

KEEPING TAIWAN'S NATIONAL SECURITY IN THE MIND'S EYE

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Under Xi Jinping, China's strategy toward Taiwan has evolved beyond traditional deterrence into a comprehensive political warfare campaign designed to reshape the nation's cognitive landscape. This brief examines Beijing's dual-track approach: a digital offensive using AI and disinformation to erode democratic confidence, alongside gray zone economic and administrative integration strategies meant to blur the boundaries of Taiwanese governance. By tracing these mechanisms, the analysis highlights how Beijing aims to normalize unification through attrition rather than force. It concludes by assessing Taiwan's counter-strategies, arguing that effective defense now requires moving beyond reactive regulation to foster deep-seated societal and institutional resilience.

Introduction

Defending Taiwan today is not just about missiles and warships—it's about protecting minds, beliefs, and the stories that shape national identity. While traditional military threats remain, a quieter and more insidious front has emerged. China is no longer focused solely on territorial claims; it aims to undermine Taiwan's sense of self—its narratives, its trust, and the democratic foundations that sustain them. Rather than relying on brute coercion, Beijing has adopted a long-term strategy

of shaping perceptions and eroding confidence through disinformation, influence operations, and institutional co-optation.¹ In this evolving battlespace, cognitive resilience has become as crucial to national security as deterrence.

Political warfare—China's effort to distort public discourse and chip away at democratic confidence—is one of the most urgent threats that Taiwan faces. By deploying influence operations, weaponized

disinformation, and culturally attuned messaging, Beijing aims to weaken Taiwan’s identity and corrode public trust in democratic institutions. This isn’t a battle fought with soldiers, but with ideas, regulations, and sustained interference. Often, the goal isn’t to persuade, but to confuse, divide, and slowly unravel confidence in Taiwan’s own political and social fabric.

Beijing’s Political Warfare Against Taiwan

China’s “Comprehensive State Security Concept” (总体国家安全观) defines national security beyond territorial defense, extending it to ideological, institutional, and even cognitive domains.² Within this framework, Taiwan’s democratic system and independent identity are not merely political obstacles—they are an existential challenge to the Chinese Communist Party’s legitimacy. Rather than confronting this challenge head-on, Beijing has invested in quieter, longer-term tools of influence that work from within Taiwan. These include shaping public narratives through localized content, offering economic incentives, and fostering cross-Strait integration in ways that blur the line between engagement and interference. The strategy is cumulative: gradually shifting how Taiwanese society views itself, its political system, and its options for the future.

Disinformation is one of the most visible tools in Beijing’s broader political warfare campaign. These campaigns have become more adaptive and context-sensitive over time, particularly around election cycles. During Taiwan’s 2022 municipal elections, social media platforms were inundated with coordinated inauthentic behavior and fabricated news stories designed to exacerbate political divisions and undermine trust in democratic institutions.³ Taiwanese influencers, meanwhile, have reported receiving offers from entities linked to China, encouraging them to post pro-unification messages disguised as benign cultural content.⁴ These efforts show that Beijing’s goal is often not to persuade overtly, but to subtly reshape public sentiment through trusted, localized channels.

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Beyond targeting electoral outcomes, Beijing has increasingly turned its focus toward shaping the views of Taiwan’s younger generations. Programs like the “Cross-Strait Youth Anchor Training Camp” and “Cross-Strait Youth Culture Month” are presented as cultural exchanges but in reality, serve to cultivate a generation of voices sympathetic to Beijing’s narratives.⁵ The “Thousand Taiwanese Youth Broadcasters Training” initiative goes further, embedding political messaging within everyday entertainment, creating content that feels genuine but gradually normalizes pro-China viewpoints.⁶

The rise of digital platforms has amplified the reach and subtlety of such tactics. TikTok, a staple for Taiwanese youth, has been leveraged to push narratives favorable to Beijing while suppressing dissenting voices. Investigations into TikTok’s practices have revealed “pay-for-play” arrangements, where content creators are incentivized to subtly incorporate pro-China messaging into their videos.⁷ European intelligence agencies have raised similar concerns, warning that Chinese-linked digital platforms are being used to influence public opinion on politically sensitive issues such as governance, human rights, and foreign policy.⁸ Taiwan’s experience reflects a broader global trend in which political warfare exploits

the openness of democratic information ecosystems to subtly steer discourse and undermine trust.

These operations have taken a more sophisticated turn with the integration of AI tools. Taiwan's 2024 presidential election saw a surge in deepfake videos and algorithmically generated disinformation, especially targeting pro-sovereignty candidates.⁹ Unlike traditional propaganda, these attacks did not attempt to promote a clear alternative; instead, they aimed to corrode public trust, depress voter turnout, and foster cynicism. By sowing disengagement rather than outright opposition, Beijing seeks to hollow out Taiwan's democratic resilience over time.¹⁰

From Digital Influence to Economic and Social Integration

Alongside its digital campaigns, Beijing continues to invest in offline avenues of influence—particularly through economic programs that blur the boundary between commercial engagement and political integration. A key pillar of this strategy is the rollout of preferential policies for Taiwanese professionals, entrepreneurs, and

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students, such as subsidized housing, tax incentives, and targeted investment zones in provinces like Fujian.¹¹ While these initiatives are framed as opportunities for cross-Strait economic cooperation, their deeper objective is to pull Taiwan's talent and innovation ecosystems into China's institutional orbit.¹² At the same time, Beijing is quietly deepening administrative ties that blur the line between Taiwanese and Chinese governance. By extending residence permits to Taiwanese citizens—modeled after those offered to residents of Hong Kong and Macau—China grants access to public services like healthcare, education, and social insurance.¹³ Through routine interactions with People's Republic of China (PRC) institutions, the distinction between the two governance models becomes less pronounced—normalizing the idea of integration not through force, but through familiarity.

Cultural and media initiatives round out Beijing's broader strategy. In provinces like Fujian, local authorities have created streamlined pathways for Taiwanese media companies to set up shop, offering regulatory perks and administrative support.¹⁴ These arrangements allow PRC-approved narratives to be repackaged in culturally familiar formats and sent back to Taiwan under the guise of authenticity.¹⁵ By promoting Taiwanese voices within a tightly controlled media environment, Beijing amplifies messages of cultural closeness, downplays political differences, and gradually shifts public sentiment toward acceptance of deeper integration.

Taiwan's Counterstrategy

Taiwan has not stood idle in the face of China's increasingly sophisticated political warfare. In recent election cycles, both government agencies and civil society groups have ramped up efforts to identify and counter disinformation.¹⁶ These efforts have become more institutionalized with the launch of the Cognitive Warfare Research Center under the Ministry of Justice Investigation Bureau, which now plays a key role in identifying cognitive threats, analyzing disinformation tactics, and coordinating cross-agency responses.¹⁷

Beijing’s push for integrated development has also triggered a stronger response from Taipei. In a March 2025 national security address, President Lai Ching-te directly named the policy as a channel for political infiltration, warning that programs framed as economic cooperation were, in reality, designed to pull Taiwan’s people, capital, and identity closer to the PRC.¹⁸ To counter this, the government introduced a strategic restructuring plan aimed at reducing economic dependence on China and encouraging Taiwanese businesses to expand globally under a “Taiwan First” framework. These steps go beyond technical fixes—they are part of a wider effort to protect national security by reclaiming the spaces Beijing seeks to quietly absorb.

Conclusion

The fight for Taiwan’s future is no longer just about territory or military deterrence—it’s about influence, identity, and control over the stories people tell about themselves. Beijing’s strategy now unfolds on two tracks: one uses digital tools to shape perceptions and erode trust from afar; the other uses economic and administrative levers to draw Taiwanese people and institutions closer to the PRC. These efforts are meant to be subtle, even mundane—but taken together, they aim to gradually narrow Taiwan’s room to maneuver and make unification feel less like a choice, and more like an inevitability.

In response, Taiwan has started to shift from reacting to shaping—calling out these threats clearly, building cross-agency defenses, and investing in long-term resilience. That work is far from over. Defending Taiwan today means not just guarding borders, but protecting the mental and civic space where democracy lives. If Taiwan is to stay secure, it must also stay clear-headed—about who it is, what’s at stake, and how it wants to face the future.

Note: This is the last article in the series on ‘Rethinking Taiwan’s National Security: Perspectives Across a Changing Landscape.’ This issue brief series explores Taiwan’s national security from multiple perspectives – examining external pressure, strategic dependencies, and internal political debates. The first article was ‘[Balancing Engagement and Confrontation: Taiwan’s Strategic Approach to National Security](#)’ by Shiau-shyang Liou. The second article was ‘[Security Choices for the Republic of China \(Taiwan\) and their Implications](#)’ by Kwei-Bo Huang.

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Lilly Min-Chen Lee is a Doctoral Fellow in International Security Studies at The Fletcher School, Tufts University. Her research looks at how the Chinese Communist Party is reshaping its national security strategy under Xi Jinping, particularly in how it defines and tries to eliminate threats to its political authority. Unlike democratic systems that tend to manage risks through institutional resilience, the CCP takes a more preemptive approach—especially toward ideological challenges. Lilly’s work traces how this mindset drives China’s global propaganda architecture, information campaigns, and use of emerging technologies like AI and surveillance. Taiwan is a key focus in her research, where she examines how Beijing uses disinformation, economic pressure, and cognitive influence to weaken democratic confidence and promote authoritarian narratives.

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Endnotes

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