past for the management of the ROC Army reserve system. This year's exercise, which reportedly allowed for the deployment of reserve soldiers in brigade-size elements, is a further step in the right direction of making reserve training more rigorous and meaningful.

This year's exercise was more ambitious, and markedly different in many aspects, from past iterations of *Han Kuang*. This article is intended to provide both a summary overview of the major training evolutions of the exercise, as well as its points of departure from past years—and what this might mean in a larger sense for the training conducted by Taiwan's armed forces to repel an actual invasion. [3]

An Overview of Major Events in Han Kuang 2025

Phase 1: Gray Zone Simulations, Preparatory Deployments, and Weapon Test Firings (July 9-11)

July 9

The opening phase of this year's *Han Kuang* exercise focused on a mix of preparatory unit maneuvers and defensive staging, in tandem with a maritime gray zone scenario. Although details are lacking, scenarios were reportedly held involving simulated People's Republic of China (PRC) Coast Guard vessels and maritime militia boats engaging in operations near Taiwan-controlled territory, with ROC Navy assets deploying to unspecified locations as a precautionary measure in the event of a larger conflict. Navy mobile radar units and anti-ship cruise missile (ASCM) systems were also dispatched to forward deployment locations. Army engineers also began the construction of anti-landing obstacles on selected beaches deemed to be potential sites for enemy amphibious operations.

Image: M1A2T tanks from the ROC Army's 584th Armored Brigade conduct test firings at the Kengzikou Training Ground near Hsinchu during the Han Kuang *exercise (July 10). (Image source:* ROC Military News Agency*)*

July 10

Highlights of the exercise on July 10 included a test-firing evolution at the Keng-zi Kou Training Facility (坑子口訓練場) in Hsinchu County, involving M1A2T tanks purchased from the United States. This evolution, though not officially part of *Han Kuang*, was observed by President Lai Ching-te (賴清德). The day also saw the deployment of two of the navy's *Tuo Chiang* (□□)-class ships, the *An Chiang* (安江) and *Ta Chiang* (塔江艦), to the east coast port of Hualien, ostensibly for the purpose of monitoring People's Liberation Army (PLA)

Navy ships operating to the east of Taiwan.

July 10 also saw combat readiness exercises on the Taiwan-administered offshore islands of Matsu and Penghu. The latter case reportedly involved a "counter-sabotage support mission" by the island's personnel, involving both the personnel of the ROC Army Penghu Defense Command and "garrison troops" (one year conscript personnel). July 10 also saw the repeat of a standard part of *Han Kuang* exercises in recent years, with the dispersal of ROC Air Force aircraft from bases in western Taiwan to sheltered locations in western Taiwan, simulating efforts to preserve these assets in the face of Chinese missile attacks.

Following a pattern from past exercises, July 10 also featured a scenario to simulate defense of one of Taiwan's major airports from enemy attack. Soldiers of the ROC Army's 269th Mechanized Infantry Brigade—operating three CM11 tanks and three CM22 mortar carrier vehicles, and other supporting vehicles—set up defensive positions near Taoyuan International Airport (臺灣桃園國際機場), to stage a defense against airborne or airmobile assaults intended to seize the airport.

July 11

July 11 featured one of the more significant training evolutions for reserve soldiers in the exercise. More than 3,000 reservists were assigned to the ROC Army's 206th Infantry Brigade, and conducted training in the vicinity of Taoyuan. On July 11 some of these reservists simulated the defense of a logistics site in Taoyuan from a simulated attack by Chinese agents. The training evolution reportedly included elements such as loudspeakers to produce gunfire sounds, and multi-colored smoke, to simulate battle conditions.

Phase 2: Transition to Full Scale Invasion and Larger-Scale Combat Operations (July 12-14)

July 12

On July 12, the military began to transition from practicing a response to gray zone operations, to defending against a full-scale invasion wherein the PLA successfully gained control of a beachhead. For the coastal defense scenarios, the ROC military focused on two primary areas: the Taichung area, which saw test firings of the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS); and defense of landing locations on the Tamsui River (淡水河) outside of Taipei.

Near Taiwan's western coast in the vicinity of Taichung, the ROC Army conducted test firings of its newly-acquired US-made HIMARS—a weapon system with an effective range of 300 kilometers (190 miles), which allows it to strike targets as far as Fujian's coast. (Taiwan received its first batch of eleven HIMARS late last year from an order it placed in 2019. The order, which has 18 outstanding units, is on track to be completed by 2026.) HIMARS are also compatible with Taiwan's indigenous Thunderbolt 2000 launcher (雷霆2000), meaning that the military can better integrate the HIMARS with its own systems. This demonstrates the first time the military has publicly tested this weapon.

Image: Reservists assigned to the ROC Army's 206th Infantry Brigade conduct a training evolution simulating the defense of a logistics site in Taoyuan (July 11). (Image source: Central News Agency)

Meanwhile, in northern Taiwan the ROC Army's 53rd Engineer Group placed obstacles in the mouth of the Tamsui River—a strategic waterway that would prove crucial to transporting a PLA landing force in Taipei. The army built three defensive lines in the river with "blocking chains" comprising gasoline barrels and live C4 explosives.

Image: Personnel of the ROC Army's 53rd Engineer Group place obstacles in the Tamsui River (northern Taiwan) to block access to the river by enemy amphibious forces (July 12). (Image source: TaiwanPlus News)

July 13

In the Taipei area, the ROC Army 21st Artillery Com-

mand performed short to medium-range missile air defense drills near Taoyuan International Airport using indigenous Land Sword II (陸劍二) and Sky Sword II (天劍二) missiles.

In Taichung, the ROC Army Fifth Theater Command practiced fortifying coastal landing sites with wave breakers, barbed wire, and tank ditches. For the first time, the army used US-made Hesco bastions—portable sand-filled barriers the US military heavily used in Afghanistan and Iraq, which require only two people and an excavator for setup. After fortifying the beachheads, the military then conducted live-fire anti-landing and road denial exercises.

In Tainan, the ROC Army 54th Engineer Group rapidly built defensive fortifications downtown overnight to block simulated enemy advances. The nighttime exercise, which ended by 5:00 AM on July 14, saw the soldiers deploy barbed wire, "Czech hedgehogs," and civilian vehicles as makeshift barricades. Further to the south, the Marine Corps' 99th Brigade, stationed in Kaohsiung, simulated rapidly transporting HUMVEEs and other tactical vehicles north to fortify Taipei. The drill, which began late at night on July 12, concluded in the early morning on July 13.

Military personnel on Taiwan's outlying islands also conducted major exercises on July 13. In Penghu County (澎湖縣), the military simulated defense operations against a PLA beach landing and airborne assault on the Penghu Airport.

July 14

On July 14, military police carried out urban combat drills in Taipei in the area between Shandao Temple Station (善導寺站) and Longshan Temple Station (龍山寺站) and practiced using the metro (MRT) for rapid deployment to meet enemy forces.

From 11:00 PM July 14 through 6:00 AM on July 15, the 202nd Military Police Command carried out an extensive transportation closure exercise on the Wanban Bridge (萬板大橋), a strategic point that connects the Wanhua District of Taipei with the Banqiao District of New Taipei City. This was the first time that the bridge—a major transit artery in the capital area—was completely closed to traffic. In the drill, the military simulated a PLA ground assault pushing its way into Taipei proper. By 1:00 AM military police completed a four-tiered series of obstacles that incorporated military equipment with civilian infrastructure and vehicles. These included roadblocks, razor wire, local buses, and Hesco barriers. In addition, the military used small reconnaissance drones to detect enemy locations before engaging—a tactic the military learned from observing the Ukraine war. In the simulation the PLA broke through the first three barriers before Taiwanese snipers and armored vehicles neutralized them.

To the south in Kaohsiung, the ROC Navy's 192nd Fleet mine-laying unit practiced a mine-laying exercise in the vicinity of Tsuo-ying Naval Base (左營海軍基地), simulating the defense of the area against an amphibious invasion. This scenario was observed by President Lai, who also visited one of the mine-laying ships.

Phase 3: Urban Warfare and Civilian Operations (July 15-18)

July 15

July 15 marked the beginning of the urban warfare and civilian operations phase. In this phase, the military simulated the PLA gaining footholds further inland and in major cities like Taipei. Like the previous phase, this was a new feature that was not present in previous Han Kuang iterations.

Military operations on July 15 included several drills including simulated amphibious assaults on key ports and outlying islands. Additionally, the ROC Navy began major missile testing operations. The navy's *Hai Feng* shore-based Anti-Ship Missile Group (海鋒大隊) tested four launch vehicles with some debuting the new extended range *Hsiung Feng III* (HF-III) (雄風三型) medium range anti-ship cruise missile, Taiwan's first supersonic missile.

In New Taipei, the 269th Mechanized Infantry Brigade defended against a simulated amphibious PLA landing in the port of Taipei. ROC Army infantry and armor carried out similar drills in Penghu and Matsu. Building off the previous day's Wanban Bridge exercise, units on Kinmen conducted a similar defense drill on Kinmen Bridge (金門大橋).

Additionally, this year's drill fully integrated the *Wan An* (萬安演習) and *Min An* (民安演習) civil defense drills under the umbrella of a concurrent "2025 Urban Resilience (Counter Air Attack) Exercise" [2025城鎮韌性(防空)演習] that tested different regions each day. In parallel with the military drills, urban resilience drills began in Central Taiwan in Taichung, Miaoli County, Nantou County, and Changhua County.

July 16

July 16 featured three prominent drills: unannounced overnight anti-airborne drills in Taipei's Songshan International Airport (臺北松山機場), rapid in-theater tank repairs, and the navy simulating escorting allied vessels into Hualien. Late at night, adversary forces executed an unannounced simulated airmobile assault on the Songshan Airport, a scenario intended to test defending forces' capabilities under an unexpected and disadvantageous situation.

In Taoyuan the ROC Army's 584th Armored Brigade practiced repairing its M88A1 tanks while in combat. During the drill, random tanks were designated as broken down, with forward support teams deployed to fix them on scene within 30 minutes.

On the east coast, the ROC Navy practiced maintaining an open corridor for allied vessels to enter the port facility of Hualien (花蓮港). As part of this, the navy built makeshift defenses involving two *Tuo Chiang*-class corvettes and anti-air units stationed around the port and simulated escorting ships from a US Navy carrier group that entered the port at 6:00 AM.

Local government officials also conducted urban resilience drills in southern Taiwan in the following locations: Kaohsiung, Pingtung County, and Tainan (the latter exempt due to Typhoon Danas recovery efforts).

Image: A social media graphic publicizing the "City and Town Resilience / Counter Air Attack Exercise" civil defense drills to be held in Taoyuan on July 17 as a component of the larger Han Kuang *exercise. (Image source: Taoyuan Events (桃園事) Facebook)*

July 17

July 17 simulated continued PLA attacks on Matsu Island, and advances into Taipei and other major cities.

In Matsu, the military practiced defending critical energy infrastructure, particularly oil tanks. The Matsu Defense Command (馬祖防衛指揮部), in conjunction with local first responders, responded to a mock enemy infiltration and sabotage operation at the Beigan Power Plant (北竿發電廠).

On the main island of Taiwan, in Taichung the ROC Army's 602nd Aviation Brigade and Taipei's 601st Aviation Brigade simulated combat operations after PLA penetration into their respective downtown areas. The brigades mainly practiced "hot pit refueling"—the practice of rapid refueling and re-arming without turning off the engine. In Taipei, the 601st Aviation Brigade flew two UH-60M Black Hawk and two AH-64E Apache helicopters along the Dahan River (大漢溪) before stopping at a riverside park in New Taipei City's Shulin District (樹林).

Urban resilience drills continued in northern Taiwan in the following places: Taipei City, New Taipei City, Taoyuan, Keelung, Yilan County, Hsinchu County, and Hsinchu City.

July 18

The last activities of the 2025 *Han Kuang* exercise wound down around noon, with a lighter schedule of military operations than the previous days. In Taipei, the army conducted live-fire exercises that simulated protracted urban warfare along the Tamsui-Xinyi Metro Line (淡水信義線) (Red Line), a strategic route that runs through the heart of Taipei. In the Bali (八里) District (northwestern New Taipei City), the ROC Army 269th Brigade conducted several defensive operations around areas of Taiwan's northern coastline.

In Penghu, security forces conducted an energy infrastructure defense operation, similar to the previous day's exercise in Matsu, in which the military and firefighting robots defended and responded to simulated fires at the Magong Power Plant (虎井發電廠).

The last round of urban resilience drills occurred in eastern Taiwan and the outlying islands, in the following locations: Hualien County, Taitung County, Penghu County, Kinmen County, and Lienchiang County.

Conclusions

While much remains to be done in terms of increasing the complexity and realism of Taiwan's military exercises, the July 2025 iteration of *Han Kuang* appears to represent another step in the right direction. The length of this year's exercise—double the previous standard of five days—allowed for a broader range of training scenarios. Among these, arguably most important

were the infrastructure defense drills—Taiwan's energy resources remain a key vulnerability— and the drills to simulate combat in Taiwan's major urban centers, a previously unthinkable thought neglected in past years.

Perhaps most important of all, the exercise represented a significant step forward in terms of more serious training for reservists; as well as the effort to mobilize greater civil defense resources in connection with the efforts of the Lai Administration's "Whole of Society Defense Resilience Committee" (全社會防衛韌性委員會). Such efforts are long overdue, and they remain at an early stage—but they do represent much needed progress. It will be incumbent on the administration, the MND, local governments, and civil society groups to maintain this momentum going forward.

The main point: In July, Taiwan held the 2025 iteration of the *Han Kuang* exercise, the largest annual training event for Taiwan's armed forces. At 10 days, this year's exercise was double the length of previous years—and involved a far more ambitious series of training evolutions, to include ones intended to better integrate military reservists and civilian civil defense personnel. While much remains to be done, this year's *Han Kuang* represented a positive step forward in terms of more rigorous training for Taiwan's defense personnel.

[1] The live maneuver and more public portion of the Han Kuang exercise, normally held in mid-summer, has generally been preceded by a closed-door tabletop / computer simulation portion, held in the spring. Far less is known about the simulation portion, due to its classified nature. The simulation phase of this year's *Han Kuang* was held from April 5-18, 2025. See: "2025 Han Kuang Extended to 2 Weeks of Wargames, 10 Day Live-Fire Drills," Central News Agency, April 2, 2025, https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202504020021.

[2] For discussion and analysis of the *Han Kuang* exercises in recent years—to include the author's criticisms of the approach to the exercises—see: John Dotson, "The Highlights of Taiwan's 2022 Han Kuang Military Exercise," *Global Taiwan Brief*, August 10, 2022, https://globaltaiwan.org/2022/08/the-highlights-of-taiwans-2022-han-kuang-military-exercise/; John Dotson, "An Overview of Taiwan's 2023 Han Kuang Military Exercise," *Global Taiwan Brief*, August 9, 2023, https://globaltaiwan.org/2023/08/an-overview-of-taiwans-2023-emhan-kuang-em-military-exercise/; and John Dotson, "The 2024 Han Kuang Exercise—a Small Step Towards More Decentralized Operations for Taiwan's Military?" *Global Taiwan Brief*, August 7, 2024, https://globaltaiwan.org/2024/08/the-2024-han-kuang-exercise/.

[3] Ibid.

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Taiwan's Soft Power Gamble in Nigeria

By: Francis Annagu

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In late March 2025, a delegation of Taiwanese trade experts landed in Nigeria's commercial hub of Lagos. The arrival of high-profile dignitaries was not televised and no press conference was arranged, but it marked the second mission in five months. The visits are a telling sign of Taiwan's intensifying effort to maintain a vital relationship with Africa's largest economy.

These kinds of trade missions to Africa's biggest democracy are about more than commerce. For Taiwan, they are a soft power play—or, at the very best, a calculated strategy to build influence through economic investment, technological innovation, and industrial collaboration in a country where Taipei has no embassy nor formal diplomatic ties. Nonetheless, with China's economic footprint dominating much of Africa, and Taiwan's increasing diplomatic isolation, the success of these delegations is critical.

Image: In 2022, Ibrahim Akopari Ahmed, former Nigerian diplomat at the Nigeria Trade Office in Taiwan, gifts Deputy Mayor of Taichung Bruce Linghu. (Image Source: Wikimedia Commons)

Taiwan's Expanding Presence

The year 2017 was a dramatic one. The Nigerian government moved Taiwan's trade office from its capital Abuja to Lagos. It acted, of course, under pressure from Beijing. Ever since, Taipei has been operating in a dip-

lomatic gray zone because Nigerian leaders changed the course of relations. After Nigeria recognized the People's Republic of China's (PRC) interpretation of the "One-China Policy," Taiwan has only been able to stitch together commercial and informal relationships via its Taipei Trade Office in Lagos.

In spite of this shift in ties, over 80 Taiwanese companies representing different interests have been operating across Nigeria's economy. They are penetrating sectors where Nigeria is lacking homegrown technology: from consumer electronics and steel to ICT, agriculture tech, as well as energy services.

Joana Mai (麥嘉容), Taiwan trade attaché to Nigeria, noted that while the trade between the countries plunged to USD 300 million in 2020, it grew to USD 530 million in the first nine months of 2021. In 2022 alone, Taiwan-Nigeria trade was estimated to have reached around USD 1 billion, though it tumbled sharply again in 2023 to USD 500 million due to several factors ranging from exchange rates, limited diplomatic representation, and the lack of renewal of a trade agreement.

As trade numbers grow, Taiwan is demonstrating its capacity to build itself into Nigeria's economic architecture using prudent commerce, as an alternative to traditional diplomacy.

Taiwan's Trade Diplomacy

Taiwan's high-brow business missions and industrial collaboration efforts are at the heart of this approach. The recent trade delegations, organized by the Taiwan External Trade Development Council (TAITRA), included the representatives from nine major Taiwanese tech firms, such as Delta Electronics, Pegatron, and Inventec, and others. Their goal is a long-term one: to transition from relations rooted in basic merchandise trade to joint investment in factories, smart manufacturing, and capacity building in areas aligned with President Bola Tinubu's Renewed Hope Agenda, which emphasizes digital transformation and industrial self-reliance.

In tandem with that agenda, Taiwanese firms, partnering with Nigerian agencies like Nigerian Investment Promotion Commission (NIPC) and the National Agency for Science and Engineering Infrastructure (NASENI), have initiated technology transfer programs to establish industrial park partnerships in cities such as Ibadan in the west, Enugu in the east, and Kano in the north, similar to the one already operating in the capital, Abuja. These economic initiatives place Taiwan in a head on competition with China and allow Taiwan to set itself apart through reliability, specialized technology, and mutually-beneficial collaboration.

Image: In May 2024, nine Taiwanese companies and MAXXIS Tyre, a Taiwanese-owned Company in Nigeria, participated in the "Nigeria-Taiwan Business Forum" in Lagos with the aim of strengthening bilateral trade between Nigeria, West Africa, and Taiwan. (Image Source: Taipei Trade Office in the Federal Republic of Nigeria)

Beyond Traditional Diplomacy

Despite its growing trade presence in Nigeria, the broader geopolitical environment has become more complex for Taiwan. In part, this is because the PRC's Belt and Road Initiative continues to attract attention and financing, while Taiwan lacks the kind of cash wielded by Beijing or Washington. This is where Taiwan's strategy for soft power is facing its toughest test.

Since the United States and other Western donors began scaling back some operations in Africa, such as USAID programs, Taiwan finds itself walking on eggshells. Previously, these aid channels were buffers for non-diplomatic actors, but now, they are shrinking. In their absence, Taiwan must look to rely more on business diplomacy and technological collaboration to keep its influence afloat.

In an article published by the East Asia Forum on March 15, 2024, written by Minglei Wang, Jeffrey Gil, and Nicholas Godfrey, three academics from Flinders University, argued that "Taiwan needs to build soft power… to overcome disabling international challenges currently facing President Lai Ching-te (賴清德). Preventive external communications can help the government of President Lai increase global awareness, in fact, even gain sympathy and win support from the

international community."

Nonetheless, through forums, business alliances, and education exchanges, Taiwan sees opportunities for new footholds of influence, even in the face of Beijing's growing economic advantages.

In September 2024, at the Taiwan Technology Day in Lagos, the chairman of the Taiwan External Trade Development Council, James Huang (黃志芳), emphasized the need for mutual cooperation rather than unhealthy competition. He highlighted some of Taiwan's strengths that include green energy, technology, and manufacturing, and encouraged joint industrial investments in these realms in Nigeria. During the same period, statements made by Huang revealed Taiwan's desire to collaborate across sectors such as ICT, petrochemicals, machinery, reflecting Taiwan's spirit of serving as a reliable partner.

Hinting at Nigeria's long-term ambitions to reduce its overdependence on oil exports, the chairman of the House Committee on Science and Engineering, Hon. Inuwa Garba, called for enhanced collaboration between Nigeria and Taiwan in the fields of science, engineering, and technology; while also emphasizing that such a partnership would accelerate Nigeria's economic growth and national development.

Taiwan's Roles in Nigerian Technology and Supply Chains

Another vital piece in Taiwan's strategy is its strength in critical technology sectors. This strength lies in the production of semiconductors, solar panels, smart grids, and industrial automation. These are areas where Taiwanese firms are able to rival other global leaders, and where Nigeria is seeking outside cooperation and expertise to boost its moribund oil and gas refinement facilities (which has been impacted by PRC competition) and reduce its import dependency. The Taiwan Climate Partnership (TCP), an alliance of leading Taiwanese tech firms including Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company Ltd. (TSMC, 台灣積體電路製造股份有限公司), Acer, ASUS, and Delta Electronics, is working assiduously to enter sustainable supply chain cooperation agreements with African markets—in which China has typically held stronger presences.

Outside of these efforts, institutions like the Taiwan International Cooperation and Development Fund (Taiwan ICDF, 國際合作發展基金會) have supported vocational and agricultural training in several West African nations: for example, establishing an ultra-modern skills training center in Gambia, organizing multi-country rice-production workshops, and supporting agricultural and vocational training in Burkina Faso. As of now, however, no such ICDF programs appear to be active in Nigeria, although they underscore the potential of this model. Further, research on Taiwan's international strategy shows that the ICDF engages with foreign elites and global audiences via development assistance and NGO-led initiatives, illustrating how Taiwan projects soft power beyond its formal diplomatic partners.

Taiwan's Competition for Influence with China

Taiwan still shoulders risk in pursuing these moves, since China is highly sensitive to any perceived encroachment by Taiwan, especially in countries where diplomatic recognition remains one-sided. Still, Nigerian officials continue to walk a precarious tight-rope, with Nigerian leaders maintaining public diplomatic and symbolic gestures toward China that align with Beijing's expectations. At the same time, they are engaging economically and commercially with Taiwan discreetly, without public acknowledgment, to avoid political fallout with China. All the same, analysts from the region argue that Nigeria, like its African counterparts, is moving along a route of strategic diversification—one that avoids overreliance on any single partner.

Speaking at a 2023 press event, Andy Yih-Ping Liu (劉翼平), Representative of the Taiwan Mission in Nigeria, highlighted Taiwan and Nigeria's mutual democratic values and expectations for economic cooperation. Liu also mentioned Nigeria's ambitions to transform its South-East region into the "Taiwan of Africa," emphasizing Taiwan's own journey of economic development. These statements underscore Taiwan's interest in partnership and shared growth that is less antagonistic, and more collaborative.

Strategic Bet

While Taiwan's diplomatic charm in Nigeria is still not very pronounced, its presence is undeniable and increasingly pronounced. Taiwan has shown that official diplomatic recognition is not the only path to gain influence in a foreign country. By embedding itself into Nigeria's economic agenda through technology, trust, and trade, Taiwan is achieving influence nonetheless.

Indeed, Taiwan's outreach in Nigeria presents an important question: can a diplomatically-isolated island build meaningful, enduring ties in Africa through soft power alone? If the Nigerian model succeeds, it could serve as a blueprint for Taiwan's diplomacy across other nations on the continent. For now, one thing is clear:

Taiwan is no longer just trying to survive geopolitically—it has begun to see the need to shape the game.

The main point: In spite of a lack of official ties, Taiwan is entirely retooling its diplomatic relations with Nigeria via strategic economic investments. Operating through its Taipei Trade Office in Lagos, Taiwan relies on commerce, technology, and vocational training to build influence in Africa's largest economy. Given that its partnerships with Nigeria fit well with President Tinubu's development agenda, Taiwanese firms are able to explore virgin opportunities. Fettered by China's economic dominance and diplomatic pressure, Taiwan pursues business diplomacy as an alternative to traditional engagement, simultaneously testing whether economic ties without governmental recognition can bring about lasting international partnerships.

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Taiwan's Path to Whole of Society Resilience

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Over the last half-decade, militaries around the world have executed a shift towards incorporating mass precision strike, with weapons such as loitering munitions and glide bombs becoming globally ubiquitous. These weapons are relatively low-cost, easy to mass-produce, and are reasonably accurate, able to partly replicate the expensive "precision strike complex" employed by Western militaries. Countries like Azerbaijan, Sudan, Iran, Ukraine, Russia, Myanmar have already employed such weapons as a substitute for higher-end capability. At the same time, technologically-sophisticated militaries are also experimenting with these capabilities to further enhance their exquisite weaponry and reduce costs.

As a consequence of this trend, many characteristics of early-mid 20th century "industrial warfare" are making a return. A particularly dark aspect is the targeting of civilians. The Russia-Ukraine War and the Iran-Israel conflict have demonstrated that national survival hinges not just on military might, but on the resilience of its civilian population and effective civil defense. Ukraine has suffered years of missile and unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) attacks; far from running low on munitions, the Russians have escalated UAV strikes on civilian infrastructure to break morale. For Taiwan, robust civil defense is no longer supplemental, but a fundamental pillar of national survival and deterrence.

A resilient society denies an aggressor the ability to win through shock and paralysis. Civil defense thus represents a strategic component of Taiwan's overall deterrence, complicating Beijing's invasion calculus by exponentially increasing the perceived cost and duration of the conflict. This article explores Taiwan's "Whole-of-Society" defense efforts to date, highlights areas for improvement, and draws actionable lessons from the Swedish civil defense model for Taiwan to enhance its resilience.

Taiwan's Whole-of-Society Defense

During the previous Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) Administration, societal engagement in defense was first conceptualized under Chief of General Staff Lee Hsi-min's (李喜明) Overall Defense Concept (ODC, 整體防禦概念). The ODC envisioned leveraging civilian resources to augment military operations. The core focus of the ODC, however, was defeating the enemy in the littorals or at the beach via asymmetric means. Civilian participation in a territorial defense force was seen as a last-ditch measure. In any case, the ODC was never fully accepted by the rest of the Ministry of National Defense (MND, 國防部), so even the relatively limited addition of civilian support to the military never came to fruition. The Tsai Administration also stood up the All-Out Defense Mobilization Agency (ADMA, 全民防衛動員署) under the MND in late 2021, but the ADMA's main mission is to improve the organization of Taiwan military reservists—with civil defense as a secondary priority. To the extent that ADMA touched upon civil defense, its most high-profile act was the publication of a civil defense handbook following the full outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine War.

The combination of the protracted Ukraine war, a new presidential administration in Taiwan, and greater US involvement in Taiwanese military training has led to a sea-change in Taiwan's defense planning. It is increasingly clear that Taiwan needs to plan for the possibility of a widespread, extended conflict. The current Lai Ching-te (賴清德) Administration has significantly elevated the importance of civil resilience, with President Lai personally assuming leadership of the Whole-of-So-

ciety Defense Resilience Committee (全社會防衛韌性委員會). The initiative is backed by substantial financial support, with NTD 150 billion (USD 5 billion) specifically earmarked for national resilience and territorial defense. The committee focuses on five key areas: civilian force training, strategic material preparation, energy and critical infrastructure, social welfare and medical readiness, and cybersecurity. In July of this year, the administration rolled out a "National Unity Month" to embed the resiliency concept into the public consciousness.

Finally, the most public demonstration of how Taiwan has reconsidered its defense can be seen in its latest annual national military exercise, *Han Kuang* (漢光演習). Previously, *Han Kuang* was a scripted performance to reassure civilians that Taiwan's military could quickly stop an invasion. Civilians were invited to observe demonstrations such as tanks neatly arranged on the beach, firing at an enemy force. This year's exercise revealed a profound change in strategy, involving unscripted simulations of urban warfare—such as troops armed with Javelins and Stingers utilizing the Taipei metro system for maneuver. The exercise also featured a larger call-up of reservists and integrated urban resilience drills. The changes suggest a more realistic understanding of the likely duration of an invasion and an acknowledgment that the fighting will probably spill over to urban terrain.

Civil Society's Growing Role in National Defense

The Taiwanese government's interest in civil defense has traditionally been attenuated by domestic political imperatives, such as a desire to avoid sparking public alarm. However, following the People's Republic of China (PRC) suppression of the 2019 Hong Kong democracy movement and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Taiwanese citizens' interest in civil defense shot up. Citizens began discussing "go-bags" and emergency first aid, while NGOs like Kuma Academy (黑熊學院) and Forward Alliance (壯闊台灣) started courses to teach skills such as friend-and-foe identification, first aid, and countering information warfare. However, the government generally avoided direct support for these NGOs, with the chronically-underfunded military wary of any effort that might drain badly-needed funds away from its priorities (mixed with an occasional *sotto voce* contempt of civilians "playing soldier"). This means that participation in the NGO courses is mostly derived from proactive individuals willing to sacrifice both time and their own money.

Under the Lai Administration, the government has finally begun its scale-up of civilian involvement in defense. Taiwan's Ministry of Interior (MOI, 內政部) has long conducted two sets of civilian drills, the emergency air-raid drill *Wan An* (萬安) and disaster-response *Min An* (民安). This year, *Wan An* and *Min An* were combined into an "Urban Resilience Exercise" (城鎮韌性演習), and ran alongside the revamped *Han Kuang*. This will give additional impetus for the MND and civilian agencies such as the National Police Agency (NPA, 內政部警政署) to work in concert in the future.

Image: A rescue drill treating injured people conducted at the 2025 Urban Resilience Exercise. (Image Source: Taiwan Ministry of Defense)

Another notable part of this year's drill was the inclusion of the private sector. PX Mart (全聯福利中心), Taiwan's largest supermarket chain, played a role in emergency air-raid drills. Staff in three stores guided customers to shelters and performed first aid during a simulated missile attack and power outage. Deputy Interior Minister Maa Shyh-yuan (馬士元) expressed government interest in expanding business involvement in the resiliency drills, emphasizing the goal of strengthening self-protection capabilities among private business and the public.

These efforts represent the start of a partnership to better integrate defense into everyday civilian life. With these initiatives, Taiwan's defense planners seek to leverage private resources to provide decentralized essential services and supply chain security during a contingency.

From Passive to Active Civilian Preparedness

In spite of this progress, Taiwan's civil defense efforts remain in their infancy. The Taiwanese government is currently seeking to modify the civil defense drills from an exercise in observation into one of passive inclu-

sion. For the most part, civilians are instructed to wait in shelters until the simulated strikes are over. In some instances during the exercises, this instruction was not provided, with shelters occasionally unavailable, aged, or in poor working order.

Even if these drills are executed to plan, the vast portion of the populace remain passive participants. Should a contingency expand beyond a few days of missile strikes, these civil defense measures would be wildly insufficient. The challenge lies in transitioning civilians from simply following instructions to becoming active contributors to the national defense effort. Civilians must possess well-practiced skills, high morale, and clearly defined roles beyond simply seeking shelter. This approach should be considered empowerment, not fear-mongering—and Taiwan can draw from several excellent global models of civil defense for its own needs. One notable model is Sweden.

Sweden's Total Defense Strategy

Sweden has long sought comprehensive security from its neighbor, Russia. During the Cold War, Sweden was deterred from joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) out of a fear that membership could spark a Soviet invasion of Finland. Instead, Sweden relied on its "Total Defense Strategy," a whole-of-society approach that combines military, government, private sector, and civil society efforts to fend off Soviet coercion and impose high costs on an invader. This legacy strategy was reintroduced as a response to Russia's attacks on Ukraine starting in 2014.

The Total Defense Strategy's key strategies include protecting civilians, preserving social order, distributing essential goods, and strengthening the public's resolve to defend the country. A central element is the Total Defense Duty, which applies to all Swedish citizens and foreign nationals in Sweden between the ages of 16 and 70. This duty does not exclusively involve military service. Citizens, including females, are expected to participate in either military service, civilian service under military direction to maintain critical societal functions, or a general national service obligation. Refusing these duties can lead to fines or imprisonment, which establishes a clear social contract under which every citizen has a legally-defined role.

The Total Defense Strategy also demands participation from the private sector. Businesses with the "*krigsviktiga företag*" designation—"war-important companies" like telecommunications, energy, and railroads—are expected to work closely with the government to provide goods and services during a crisis. The Swedish model also aims to make households self-sufficient for a designated duration of time.

Finally, the foundation of this entire strategy is psychological defense that can uphold a wartime effort in the face of unrelenting Russian information warfare. Sweden maintains a dedicated Psychological Defense Agency that is responsible for countering foreign malign influence activities and implementing training, exercises, and information initiatives to ensure social cohesion.

Taiwan's Path Forward

Taiwan's top priority is to develop and practice the mobilization of a decentralized civil defense effort, beyond just drills to shelter from missile/UAV strikes. The MOI Civil Defense Office (民防指揮管制所) is obligated to field a civil defense force (民防團隊), but the scope, responsibilities, and training remains murky. Nor is it clear that the MOI and MND have practiced wartime mobilization and transition for such a force. At the same time the relationship of that force to existing civil defense NGOs is undefined. This must be changed, as government agencies need to practice not just working with each other but with private organizations as well.

One potential area of cooperation could be the creation of a pre-established digital platform for use by the civil defense force, NGOs, local community leaders, and neighborhood associations to identify, vet, and organize volunteers by skillset during a crisis. These volunteers could then better manage localized shelter management, basic first aid, and decentralized distribution of supplies in concert with existing military and government emergency response protocols. This draws upon both Taiwan's COVID-era experience, as well as the expectations from Sweden's Total Defense Duty. Looking at the example of the Russia-Ukraine War, such volunteers will also be critical for noncombatant evacuations should the enemy advance onto the island.

Second, deeper and formalized public-private partnerships are needed. Taiwan can move beyond cursory private sector participation by establishing institutionalized partnerships between government agencies and critical areas of the private sector. While Taiwan already has agreements with companies like PX Mart and Taipower (台電), a broader set of "war-important industries" would drastically enhance Taiwan's supply chain resilience. The rumored use of convenience stores as wartime hubs would be a good example. Mandating regular, realistic joint exercises between the government, the military, and critical companies will provide a rigorous test of Taiwan's supply chain resilience and infrastructure protection. Ukraine's rapid

and vast expansion of its domestic arms industry also indicates the value of such partnerships during a protracted war. The private sector's participation could be sweetened with tax incentives or advantageous regulatory frameworks.

At the public level, Taiwanese society would benefit from wide-spread basic life-saving skills training, as well as courses in disinformation and propaganda identification. Such an effort would require the government to scale-up the activities of civil defense NGOs, such as via lessons and drills taught in schools, community workshops, and workplace safety programs. A Taiwanese version of Sweden's Psychological Defense Agency is needed to cultivate a resilient population.

Securing Taiwan's Future Through Societal Strength

A resilient Taiwan means a Taiwan that is capable of decisive action amid a crisis. Resilience is critical to deter two Chinese Communist Party delusions: first, the delusion that military force can overawe and panic the populace; second, the delusion that simply seizing a geographical location or killing political leadership will induce paralysis and capitulation.

By embracing a truly Whole-of-Society Defense that fosters active participation and self-reliance, Taiwan can demonstrate that its populace—not just its military—is willing and able to defend against coercion of any kind. The best civil defense is one that the adversary dares not openly test at all.

The main point: Taiwan has begun to emphasize "whole-of-society resilience" as a deterrent against aggression. To make this deterrent credible, Taiwan can adapt aspects of the Swedish Total Defense Strategy model to build on its own civil defense efforts.

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Welcome to Taiwan: Tourism and Soft Power

By: Jordan Laramore

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Tourism and Soft Power

Due to the fact that tourism is primarily seen through an economic lens, people do not usually give much thought to tourism when discussing foreign policy and international relations. However, tourism plays an essential role in politics—namely in the realm of soft power, defined as a country's ability to influence others without resorting to coercive pressure. When it comes to tourism, the idea is that through shared positive experiences facilitated by in-person visits, people will develop a favorable opinion of the destination nation. In turn, these experiences can bolster a nation's international image and legitimacy. As a result, tourism serves Taiwan's economic and diplomatic objectives, both boosting Taiwan's international support and diversifying its global connections.

Overview of Taiwan's Tourism

Taiwan's export-driven economy has a particular focus on technology, namely semiconductors. However, in recent years, the nation has invested heavily in its tourism industry to drive growth and diversify the economy. Taiwan's most successful year of tourism was 2019, right before the sector was paralyzed by the COVID-19 pandemic just months into 2020. That year, Taiwan saw over 11.8 million visitors to the island in 2019, with earnings from tourism for the year estimated to have surpassed NTD 445.6 billion (USD 14 billion).

Globally, COVID-19 precipitated the loss of jobs and trillions in revenue for the global tourism industry. For its part, Taiwan received 1.37 million international tourists in 2020, with earnings from tourism reaching NTD 53.9 billion (USD 1.8 billion)—representing an 88.3 percent and 87.5 percent decline from the previous year respectively. Albeit slowly, the industry has steadily recovered and appears to have returned to a level one may consider "normal." Still, Taiwan has yet to see its number of international visitors reach 2019 levels, welcoming 7.85 million tourists in 2024. Though the number of visitors is small compared to more famous tourist destinations in the region, like Japan and Thailand, this is an improvement from 2023, during which Taiwan had 6.4 million visitors.

Chinese Tourism to Taiwan

As the People's Republic of China (PRC) economy grew after its "reform and opening up" policy, a new market opened: PRC-origin tourism. Quickly, Taiwan saw a chance to expand its tourism industry and improve people-to-people exchanges across the Strait. During the administration of China-friendly Kuomintang (KMT, 國民黨) President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) from 2008 to 2016, cross-Strait relations were highly amicable. During this period Taiwan and China signed numerous cross-Strait agreements, many of which had practical

applications, such as agreements on civil air transportation and postal service cooperation. Eventually, Ma's approach culminated in a historic 2015 meeting with PRC President Xi Jinping (習近平) in Singapore. During this golden era of cross-Strait relations, Chinese tourists were the largest group of visitors to the island. In 2015, during the surge in tourism, Taiwan saw over 10 million visitors, with 4 million from China, accounting for 40 percent of visitors.

As shown in President Ma Ying-jeou's 2015 New Year's Day Message, when he said cross-Strait exchanges are "…going to lay the foundations for peace among the next generation of ethnic Chinese," the hope was that the increased people-to-people exchanges would not only provide economic benefits but also foster mutual understanding and reduce tensions in the long term. Some also believed that Chinese tourists or students in Taiwan could be inspired by its democracy and later push for democratic reforms after returning to China. For instance, a 2016 *Reuters* report covered Chinese tourists' interest in Taiwanese democracy, with one tourist and Chinese Communist Party (CCP, 中國共產黨) member saying, "In China, democracy is just a word, but in Taiwan they put it into practice." However, thus far, Chinese tourism to Taiwan has not produced democratic change in the PRC. Moreover, the cross-Strait relationship would steadily deteriorate once former President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) took office in 2016, as China ramped up pressure on the Taiwanese leader.

Beijing maintained an immense distrust of former President Tsai and sought to leverage tourism as a political and economic tool to influence her. In 2016, Taiwan saw a decline in the number of Chinese tourists. In response, Taipei accused China of limiting the number of lucrative tour groups allowed to visit. China, in turn, blamed a July 2016 bus crash in Taipei, which killed 24 Chinese tourists, for the decrease in visitors. In 2019, as cross-Strait tensions increased, China suspended individual travel to Taiwan. This time, the PRC's Ministry of Culture and Tourism (文化和旅遊部) explicitly stated that individual trips to Taiwan would be suspended "due to current cross-Strait relations." This led many observers to conclude that China was indeed weaponizing tourism to put pressure on the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民進黨) and former President Tsai Ing-wen.

The PRC has used similar pressure tactics on other nations, such as South Korea. China objected to the installation of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system, an American missile defense apparatus, in South Korea. In a show of dissatisfaction, PRC authorities are believed to have told travel agencies to stop selling trips to South Korea. Reduced tourism from China dealt a heavy blow to the travel industries in both Taiwan and South Korea.

Diversifying Taiwanese Tourism

Policymakers in Taiwan worry that their economy has become dangerously reliant on the economy of the PRC. To address concerns that Taiwan and China may be too close economically, policymakers have sought to reduce their economic dependence on China. The New Southbound Policy (NSP, 新南向政策) has become an important part of addressing such concerns. The NSP places increased emphasis on people-to-people exchanges and—as set out in the NSP guidelines—the government has tagged tourism as a key tool for promoting people-to-people exchanges. Since 2016, the Taiwanese government has eased or removed visa requirements for numerous nations, including NSP target countries, in its effort to increase tourism.

It appears that the objective of new measures promoting tourism is not only to increase the overall number of tourists but also to reduce reliance on Chinese tourists. This has seen some success, as demonstrated by the contrasts in tourists' countries of origin between 2015 and 2024. In 2024, Taiwan saw over 7.8 million inbound tourists. Though lower than 2019 levels, it marks a significant improvement from 2020. In 2024, PRC tourists could not break into Taiwan's top five nations by the total number of visitors, only placing seventh in the top ten. The top three nations by the number of visitors were Japan, Hong Kong, and South Korea–sending 1.3 million, 1.1 million, and 1 million tourists, respectively. Additionally, five NSP countries made it into the top ten list—two of which, the Philippines and Singapore, sent more visitors than China. Additionally, the target nations of Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam trail right behind China by number of arrivals. Current statistics regarding Taiwan's inbound travelers indicate that 2025 will follow a similar trend to that of 2024, with Japan, South Korea, and Hong Kong making up the largest plurality of visitors. This highlights that—despite a decrease in Chinese tourists—Taiwan has seen overall tourism grow.

Taiwan's local governments are also seizing every opportunity to promote tourism to boost local economies. For example, the Kaohsiung city government has exchanged delegations with numerous countries, such as Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, South Korea, and Vietnam, to promote itself as a tourist destination. In particular, the city has highlighted its local food scene to travel agencies and major media outlets from the

respective countries, and has invested heavily in renovating and revitalizing areas to appeal to tourists.

Last February, Kaohsiung held its inaugural Sunshine Island Vibe Fest in a further effort to generate tourism. In order to put on the event, Kaohsiung partnered with local representative offices from the Philippines, the United States, Japan, and Thailand. The event's goal was to promote cultural exchange, tourism, business, and regional cooperation among participating nations. It featured fresh food, live music, and a chance for attendees to build connections and develop greater familiarity with businesses and products from Taiwan and other participating nations. Meanwhile, Taiwan's Tourism Administration (交通部觀光署) has hosted overseas events to encourage individuals to visit the island, such as the Taiwan Day promotional event held in Thailand. In another move to support tourism, the Taiwanese government has enlisted a local Thai celebrity and travel agencies to produce a short film and other promotional materials.

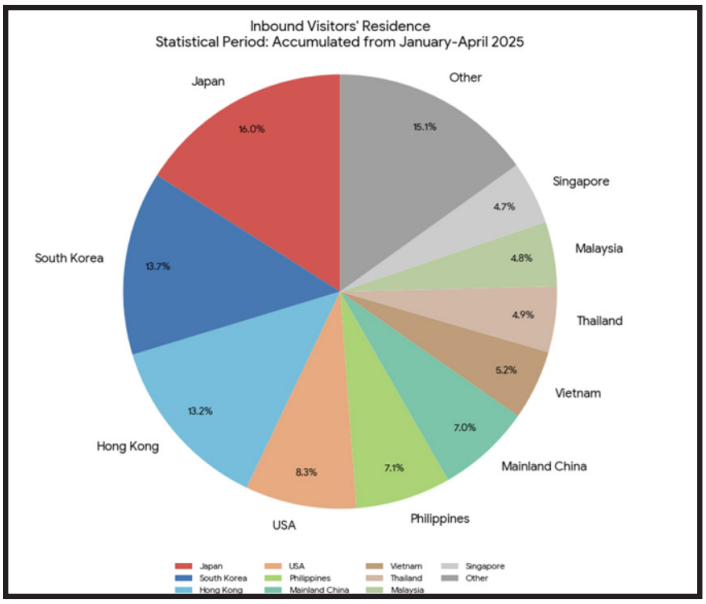

Image: Inbound Taiwan visitors' residences from January-April 2025 (Image source: Tourism Statistics Database, Ministry of Transportation)

In 2024, Taiwan's *Central News Agency* reported that Kaohsiung's concerts attracted 1.71 million attendees and generated more than NTD 5.7 billion (USD 174.15 million) in tourism-related revenue. Meanwhile, the Port of Kaohsiung is expected to welcome 115 cruise ships in 2025, with international cruise passenger arrivals estimated to exceed 170,000, an increase from the 90,000 passengers Taiwan welcomed in the previous year. Due to efforts by federal and the local governments, not only are more tourists able to visit Taiwan and gain a first-person perspective of being there in person, but local Taiwanese economies have also benefited.

Conclusion

In the spring of 2023, the Pew Research Center surveyed international favorability regarding Taiwan and found that a median of 48 percent of people across 24 countries hold a favorable view of the island. This is contrasted with a median of 28 percent who hold an unfavorable view of Taiwan. However, of greater interest is the quarter of respondents that have no opinion on Taiwan. This indicates that Taiwan's image has room for growth and a potential market to advertise tourism to. For instance, European countries like Germany and the United Kingdom tend to have favorable views of Taiwan but make up only a small portion of visitors. Europe as whole only contributed around 30 thousand visitors in May 2025. Europe and its large population—Germany alone has a population of around 84 million—offers economic opportunity for the island's tourism sector. If Taiwan can tap into that market, it should expand its messaging both to those who have favorable views of Taiwan and those who have no opinion of the island, since they are the most likely individuals to visit Taiwan.

In terms of what future tourism efforts should focus on, a Taiwan Tourism Administration survey discovered that inbound visitors overwhelmingly cited food (82.17 percent), the island's scenic beauty (69.66 percent), and the friendliness of the Taiwanese (47.20 percent) as reasons for choosing Taiwan for sightseeing. Since Taiwanese officials know why people choose to travel to the island, they should therefore lean into those strengths. For instance, because food is a major draw for tourists, Taiwan should look to that to attract visitors. In this vein, Taiwan can draw inspiration from Thailand's famous Global Thai Program as an example to follow.

The Global Thai Program is a diplomatic initiative by the Thai Government to increase the number of Thai restaurants worldwide by deliberately crafting policies intended to make it easier for Thai restaurants abroad to import food, train chefs, and receive financial support. By familiarizing people with Thai food, individuals are more inclined to visit Thailand to try the "authentic" version and experience the culture firsthand. Taiwan should do the same and look for local and overseas partners to bring Taiwanese food to the world and more aggressively support the growth of Taiwanese restaurants abroad. One can look at the popularity of

boba tea, which has become the poster child of Taiwanese culture to millions, and the success of Din Tai Fung abroad as an example of the potential success Taiwanese food can have when it goes global. In the long run the goals should be to attract more tourists, increase Taiwanese food exports, and familiarize foreigners with Taiwanese cuisine and culture, much like Thailand's highly successful Global Thai Program.

Soft power is key to the narrative battle between the PRC and Taiwan, and tourism is a key building block of soft power. Soft power is an area in which Taiwan can and has shown success: look no further than the current boba tea craze, and its former role as a hub for Mandopop music. Tourism, as a soft power tool, strengthens international support, enhances visibility, and asserts Taiwanese identity on the global stage. Through visiting Taiwan, it becomes clear that Taiwan is not the same as China. Tourism helps Taiwan tell its story, and fosters understanding and recognition of its unique identity. The island of Taiwan is home to democracy, personal freedom, and a thriving civil society, which stands in sharp contrast to China and its authoritarian tendencies. Therefore, inviting people to experience Taiwan personally may be one of the most practical ways to affirm the nation's democratic identity. Personal experiences shape people's opinions in profound ways—and through tourism, Taiwan can shape opinions in its favor while reaping the economic benefit thereof.

The main point: Tourism is known to yield economic benefits, but it can also be used as a tool for soft power. As a result, tourism is one way that Taiwan can assert itself as thriving and successful in the eyes of the global community. Therefore, Taiwan should encourage international tourism to expand its popular image beyond the issues of semiconductors and geopolitical tensions.

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An Ally in the Arts: How International Independent Filmmaking and Film Festivals Enhance Taiwan's Visibility

By: Trinity Tai

Trinity Tai was a Summer 2025 intern at the Global Taiwan Institute.

At the 2025 Cannes Film Festival, Taiwanese director Shih-Ching Tsou's (鄒時擎) solo directorial debut, *Left-Handed Girl* (左撇子女孩), earned the Gan Foundation Award for Distribution—an accolade commissioned to help new filmmakers distribute their first feature films across France. Taiwan's increased visibility at renowned international independent film festivals like the Cannes Film Festival is much welcomed. Indeed, independent films' reputation for prioritizing storytelling over commercial appeal, as well as their trademark grassroots approach to film production and distribution, make them an ideal tool to amplify a unique, pluralistic Taiwanese identity.

In recent years, the proliferation of streaming platforms has granted a handful of independent and commercially-oriented Taiwanese films widespread exposure. Nonetheless, many of Taiwan's most globally influential films first gained recognition via their success in large international independent film festivals. Hou Hsiao-hsien's (侯孝賢) *City of Sadness* (悲情城市), a sprawling film about the aftermath of World War II and the Kuomintang's (KMT, 國民黨) rule in Taiwan, earned Taiwan its first Golden Lion at the 46th Venice International Film Festival in 1989. The late Edward Yang's (楊德昌) *A Brighter Summer Day* (牯嶺街少年殺人事件) won critical acclaim at the Tokyo International Film Festival, where it was awarded the FIPRESCI Prize, while Yang's later work *Yi Yi* (一一) secured him a Best Director Prize at the 2000 Cannes Film Festival. *Vive L'Amour* (愛情萬歲) earned Malaysian director Tsai Ming-liang (蔡明亮)—a prominent figure in Taiwanese cinema—a Golden Lion award at the 1994 Venice Film Festival. In the same decade, Academy Award-winning Taiwanese director Ang Lee's (李安) early independent films, such as *The Wedding Banquet* and *Eat Drink Man Woman*, secured a host of nominations and accolades from independent film festivals like the Berlinale and award ceremonies like the Independent Spirit Awards. Taiwan maintains a notable presence in international film festivals today, and *Left-Handed Girl*'s recognition at Cannes marks a continuation of this legacy.

Indie for Taiwan: Capturing Crowds, Interpersonal Exchange, and Symbolic Alignment

Taiwan's continuous presence in the independent film scene, especially at international independent film festivals, helps cultivate its soft power and strengthens its bid for international recognition—both practically and symbolically. Taiwanese independent films comprise a majority of Taiwan's most lasting contributions to the global film industry. In US colleges, syllabi for courses on Taiwanese cinema favor films from the Taiwan New Wave Cinema movement, a period in Taiwan's film history dominated by independent productions. Past

Taiwanese film festival winners have also been immortalized in the Criterion Collection, a New York-based company best known for its renowned selection of "important classic and contemporary films." Preceding Taiwanese films have built an audience base that Taiwan should continue to invigorate.

Taiwan's participation in international independent film festivals also improves Taiwan's visibility and soft power by fostering people-to-people ties. Independent international film festivals like Cannes and the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) present attendees with an array of networking opportunities, spanning breakfast meetings to professional development events. Taiwanese filmmakers' engagement in such invite-only events functions as an exercise in people-to-people diplomacy by letting Taiwanese industry professionals forge professional networks and broaden other attendees' perceptions of Taiwan. Besides professional development, separate social gatherings made available to the attendees of prominent film festivals also serve as avenues for publicity. The appearance of high-profile figures like American director Sean Baker and Japanese filmmaker Hirokazu Kore-eda at the Taiwan Film and Audiovisual Institute's 2025 Cannes Taiwan Cinema Night—an externally-hosted event celebrating achievements in Taiwanese filmmaking—can further assist in expanding the global reach of Taiwanese independent films.

Figure: Visualizations of Taiwanese submissions accepted to compete in the most well-attended international independent film festivals (Figure source: Author's original work via Flourish)

More than any other segment of the film community, independent film festivals have boosted Taiwan's bids for international recognition. The 2023 and 2024 Sundance Film Festivals Asia were held consecutively in Taipei, with both featuring a curated lineup of international independent films and Taiwanese short films. While the event—the product of a collaboration between the Taiwanese American-run company G2Go Entertainment (雞兔狗) and the Sundance Institute—is smaller than the Sundance film festival in Utah, it offers ample opportunity for emerging Taiwanese independent filmmakers to showcase their projects to a regional (and, at times, global) audience. Event organizers' decision to hold the festival in Taiwan also indicates the global independent film community's openness to establishing Taiwan as a hub where independent film enthusiasts from across Asia can gather.

Another indicator of the independent film community's acceptance of Taiwan is reflected in the absence of contentious naming conventions undercutting Taiwan's submissions to international independent film festivals. Typically, when Taiwan is permitted to compete in international sporting events like the Olympics or join international organizations such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), it can only do so under the name "Chinese Taipei." However, the top international film festivals appear to attribute Taiwan's contributions directly to "Taiwan" or "Taipei," sometimes even explicitly naming Taiwan as a "country." [1] In an announcement publicizing its 2025 festival lineup, the Los Angeles-based Slamdance Film Festival listed Taiwan as a "country" from which submissions were received. Meanwhile, a blogpost published on the official website of the widely attended Clermont-Ferrand short film festival in France chronicles the thematic evolution of Taiwanese cinema in an entry titled "2023 country in focus: Taiwan." Independent festivals' explicit recognition of Taiwan and the stories Taiwanese filmmakers have to share presents a stark contrast to Taiwan's treatment by the mainstream film industry.

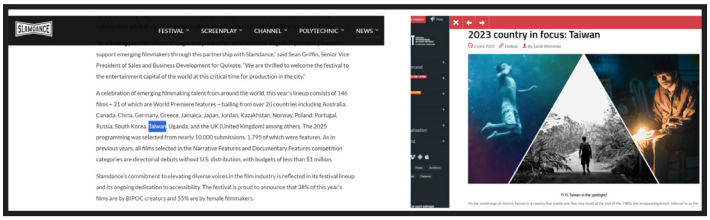

Image: Screenshots from Slamdance and Clermont-Ferrand's website explicitly recognizing Taiwan. (Source: Screenshots captured by author)

International film festivals have also publicly defied the People's Republic of China's (PRC) political stances. To the PRC's chagrin, *Revolution of Our Times* (時代革命), a documentary about Hong Kong's struggle for democratization, premiered at the 2021 Cannes Film Festival—a day before the winner of the Palme d'Or was

announced. Due to the last-minute announcement of the documentary's inclusion, the PRC was unable to prohibit its filmmakers from participating in that year's festival, but Chinese films were noticeably absent from the 2022 Cannes official selection. Even before the incident, the Chinese government had begun to toughen its stance on PRC filmmakers' attendance at international film festivals, especially those organized by Western nations. In 2018, China's State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT, 国家广播电视总局) was dissolved, further consolidating the Party's control over Chinese films. Following the change, the number of Chinese film entries withdrawn from Western international film festivals at the last minute experienced a steady rise. It seems that Cannes had concealed the debut of *Revolution of Our Times* in order to prevent Chinese films from being pulled from the festival lineup.

Sparking Dialogue on Inclusivity: Indie Films as a Jumping-off Point

Beyond using film festivals to promote its visibility, independent filmmaking can aid Taiwan in capturing its unique social landscape and political challenges through more pluralistic and complex cinematic narratives. Taiwan, whose history was shaped by multiple colonial empires and whose sovereignty is currently contested by the PRC, also has an obligation to define and display Taiwanese identity as inclusively as possible. Independent filmmaking, while complementing the grassroots spirit and pluralism of Taiwanese democracy, should not be treated as a flawless tool for producing diverse interpretations of who and what constitute Taiwan.

Mongrel (白衣蒼狗), an acclaimed Taiwanese independent film that follows the life of a Thai migrant care worker in Taiwan, was one of six Taiwanese films at Cannes. While many critics praised the film's depiction of the adversities endured by Southeast Asian migrant care workers in Taiwan, a handful of critics and users of the popular social networking platform Letterboxd critiqued the film for its depiction of a pressing social issue. One reviewer from Singapore wrote: "I am sorry for the migrant workers of Taiwan who thought they could see some form of representation for themselves but were delivered with a sad, one-dimensional portrayal of their daily hardship." Mongrel's mixed reviews point to independent films' potential for catalyzing dialogue. Independent films play a crucial role in uncovering underrepresented perspectives, but viewers should be cautious about heralding them as any more than a jumping-off point from which they can conduct further research on Taiwan.

Apart from sparking conversation, Taiwan must place particular emphasis on giving aspiring filmmakers from underrepresented communities an opportunity to shape and broadcast their stories. Taiwan's use of independent films as a medium of storytelling, alone, cannot positively influence how it is perceived internationally. Independent films have added diverse perspectives to Taiwan's mainstream film industry, but to further democratize Taiwanese filmmaking, filming equipment and knowledge must be made more accessible. To this end, Indigenous filmmaker Sayun Simung inaugurated the Ministry of Culture-backed Indigenous Film Academy of Taiwan (台灣原住民族電影學院) in August of 2022 to equip Indigenous communities—many of which have been reduced to subjects of outsider examination—with the exposure and resources they need to become agents within their own narratives. Still, as of June 6, 2025, the Academy indicates that it remains in its "early stages," suggesting room for further progress toward supporting Indigenous-led filmmaking initiatives.

Sustaining Investment in Independent Filmmaking

Taiwan should continue to seize on the significance of its submissions to international independent film festivals as an avenue for public diplomacy. In 2024, the Bureau of Audiovisual and Music Industry Development (BAMID, 文化部影視及流行音樂產業局) of Taiwan's Ministry of Culture (中華民國文化部) collaborated with Marché du Film (the Cannes film market) to launch the "Golden Horse Goes to Cannes" initiative. The initiative, though seemingly a one-off occurrence, secured the entry of five Taiwanese films into the 2024 Cannes Film Festival. Meanwhile, Taiwan's eagerness to host satellite versions of established international film festivals like the Sundance Film Festival cements it as an active contributor to global indie filmmaking. International Taiwanese film festivals, including Impression Taiwan's Taiwan Film Festival Berlin and Taiwan Entrepreneurs Society Taipei/Toronto's (TESTT) Taiwan Film Festival in Toronto also facilitate the entry of Taiwanese independent films into markets from which they are typically absent. By ensuring the widespread reach of Taiwanese independent films to global independent film enthusiasts, Taiwan can build upon its legacy in independent filmmaking.

Apart from appearing at festivals, Taiwan's government and filmmakers should aim to negotiate the addition of a "Taiwan International Independent Film Festival

Favorites" lineup across popular streaming platforms. Such a curated list would position Taiwan as an active contributor to the indie film scene while ensuring selected films reach a more general audience. The Taiwanese government can also increase funding to various media organizations to make a select number of films free to watch on demand for a limited time, as it currently does with Taiwan Plus. Furthermore, to maximize the narrative-building potential of such resources, free films should be coupled with educational resources.

Reflecting Taiwanese Society and Values through Independent Films

Outside of the works they write and direct, Taiwan-based creatives also leave their mark on the independent film scene through their work as producers. Taiwanese co-produced projects are equally vital to helping Taiwan construct a narrative about the type of place it is and the values it supports. Already, BAMID offers monetary incentives to increase the number of Taiwanese-produced foreign films and TV dramas. Nonetheless, the focus for Taiwanese creatives should lie in exercising greater intentionality about the projects with which they align rather than simply increasing the quantity of films they produce. This can entail co-producing queer films, films that explore pro-democracy themes, or films that critique social issues Taiwan has voiced its interest in rectifying.

Independent films, known for their grassroots spirit, align closely with Taiwan's values-based and civil society-oriented democracy. They have also given Taiwan a form of uncompromised global exposure that it lacks at other international events. Taiwan should utilize the opportunities for visibility and people-to-people exchange afforded by international independent film festivals to showcase an all-encompassing picture of Taiwan. Still, ensuring that Taiwanese films are showcased at international independent film festivals is not the end of the road. The quality of the stories Taiwan tells and produces also matters—notably, more efforts should be made to center the perspectives of marginalized groups.

The main point: The visibility of Taiwanese films in international independent film festivals constitute an indispensable part of Taiwan's efforts to expand its international space. On top of film festivals' greater acceptance of Taiwanese works, independent filmmaking is generally more conducive to amplifying non-mainstream perspectives. However, independent filmmaking is just a starting point, and concrete measures to present a more expansive picture of Taiwan must accompany funding for existing independent filmmaking and festival collaborations.

[1] All the top 10 international film festivals credit Taiwan's entries as from "Taiwan" or "Taipei."

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