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Why Taiwan's 2026 Local Elections Will be Key to PRC Cognitive Warfare Strategy

By: Eliza Cormer

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At the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) annual Taiwan Work Conference (对台工作会议) in February this year, top Chinese officials reportedly discussed establishing a task force to interfere in Taiwan's November 2026 local elections. The officials outlined a specific strategy: employing united front work in cyberspace to damage "Taiwan independence forces" (台獨勢力), a phrase the CCP frequently uses to identify officials of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民進黨). The effort was reportedly classified as a top priority within the CCP's Taiwan policy for the year.

Meanwhile, academics in Taiwan anticipate that the People's Republic of China (PRC, 中华人民共和国) will launch initiatives offering economic incentives to cities and counties in Taiwan, such as by purchasing agricultural products, loosening import restrictions, and increasing group tourism efforts. The use of economic tools to influence Taiwan's voters in local elections is not new. Indeed, reports from the CCP's Taiwan Work Conference suggest that economic incentives will likely be accompanied by subtler, PRC-orchestrated cognitive warfare operations, involving targeted information campaigns to shape Taiwanese perceptions on key issues.

Election periods in Taiwan historically bring about an uptick in influence operations facilitated by the PRC. This was seen on a large scale during the 2024 national elections—with the Legislative Yuan (LY, 立法院) and the presidency on the line, electoral outcomes would have a distinct impact on Taiwan's cross-Strait policy. Although the upcoming elections in 2026 will place local—not national—officials on the ballot, they still have significant influence on Taiwan's political landscape and will elevate certain candidates in advance of the 2028 presidential elections.

Two factors have accelerated PRC information operations targeting Taiwan in recent years: intensifying cross-Strait tensions, and developments in AI and data harvesting technology. Taiwan's National Security Bureau (NSB, 國家安全局) recorded a 60 percent increase in inauthentic social media accounts between 2024 and 2025,

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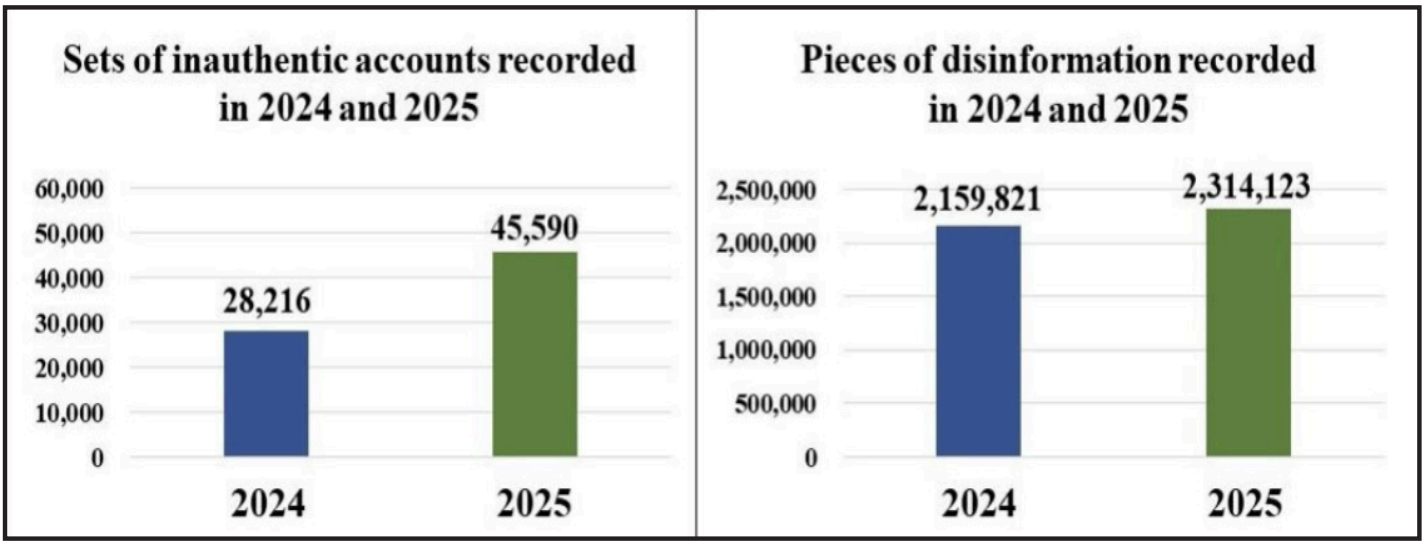

Image: Taiwan's National Security Bureau statistics on inauthentic accounts and disinformation in 2025. (Image source: NSB)

and tracked over 2 million instances of disinformation within the same year (a 74 percent increase since 2023).

With local elections set for November 2026, Taiwan can expect to face targeted information operations from the PRC in the coming months. This article will examine how Beijing's cognitive warfare operations have evolved both strategically and operationally, and why they are increasingly relevant to this year's local elections in Taiwan.

Growing Sophistication in PRC Information Operations

In January 2026, the NSB released a report titled *Analysis of China's Cognitive Warfare Tactics Against Taiwan in 2025* (2025年中共對臺認知作戰操作手法分析), which relayed data on cognitive warfare efforts by the PRC to manipulate public opinion in Taiwan. The report identified the PRC's four strategic goals: to "exacerbate internal divisions within Taiwan," "weaken Taiwanese people's will to resist the enemy," "influence allies' willingness to support Taiwan," and "win support for China's stance." The NSB outlined the primary social media manipulation tactics employed by the PRC, as well as the PRC-based firms that collaborate with the government on information operations. According to the report, the PRC directs Chinese IT and marketing companies to "analyse Taiwan's social dynamics, establish diversified channels to disseminate disinformation, employ inauthentic accounts to manipulate public opinion, use AI to generate highly realistic videos, [and] conduct cyber intrusions to hijack Taiwanese users' accounts."

The strategic interests of Beijing's cognitive warfare tactics have shifted focus in recent years from promoting pro-China sentiment to stoking social divisions and elevating distrust in Taiwan's government, political leaders, and military capability. Alongside the shift in narrative priorities, PRC-based influence actors have increased the sophistication and subtlety of their information campaigns. Following the last local elections in 2022, the Taiwanese NGO Doublethink Lab reported that PRC interference and information efforts had grown increasingly decentralized and harder to track, with a decline in content farm production and a shift in focus towards identifying and leveraging existing divisive issues within Taiwan. This report identified that during the election period, PRC-led information campaigns amplified discourse on select contentious issues through CCP-directed media entities as well as Taiwanese media entities with aligning values but no relationship to the CCP. One such example was a rumor suggesting that the DPP was planning to sell Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC, 台灣半導體股份有限公司) to the United States, which was later found to have been heavily circulated by inauthentic accounts from the PRC.

PRC Strategic Interests are Increasingly Relevant to Local Elections

PRC efforts to influence and spread disinformation during Taiwan's national elections has been widely covered. Indeed, in national elections where cross-Strait relations are a perpetual talking point, the PRC's inter-

ests in electoral outcomes are relatively clear. During the 2024 national elections, the PRC reportedly engaged in information campaigns to amplify criticisms of the DPP-led government's handling of an egg-shortage crisis. PRC actors channeled critical information through state-owned media outlets, and conducted social media campaigns (primarily on Facebook). In a similar campaign, PRC actors reportedly disseminated forged documents alleging massive "dollar diplomacy" cash transfers from Taiwan to Paraguay, escalating criticisms of then-presidential candidate Lai's foreign engagement. The forged documents were also linked to PRC-affiliated online actors.

Local elections in Taiwan were historically insulated from national policy debates or cross-Strait issues; with voting outcomes in these elections typically shaped by local issues such as housing, food security, and patronage. However, following a year of intense political polarization, Taiwanese society in 2026 is arguably more vulnerable to PRC attempts at division. As partisan polarization increases, local politics within Taiwan are increasingly influenced by national issues rather than local ones. Such a dynamic has decreased the political power of local factions and rendered electoral outcomes more reliant on partisan allegiance.

Coinciding with the nationalization of the local political landscape in Taiwan is the nation's increasing susceptibility to PRC cognitive warfare. Local political outcomes often elevate and position political leaders to hold national office, in turn impacting cross-Strait politics. The outcomes of local races are also opportunities for the PRC to grow its influence on local issues, through candidates who promote closer economic ties with the PRC. Some analysts argue that local elections are more conducive to PRC influence operations than national ones, as the information space is fragmented, and PRC actors can conduct campaigns with less chance of detection.

Image: Documents leaked from Golaxy depicting data collection on key political figures in Taiwan, including Ko Wen-je (柯文哲), Lai Ching-te (賴清德), and Su Tseng-chang (蘇貞昌) (Image source: Vanderbilt University)

Expanding PRC Efforts: Reported Interference in the 2025 KMT Chair Elections

In October 2025, allegations surfaced regarding PRC interference in the KMT chairmanship election. During the race to decide the party's next chair, KMT political commentator Jaw Shaw-kong (趙少康) alleged that AI-generated content and newly created social media accounts with foreign IP addresses had targeted the moderate candidate Hau Lung-bin (郝龍斌) and promoted the conservative, Beijing-friendly candidate Cheng Li-wun (鄭麗文), who ultimately won the election. The NSB later announced that they had identified over 1,200 TikTok and YouTube videos discussing the election that had been created by overseas accounts. Speculation regarding PRC interference elicited shock and concern among some KMT officials and members, who trend towards friendlier views on relations with the PRC. Interference in intra-party elections, specifically KMT ones, suggests a more subtle and intricate PRC influence strategy.

Expanding PRC Efforts: Growing AI Capabilities

The expansion of global AI use has widened the capacity of disinformation and influence campaigns, and created new challenges for countering them. Fake accounts are harder to identify and track. Deep-fakes are more convincing. Content is more acutely targeted to audiences.

In 2025, Vanderbilt University's Institute of National Security released leaked documents exposing the operations of a PRC-based "influence-for-hire" company, GoLaxy (中科天玑). The investigation uncovered GoLaxy's use of AI-powered Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) systems to conduct large-scale influence operations to impact foreign elections, including in Taiwan, encompassing extensive data on national and local Taiwanese political figures, parties, and institutions. Analysis by Doublethink Lab outlines how GoLaxy engaged in one project that collected 50,000 Taiwanrelated news items, and categorized actors mentioned into "Hardliners (顽固派), Moderates (友好派), Swing Voters (摇摆派), Objectivists (客观派), and their opposites." Each category included at least 1,000 key individuals, enabling development of targeted and politically impactful influence campaigns. This discovery has provided significant insight into PRC efforts to develop fully autonomous FIMI systems and incorporate AI models into comprehensive information campaigns.

Conclusion

Evidence suggests that Taiwan will likely remain a target of PRC influence operations in the November local elections. Though cognitive warfare operations seem all but certain, their full scope and impact is yet to be determined. Civil society efforts in Taiwan to investigate them, such as Doublethink Lab's election monitoring hub, have broadened in recent years. With dogged investigative efforts at all levels of society, there remains hope that PRC influence operations during the local election cycle will not escape reporting. By attuning voters to these interference threats, monitoring efforts have developed into a robust and effective defense force in their own right.

The main point: As the quantity and quality of Beijing's cognitive warfare operations against Taiwan increase, observers are focused on the 2026 local elections in Taiwan as a target of PRC influence. The growing divide both within and between political parties in Taiwan exposes vulnerabilities for PRC information operations to exploit. Meanwhile, developments in AI have allowed PRC-based influence actors to conduct more tailored information operations against the island.

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Trust as Infrastructure: How Transparency Can Save Taiwan's Digital Lifeline

By: Liu I-chen

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In 2025, as reported in a *Nikkei Asia* investigation, Taiwan experienced an unprecedented surge in subsea cable disruptions. These incidents were widely attributed to People's Republic of China (PRC, 中华人民共和国) gray zone tactics, designed to test the island's maritime security and connectivity resilience. Indeed, over the past five years, most cable incidents around Taiwan have been caused by human activity, often involving vessels carrying flags of convenience from other countries. As these disruptions transition from isolated events into a persistent campaign of coercion, Taiwan's ability to secure its future depends on building a resilient system that ensures its connection to the world—while simultaneously maintaining the fundamental right to information.

In March 2026, former Taiwanese legislator Jason Hsu

testified before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, warning that Taiwan's connectivity is surgically vulnerable. Cutting just three primary subsea cable clusters could effectively sever 99 percent of Taiwan's external bandwidth. While the recent deployment of Low Earth Orbit (LEO) satellite services such as the partnership between Chunghwa Telecom (中華電信) and Eutelsat OneWeb can offer a vital fallback option, it remains a narrow pipe for bandwidth.

Amid this intensifying threat, Taiwanese policymakers argue—for the sake of national security—that the governance, decision-making, implementation processes and the redundancy planning of critical infrastructure should remain "invisible" to the public. However, in the era of hybrid warfare, invisibility does not guarantee protection. Instead, it may become a source of vulnerability. In this regard, only through transparency, accountability, and substantive participation of civil society can Taiwan demonstrate its most formidable resilience to PRC coercion.

The Psychological Battlefield

The goal of the PRC targeting Taiwan's subsea cables has been to isolate the island from the inside out. Blocking information flows creates a devastating rupture in trust, both among citizens who lose access to reliable information and between the public and institutions that fail to explain what is happening. Yet, in recent policy fora, senior Taiwanese experts have argued that the government's priority should be to "pacify society" rather than simply "disclose information." Stakeholders even suggested that the public's right to know should be curtailed in the name of national security to prevent exposing weaknesses. However, international human rights law holds that national security justifications should not be used to restrict access to information that serves the public interest.

While this national security logic may seem rational at first glance, it inadvertently achieves the PRC's objectives. Cutting subsea cables is designed to instill fear by blocking access to information, which affects an open society's ability to disclose more information. When governments fail to provide genuine explanations to citizens during internet slowdowns or outages, suspicion quickly spreads and disinformation may thrive in an information vacuum. Citizens may ask: "Is the government incompetent?" "Is this an enemy attack?" "Has Taiwan been abandoned by the world?" The panic and uncertainty bred by opacity constitute one of the principal objectives Taiwan's adversaries seek to achieve.

Recognizing the severity of these gray-zone threats, Taiwan attempted a legislative solution in early 2026. The implementation of a series of amendments, including revisions to the *Telecommunications Management Act* (電信管理法) and the *Law of Ships* (船舶法), has significantly stiffened penalties for intentional cable damage, with offenders now facing up to seven years in prison and fines of up to NTD 10 million (approximately USD 300,000). Crucially, these reforms mandate that all vessels operating within Taiwan's territorial sea, as well as vessels prohibited from operating in restricted waters under Taiwan's jurisdiction, must keep their Automatic Identification Systems (AIS) switched on at all times. As a navigational tracking system, AIS transmits a vessel's identity, location, and direction in real time. Its mandatory activation is particularly significant given that vessels suspected of involvement in gray-zone operations around Taiwan have been repeatedly documented as disabling their AIS transponders to conceal their movements and avoid accountability. While these amendments provide the government with more robust tools for maritime attribution, they do not address the need for timely and systematic information-sharing with the public when connectivity disruptions occur.

Transparency as Defense

Ukraine's wartime experience offers a starkly different lesson. When Russia devastated Ukraine's power grid in the winter of 2022, its energy company did not choose concealment. Instead, it adopted a strategy of radical transparency, providing daily updates on damage details and precise power rationing schedules. This transparency did not lead to collapse. Rather, it allowed the public to reorganize their lives with predictability and transformed potential anger into collective support for the repair crews.

Taiwan's vibrant civic tech community has demonstrated a similar form of resilience, grounded in transparency with bottom-up initiatives. One example is the g0v community, a decentralized network of civic tech activists dedicated to solving social issues with open-source transparency. They have initiated rounds of hackathon-style meetings to map consequences of systemic internet disruptions and potential civil society responses. Other civil society members launched projects such as the "Taiwan Submarine Cable Real-time Map," which successfully compelled government agencies to publicly disclose the latest status of cable disruptions and create public awareness regarding the danger of subsea cable disruptions.

These initiatives prove that civil society can play an active role in defense that increases public awareness and seeks solutions. The government should embrace this momentum by proactively incorporating civil society actors. While the surge in cable disruptions was aimed at exposing Taiwan's fragility, institutionalized transparency and a resilient approach could provide a new, feasible global norm for critical infrastructure protection.

Beyond the Black Box of Bandwidth

However, Taiwan's current approach to resource allocation remains worrying. Frequent cable damage has forced Taiwan to actively turn to LEO satellites as a backup system to keep Taiwan connected. Nevertheless, LEO satellites can provide only a fraction of the bandwidth of subsea cables. Therefore, how—and for whom—this limited resource is prioritized during a crisis is critical. As of now, there is no publicly available information on these protocols, though it appears that connectivity will be restricted primarily to the defense sector and core national security functions.

However, Taiwan's designation of bandwidth in a national crisis cannot be shielded from oversight simply in the name of "national security." Taiwan urgently needs a more transparent and inclusive model that addresses the challenges at different levels.

First, transparency stabilizes trust within society. Providing open data on latency and cable damage directly counters the psychological attacks that adversaries use to destabilize a society. When people understand the "why" and "how long," they can adapt rather than react with fear. While transparency cannot physically repair a severed cable, it is the only mechanism that prevents a technical failure from escalating into a total breakdown of trust. One possible approach is to further utilize the Whole-of-Society Defense Resilience Committee (全社會防衛韌性委員會) under the Office of the President. The committee should expand its focus from technical redundancies towards an institutional mechanism that can provide transparency and include broader civil society experts.

Second, transparency turns security into a collective effort. The government can work alongside civic tech experts, civil society, and service providers to identify which of Taiwan's critical services—spanning daily livelihood, economic activity, and social functions—would be compromised in a total cable severance scenario, and to what extent. This collaborative approach ensures that bandwidth allocation planning is more resilient than a top-down, military-only strategy.

Third, openness fulfills Taiwan's commitment to international human rights law. This also upholds the right to seek and receive information, as protected under Article 19 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, the right to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas of all kinds.

Hybrid warfare specifically targets social cohesion. Replacing the outdated "invisible infrastructure" mindset with a radical transparency framework will further enhance resilience. By leading efforts to provide the public with real-time information, civil society can be included as partners in defense. Ultimately, trust driven by transparency and civic participation remains the foundation upon which Taiwan's true resilience is built.

The main point: PRC grey-zone tactics are increasingly targeting Taiwan's subsea cables. Instead of shielding infrastructure governance from the public, Taiwan should adopt a multistakeholder approach. The government should provide timely information on disruptions and involve civil society in resilience planning. Taiwan's most durable defense against hybrid coercion is trust through transparency.

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Taiwan's Labor Practices in the Crosshairs

By: Hope Ngo

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In recent years, Giant Manufacturing (巨大機械工業股份有限公司), a Taiwanese company known as the world's largest bicycle manufacturer, has faced a series of mounting challenges. In early 2025, the company reported a whopping 60 percent decline—equivalent to USD 57.6 million—in operating profits for the year prior. Giant said the downturn was triggered after a re-evaluation of their inventory, as a result of a decline in value from discounting. After that announcement, Giant had been looking forward to healthier balance sheets for 2025. However, in September, Giant hit another major setback when it became the first Taiwanese manufacturing company to be slapped with a Withhold Release Order (WRO) from US Customs and

Border Protection (CBP) "due to violations of (laws) prohibiting goods made with forced labor from entering the US."

The order—which is valid until Giant can prove otherwise—covers bicycles, bicycle parts, and accessories made at Giant's factories on home soil. It also allows US agents to seize Giant's "Made in Taiwan" products, regardless of the US port of entry. At the time, it was estimated that the WRO could cost Giant as much as five percent in lost revenues. A Giant spokesperson denied the charges of forced labor against the company, insisting that the Taiwan Giant headquarters were a "model factory," and that US officials "never conducted an on-site inspection or asked for information."

Image: A Giant bicycle shop in the Tso-ying District of Kaohsiung City (高雄市左營區). *(Image source: Wikimedia Commons)*

While the CBP did not cite specific evidence that tied Giant to explicit instances of forced labor, the order lists five alleged forced labor indicators as set by the International Labour Organization: the abuse of vulnerability, abusive working and living conditions, debt bondage, withholding of wages, and excessive overtime. The charges may have been a shock to some, but they were not surprising to those familiar to Taiwan's industrial landscape and the labor dynamics underpinning its economy. Only months prior to the CBP action, Danish investigative journalist Peter Bengtsen published *Speed Up!*, a study identifying which manufacturing sectors were most likely to experience incidents of forced labor. The report compiled interviews from 200 migrant workers conducted between 2022 and 2025, and name-checked 13 firms—including Giant and rival firm Merida (美利達工業股份有限公司)—as having benefited from forced labor. The results of Bengtsen's investigation casts aside the argument that Giant invited scrutiny because it is a global leader in the bicycle manufacturing industry. Instead, they draw attention to the prevalence of forced labor across Taiwan's industrial sector.

The CBP's order proved to be a portent of things to come. Just weeks after Taipei signed its *Agreement on Reciprocal Trade* (ART) with the United States, the country was named by the United States Trade Representative's Office as one of 60 economies in which industries are accused of engaging in the practice of forced labor. This is in addition to a Section 301 investigation which was—in the USTR's words—triggered by "concerns" over what it called "structural excess capacity and production in specific manufacturing sectors," including semiconductors, electronics, and machinery.

The idea that people work under slave-like conditions in the 21st century might seem archaic, but it is a situation in which millions around the globe find themselves. Statistics from the International Labour Organization show that 27.6 million men, women, and children are trapped into forced labor worldwide—most of them in the Asia Pacific region—with migrant workers facing a risk roughly three times higher than others. To this day, the practice is lucrative. Globally, illegal forced labor is estimated to generate as much as USD 236 billion in illicit profits. And while Taiwan has a reputation of upholding democratic values in the Indo-Pacific region, the island has for years been repeatedly tied to accusations of forced labor across different industries, from fishing to manufacturing.

Taiwan's Legal Infrastructure for Labor Rights

Taiwan's forced labor problems do not stem from the lack of a legal framework that governs the hiring process and retention of migrant labor (外籍勞工). Rather, it comes from weak laws—and at times a reluctance to enforce the laws that do exist—to ensure that both Taiwanese and migrants are treated fairly. But this is a systemic problem that predates even Taiwan's Martial Law Era, which not only restricted constitutional rights including free speech and assembly, but also prohibited the formation of opposition groups.

Martial law made it impossible to form labor unions, whose existence was sanctioned by the 1929 *Labor Union Law* (工會法)—as pointed out by Dorthy S. Liu et al. in analysis of the 1992 *Employment Service Act* (就業服務法). Liu further cites other labor-related legislation also gathering dust, including the 1928 *Labor Disputes Law* (勞資爭議處理法) and the 1930 *Collective Agreement Law* (團體協約法): both measures may have appeared to be pro-labor, but in practice had

the opposite effect. The former made it difficult for workers to strike; and the latter, which gave unions a say in the hiring process, presented exemptions that made this unlikely. The 1984 *Labor Standards Law* (勞動基準法) is seen as a more recent example of this, as it gave workers the right to strike on paper—even though it was not allowed in practice until martial law ended in 1987.

A similar lack of oversight and enforcement is at the core of Taiwan's problem with migrant labor. Before the 1990s, most blue-collar migrant workers came from Malaysia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, and most were in Taiwan illegally. These workers found employment by violating the terms of stay for their visitor visas, and worked in a variety of industries including manufacturing and construction. Because they had been hired by small companies, they were difficult to track down—so estimates involving their numbers varied, ranging from 50,000 to as much as 200,000.

The perennial labor shortage triggered by Taiwan's economic growth forced the government to fill the gap by legalizing their presence through the *Employment Service Act* (就業服務法), which was passed in 1992. While the law did allow migrant workers into the country, it also passed several provisions that were intended to protect the local labor market. For instance, the law did not allow migrant workers to change jobs after they arrived in Taiwan, regardless of the conditions to which they were exposed.

Taiwan's Murky Broker System

The *Employment Service Act* also allowed private firms to "manage" and charge "broker fees" (服務費) for these workers, creating a murky and potentially exploitative situation for migrant workers. To enter Taiwan as a member of the blue-collar workforce, applicants from Southeast Asia go through recruitment agencies in their home countries, who work with counterparts in Taiwan. The recruitment counterparts in Taiwan then match them with employers. Together, these agencies are responsible for matching workers with jobs and handling all their paperwork, from visas and work permits to health check-ups. For decades, these brokers did not operate under any government oversight, which allowed them to collect exorbitant job placement fees or "labor costs" that often exceeded several times a worker's salary.

Although the government has since banned brokers from collecting "broker fees," it still permits "monthly service fees," which are also being charged to workers—often saddling them with debt as much as tens of thousands of US dollars. In 2018, the international labor rights group Verite estimated that migrant workers could be charged anywhere from USD 1,500 to USD 6,000 each—amounts these workers could not afford given they typically earn monthly salaries of less than USD 500. These charges subsequently become debt, and it is estimated that a migrant worker needs a minimum of a year to pay off the amount owed.

The clause that had banned migrant workers from changing jobs also ensured that they had to remain with the same employer effectively until the debt was paid off, regardless of work conditions. This situation has been seen across manufacturing sectors and in the fisheries industry, which the Stella Maris International Migrants Service Center estimated in 2022 to account for about 32,000 migrant workers. The fishing industry gained international notoriety after the media exposed instances of abuses, injuries, and death. Most of the fisheries workers are considered as cheap labor, doing "difficult, dirty, and dangerous" work that is necessary for keeping one of the world's biggest distant water fishing fleets afloat.

While the Ministry of Labor (勞動部) has been quick to point out that there are laws protecting these migrant workers, the workers are hamstrung by a host of shortcomings: including language barriers, a lack of understanding of local laws, little organization and representation, and a insufficient support. Rights groups say that, regardless of the political party in charge, there has also been an unwillingness on the part of the government to address the problem in the past—suggesting an "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" mentality.

The Impacts of the Giant Bicycle Case

Giant's WRO appears to have been a blessing for Taiwan's migrant labor workforce. In December 2025, the company said it had provided refunds to its existing migrant workforce and created "grievance mechanisms" for workers to give feedback about their working conditions. Also in December, a labor broker was fined about USD 320,000 for illegally charging job-placement fees to migrant workers. Ministry of Labor officials said it was the tenth agency that was fined for overcharging, and that it was planning to conduct 2,500 inspections this year. After the ART was signed in February 2026, the government promised to strengthen protections against migrant workers, starting with the release of a reference guide informing businesses how to avoid conditions that might lead to forced labor accusations.

Remedial actions may be enough for Giant to shake its WRO and for the government to get Taiwan off the USTR Section 301 list, but only time will tell if it will actually provide equitable conditions for its migrant workers, who are sorely needed as Taiwan's population ages. The country already has a track record of creating laws and then discarding them at will—which means that for labor groups, the real test will lie not in the statute books, but whether or not new regulations are actually enforced.

The main point: In September, the prominent Taiwanese manufacturer Giant was hit by US sanctions over alleged forced labor practices. The sanctions have raised awareness regarding labor rights violations baked into Taiwanese law, forcing a reckoning on Taiwan's treatment of migrant workers.

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Coercion at New Heights: President Lai's Africa Trip Canceled from the Skies

By: Thomas Shattuck

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This article was originally published on April 27, 2026 and was updated on May 5, 2026.

Taiwan's President Lai Ching-te (賴清德) was supposed to embark on his first diplomatic trip to Africa on April 22. The delegation was heading to the Kingdom of Eswatini for several days in honor of the 40th anniversary of King Mswati III's accession to the throne. Eswatini, the last of Taiwan's official diplomatic allies in Africa, is an absolute monarchy located in southern Africa. Mswati, who has 16 wives and over 30 children, attended Lai's 2024 inauguration, and then-President Tsai Ing-wen visited the country in September 2023 before the end of her second term in office. For a moment, it looked as if Lai was going to do what a typical head of state does—carry out state-to-state diplomatic relations—which, given Taiwan's diplomatic isolation, is a rare occurrence for its president. The Eswatini celebration will have many other leaders from around Africa in attendance, which would have granted Lai potential exposure to other heads of state on the continent.

Not so fast.

At the eleventh hour, Taipei announced that the entire trip was canceled because Lai's plane could not get to Eswatini. There were no mechanical issues with the aircraft. Rather, three countries on Lai's flight route—Seychelles, Mauritius, and Madagascar—revoked permission for Lai to fly through their airspace. Without these flight permits, Lai could not easily reach Eswatini, as these three countries control a significant portion of the airspace in the Indian Ocean, and diverting to another route would have likely resulted in more countries following suit.

There is a debate that rightfully questions the purpose of Taiwan's official relationship with Eswatini given its history of violence against democratic protests and activism. Indeed, there is an element of hypocrisy that Taipei must address for supporting such an anti-democratic government while it paints itself as a global bastion of democracy elsewhere.

Image: Secretary-General to the President Pan Men-an speaking at a press conference at the presidential office, announcing the cancellation of President Lai's planned trip to Eswatini (April 21, 2026). (Image source: ROC Presidential Office)

This article does not seek to analyze the Taiwan-Eswatini relationship. Instead, it focuses on the implications for Taiwan of Lai's canceled trip. The forced cancellation of this trip marks a new type of coercion carried out by the People's Republic of China (PRC) in its effort to constrain Taipei's ability to carry out normal international relations.

Chinese Coercion at High Altitude

How did a typical diplomatic visit get upended so drastically? Why would three separate countries revoke a sitting president's ability to fly through their airspace? Taiwan's answer is simple: China bullied them into

doing it. In a press conference held on April 21, Pan Meng-an (潘孟安), the secretary-general to President Lai, blamed the PRC government for the abrupt cancellation, stating that:

> *President Lai was originally scheduled to depart on April 22 for a visit to Eswatini. However, flight permits for certain countries along the charter flight's route were abruptly canceled. […] According to our understanding, three countries, Seychelles, Mauritius, and Madagascar, canceled the flight permits for the president's charter plane without prior notice or justification. The real reason behind their decisions was intense pressure from the authorities in China, including economic coercion. […] The government of the Republic of China (Taiwan) strongly condemns the crude and coercive actions of the authorities in Beijing.*

It is currently not known what sort of coercion Beijing implemented to get the three countries to revoke overflight permission. Seychelles and Madagascar did not allow overflight because they do not recognize Taiwan as a country, so they banned the president from using their airspace for the diplomatic delegation. A Madagascar Ministry of Foreign Affairs official said, "Malagasy diplomacy recognises only one China. The decision was made in full respect of Madagascar's sovereignty over its airspace." And a Seychelles official said, "The decision was taken independently and in ac-

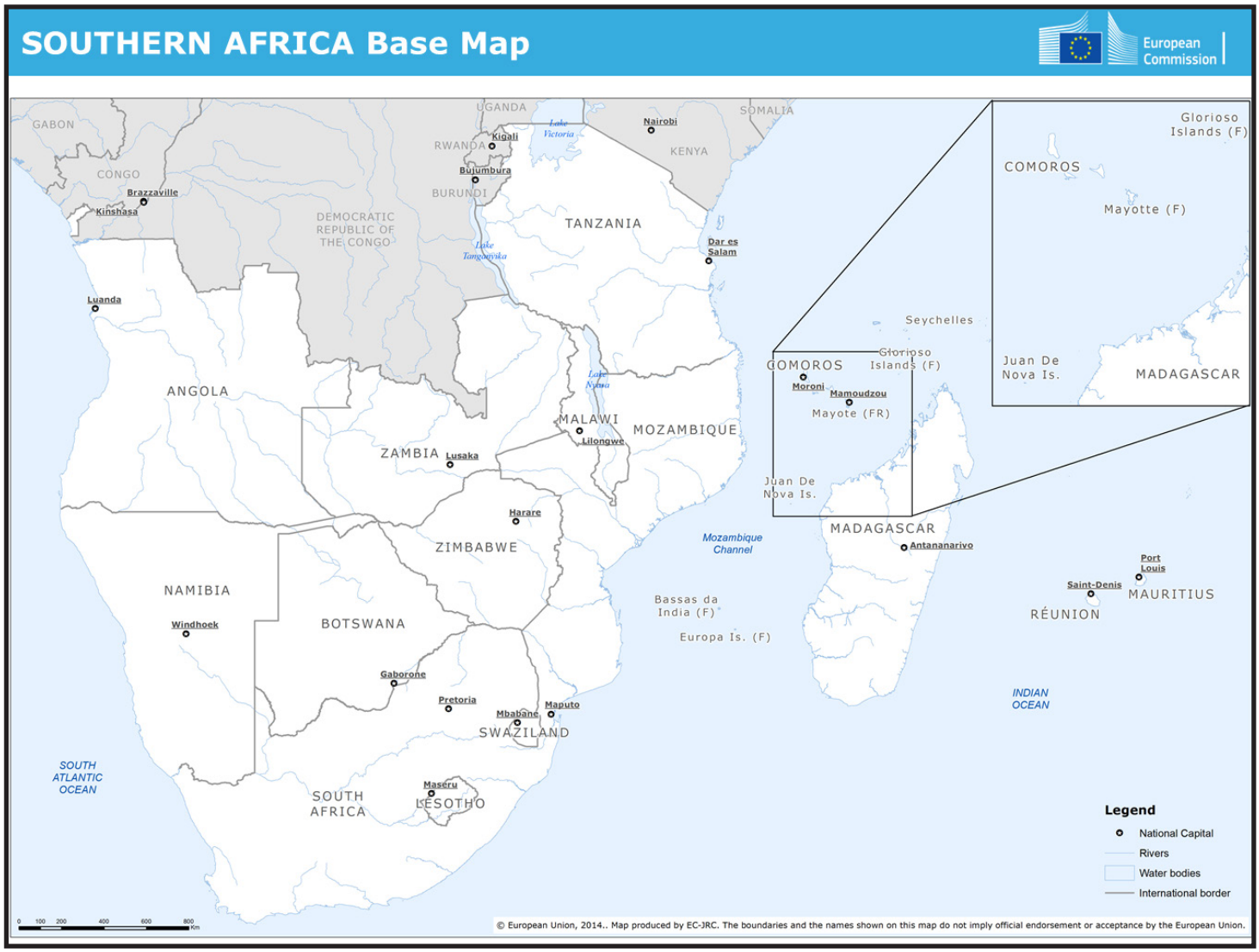

Image: A map of southern Africa showing Eswatini (labeled here as Swaziland, the country's name prior to 2018). As a landlocked country, flights to Eswatini's capital Mbabane must pass through the airspace of one of its neighbors. Flights from Asia would approach from the east, and would need to pass through the airspace of the Seychelles, Comoros, Mauritius, and/or Madagascar, unless employing a circuitous route. (Image source: European Commission / Wikimedia Commons)

cordance with established procedures."

However, according to Taipei, there's more to the story than three countries all independently making the same decision at the same time. According to one official in Taipei, Beijing threatened to revoke debt relief for these countries if they did not block Lai's flight.

Beijing's Economic Coercion in Relation to Taiwan's Diplomatic Contacts

The use of debt as leverage has, of course, played no part in official PRC commentary about the denied overflight permissions—which has instead praised the three African states for making a correct diplomatic decision. PRC Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Guo Jiakun (郭嘉昆) applauded the decision by the three countries when asked about it during a regular press conference on April 22, and used it as an occasion to once more assert PRC sovereignty claims over Taiwan:

> *All African countries, with the sole exception of Eswatini, have established diplomatic ties with China [and] have reiterated on many occasions that they firmly uphold the one-China principle, there is but one China in the world, Taiwan is an inalienable part of China's territory, the Government of the People's Republic of China is the sole legal government representing the whole of China, and they firmly support all efforts by the Chinese government to achieve national reunification. China highly commends relevant countries' commitment to the one-China principle which is fully consistent with international law and basic norms governing international relations. It's very clear that there's no longer a so-called "ROC president" in the world anymore. Anyone who wears that false title is acting against history and will only invite disgrace upon themselves.*

Despite its effort to present its coercive measures in upright diplomatic terms, Beijing has a long history of utilizing bullying and arm-twisting to prevent Taiwanese officials from participating in international organization meetings—as well as to prevent foreign officials from supporting or visiting Taiwan.

Beijing carried out a massive economic pressure campaign against Lithuania when Vilnius and Taipei announced plans to open unofficial representative offices in each other's capitals. It canceled a large order of Czech pianos after a group of Czech legislators visited Taiwan. It regularly blocks Taiwan from attending meetings as a guest observer at international fora such as the World Health Assembly, Interpol, and International Civil Aviation Organization. Now, it has bullied three African countries into forbidding Taiwan's president from using their airspace, even in a situation where Lai had not made a landing request for refueling—as the president was planning to fly directly from Taiwan to Eswatini, both to avoid putting any country in a difficult position and to circumvent the turmoil in the Middle East.

The decision by Mauritius, in particular, should trouble the United States and its allies as the overflight ban demonstrates the level of economic power that Beijing holds over the country. Mauritius has historically held sovereignty over Diego Garcia, which is a critical military base in the Indian Ocean. The United Kingdom is currently working towards a deal with Mauritius on the future of the island and the base. If Beijing can play such a heavy hand on Lai's overflight access, then London and Washington need to worry about the role of China in the future success of any deal over Diego Garcia. This one example sheds light on global Chinese influence and how one decision related to Taiwan demonstrates future potential dangers for other countries.

Taiwan's Isolation: A 35,000-Foot View

The decision by Mauritius, Madagascar, and Seychelles fits into a broader pattern of countries prioritizing their relationship with Beijing over short-term negative press about Taiwan—or third-order concerns of other countries about their reliability in the face of Chinese coercion.

In advance of the visit, the Lai administration tried to paint a promising picture of Taiwan's international relations in Africa. Over 40 African officials from 11 countries expressed support for Lai's visit. However, outside of Somaliland, which has a strong quasi-official relationship with Taiwan, it's unclear how many of these countries—Malawi, Botswana, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ivory Coast, South Africa, Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, and Zimbabwe—would welcome Lai into their countries. Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs noted that the support was cross-regional and cross-party, but did not mention if any of the ruling parties expressed such support.

There are only so many countries remaining that would welcome Lai, and resist Chinese efforts to stop such a visit. Officially, there are only 12 countries left on earth that would welcome Lai for an official state visit. But that number shrinks after considering that Lai did not attend the 2025 inauguration of Pope Leo XIV to avoid putting the Holy See in an awkward position with Bei-

jing—despite its official relationship with Taipei. And Lai has only conducted a stopover visit in Guam and Hawaii since becoming president—he has not yet visited the continental United States. The Trump administration canceled a planned stopover visit to New York in 2025 in an effort to reduce major obstacles to a trade deal, and eventually a summit between President Donald Trump and CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping.

Lai's ability to travel and carry out his role as president by engaging in state-to-state relations is becoming increasingly endangered as countries push Taipei aside in hopes of better ties with Beijing. When Tsai Ing-wen was president, she faced similar dilemmas, but was able to visit 17 countries, including nine in her first two years in office. Granted, six of those countries no longer have diplomatic relations with Taiwan, so Lai's list is much more limited. It shows how few and far between such opportunities are for Lai.

The Chinese pressure on Seychelles, Mauritius, and Madagascar is a precedent-setting move. And whenever Beijing carries out such a move, it is not the only time that it will occur. Eswatini is Taiwan's last ally in Africa, and Paraguay is Taiwan's last ally in South America. If Lai wanted to visit Paraguay—a country high on Beijing's poaching list for the same symbolic reasons as Eswatini—what is stopping Beijing from pressuring one or more countries in South America from following the Africa precedent? Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, or Argentina, for example, could block Lai's overflight permissions to travel to their landlocked neighbor Paraguay.

Some countries may be resolute in their support for Taiwan, but if Beijing cannot win their formal diplomatic recognition, then it can now use a new tool to prevent the president of Taiwan from carrying out state-to-state diplomacy.

Turbulence Ahead?

It's unclear what would be next for Lai. Canceling a trip to Eswatini is not going to negatively affect the average Taiwanese citizen, especially since Foreign Minister Lin Chia-Lung (林佳龍) made the trip instead. The economic benefit of the relationship or any deals signed on the trip would also be negligible. However, the damage done to Taiwan is not entirely symbolic, as the Chinese coercion in this instance is novel and likely to be used again. The Lai Administration needs to game out a response to future scenarios in which third parties attempt to prevent him from carrying out his formal presidential duties.

One positive for Lai in the domestic space is the effect that this Chinese bullying might have on the opposition parties' cross-Strait messaging. This incident occurred in the direct aftermath of the pseudo-summit between Kuomintang (KMT) Chairwoman Cheng Li-wun (鄭麗文) and Xi. Both opposition parties, the KMT and Taiwan People's Party, condemned China's role in the cancellation of Lai's trip. This whole situation does not help their argument for fostering closer cross-Strait relations when Beijing acts out so blatantly.

This incident could spark some goodwill, or even pressure, on the Trump Administration to allow Lai his desired New York stopover. In July 2025, the Trump administration blocked Lai from stopping in New York on his way to Latin America. Such a stopover should be allowed now as a way to push back against the PRC's recent actions. As Beijing continues to expand its coercion toolkit against Taiwan, Washington and like-minded partners need to consider how best to tackle the issue head-on. At the very least, the Trump Administration could publicly announce that Lai is welcome to enter the United States without a stopover refueling excuse, as a way to counter further Chinese coercion. The canceled Eswatini visit perfectly encapsulates the creativity of Beijing's comprehensive global coercion directed against Taiwan, and creative solutions are needed to sufficiently counter it.

The main point: The recently canceled diplomatic visit to Eswatini by President Lai Ching-te is a new precedent-creating type of coercion carried out by the People's Republic of China against Taiwan. Pressuring third countries into denying Taiwan's president airspace access has the potential to limit the friendly skies through which Lai and his successors can use to fulfill their democratically-elected duties.

May 5 Update: The Skies Are Free Again?

After Taipei announced the cancellation of the Eswatini trip, Lai subsequently surprised the world by secretly traveling to the country on May 2. Seychelles, Madagascar, and Mauritius did not have changes of heart—and Lai did not convince other countries in the region to allow him overflight. (In fact, both Germany and Czechia reportedly refused to allow Lai a re-fueling stopover after the initial route did not work out. The two European countries were reportedly concerned about the effect that such a decision would have on their relationship with Beijing.)

Instead, Lai took King Mswati III's own private jet, traveling to Eswatini and back in the company of Eswati-

ni's deputy foreign minister. Lai took a circuitous route through the southern Indian Ocean, which avoided flying over any of the airspace of the three African nations in question. However, Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, the Philippines, and Australia all provided the Eswatini aircraft with overflight permission.

Lai was able to outmaneuver Beijing in the end, but the episode represents a significant change in how countries handle Taiwanese politicians' ability to travel abroad, and how Beijing utilizes coercion and fear to prevent Taipei from carrying out state-to-state relations.

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Eroding Taboos in Security Cooperation Between Taiwan and Europe

By: Matej Šimalčík

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Towards the end of January this year, the European Parliament adopted a resolution that called for "enhancing security and defense cooperation and partnership with the EU's Indo-Pacific partners, including Taiwan, particularly in drone technology and relevant industries."

The European Parliament's call for more defense cooperation with Taiwan has followed sustained efforts by certain member states—namely Poland, Czechia, and Baltic nations—to chase down drone cooperation with Taiwan. These European countries seek to remilitarize and achieve technology transfers and investments with added value—largely inspired by Ukraine's successful use of drones in its defense against Russian aggression.

Taiwan has seized this opportunity as a means to diversify economic ties with Europe beyond semiconductors. As recently as December 2025, Minister of Economic Affairs Kung Ming-hsin (龔明鑫) visited Prague and Warsaw, and elevated drones to one of the key topics for discussion with public and private sector counterparts. Warsaw and Taipei also signed a memorandum of understanding on developing secure supply chains, free of weaponizable Chinese components (risks associated with potential cyber vulnerabilities, or supply-side dependencies). This is the main selling point for Taiwanese drones globally and has fostered new discourse on so-called "non-red" supply chains. Such a drone supply chain could help to curb European state over-reliance on unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) from China.

Czechia has emerged as the largest buyer of Taiwanese drones, followed by Poland—sales to these countries have been a significant component of the 35-fold increase in exports of Taiwan-made UAVs over 2025, as reported by *The Economist*. This makes cooperation between Taiwan and Europe a mutually beneficial endeavor: Europe secures a supply of critical military technology for itself, and Taiwan can scale up its budding UAV industry.

New Friends and Old Partners Drive the Momentum

This development is part of a broader trend of maturing ties between European states and Taiwan. Taiwan-European ties have increasingly normalized over the past five years, shifting from covert engagement to interactions in the public spotlight. Data on mutual engagements between EU members and Taiwan—collected by the EU-Taiwan Tracker project run by the Central European Institute of Asian Studies—shows a five-fold increase in overt engagements with Taiwanese interlocutors between 2019 and 2024. These engagements span economic, political, security, para-diplomatic, and civil society fields.

However, Europe is not a homogenous region. Under deeper analysis, four categories of European state interactions with Taiwan emerge:

- **Old Partners:** Largely encompassing countries of Western Europe that have fairly broad and long-term relations with Taiwan, often dating back to the period of their diplomatic recognition of the Republic of China. These countries maintain robust economic ties with Taiwan and often engage with Taiwanese counterparts at the political level as well.
- **New Friends:** Countries of the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) region that, after a period of dormancy, rediscovered engagement with Taiwan at the beginning of the 2020s. They are often among

the most politically active European states vis-à-vis Taiwan.

- **Pragmatists:** Countries that are relatively wary of pursuing political relations with Taiwan (for a variety of reasons), yet enjoy beneficial economic ties.
- **Laggards:** States with comparatively underdeveloped relations with Taiwan in both political and economic domains, and which would require wide-ranging changes in their approach to Taiwan to engender more robust (political or economic) ties with Taiwan.

The two former groups—*Old Partners* (France, Germany, the United Kingdom) and *New Friends* (Czechia, Lithuania, Poland)—alongside the EU institutions, are responsible for most of the growth in Europe-Taiwan relations, as well as the expansion of acceptable limits for engagement with Taipei.

For instance, while meetings at the deputy ministerial-level have become fairly normal, ministerial-level interactions are still unusual. Two instances have occurred of European ministers visiting Taiwan. In 2023, German Education Minister Bettina Stark-Watzinger visited Taiwan. In 2025, Taiwan welcomed Czech Minister of Science, Research, and Innovation Marek Ženíšek. In all instances of high-level interaction, visits were carried out by officials in charge of less-sensitive portfolios (i.e. ministers in charge of foreign affairs or national defense did not visit the island).

Nevertheless, even though individual European states differ in how they approach Taiwan, most European countries are allowing greater leeway for political, economic, and societal engagement with Taiwan. This gives Taiwan opportunities to engage European nations not just in the fields of trade, investment, technology, or culture—traditional cooperation areas—but to move also into areas usually considered more sensitive, such as political and security cooperation.

Three Dynamics Erode Taboos on Security Cooperation

For a long time, European governments have treated security and defense cooperation with Taiwan as a taboo issue, driven by fears of potential Chinese retribution. Indeed, after France supplied Taiwan with frigates and fighter jets in the early 1990s, it faced a diplomatic standoff with Beijing. It was settled only in 1994, after Paris pledged not to make future military sales to Taiwan, and agreed to a Beijing-aligned interpretation of a One-China Policy.

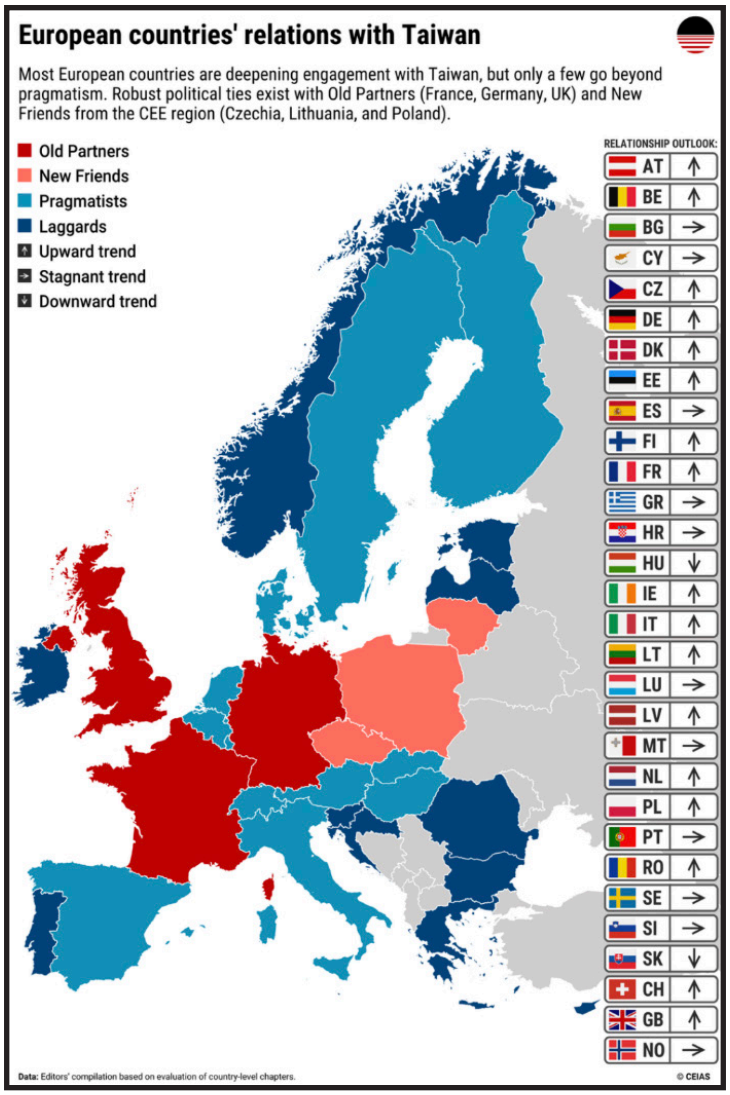

Image: Map showing the relationship types of European countries with Taiwan (Image Source: CEIAS)

The recent evolutions in drone cooperation, however, indicate that perceptions regarding defense and security cooperation with Taiwan are rapidly changing across Europe. In fact, three recent developments have been essential to dismantling the traditional taboos. First, "security-adjacent" economic cooperation is exposing Europeans to the idea of security, and even military, cooperation with Taiwan. While partnerships on secure UAV supply chains are one example of security-adjacent economic cooperation, more is already happening. Last September, an unprecedented number of European companies made their way to Taipei to showcase their products at the Taipei Aerospace and Defense Technology Exhibition, Taiwan's largest defense trade show. Among them was Airbus, the European aerospace giant, which is otherwise keen on selling its commercial aircraft to China, the company's largest individual market. Czech and German defense companies also made appearances.

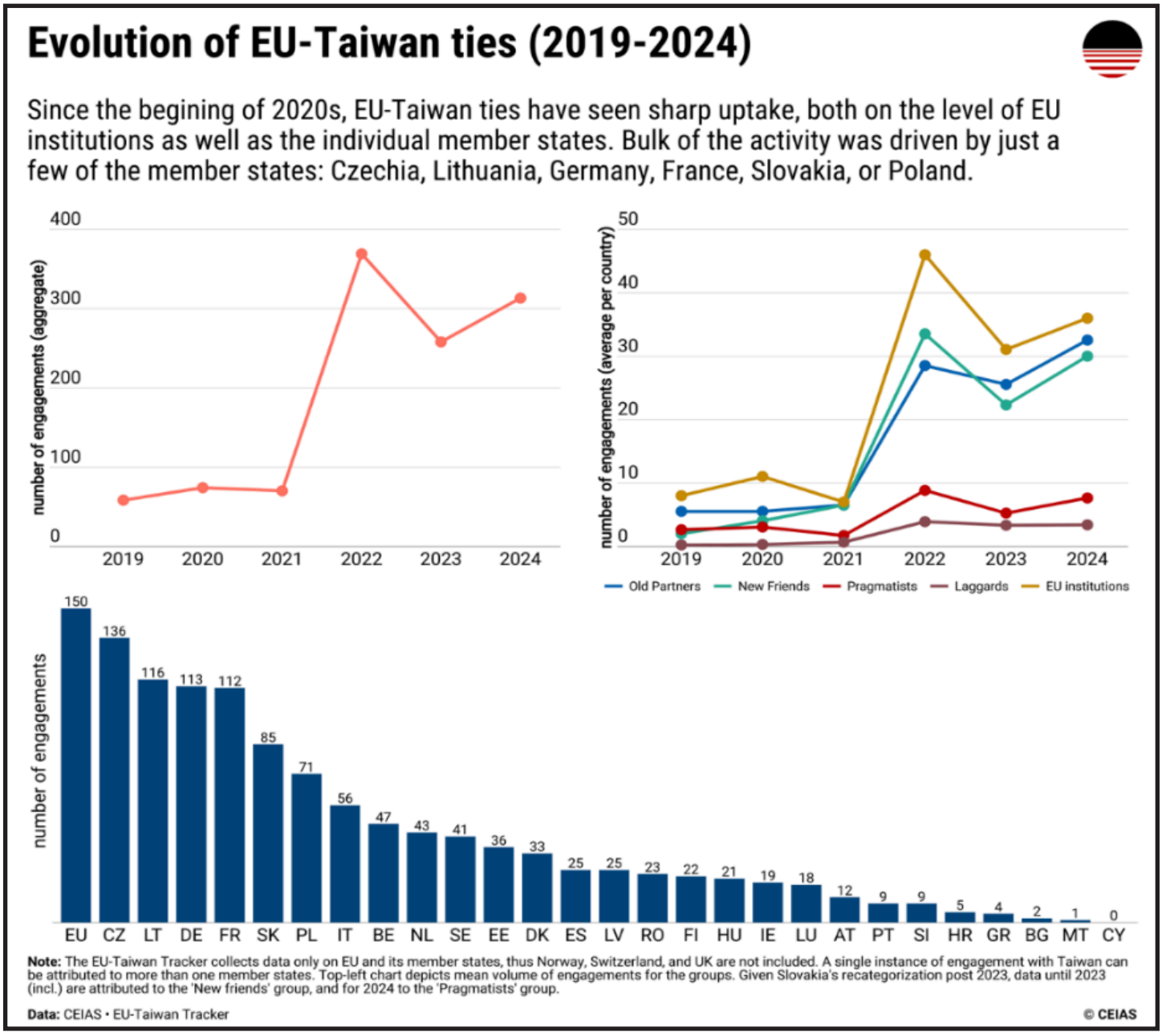

Image: Graphs showing engagement trends between EU countries and Taiwan (Image Source: CEIAS)

Europe's long-standing interest in Taiwanese semiconductor investments is vital not just for the continent's automotive industry or AI companies, but also for the continent's remilitarization efforts. Modern defense platforms rely heavily on supplies of microchips, enhancing Taiwan's industrial importance. In this light, widespread dependencies on imports of mature node (legacy) chips from China are particularly worrying. Initiatives like the ESMC fab in Dresden—a joint project between Taiwan's TSMC and European chipmakers Bosch, Infineon, and NXP, which will produce legacy chips—directly contribute to Europe's effort to wean itself off imports from China, and achieve its 2030 goal of producing 20 percent of the world's semiconductors.

Security-adjacent business deals have also led to projects based in Taiwan. Given its near-total reliance on imported fossil fuels, Taiwan runs the risk of being cut off from imports of coal, oil, and LNG in the event of a China-initiated blockade or military invasion. Supply disruptions caused by the Hormuz Strait blockade have highlighted this strategic vulnerability. To improve Taiwan's resilience, European companies have been investing in the construction of offshore wind farms, and prospecting Taiwan's potential for geothermal en-

ergy generation. Danish companies have played a crucial role in this regard—the Ørsted-developed Greater Changhua 1 and 2a wind farms (大彰化離岸風力發電場), inaugurated in 2024, have essentially doubled Taiwan's offshore wind capacity.

Secondly, Taiwan and Europe increasingly engage on matters of soft security, such as dialogues on how to respond to Chinese and Russian foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) operations. Overlapping interests also exist in the protection of critical infrastructure (such as undersea cables) or economic security. Much of the cooperation has been driven by the Global Cooperation and Training Framework (GCTF), a platform initiated in 2015 by Taiwan with the participation of the United States, Japan, Australia, and Canada. While it took until 2025 before a European country—the United Kingdom—joined the GCTF, many European nations have participated in individual activities on a more *ad hoc* basis. This includes Taiwan's more active partners such as Czechia and Lithuania, but also more reluctant states such as the Netherlands, Finland, and even Greece. This renders the GCTF a valuable tool for fostering cooperation in areas that might otherwise be too sensitive for bilateral cooperation.

Thirdly, the global polycrisis, including disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, China's weaponization of supply chains, and Chinese and North Korean support for Russia's aggression against Ukraine, have driven home the understanding that European and Indo-Pacific security are deeply interconnected. This has contributed to advent of European nations' freedom-of-navigation operations (FONOPs) in the region. European nations have even conducted FONOPs through the Taiwan Strait, asserting its status as an international waterway. In 2024, Dutch, German, and French ships transited the Taiwan Strait, much to Beijing's dismay. A year later, in September 2025, the UK traversed the Strait jointly with the United States during Operation Highmast, which saw a British carrier strike group make several port calls and engage in various exercises across the Indo-Pacific.

Way Forward: Investing in Futureproofing the Relationship

Under the pressure of geopolitics and the global polycrisis, Europe's traditional misgivings about security cooperation with Taiwan are steadily fading away. However, ensuring the momentum carries forward requires both sides to invest in future-proofing the relationship:

- Taiwan and the EU should continue to pursue diversification of economic relations beyond semiconductors and into other security-adjacent fields such as artificial intelligence, quantum computing, biotech, aerospace engineering, or energy. Focusing on building supply chain resilience in these fields will help Taiwan to position itself as Europe's indispensable partner.
- Achieving lasting economic cooperation in these fields requires that Taiwan and Europe work together to remove remaining tariff and non-tariff trade and investment barriers. Imposition of local content requirements by Taiwan against European wind energy companies—which resulted in the EU initiating WTO proceedings against Taiwan in 2024—should serve as a warning scenario.
- In order to better withstand political fluctuations in Europe and Taiwan, both sides need to invest in relationship building. This should include interactions across the political spectrum, and the pursuit of broader party-to-party relations—a dimension of mutual relations that has so far been mostly underdeveloped.
- European countries and Taiwan should double down on ongoing and future track 1.5 diplomacy initiatives, which can serve as platforms for constructive evaluation and feedback on the relationship.
- European states should continue to engage Taiwan in dialogue on soft security issues where both sides have overlapping interests as well as a corpus of experiences and lessons learned that can be shared. For sustained soft security cooperation, European countries should move towards full membership in the GCTF platform. To help achieve this end, Taiwan should work with existing members, like the UK, Australia, or Japan, to motivate European stakeholders to pursue this goal.

The main point: Catalyzed by a global polycrisis and associated disruptions, Taiwan and European countries have rapidly moved towards deepening their relations—resulting in a five-fold increase in engagement volume in recent years. Engagement is now delving into the more sensitive areas of security and defense cooperation. To ensure continued momentum, both sides need to invest in future-proofing their mutually-beneficial ties.

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