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Taiwan's diplomacy has faced unique challenges, stretching all the way back to the 1970s. In 1971, [Taiwan lost its seat at the United Nations](#), and in 1979 the United States [switched its official diplomatic recognition](#) from Taiwan (the Republic of China) to the People's Republic of China (PRC). Following America's decision, [45 countries](#) cut ties with Taipei and recognized Beijing. Meanwhile, Beijing has made clear that every country establishing diplomatic relations with the PRC must unconditionally adhere to its [One-China Principle](#), meaning that these countries cannot simultaneously maintain official diplomatic relations with Taiwan.

This isolation has forced Taipei to reinvent how it pursues diplomacy, even as most governments eschew formal diplomatic ties. For roughly two decades following its ouster from the UN, the solution was money. Taiwan competed for recognition by outspending Beijing in the small states of Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Pacific. In doing so, it traded foreign aid for the perpetuation of diplomatic relations. In recent years, however, this has no longer been the case. Taiwan's central position in the global semiconductor supply chain, combined with its effective response to the COVID-19 pandemic through the [Taiwan Can Help](#) campaign, has resulted in a shift toward "[technology diplomacy](#)." Leveraging its technological expertise and strategic economic position, Taiwan has strengthened its global standing and deepened international partnerships with more powerful countries than it has traditionally had access to. This article traces the transitions in Taiwan's diplomatic strategies to examine how Taiwan

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achieved its current place and what technology diplomacy can and cannot deliver.

Dollar Diplomacy

Buying Recognition (1990s–2008)

Feeling the pressure of exclusion from the international community, Taiwan engaged in [dollar diplomacy](#) to maintain its formal diplomatic relations with small, developing nations, primarily in Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Pacific. This approach dominated Taiwan's strategy from the 1990s to the early 2000s. Through [generous foreign aid](#), development assistance, and financial investment, Taiwan sought to exchange money for recognition. [From 1999 to 2008](#), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' (MOFA, 外交部) foreign aid budget accounted for one-third of its overall budget. In 2008, Taiwan's official development assistance (ODA) [totaled 430 million USD](#), representing 0.11 percent of gross national income (GNI). By contrast, in 2023, Taiwan allocated approximately [468 million USD to ODA](#)—accounting for just 0.060 percent of GNI. These figures underscore the centrality of dollar diplomacy to Taiwan's foreign policy during the 1990s and 2000s, when foreign aid was a primary instrument for preserving diplomatic recognition.

Under Chen Shui-bian's (陳水扁) presidency from 2000–2008, Taiwan approached diplomacy in a manner framed as "[beacon \[or scorched-earth\] diplomacy](#)" (烽火外交). The phrase signified that Taiwan should not adopt a defensive stance in the face of China's growing diplomatic, military, and economic advantages. Rather, Taiwan should "[light up the fire](#)" on the international stage in exchange for survival. Under this framework, [President Chen frequently visited Taiwan's diplomatic allies in Central America and Africa](#), despite pressure from China. In 1998, Taiwan established the [Republic of China \(Taiwan\)-Central American Economic Development Fund \(ROC-CAEDF, 中華民國-中美洲經濟發展基金\)](#) to provide diplomatic allies up to USD 240 million by 2010. Taiwan also supplied hundreds of millions of dollars in direct assistance to its diplomatic allies. For example, Costa Rica received over [USD 340 million](#) in aid between 2000 and 2005, much of it directed toward public works and hospital reconstruction. Similar infrastructure and school-building funds were extended to 12 other diplomatic allies in Central and South America under the [Jung Pang Project](#) (榮邦專案). In 2004, Taiwan's MOFA budget peaked at [NTD 27.9 bil-](#)

[lion \(over USD 900 million\)](#). This approach, however, drew criticism from the opposition. Lawmakers from the Kuomintang (KMT, 國民黨) routinely [condemned](#) Chen's foreign aid programs, accusing the government of wasting hundreds of millions of dollars in fruitless attempts to maintain diplomatic recognition from smaller nations. Although KMT critique is partisan, it identified a genuine structural flaw. Recognition purchased with money is only enjoyed by whomever is willing to pay more. By the early 2000s, Beijing's economy was [already several times](#) the size of Taiwan's and was continuing to grow. Dollar diplomacy could slow Taiwan's diplomatic attrition, but it could not compete with China's economic firepower in the long term.

Interim Period

Viable Diplomacy and Its Costs (2008 – 2016)

Recognizing these difficulties, Chen's successor, President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九), initiated the policy of "[Viable Diplomacy](#)" (活路外交). Its two pillars were the "[Diplomatic Truce](#)" (外交休兵) and "[Proactive Diplomacy](#)" (積極外交). The former called for refraining from cutthroat competition with China and pursuing shared prosperity, while the latter referred to actively seeking cooperation with economies in the Asia-Pacific and participating in international organizations. Under this approach, Taiwan refrained from dollar diplomacy and [did not pursue dual recognition](#) in a zero-sum contest with China. This restraint was, to some degree, reciprocated by Beijing; [only one country](#) severed diplomatic relations with Taiwan during Ma's eight-year tenure. Taiwan was also permitted to participate in some international organizations, such as joining the [World Health Assembly](#) as an observer under the name "Chinese Taipei." Despite these achievements, most of these gains were secured through tacit adherence to Beijing's "One-China Principle" (一個中國原則) which drew [criticism from the then-opposition Democratic Progressive Party](#) (DPP, 民進黨) as a form of self-debasement before Beijing. Although the truce delivered relative stability, its price should not be underrated. Eight years of restraint rendered Taiwan's international space reliant on Beijing's discretion, rather than any capability Taipei itself controlled. When that restraint ended, so did the gains.

Steadfast Diplomacy (2016 – 2020)

These concerns were validated as Taiwan's diplo-

matic position worsened when the DPP returned to power in 2016. Recognizing that it could no longer compete with China through foreign aid, Taiwan sought to build a coalition of democracies that shares its values of peace, democracy, human rights, and freedom under a new concept: “[steadfast diplomacy](#)” (踏實外交). Taiwan emphasized [substantive engagement](#) in technology and economics to secure bilateral relations with partners such as the United States and European states. Nevertheless, Taiwan lost [10 diplomatic allies between 2016 and 2024](#), largely because [Beijing wielded its economic leverage and “dollar diplomacy”](#) to pressure and induce Taiwan’s former diplomatic allies to switch recognition under its “One-China Principle.” Taipei correctly concluded that it could no longer compete on aid, and shared democratic values gave partners reasons to sympathize with Taiwan. Yet, what was still missing was leverage—something Taiwan held that other states needed.

The Rise of Tech Diplomacy

The Pandemic Turn: Masks, Chips, and Vaccines (2020 – 2021)

Taiwan finally gained diplomatic leverage during the pandemic, and the government seized its chance. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit the rest of the world in 2020, the Taiwanese government’s [early detection](#) and swift restrictions on travel from Wuhan allowed the island to remain largely unaffected. Watching the world suffer from a shortage of medical equipment, Taiwan launched the “[Taiwan Can Help](#)” campaign. In total, Taiwan donated [more than 54 million medical masks](#) to over 80 countries worldwide, along with [other medical equipment and supplies](#). The campaign became a diplomatic success story, highlighting Taiwan’s capacity and willingness to contribute to the international community, despite its [exclusion from major international organizations](#).

The COVID-19 pandemic also exposed a significant global shortage of [semiconductor chips](#). For several years since 2018, [sales of chip-hungry autos had been declining](#), and the pandemic initially worsened this trend. However, [demand for autos rebounded sharply in the fourth quarter of 2020](#), at which point supply could no longer keep pace with the surge. Concurrently, the pandemic triggered a dramatic increase in demand for consumer electronics chips—used in [cellphones, computers, and digital communications](#). Since [consumer electronics chips](#)

[yield higher profit margins](#) than automotive chips, manufacturers prioritized them, ultimately producing a severe shortfall in automotive chip supply.

In 2020, Taiwanese chipmakers, including the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC, 台灣積體電路製造公司), United Microelectronics Corporation (UMC, 聯華電子), and Powerchip (力積電), [accounted for 63 percent of global chip production](#). As a result, many countries, [including Japan, Germany, and the United States](#), turned to the Taiwanese government for assistance, expecting these companies to ramp up automotive chip production.

At the same time, Taiwan was struggling with a vaccine shortage. By mid-2021, [only seven percent of Taiwan’s population had been vaccinated](#), as Taiwan had struggled to purchase vaccines due to international political barriers. China’s [Fosun Pharma \(復星医药\)](#) held the [distribution rights](#) to the BioNTech-Pfizer vaccine that was developed in Germany for mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. Fosun Pharma requested that the [word “country” be removed](#) from Taiwan’s purchase announcement. Although the Taiwanese government agreed, the deal for five million doses [ultimately fell through](#). Why it collapsed remains contested. Taiwan [accused](#) Beijing of intervening to block the agreement, while China’s government denied any obstruction. Whatever the proximate cause, the episode showed that Taiwan’s exclusion from the international system was not merely symbolic, but could translate directly into national crises during public health emergencies.

Nonetheless, the “Taiwan Can Help” campaign yielded returns. Japan donated [1.24 million](#) AstraZeneca doses to Taiwan, while the [United States shipped 2.5 million COVID-19 vaccine doses](#). In this episode, Japan assisted Taiwan by acting as a diplomatic bridge. To bypass potential political interference from China, Japan allowed [a batch of AstraZeneca vaccines](#) specifically produced for Taiwan to be routed through Japan and delivered as an official donation. These actions demonstrated how Taiwan’s pandemic diplomacy could translate humanitarian assistance and international goodwill into concrete diplomatic support.

Domestically, there was also debate over whether Taiwan should trade its chips for vaccines. In one prominent example, German Minister for Economic Affairs and Energy Peter Altmaier [contacted](#) Taiwan’s Ministry of Economic Affairs (MOEA, 經濟部) to express hope that TSMC could prioritize German

orders to support its automotive industry. Taiwan's then-Economic Minister Wang Mei-hua (王美花) [confirmed](#) that she had met with the German representative to Taiwan, Thomas Prinz, to ask for help in procuring vaccines, and that Prinz had agreed to relay the request to the German government. In the end, Germany [backed away](#) from the chips-for-vaccines talks, for fear of provoking China.

Inducement & Investment for Engagement (2020 – Present)

Although the negotiations with Germany failed, the episode prompted Taiwan to consider using its technological strength as a tool of diplomatic engagement. For instance, in spite of [economic coercion and diplomatic pressure](#) from China, a “[Taiwanese Representative Office](#)” (駐立陶宛台灣代表處) was opened in Vilnius, Lithuania in 2021. Unlike other European offices, which [use the name “Taipei,” this office uses “Taiwanese,”](#) signaling Lithuania's support for Taiwan's international status. Building on this breakthrough in relations, the Taiwanese government invested in [three Lithuanian companies](#) in the fields of semiconductors, renewable energy, and artificial intelligence in 2023. Meanwhile, Taiwan launched a [USD 200 million investment fund](#) to bolster the semiconductor, laser, and biotechnology sectors of the European country. However, in February 2026, Lithuanian Prime Minister Inga Ruginienė [shared in an interview](#) her view that it had been a mistake to establish the Taiwanese office. Critics attributed the change in Lithuania's attitude to the country's desire to revise relations with China and [disappointment in the scale of](#) Taiwan's investment in Lithuania's semiconductor industry. In response, Taiwan's MOFA stated that Taiwan [had invested](#) a higher-than-reported figure EUR 16.8 billion (USD 19.3 billion) and that there had been [no set target](#) for investment during the initial negotiations. While the new Lithuanian government that came to power in July 2026 claimed [that the country's stance toward Taiwan remained unchanged](#) and that Vilnius would continue the economic partnership, the case showcases the extent to which Taiwan's diplomatic relations revolve around technology cooperation.

Meanwhile, the [Czech Republic](#) is now one of Taiwan's closest and most outspoken partners in the European Union (EU). In 2020, President of the Senate of the Czech Republic Miloš Vystrčil visited Taiwan and [declared](#) “I am Taiwanese” during his speech in the Legislative Yuan. Vystrčil sought to

demonstrate the Czech Republic's support for Taiwan despite pressure from China. Since then, officials from the Czech Republic have [frequently visited](#) Taiwan and have developed partnerships in drones, artificial intelligence, and smart cities. This year, Taiwan's National Development Council (NDC, 國發會) announced [an EUR 50 million \(USD 57.6 million\)](#) investment in the Czech Republic's semiconductor and AI sectors.

To further promote economic and industrial cooperation between Taiwan and Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries—including Lithuania, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic—Taiwan's NDC [launched two complementary financial initiatives](#) in 2022. These initiatives consist of a [USD 200 million investment fund](#) focusing on direct equity stakes in strategic high-tech sectors, alongside a [USD 1 billion credit fund](#) aimed at providing low-cost loans for Taiwanese firms to invest in Eastern European countries, including Poland, Serbia, and Romania. In parallel, Taiwan also actively participated in [European technology exhibitions in Poland and Italy](#) to deepen cooperation with European partners on semiconductors and artificial intelligence (AI), promoting an image of a “[Trusted Technology Taiwan](#).”

This tech diplomacy has yielded broader success. Semiconductor giants such as TSMC and its suppliers are rapidly establishing manufacturing hubs across the [United States, Japan, Germany, and Singapore](#), earning preferential treatment from host governments. Concurrently, nations across [Central and Eastern Europe](#) and [Central and Latin America](#) are pushing to collaborate with Taiwan on talent cultivation, technology research and development (R&D), and testing and packaging infrastructure. This kind of economic and security cooperation has given Taiwan more opportunities for diplomatic engagement without the need for formal diplomatic relations.

Technology Power as Leverage (2025 – Present)

In the recent past, Taiwan has notably turned chip exports into leverage when facing discriminatory treatment. In 2025, under pressure from Beijing, South Africa [requested](#) that Taiwan move its liaison office out of its capital city, Pretoria—and further demanded that it be rebranded as a commercial office. In response, Taiwan's Ministry of Economic Affairs imposed [unprecedented restrictions on semiconductor and technology exports](#) to South Africa, leveraging its chip supply chain as a [tool of statecraft](#) for the

first time. [Taiwan's foreign minister](#) ultimately did not enact the restrictions, after receiving a request to negotiate from South Africa. Even though export restrictions were suspended, Taiwan's total exports to South Africa have [dropped by 32.9 percent since 2023](#). This episode demonstrates Taiwan's ability to wield technological power as leverage in diplomatic impasses.

What the Shift Means

Taiwan's shift toward tech diplomacy has implications. First, it highlights that simply using the number of formal diplomatic allies as a measure of Taiwan's diplomatic strength is anachronistic. Counting how many diplomatic countries Taiwan might lose (in, for example, Latin America) ignores the density of Taiwan's deeper engagements with European countries, Japan, and the United States—which are arguably more critical to Taiwan's security and economic priorities.

However, tech diplomacy also comes with vulnerabilities. The strategy transfers a substantial share of diplomatic initiative to private actors in Taiwan, such as semiconductor manufacturers. As corporations, their main priority is to generate profit, and it is thus unfair to expect these companies to prioritize diplomatic responsibilities over market logic. Where TSMC decides to build foreign chip fabs is essentially now a facet of Taiwan's foreign policy. This places new burdens on Taiwan's MOFA and MOEA to work closely with private firms in order to balance national interests with corporate profit.

Lastly, although Taiwan's tech power has been employed as a deterrent in the South Africa case, it is still largely untested as an instrument of sustained leverage. If Taiwan begins to liberally employ the threat of export restrictions of semiconductors, other countries may view Taiwan as an unreliable partner and may begin to diversify away from the island in order to offset exposure. This would ultimately undermine Taiwan's leverage and render it more isolated internationally. In the near term, Taipei must focus its efforts on converting transactional interest into durable commitments—such as trade agreements, security dialogues, and institutional memberships—thereby delivering a lasting impact to Taiwan's security and diplomacy.

The main point: Taiwan's diplomacy has shifted from “dollar diplomacy” towards a “technology diplomacy” derived from its dominance in semicon-

ductors. As its pool of formal allies shrinks, Taipei is increasingly using its indispensable role in global chip supply chains to deepen unofficial partnerships and defend its international space, both through inducements and hard leverage.

Boys' Love and Soft Power: How *Danmei* Crackdowns in China Create an Opportunity for Taiwan

By: Savannah Graves

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Over the past few decades, “Boys' Love” (BL) literature, television, and film have taken the world by storm. From [the first emergence of the BL genre in 1970s Japan](#), many Asian countries have since begun to produce their own BL content: including South Korea, Thailand, China, and Taiwan. Now, with the introduction of global streaming platforms, BLs have been able to enter many foreign markets, allowing cultural exchange and the potential for improved outlooks of Asian cultures, thereby increasing their soft power

Yet, due to China and Taiwan's use of similar language and cultural nuances for their productions, authors and publishers from the two countries have been competing for the same audience. This has allowed China's BL boom, also known as *danmei* (耽美, specifically used to refer to BL content from China), to overshadow Taiwanese BL content—especially as recent dramas have garnered millions or even billions of views in online platforms. However, as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has begun to suppress *danmei* material—not just by censoring content, but also by arresting creators—this has opened the market for Taiwanese BLs to take the stage as the major producer of LGBTQ+ entertainment for using the Chinese language market. Alongside Taiwan's strides to create one of the most LGBTQ+ friendly spaces within Asia, it provides an opportunity to amplify Taiwan's soft power through television and film, introducing Taiwanese culture and values to audiences far beyond Taiwan itself.

A History of Danmei in China: From Acceptance to Suppression

It was the late 2010s. *Danmei* had entered the realm of Chinese dramas: the famous *danmei* web novel *Are You Addicted* (你丫上瘾了) found both praise and scrutiny nationwide from its homoerotic depiction of two male lovers in high school. The novel received so much attention that it was adapted into a web series called *Addicted* (上瘾), [garnering 10 million views on its first day streaming](#). BLs had found a new place in East Asia to thrive.

That was, until it could no longer hold up under the scrutiny of the CCP.

Not soon after *Addicted's* rise to fame, the Chinese government banned [any and all depictions of gay relationships and people on TV](#). Claiming the drama had “vulgar, immoral, and unhealthy content,” the CCP’s State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT, 国家新闻出版广电总局) pulled the drama from all Chinese streaming websites with only 3 episodes left until the season finale. With new regulations on content that “exaggerated the dark side of society,” *Addicted* found itself facing censorship in real time.

With such censorship laws, the Chinese *danmei* scene had to pivot to more “morally correct” themes. This required many dramas to instead [“bromance-ify” their stories](#), focusing more on the friendship between male protagonists while also highlighting dramatic elements of the storyline. For example, *Mo Dao Zu Shi* (魔道祖师), a famous web novel by Mo Xiang Tong Xiu (墨香铜臭), follows the story of a demonic cultivator able to control ghosts—who comes back to life 13 years after his death to reunite with a former male classmate in order to solve a murder, while also coming to realize his feelings for said classmate. Its television adaptation, *The Untamed* (陈情令), however, completely rid itself of any explicit homoerotic scenes, while also conforming to other Chinese censorship laws on ghosts and the undead. With such enticing themes, Chinese television producers were able to skirt past censorship laws and find critical acclaim worldwide: *The Untamed* [passed over 9.5 billion views on Tencent Video](#) just two years after it first aired.

Yet, somehow, that still was not enough for the CCP, as more censorship laws came into effect in 2021 after the critical success of *The Untamed*. Starting that year, the CCP began an “internet cleanup campaign,”

with the Central Propaganda Department (CPD, 中国共产党中央委员会宣传部) issuing an [“Notification on Carrying Out Comprehensive Management of the Field of Culture and Entertainment.”](#) This article [determined that danmei adaptations](#) were destroying social environments, and were particularly harmful to teenagers. Since this crackdown, Chinese authorities have officially declared a boycott on *danmei* adaptations, including both live-action and *manhua* (漫畫, cartoon) forms, in order to address concerns of “morality” in media. Furthermore, the CCP even banned online Chinese literature platforms such as Jinjiang Literature City (晋江文学城), Fanqie Novel (番茄小说), Bilibili Manga (哔哩哔哩漫画), and Miss Evan (猫耳FM) from having *danmei* content on their websites. State crackdowns have led to arrests of authors nationwide, with over [30 writers facing imprisonment](#) for writing *danmei* in 2025 alone.

Such stringent restrictions and censorship have thus resulted in a decline in the production of many *danmei* series in China. Even authors who were able to overcome the “Great Firewall” and publish on the Taiwan-based Haitang Literature City (海棠文学城) [have faced imprisonment](#) from the Chinese government. Consequently, many Chinese creators have had to completely stop producing BL content as crackdowns have worsened, leaving many to wonder how or if Chinese *danmei* culture will continue to prosper.

In the Face of Censorship, Taiwan Brings Hope to LGBTQ+ Communities

As limitations on LGBTQ+ expression continue to expand throughout China, Taiwan has become a beacon of hope not just for the BL genre, but also for LGBTQ+ communities throughout Asia and beyond. As the [first Asian country to legalize gay marriage](#) (with the law coming into effect on May 24, 2019), Taiwan has already displayed a significant acceptance of LGBTQ+ minorities, thereby paving the way to improve its image globally. For example, Taiwan hosts one of the largest pride parades throughout Asia every October, [with nearly 150,000 participants in 2025 alone](#), showcasing wide public support. Furthermore, Taiwan has incorporated LGBTQ+ rights into legal protection more broadly. Its [Gender Equality in Employment Act](#) prohibits employers from discriminating against employees for their gender or sexual orientations. Additionally, in 2023, Taiwan passed a law that allows same-sex couples in Taiwan to have full adoption rights. With



Image: A scene from Taiwan's 2016 Pride Day events (October 29, 2016). (Images source: [Kokuyo / Wikimedia Commons](#))

considerable support from the public and policy, censorship laws have not been pushed like in China. Taiwan's BLs therefore already have the foundation to be accepted and even praised throughout Asia and worldwide.

Moreover, Taiwan's attitudes toward LGBTQ+ content create a distinct opening for the BL genre to find an even larger audience to amplify Taiwan's global image. First, unlike China, the Taiwanese government has not explicitly censored any LGBTQ+ content, with [content laws for television](#) applying to both opposite and same sex relationships on screen. Additionally, Taiwan hosts the largest streaming service for LGBTQ+ content, GagaOOLaLa—which [surpassed over five million registered users globally in 2025](#), with over 35 percent of those users being from the US. With multiple genres available, the streaming service becomes a prime medium that introduces the diversity of Taiwan's LGBTQ+ contents and the island's inclusiveness to foreign audiences.

Taiwanese LGBTQ+ friendly television has already received massive amounts of popular support,

especially in East Asia, as BL content has become increasingly popular worldwide. For example, since 2020, BL novels like *My Influencer Boyfriend* (我的網紅男友), *Day Off*, and *The Shimmering Summoner* (微光的召喚師) [have been translated into Japanese](#) due to their high popularity. GagaOOLaLa also promotes Taiwan's BL series globally by offering subtitles in English, Japanese, Korean, Thai, and Spanish. With enough popularity and support to translate BL literature along with the infrastructure necessary to export more Taiwanese BL television and film, Taiwan has the momentum to create products that can promote tourism to Taiwan. Displaying Taiwanese culture and way of life in the programs can also boost its image as an open and inclusive Asian country.

With Taiwan's clear openness to the LGBTQ+ community, the country has been able to create a popular product that China is no longer able to provide. Its production of BL literature, television, and film can definitely allow it to further enhance its already well-developed soft power influence. However, even with such a prime global market opportunity, Tai-

wan still faces several obstacles to create a branded product that international viewers will be attracted to and recognize as distinctly Taiwanese.

Current Challenges for Taiwanese BL Material, and How to Overcome Them

While Taiwan has the ability to utilize its open-minded society and prime infrastructure to promote its domestic BL content, global audiences may not be attracted to these products or understand their Taiwanese origin. One of the current issues is that many fans of BLs have been largely attracted to *danmei* focusing on traditional Chinese culture with fantasy elements—such as *The Untamed*, which is set in ancient China and incorporates many fantastical *xianxia* (仙侠) elements. Other popular Chinese dramas amongst international fans often integrate both contemporary and ancient elements while preserving Chinese cultural characteristics. In addition, due to its similar cultural and linguistic elements to China, Taiwan has struggled to produce a distinct BL product that global viewers recognize as coming from Taiwan. Some Taiwanese BL series, such as the [popular *HIStory 3: Trapped*](#), have mainly focused on utilizing contemporary settings—thereby making it difficult for international audiences to distinguish them from their modern Chinese counterparts.

The Taiwanese BL industry therefore needs to establish a niche in the realm of BL. While Taiwanese BLs are already much more open about romantic and sexual relationships in comparison to Chinese BLs, not every viewer will recognize that immediately. In order to create BLs that global viewers will understand as Taiwanese, the use of local Taiwanese cultural elements and locations is essential in these productions. Furthermore, many of Taiwan's BL dramas are set in modern times, which may tend to be less popular amongst international audiences. However, if Taiwan wants to focus on historical storytelling, the Taiwanese government should encourage local/domestic creators to incorporate aspects of Taiwan's past (such as the Japanese colonial era), or of the cultures of indigenous and other minority populations, in order to tell more distinctive stories about Taiwan.

Distinct Taiwanese branding in BL products can be encouraged through state grants and subsidies for creators that focus on regional storytelling on Taiwan, similar to the current [2026 Innovative Content Grant for International Co-Funding and Co-Productions](#), as well as through the promotion of international film festivals that have themes on

unique Taiwan experiences. Furthermore, the Ministry of Culture's (文化部) Bureau of Audiovisual and Music Industry Development (BAMID, 文化部影視及流行音樂產業局) can partner with international platforms like GagaOOLala to create initiatives that promotes more domestic LGBTQ+ content. Since many international viewers will use subtitles to consume these products, the use of both Mandarin and other languages in Taiwan to tell the story should not be too big of a hindrance to their consumption. By creating content that reflects Taiwan's openness to LGBTQ+ communities and its democratic values, Taiwan can further amplify its unique soft power while distinguishing itself as culturally and politically separate from China.

The main point: Taiwan is already one of the most LGBTQ+ friendly countries in Asia. Its streaming services have widely supported Taiwanese BL stories, and advanced global visibility of LGBTQ+ content by providing international language subtitles. These steps have created a valuable opening for the country to establish a larger audience. By utilizing the dichotomy between China and Taiwan's censorship laws and regulations, as well as by establishing a creative niche distinct from China, Taiwan can use the popularity of BL literature to create further international soft power influence.

Taiwan Must Shift Course in its Domestic Drone Warfare Production Strategy

By: Alexei Hoffman

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In May 2026, Taiwan's Legislative Yuan (LY, 立法院) [passed](#) a special budget bill whose very name contained the words "strengthening asymmetric

capabilities” (強化不對稱戰力). Despite the legislation’s title, the bill failed to fund some of the most asymmetric weapons in Taiwan’s domestic industrial base. Lawmakers [pared](#) the Executive Yuan’s (行政院) original NTD 1.25 trillion (USD 40 billion) request by about 38 percent—to a ceiling of NTD 780 billion (USD 24.8 billion). The LY [excluded](#) every domestic procurement contract and retained funding only for American systems purchased through US Foreign Military Sales (FMS).

Among the [cuts](#) were the Republic of China (ROC) (Taiwan) Army’s [208, 200](#)-unit littoral attack-drone program (濱海攻擊型無人機), and 635 sets of man-portable counter-drone systems (人攜式無人機反制系統). These are exactly the sort of cheap, dispersed, hard-to-target systems for which the bill was titled. The LY [called the decision](#) budget housekeeping: the purchases were deferred to the annual budget process for tighter review rather than canceled. Events since have borne that out. On August 27, the legislature [passed its own act](#) routing up to NTD 240 billion (USD 7.6 billion) for unmanned systems over six annual budgets, and on September 3, the Executive Yuan’s supplementary budget [re-entered NTD 55.9 billion](#) for the same three littoral drone and boat programs. The money is coming back, and it is coming back for the same small systems. Since the EY first proposed the supplemental budget, the fight in the chamber turned on a number: how large the budget should be, and how many drones the government should buy. The more urgent question—one with which lawmakers have scarcely engaged—is what drones Taiwan actually needs for its most effective defense posture.

The drones Taiwan’s own industry builds do not have the range the mission requires. Combat drones fall into two kinds, distinguished less by the distance they travel than by the work they are built to do. A first-person-view (FPV) drone is a cheap, expendable munition that an operator flies by live video feed into a target in view—a vehicle, a gun position, a soldier in the open—and it is the weapon of the close fight, the point at which two forces have already met. Meanwhile, long-range maritime strike drones offer completely different capabilities, ranging far out over open water to find and sink hostile ships before they reach the coast.

The drones Taiwan [builds and exports](#) in volume are overwhelmingly of the first kind: Group 1 drones—

small, short-range platforms employed on the front lines. Used defensively along Taiwan’s own beaches, that tier is a legitimate innermost layer, though it is also the layer of last resort. What Taiwan does not build are the long-range strike drones ([Group 3 and above](#)) that it will need to break an invasion fleet across the Strait. The EY’s original special act carried the first production order for one such design, the National Chung-Shan Institute of Science and Technology’s (NCSIST, 國家中山科學研究院) Albatross II. When it pared down the special budget, the LY struck the Albatross II off the domestic procurement list, instead relying on FMS from the United States to obtain larger drones. Yet, these FMS lines do not close the gap. The US-made MQ-9Bs arriving this year are surveillance aircraft, and the American ALTI-US loitering munitions now under contract can cross the Strait but carry warheads of 15kg or less—sized for vehicles and landing craft rather than amphibious transports. The long-range anti-fleet tier is the one Taipei is not acquiring, at home or abroad. At the same time, the LY also excluded funding for low-cost air defense systems that will be needed against the People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA, 中國人民解放軍) [saturation attacks](#).

The PLA Will Set the Range

As the attacking force, the PLA will hold the initiative in a cross-Strait conflict, and has greater influence over where fighting will occur. The PLA’s own short-range drones can be deployed close to Taiwan’s shores. Taiwan does not enjoy the same luxury: if it wishes to strike the PLA’s invasion fleet far out to sea, it needs drones with sufficient range.

The Pentagon sorts drones into [five groups](#)—determined by takeoff weight, altitude, and speed. These correspond with range closely enough that a drone’s group serves as a reliable proxy for how far it can travel. A Group 1 system—the FPV class weighing under 9 kg—has only a few kilometers of range. Group 3 drones and above can travel hundreds or thousands of kilometers. The drone platforms that Taiwan currently manufactures [operate](#) at ranges below 50km. This is insufficient for combat in the Taiwan Strait, which sits at about 180km wide.

The invading force, China, can also carry its drones forward. The [Type 076 Sichuan](#) (四川艦), an amphibious ship built to carry and launch drones, is expected to commission this year. The Type 076 vessel will allow the PLA to employ even shorter-range drones



A Teng Yun II (騰雲二型) drone prototype sits on display at a defense exhibition in Taipei (Kenchen945/[Wikimedia Commons](#), CC BY-SA 4.0).

across the Strait. Taiwan has no such capabilities at hand. The Center for a New American Security's (CNAS) "[hellscape](#)" concept of asymmetric defense—considered a leading interpretation of Taiwan's ideal deterrence strategy—positions long-range systems in an outer layer 40 to 80km from shore, where the concept expects attrition of an invasion fleet to begin, while PLA transports are still concentrated and far from the beaches. According to the "hellscape," short-range drones should only be used at the final 5km before the beaches. Taiwan's own [doctrine](#) reads the same way: "deny the enemy at the far shore, engage them at sea, destroy them in the littoral, and annihilate them on the landing beaches" (拒敵於彼岸、擊敵於海上、毀敵於水際、殲敵於灘岸). The beach layer is planned for; but if the fight reaches it, Taiwan has already failed at the denial phase. Thinning the PLA fleet at sea demands Group 3 drones and above.

Drones dominate the land war in Ukraine; by one 2025 [estimate](#), they were inflicting 70 to 80 percent of casualties on both sides, chiefly through small attack drones. The Black Sea is a different story, and

the more instructive one for Taiwan. The weapons that [drove](#) the Russian fleet out of Sevastopol were [Neptune](#) and [Storm Shadow](#) cruise missiles and purpose-built unmanned surface vessels: the [Magura V5](#), carrying a 320kg warhead over several hundred kilometers, and the larger [Sea Baby](#), carrying up to about 850kg. By March 2024, the Ukrainian navy counted [a third](#) of Russia's Black Sea warships sunk or disabled. Taking the land war's lesson at face value, one may conclude that Taiwan should out-produce China in Group 1 drones. The maritime record points the other way: sinking ships took platforms with hundreds of kilograms of payload and the range to reach a fleet in port. The FPV is decisive in the Donbas because the front is a contiguous band of land a few kilometers deep. Yet, Taiwan's fight will be in maritime interdiction, over open water, in a jammed spectrum, and with no static line to hold. As Dr. Su Tzu-yun (蘇紫雲), a research fellow at Taiwan's Institute for National Defense and Security Research (INDSR, 國防安全研究院), [puts it](#), "In Ukraine, the fighting is on flat, open ground; for Taiwan, the drones come in first at sea" (烏克蘭是平原作戰，我國則是先用於海上作戰).

Figure 1: Same Drone, Different Reach

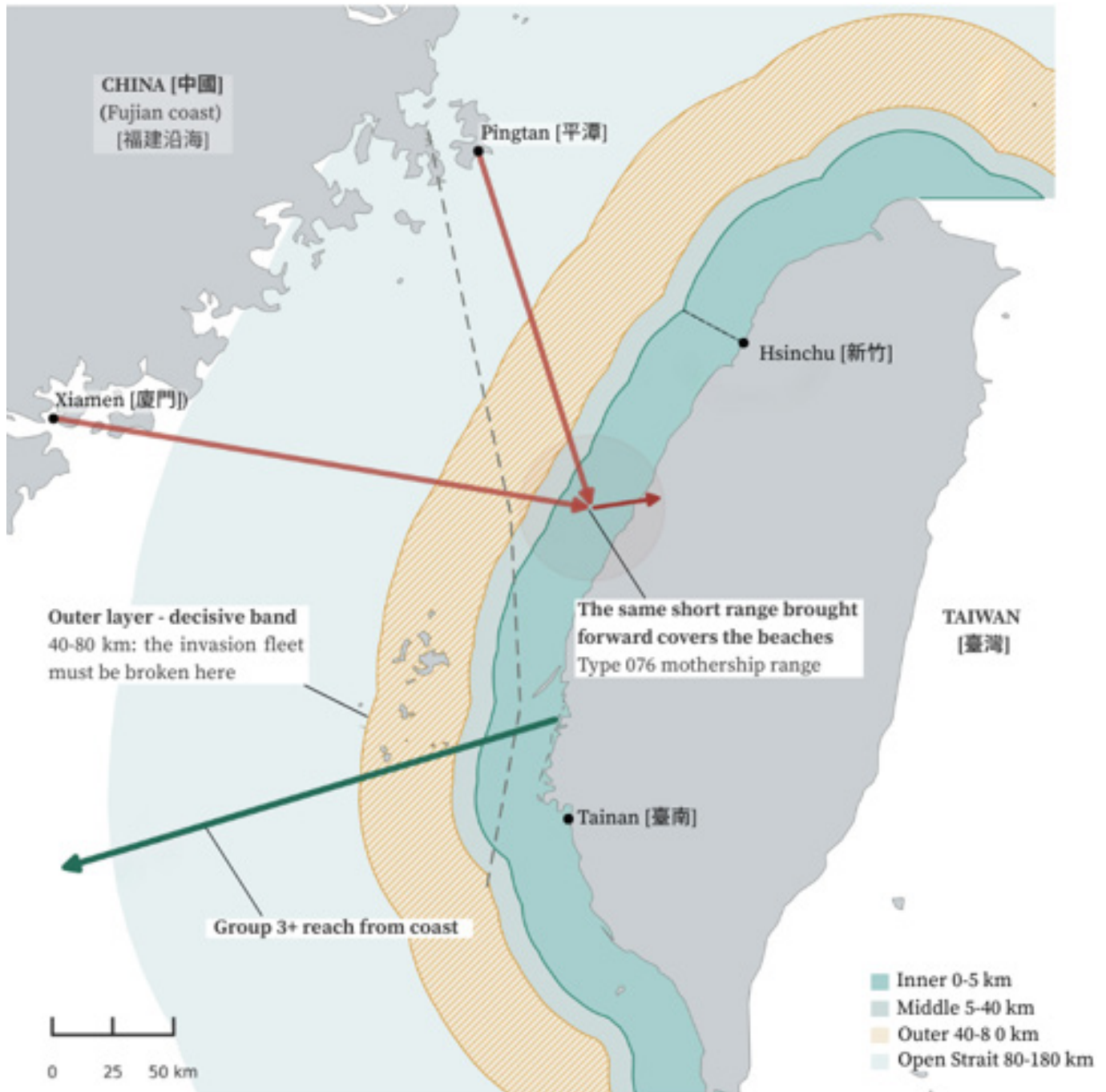


Image: A schematic of the various zones reachable by both PLA and Taiwanese drones (Image Note: the Type 076 Sichuan is expected to be commissioned in 2026 and is not yet in service; drone mothership figures are PLA-reported and illustrative; distances are approximate.)

Source: Author's creation, based on [Hellscape for Taiwan: Rethinking Asymmetric Defense](#) (Center for a New American Security, February 2026); [Defense Primer: Categories of Uncrewed Aircraft Systems](#) (Congressional Research Service, October 25, 2024); and Natural Earth, "Land" and "Minor Islands," [1:10m Physical Vectors](#).

Building the Bottom, Importing the Top

Taiwan has yet to produce indigenous long-range anti-ship drones. The LY cut funding to manufacture designs for the [Albatross II](#) (銳鳶二型), a 2,000km maritime reconnaissance-strike drone (Group 4). Funding to produce the [Teng Yun II](#) (騰雲二型) (Group 5) prototype was also stripped. Both designs passed [combat evaluation](#). Indeed, the fielding constraint is political, not technical.

Taiwan does build one long-range strike drone—the anti-radiation [Chien Hsiang](#) (劍翔), with a 1,000km range—but it is designed to home in on enemy radar emitters rather than ships. Taiwan has filled the gap with foreign imports. The first two [MQ-9Bs](#) were [handed over](#) in March 2026 and arrived on the island in June. They are weapons-ready airframes, but the 2020 sale [included](#) maritime radar and sensors rather than munitions, and the air force has [budgeted](#) for them as long-endurance surveillance aircraft. Anduril [delivered](#) 291 ALTIUS-600M loitering munitions between August 2025 and March 2026, and in late August Taipei signed a [NTD 26.9 billion \(USD 847 million\) agreement](#) for 1,554 ALTIUS-700M and 478 ALTIUS-600 ISR aircraft, with first deliveries [due](#) late this year. All of them are built in the United States. Anduril has [opened](#) a Taipei office and signed a memorandum with NCSIST on command-and-control software. Taipei and Washington have [agreed in principle](#) to co-produce NCSIST's Mighty Hornet I attack drone, but no US-designed drone has yet been assembled on the island. The Research Institute for Democracy, Society, and Emerging Technology (DSET, 科技、民主與社會研究中心), a government-backed Taiwanese think tank, has [warned](#) that the LY's decision to cut out funding for domestic drones may have set back the industry close to two years—even if the LY ultimately funds these projects through the annual budget process.

Taiwan exports large numbers of Group 1 systems to Czechia and Poland—which, by DSET's [account](#), are then shipped onwards to Ukraine. Attempting to out-produce China in the Group 1 category is a contest of mass that the smaller side, Taiwan, will lose. Over-investment in the export business of FPVs may result in lost capital and attention in long-range maritime drone production. Leaving the heaviest drones to American exporters may seem like a sensible division of labor, but routing the larger tiers through a single supplier is a vulnerability that domestic production was meant to hedge against.

Buying the Top, Skipping the Bottom

The same lopsidedness runs through Taiwan's air defenses, in mirror image. In drones, the island builds the bottom tier and imports the top. In air defense, it is buying the top tier first. T-Dome (台灣之盾), the layered air defense system that President Lai Ching-te (賴清德) [announced](#) in October 2025, links Patriot batteries, [NASAMS](#), and [Sky Bow](#) (天弓) into a single [sensor-to-shooter](#) network built for the missile tier (ballistic and cruise missiles, as well as larger one-way attack drones). Defending against the PLA's low-end air capabilities is another matter. Swarms of low-cost FPV drones, possibly delivered by the *Type 076* vessel, would undercut the T-Dome's capabilities. In such a scenario, the exchange turns ruinous: a USD 1 million AMRAAM-class interceptor fired at a USD 1,000 FPV would equate to a cost-exchange ratio of 1,000 to 1. That ratio has [not been sustainable](#) for the United States' missile defense operations in the Middle East, and it will not be sustainable for Taiwan.

Taiwan has fielded defenses against mass FPV attacks and close-in swarms: such as the [Land Sword II](#) (陸劍二) surface-to-air missile system, the [Skyguard](#) (天兵) anti-aircraft gun, and jammers. Yet these platforms are too few and too loosely tied together to be relevant. The EY's special defense budget had also [carried](#) 635 man-portable counter-drone sets (人攜式無人機反制系統)—kits that one or two soldiers can set up in fifteen minutes to detect small drones at about 4 km and jam or take over their control links at about 2 km. They were meant for the targets T-Dome does not cover, command posts, radar sites, ships in port, and infantry in the field, and were to be spread across all four services. The LY excluded them with the rest of the domestic list.

As of May, DSET could [confirm](#) only two military counter-drone programs, worth NTD 5.3 billion (USD 170 million) between them, and the domestic supply base has not yet shown it can deliver even at that scale. The ROC Army's one large domestic buy—26 fixed-site counter-drone systems contracted to Tron Future (創未來科技) for NTD 988 million in early 2025—[failed](#) acceptance testing three times against the specified 6km detection and 4km jamming ranges. The Ministry of National Defense (MND, 國防部) [canceled](#) the contract in July without payment and plans to re-tender it at a higher unit price through a 2027 supplementary budget. The hard-kill layer is thinner still: Taipei has yet to place any order for

drone defenses in that kinetic tier.

The misplaced priorities in drone defense echo a long-standing problem in Taiwanese military acquisitions. T-Dome is a presidential flagship project and draws the oxygen, while the counter-drone layer has no champion. This story has played out before. Admiral Lee Hsi-min's (李喜明) "[Overall Defense Concept](#)" (整體防衛構想), built around a mass of small, dispersed, and lethal systems, was sidelined when he retired. Dr. Michael Hunzeker, director of George Mason University's Taiwan Security Monitor, has [written](#) that the Overall Defense Concept was abandoned because "true asymmetry undercuts the rationale for pursuing high-profile, high-prestige, and high-cost weapons." The order of funding—T-Dome first and the counter-swarm layer when money allows—is the preference Hunzeker describes, applied to a new program.

Buy for the Mission

Some contend that Taiwan's success in FPV exports will seed a strong wartime production base that will, in time, turn out larger systems. DSET's Samara Duerr [frames](#) the exports as laying the foundation for "a surge ability later on." Indeed, the numbers are impressive. Taiwan [exported](#) 181,159 drones in the first four months of 2026, nearly 20 times the figure for the same period a year earlier. It is true that European countries see the value of a drone supply base [relatively free](#) from China's supply chains. But it is not a given that success in the FPV sector will bring about long-range indigenous drones.

A Group 1 FPV production line does not automatically refine the turboprop, radar-equipped, satellite-networked maritime strike technologies that the *Albatross II* and *Teng Yun II* employ. Even the small end is harder to industrialize than export figures suggest: the US Army Materiel Command [budgeted](#) USD 75 million for machinery to produce brushless motors and wiring for its own small-drone push, with an eight-month lead time before a line could open. Taiwan's sector has a second problem that volume does not fix. Its many makers run on control software and data links that do not interoperate, so one firm's drones cannot be tasked or fed into a common picture alongside another's. DSET's Samara Duerr [describes](#) the ecosystem as highly fragmented. The Taiwanese government has handed NCSIST the job of building a common command layer. Ukraine [solved](#) this with Delta, a cloud-based battle-manage-

ment system that its Ministry of Defense took over from the volunteer group Aerorozvidka and adopted across the armed forces in 2024. Delta [pulls](#) drone video, satellite imagery, radar tracks, and unit reports onto one map, lets operators assign targets and control aircraft from it, and has demonstrated data exchange with 15 allied command systems. Taiwan has nothing comparable. What the special act would have provided, and the LY [excluded](#), was the production order for the Albatross II line: the one item on the domestic list that would have put a radar-carrying, military-grade maritime aircraft into serial production and pulled Taiwanese subcontractors up the tiers with it. Whether the Executive Yuan's September 3 supplementary budget restores that order, and whether the legislature passes it, will decide whether the gap closes.

Taiwan is building drones only for close fights at its beaches—already identified as the battlefield of last resort. Meanwhile, in missile defense, it overinvests in exquisite systems, raising a prestige shield against the missile tier while the defense against drone swarms is starved of support. Admiral Lee Hsi-min [put it plainly](#): the Overall Defense Concept is "not about abandoning conventional combat power, but about how resources are allocated" (並非摒棄傳統戰力，而是資源分配問題).

Taiwan can make the cheapest correction without waiting on anyone: scaling its counter-swarm defenses and buying the hard-kill interceptors that its own firms already make. Programs excluded from the special act are returning through supplementary and annual budgets, the slower road DSET warned about. The FMS side is moving faster—the ALTIUS contract was [signed](#) in late August. Beyond that, procurement ought to start from the mission each layer has to perform and buy for it. The anti-fleet layer at 40 to 80km needs a radar-carrying aircraft with a warhead that can stop a transport, which no FPV and no ALTIUS provides. Meanwhile, the beach layer needs mass, and the counter-swarm layer needs cheap interceptors and jammers at the units that will be hit. Unit counts follow from those requirements rather than the other way round. All of it should run on a single command network—Taiwan needs a sibling to Ukraine's Delta network—because anchor orders and integration are what make mass lethal. Finally, Taiwan should make use of [Section 1266](#) of the United States' 2026 *National Defense Authorization Act* (NDAA). This provision directs the Pentagon to pursue co-production with Taipei of the advanced

US platforms at home, rather than exclusively importing them.

The PLA's *Type 076* vessel *Sichuan* is on [trials](#) in the South China Sea and is due in service this year. At the same time, China has reportedly converted more than [500 retired J-6 fighters](#) into expendable drones, with over 200 already [staged](#) near the Strait. As Taiwan wrangles over the appropriate drone warfare platforms, China is busily amassing saturation capabilities designed to overwhelm Taiwan's exquisite air defenses in the opening wave.

The main point: Taiwan has overinvested in low-cost FPV drone production while neglecting long-range maritime strike platforms. In missile defense, the problem is reversed: Taiwan spends too much on exquisite missile defense systems and is not preparing for low-cost saturation attacks. Taiwan's task is not to produce more drones but the right drones.

Taiwan is Showing Resilience Amidst the “Zombie Vape” Crisis

By: Karyn Kao

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Prior to joining GTI, Karyn has worked on Taiwan-US defense cooperation as a research intern with the Coalition Defense of Taiwan project at the American Enterprise Institute. During her time at Academia Sinica in Taipei, she co-authored a published paper on Taiwan's popular perceptions of victory in Taiwan against Chinese military aggression. Her research interests include China's short-of-war strategies against Taiwan and the Indo-Pacific region, intersection of Taiwan's domestic politics and great power competition, and democratic governance.

In recent years, Taiwan has observed a significant and concerning surge in the abuse of the synthetic drug etomidate. Etomidate is an emerging synthetic drug that is used in medical settings as a [depress-](#)

[sant](#) to the central nervous system, but has also been abused as a recreational narcotic throughout [Southeast and East Asia](#), including Taiwan. According to Taiwan's [Ministry of Health and Welfare](#) (衛生福利部), there were only 22 cases of etomidate abuse in 2023; in 2025, abuse cases had increased to 20,727, and 8,608 cases were recorded in the first four months of 2026. Traffic accidents caused by driving under the influence of drugs have also risen in Taiwan: drug-impaired driving has increased [123 times from 2023 to 2025](#), causing [17 casualties](#) from January to May of this year. High-profile [vehicular accidents](#) occurring due to illicit use of etomidate have caught considerable public attention.

In response to the rising danger to public safety brought about by etomidate abuse, the Taiwanese government has initiated several policy responses. The Executive Yuan (EY, 行政院) officially [changed](#) the classification of etomidate from Class Two to Class One in June of this year, in the hope of deterring abuse through harsher criminal consequences. The Legislative Yuan (LY, 立法院) has also passed an [amendment](#) to the *Road Traffic Management and Penalty Act* (道路交通管理處罰條例) to elevate criminal penalties for drug-impaired driving.

What is “Zombie Vape”?

In medical terms, etomidate is a short-acting [intravenous \(IV\) sedative-hypnotic](#) drug. In contrast to the effects of nervous system stimulants like amphetamines, the [symptoms](#) of etomidate abuse range from body tremors, to an inability to think clearly or control the body, to unconsciousness. In order to attract a broader base of users, especially teenagers, drug traffickers exploit various types of paraphernalia to make etomidate more attractive and accessible. Alongside [surging increases in the use of nicotine equivalents](#), vapes have become the most common paraphernalia for etomidate abuse in Taiwan.

As etomidate vape users have been witnessed undergoing [psychotic episodes as well as seizures](#), the substance has earned the popular nickname “[zombie vape](#)” (喪屍煙彈) among the Taiwanese public. A 2025 report by the Ministry of Health and Welfare indicates that so-called zombie vapes have become the second-most used drug among Taiwanese citizens under [19 years old](#). This phenomenon is likely associated with the younger generations' perception of [vape usage as harmless](#). Both the popularity of



Image: A Taiwan government social media graphic warning against the dangers while driving under the influence of “zombie vapes.” (Image source: [ROC Criminal Investigation Bureau / National Immigration Agency](#))

zombie vapes within certain teenagers’ communities, and the continuously-evolving characteristics of the synthetic manufacturing process, have posed significant challenges to the government’s counter-measures.

Challenges to Taiwan’s Resilience and State Capacity: Exhaustion and Opportunities

The sudden prevalence of zombie vape in Taiwan has posed undeniable challenges to government capacity and societal resilience in areas like policing and forensics, corrections and public health, and border control. In the context of the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) [unrelenting maritime coercion](#) in Taiwan’s near seas, combating drug smuggling by sea may place extra burdens on the island’s already-strained enforcement agencies. However, the

zombie vape crisis could also be an opportunity for Taiwan to showcase its policy adaptability and growing societal resilience.

Police Interdiction and Forensic Testing

Police are at the front line of countering emerging drugs, including zombie vapes. Taiwan's National Police Agency (警政署) has expanded its [enforcement campaigns](#) against drug-impaired driving by mobilizing more officers and increasing traffic checkpoints. Additionally, the EY has submitted an amendment to make [mouth swabs](#) a legal measure in drug screening, aiming to improve police's efficiency in identifying individuals under the influence. Taiwan's interdiction efforts have brought about positive results. Drug-impaired driving [decreased 33 percent](#) after just the second month of the enforcement campaign. Still, as the physical safety of on-duty officers is put on the line during traffic stops and illicit drug activity crackdowns, the National Police Agency needs to ensure that the drug enforcement effort does not overwhelm a police system that has been struggling with an existing [overwork culture](#).

Meanwhile, forensic units are striving to catch up with the ever-evolving number of synthetic drugs. [Limited testing capacity](#) has placed forensic units under immense pressure. Currently, there are only [three national testing agencies](#) in Taiwan, and the zombie vape crisis has further increased testing demand. In addition, drug traffickers are able to manipulate the [chemical composition](#) of emerging drugs, forcing forensic laboratories to adapt techniques to identify illicit drugs.

Fortunately, Taiwan has already laid the groundwork for responses to emerging illicit substances. The [New Generation Anti-Drug Strategy Guidelines](#) (新世代反毒策略) were a policy framework launched in 2017, investing in testing technologies for emerging, synthetic drugs. Taiwan's national laboratories have also started [delegating](#) testing work to privately-owned laboratories, appointed by the Ministry of Justice (法務部). To further support private laboratories in emerging drug testing, the Food and Drug Administration (食品藥物管理署) established an [inventory of reference standards](#) for emerging drugs, which has been maintained and updated with newly-identified illicit drugs. These standards are shared with laboratories nationwide. Meanwhile, the government continues to promote integration across ministries and has invested more in forensic

capacity through [Phase Three](#) of the *New Generation Anti-Drug Strategy Guidelines*, which runs from 2025 to 2028.

Criminal Punishment vs. Medical Treatment for Drug Abuse

Taiwan has traditionally endeavored to find a balance between treating drug users as criminals and patients. The legal framework in Taiwan categorizes illicit drugs into [four classes](#), with consumption of Class One drugs bringing about the most severe criminal penalties. Since the passage of the [Narcotics Hazards Prevention Act](#) (毒品危害防制條例) in 1998, Taiwanese governance has enforced the [“dual track of patient and criminal”](#) (病犯雙軌制), recognizing that drug users are also in need of medical and mental health treatment. Therefore, rather than sentencing, court-ordered [“observation and rehabilitation”](#) (觀察勒戒)—which isolates influenced individuals from accessing drugs while providing medical support at rehab centers—has been a prevalent measure for first-time users of Class One and Class Two drugs. Besides the judicial system, Taiwan's Executive Yuan (EY) has also committed to rehabilitation support. All three phases of the *New Generation Anti-Drug Strategy Guidelines* [expand](#) recovery measures aimed at reintegrating former drug users into society, such as job search assistance and family support services.

Similar to the spirit of the Criminal Code, the [Juvenile Justice Act](#) (少年事件處理法) prioritizes rehabilitation treatment over sentencing in cases of teenage drug use. For juveniles between the age of 12 and 18 who have committed Class One and Class Two drug offenses, courts usually order [juvenile protection dispositions](#): such as consultations, probation, and corrective education. Courts may also require drug-influenced teenagers to go through treatment at teenage rehab centers. The Education Ministry (教育部) also [requires](#) schools to support the recovery of drug-using juveniles through mandatory reporting to local social welfare departments, and the establishment of counseling groups consisting of teachers, parents, and counselors.

In spite of the government's efforts to rehabilitate drug users, correctional penalties for abuse have still resulted in [strains on the prison system](#), even before the emergent zombie vape crisis. As of April 2022, more than [40 percent of Taiwanese prisoners](#) were serving sentences for drug-related offenses.

Most correctional facilities are also suffering from [a shortage of case management personnel](#) who can provide the necessary support to former drug users. The Taiwanese government has tried to alleviate this systemic overload by promoting [integration](#) across governmental agencies and [partnerships](#) with private medical facilities and rehab centers. However, intragovernmental coordination is still hindered by [jurisdictional overlap as well as uncertainty over division of responsibility](#), while many hospitals are [unwilling to establish care units](#) for drug addiction due to insufficient economic incentives.

Border Control Against Drug Smuggling

In early July of this year, Taiwan's National Security Bureau (NSB, 國家安全局) [revealed](#) that the majority of etomidate precursors are smuggled from the PRC. The PRC-origin chemical materials are then transported to [Taiwan-based factories](#) for processing into finished etomidate. Although few details have been made public, increasing smuggling activities from the PRC have stirred heated public debates regarding the possible involvement of the PRC government in etomidate trafficking. Not surprisingly, the PRC authorities have [rejected](#) the findings in the recent announcement by Taiwan's NSB.

The NSB has identified [three main routes](#) of etomidate precursor and finished product smuggling into Taiwan. First, sea or air cargo has been the main channel of smuggling activities, as large amounts of illicit drugs can be falsely registered as permissible traded goods, and then enter the borders along with other cargo. Secondly, drug traffickers liberally exploit international package deliveries by vaguely labeling mailed shipments or by using individuals—knowing or unknowing—to carry drugs through customs. Lastly, smugglers also transfer illicit drugs onto Taiwanese fishing boats out at sea, after which the fishing boats return to port on the island.

Multiple governmental agencies are involved in the interdiction of drug and precursor-chemical smuggling into Taiwan. Under the [Regulations for the Inspection and Examination of Imported Medicaments](#) (輸入藥物邊境抽查檢驗辦法), active pharmaceutical ingredients must be [randomly examined](#) at the border in order to catch illegal precursors arriving under fake labels. Taiwan's Customs Administration (關務署) utilizes advanced technologies, such as [handheld Raman narcotics detectors](#), to examine international packages, cargo, and luggage for smuggled sub-

stances. While the Coast Guard Administration (海巡署) actively monitors maritime activities and [intercepts](#) maritime smuggling, the NSB has also been heavily involved in drug interdiction by collecting and exchanging [intelligence](#) with local law enforcement entities. The NSB is also developing and training [drones](#) to improve technological reconnaissance of maritime drug smuggling.

Moreover, the Taiwanese authorities have cooperated with international partners in combating drug smuggling. Supported by a [Memorandum of Understanding](#) (跨境緝毒合作備忘錄) signed between Taiwan and the United States in 2025, Taiwan's Coast Guard Administration and the Ministry of Justice Investigation Bureau (法務部調查局) have successfully conducted interdictions against smuggling activities at sea, using intelligence provided by the [US Drug Enforcement Administration \(DEA\)](#). The Interior Ministry (內政部), which runs Taiwan's national police force, has also cooperated with law enforcement of [India, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Laos](#) in efforts to intercept transnational smuggling. Nonetheless, due to the PRC's continuous efforts to coercively restrain Taiwan's diplomatic status, Taipei has been prevented from participating in official multilateral platforms, such as drug-related conferences held by the [United Nations](#) and the [International Criminal Police Organization \(Interpol\)](#).

Policy Implications

The emerging zombie vape crisis constitutes a challenge to Taiwan's national security through the exhaustion of state capacity and the diversion of attention from other crises, such as ongoing Chinese gray zone aggression against the island. Nevertheless, the Taiwanese government can turn this crisis into an opportunity by showcasing societal resilience and policy adaptability. To better counter the issue of etomidate abuse, the government should pursue the following policy actions:

- Improving integration across agencies: While intragovernmental networks have been established, the government should continue to establish clear differences in jurisdiction among different agencies, as well as encourage transparent communication. In addition, to further alleviate the burden on public sectors, the government should encourage the participation of private partners in forensics, education, and public health. Obstacles to entry for private sectors can be addressed with greater finan-

cial incentives and better-coordinated information sharing systems.

- Investing more in professional development in policing, forensics, and rehabilitation treatment: The government should procure more protective gear and update safety measures for police officers carrying out drug enforcement campaigns at traffic checkpoints. In order to stay a step ahead of the emergence of new illegal drugs, additional financial and training support should be provided to both national and privately-owned forensic laboratories. Investment in rehabilitation programs is also critical for addressing the issue of short-staffing in treatment systems.
- Expanding awareness education: The Ministry of Education should coordinate with local government entities to expand awareness training programs and counseling services on school and university campuses. Governmental agencies, including in education as well as in health and welfare, should support schools and universities in providing rehabilitation and mental health resources on campuses.

Furthermore, Taiwan's efforts in countering the zombie vape crisis highlight the importance of Taiwan's ability to conduct international cooperation. Given the transnational nature of drug trafficking, international cooperation is critical in addressing the problem. The exclusion of Taiwan from multilateral fora will hold back global responses to the narcotics crisis. Since it is unlikely for Taiwan to be allowed to participate in intergovernmental organizations or conferences in the near term, international partners should seek collaboration with Taiwan through flexible diplomatic mechanisms, such as memoranda of understanding or regional cooperation frameworks. It is time for the international community to learn from the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic: when Taiwan strived to contribute to the world with an [early warning](#) on the outbreak to the World Health Organization (WHO), and engaged in resource sharing through "[mask diplomacy](#)." In these moments, international cooperation with Taiwan proved highly advantageous to global public health.

The main point: Taiwan has seen a huge increase in etomidate abuse, which constitutes a national security threat to the island. As Taiwan demonstrates its resilience through state capacity and policy adaptability, the international community should cooperate with Taipei in combating the trafficking of

emerging drugs.

How to Navigate Taiwan's Security Dilemma?

By: Huynh Tam Sang and Truong Tuan Kiet

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Under Xi Jinping, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has sped up [military modernization](#) while intensifying [military](#), [economic](#), and [cognitive pressure campaigns](#) against Taiwan. Meanwhile, President Donald Trump's [transactional](#) approach to foreign policy has generated concerns in Taiwan regarding the consistency and predictability of the US commitments. Furthermore, a [divided government](#) has complicated the efforts of Taiwanese President Lai Ching-te (賴清德) to formulate and implement long-term security policies—as seen when the Kuomintang (KMT)-led opposition blocked Lai's [USD 40 billion](#) special defense budget six times before a reduced [USD 26 billion](#) version passed in May 2026. Taiwan's security challenge is a question of deterrence, political identity, and policymaking. But measures to strengthen Taiwan's security will likely intensify domestic polarization or increase the risk of escalation. Therefore, Taiwan needs to increase its resilience and strength without triggering conflict.

In this regard, three mutually reinforcing efforts shape Taiwan's security resilience: (1) institutionalizing asymmetric deterrence; (2) diversifying security partnerships; and (3) rebuilding domestic political consensus.

Institutionalizing Asymmetric Deterrence

Given the PRC's superior military capabilities, Taiwan cannot compete in a conventional manner. Therefore, through the strategy of [asymmetric deterrence](#), Taiwan should seek to exploit the vulnerabilities of

a superior adversary through dispersed, survivable, and cost-effective capabilities. This concept is not new. In 2008, William Murray first [proposed](#) the “Porcupine Strategy”—whereby Taiwan should make an invasion prohibitively costly rather than match the PRC weapon-for-weapon. This was adopted and formalized in Taiwan’s [2017 National Defense Report](#). Additionally, Taiwan’s then-Chief of the General Staff, Admiral Lee Hsi-ming (李喜明), introduced in 2018 the “[Overall Defense Concept](#)” (ODC)—which divided Taiwan’s forces into two components: a smaller conventional force of major weapons platforms, such as fighter jets, warships and tanks for homeland defense, and a larger asymmetric force of low-cost, mobile and dispersed systems including missile launchers, sea mines and fast-attack craft designed to survive an initial PRC strike and sustain continuous attrition. In doing so, the ODC reframed deterrence as denial, which makes an invasion prohibitively difficult and costly to execute. At the Yushan Forum this year, President Lai [reaffirmed](#) that Taiwan would accelerate the development of asymmetric capabilities.

Despite the recognized importance of developing asymmetric capabilities, internal [disagreements](#) continue among Taiwanese policymakers: chiefly between military traditionalists who favor prestige conventional platforms and reform-minded officials who champion asymmetric systems. This has hindered major steps forward. Moreover, the long reliance on large warships and heavy weaponry has prevented the military’s transformation into a flexible and decentralized asymmetric model, with continuing [considerable resistance](#) from internal disagreements.

The events in May demonstrate this challenge: After months of legislative gridlock, the Legislative Yuan (立法院, LY) [passed](#) a special defense budget of USD 26 billion, which occupied around 65 percent of the USD 40 billion that the Lai administration originally [proposed](#). The approved package concentrated funding on weapons that were approved for sale by the United States; that is, systems cleared through Washington’s [Foreign Military Sales process](#), under which the State Department and Congress must sign off before American-made arms can be transferred to a foreign government. However, the budget cut allocations for domestic systems, such as indigenous drone production.

The outcome reveals Taiwan’s legislative constraints: lawmakers gravitated toward external platforms

over decentralized and made-in-Taiwan asymmetric systems, as had been [envisioned](#) by Admiral Lee.

To address this issue, the Ministry of National Defense (國防部, MND) should make the case for asymmetric procurement in terms that the LY can evaluate on their own merits, rather than relying on doctrine. For example, the MND can publish comparisons showing how many mobile anti-ship missile batteries or naval mines, priced per unit, could be procured for the cost of a single frigate or fighter jet, alongside estimates of how many PRC vessels or aircraft each option could plausibly deter or destroy. This could shift the debate from abstract doctrine to a metric that every legislator, regardless of party affiliation, can evaluate.

Expanding the Network of Security Partners for Deterrence

The uncertainty surrounding Trump’s commitments to support Taiwan, and China’s expanding military strength, urges Taiwan to pursue a calibrated strategy of security diversification. This approach could improve intelligence sharing, enhance interoperability in contingency planning, and complicate the People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA) operational calculations. Furthermore, a broader network of stakeholders interested in cross-Strait stability can increase the political and diplomatic costs of aggression against Taiwan, strengthen deterrence, and reduce the island’s isolation.

The urgency of this diversification was underscored when Acting Secretary of the US Navy Hung Cao [confirmed](#) in May 2026 that Washington had partially suspended pending arms deliveries to Taiwan. Unlike the September 2025 suspension, which critics [attributed](#) to Trump’s trade-off approach toward Beijing, this was cited as a shortage of ammunition following prolonged US military operations against Iran. The lesson for Taiwan remains the same: Washington’s arms deliveries to Taipei depend not only on the island’s political will, but also on the US’s own strategic calculations.

In this regard, cooperation with regional middle powers such as Japan, Australia, and the Philippines should be prioritized, as they share an interest in maintaining stability across the Indo-Pacific.

(I) Japan

Japan’s current Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi has

been vocal in forging ties with Taiwan, focusing on [defense commitments](#). As a large portion of Japan's energy, resources, and maritime traffic [transit](#) through the Taiwan Strait, Taiwan's security is, in essence, closely tied to Japan's national security. In addition to hardware, [military education exchanges](#)—from the cadet to senior-officer level—could diminish Taiwan's shortfalls in [human capital](#), particularly the shortage of volunteer personnel and retention of skilled pilots. This would build shared professional vocabulary and mutual understanding of operational procedures.

Furthermore, both sides need to [strengthen coordination](#) in countering China's grey zone activities through real-time intelligence sharing and analysis, and improve interoperability in missile defense and aerial response, facilitating effective crisis management.

(II) The Philippines

Taiwan's security cooperation with the Philippines has gradually become more salient. Notable activities include [joint patrols](#) in the Bashi Strait and Taiwan's [deployment of observers](#) to the Kamandag military exercise, involving the US and other partners.

Strikingly, the current government of the Philippines has not hidden its desire to collaborate. In July 2025, Philippine Defense Minister Gilbert Teodoro Jr. [said that](#) "it would be hiding from the obvious to say that Taiwan's security will not affect us." Moreover, in May, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. [underlined that](#) the Philippines has "no choice" but to be drawn into a Taiwan contingency, expressly stating Manila's stake in cross-Strait stability.

In late 2025, Taiwan's Coast Guard Administration (海洋委員會海巡署) and the Philippine Coast Guard [held a meeting](#) to explore intelligence sharing and capacity building, although lacking a formal and binding framework. Hence, the Lai administration should focus on concrete mechanisms: such as a memorandum of understanding on maritime information sharing, a regular yearly patrol schedule, and an exclusive communication channel during crises.

As America's close ally, the Philippines has been willing to facilitate US support in a Taiwan contingency. In 2023, under the terms of the *Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement* (EDCA), Marcos decided to [increase](#) American military access to strategic bases

in the north of the archipelago, particularly in the Cagayan region. Manila also [permitted](#) the US Typhon mid-range missile system to be deployed in Ilocos Norte, which is only 350 km from Taiwan.

(III) Australia

Taiwan's defense cooperation with Australia is more challenging than cooperation with Japan and the Philippines, mainly due to Australia's caution regarding China's reaction: Australia's [2026 National Defence Strategy](#) [devotes](#) extensive attention to China's military buildup, yet avoids naming Taiwan.

However, as the PLA expands its operational capabilities and [exerts](#) pressure on Australia's own forces, Canberra should proactively support Taiwan's deterrence capabilities. The 2026 strategy [prioritizes](#) long-range strike, missile defense, and undersea warfare—thus, a Taiwan-Australia technical dialogue would find more traction if framed around these specific capability areas. In addition, Taiwan could enhance engagement by proposing informal security dialogues (Track II), cooperating on low-sensitivity dual-use technologies, or establishing direct communication channels with the Australian Department of Defence.

If successful, Taiwan could build a regional defense partnership network stretching from Japan to Australia, thereby enhancing its resilience against Beijing's pressure and Washington's uncertainty. In this context, Japan should be the first priority, as its defense capabilities can [provide](#) greater assistance. Additionally, the Takaichi Administration's [stance](#) toward China should be used as leverage to strengthen ties with Taiwan. The Philippines should follow next, since Manila has locked in maritime friction with China and is likely willing to enhance security cooperation with Taiwan. As the third priority, Taiwan could pursue cooperation with Australia at a slow and gradual pace.

Restoring Domestic Political Consensus for National Resilience

The salient issue currently plaguing Taiwanese politics is that political parties engage in [mutual hostility](#), resulting in a highly confrontational, "zero-sum" political landscape. Parties must build a minimum level of consensus so that Taiwan can respond more effectively to security challenges. History proves that it is not impossible: During the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, Taiwanese leaders quick-

ly [formed](#) a relatively unified front, prioritizing the outbreak as a security issue and implementing a whole-of-society approach.

Such a consensus should re-emerge regarding the defense budget. Currently, the DPP [advocates](#) for a greater increase in defense spending to build a comprehensive deterrent. Conversely, the KMT [argues](#) that the budget should be allocated to welfare initiatives. In November 2025, the debate intensified when Lai announced a special USD [40 billion](#) defense package spanning eight years. The KMT [blocked the budget](#) six times before it entered the National Defense and Foreign Affairs Committee for discussion.

The deadlock was partially resolved in May 2026, when the Legislative Yuan [passed](#) a special defense budget worth approximately USD26 billion. This [reflects](#) the KMT-TPP bloc securing significant cuts to domestic development programs and accompanying oversight provisions, while the DPP agreed to a reduced budget to keep the process advancing.

Despite resolving the legislative deadlock, a question remains unanswered: How to ensure that the budget is allocated in a way that enhances Taiwan's asymmetric deterrence capabilities. Hence, the Lai Administration should push for the establishment of a [Cross-Party Defense Oversight Committee](#), structured as a standing sub-committee under the Legislative Yuan existing [Foreign Affairs and National Defense Committee](#). This committee would have access to quarterly technical and financial reports on procurement progress. The committee's mandate would be to evaluate the cost-effectiveness of asymmetric platforms versus conventional ones, based on comparative data released by the MND. In this way, oversight serves as both a concession to the KMT and as a mechanism to protect the DPP's procurement priorities.

The main point: At the core of debates on Taiwan's security are mounting pressure from the PRC, the Trump Administration's tenuous security commitments, and internal political turbulence that hinders an effective response. To navigate this turmoil, the Lai Administration should beef up asymmetric deterrence, broaden a network of like-minded security partners, and cultivate an internal political ecosystem built on mutual understanding, constructive participation, and accountability.