

COUNTERING CHINESE INFLUENCE CAMPAIGNS AGAINST TAIWAN: THE 2020 ELECTIONS AND BEYOND

KHARIS TEMPLEMAN

Social Science Research Associate
Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center
Freeman Spogli Institute
Stanford University
kharis@stanford.edu

SEPTEMBER 26, 2019

Paper prepared for the “2019 Defense Forum on Regional Security: Taiwan, China, the U.S., and Asymmetrical Security Thinking,” workshop organized by the Institute for National Defense and Security Research, Taipei, Taiwan, October 3-4, 2019. Work in progress; please do not cite without prior permission.

1. Introduction: Sharp Power Threats to Democracy

Interest in “sharp power” threats to democracy around the world has jumped in recent years. Beginning with credible evidence of a Russian campaign to interfere in the US presidential election of 2016, politicians, journalists, security experts, academics, social media and technology companies, good government advocates, and others have turned their attention to the sudden emergence of this new and terrifying threat to democratic practices. Concern about Russian disinformation campaigns that seek to undermine trust and foster division and dysfunction in democratic institutions has expanded to cases in Eastern Europe (Poland, Hungary, Ukraine, the Baltics, etc.), the United Kingdom (Brexit), France (Macron vs LePen), Italy (5-Star Movement), and Greece (Golden Dawn), among others.

Now China’s influence operations are attracting new scrutiny as well.¹ The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has long attempted to shape the discourse about the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in other countries in a direction that favors its preferred narratives and interests. But it is only in the last five years that these efforts have been viewed more widely in the West as a potential threat to domestic freedoms and democratic practices, and to the independent formulation of foreign policy. The CCP’s quiet campaigns to reshape perceptions of China abroad, particularly messaging about the benefits and inevitability of CCP rule, have finally triggered a backlash in a rising number of cases, including in Australia, the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom.²

¹ See *Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence*, National Endowment for Democracy, December 5, 2017, at: <https://www.ned.org/sharp-power-rising-authoritarian-influence-forum-report/>; Didi Kirsten Tatlow, “The Chinese Influence Effort Hiding in Plain Sight,” *The Atlantic*, July 12, 2019, at:

https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/07/chinas-influence-efforts-germany-students/593689/?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=share

² Clive Hamilton, “How Australia Is Fighting Chinese Interference,” *Foreign Affairs* July 26, 2018, at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/australia/2018-07-26/australias-fight-against-chinese-political-interference>; Larry Diamond and Orville Schell, “Chinese Influence and American Interests: Promoting Constructive Vigilance,” Hoover Institution Press, November 29, 2018, at: <https://www.hoover.org/research/chinas-influence-american-interests-promoting-constructive-vigilance>; J. Michael Cole, “The Hard Edge of Sharp Power: Understanding China’s Influence Operations Abroad,” Macdonald-Laurier Institute, October 25, 2018, at: [https://macdonaldlaurier.ca/files/pdf/20181022_MLI_China's_Influence_\(Cole\)_PAPER_WebreadyF.pdf](https://macdonaldlaurier.ca/files/pdf/20181022_MLI_China's_Influence_(Cole)_PAPER_WebreadyF.pdf); Charles Parton, “China-UK Relations: Where to Draw the Border between Influence and Interference?,” Royal United Services Institute Occasional Paper Series, February 2019, at: <https://rusi.org/publication/occasional-papers/china-uk-relations-where-draw-border-between-influence-and>.

Along with this belated recognition of the threats posed by Chinese influence campaigns has come a renewed interest in the resiliency of Taiwan’s democracy.³ Taiwan is on the front line of these campaigns, and it appears to most outside observers to be acutely vulnerable to Chinese exercise of sharp power. In the diplomatic, economic, military, and global media domains, the PRC’s influence has grown dramatically over the last decade, and its leaders have not been shy about using this power to try to shrink Taiwan’s international space, punish its businesses, intimidate its populace, and silence its voices in international media.

This outside attention to Taiwan’s challenges is welcome. Taiwan does, indeed, face the most dire existential threat to its long-term survival as a democracy of any country in the world today. And even for those who have no special interest in or fondness for Taiwan, It presents an important test case for understanding how the CCP operates in a democratic environment, including the strengths and weaknesses of Chinese influence campaigns. Taiwan is also a testing ground for techniques that the PRC’s influence organizations may roll out in other times and places in the future, and so serves as a potential “early warning” site for detecting advances in tactics or shifts in strategy.

Nevertheless, this sudden attention from researchers more familiar with Russian-style campaigns runs the risk of missing three critical points about the threat to Taiwan. These are:

1. *Chinese goals are fundamentally different from Russia’s*, and therefore their strategies and tactics are likely to differ as well;
2. *The Taiwan political system is very different from those in the English-speaking world*, and in some ways better equipped to identify and counter Chinese influence operations;
3. *The most critical threats to Taiwan are overt, not covert* – unlike its relationships with the English-speaking world, Beijing is clearly the more powerful actor in the PRC-Taiwan relationship, and a disinformation campaign conducted through social media platforms is only one tool of many that it can use to bring pressure on the Taiwanese political system.

³ E.g. Nicolas J. Monaco, “Computational Propaganda in Taiwan: Where Digital Democracy Meets Automated Autocracy,” Google Jigsaw, Working Paper no. 2017.2; “Taiwan: Presidential Election 2020 Scene Setter,” Stanford Cyber Policy Center, Internet Observatory, August 26, 2019, at: <https://cyber.fsi.stanford.edu/io/news/taiwan-presidential-election-2020-scene-setter>

In the next section, I elaborate on each of these points. Section 3 then provides a broad overview of the Taiwan political system’s relative strengths and weaknesses, considering how a concerted influence campaign by the CCP might affect democratic practice. Section 4 discusses steps that Taiwanese and partners and allies might take to most effectively counter the Chinese threat to the integrity of campaigns, elections, and the democratic process, both in the run-up to the 2020 general elections and in the longer term.

2. What are the Threats to Taiwan?

Researchers familiar mostly with the Russian-style disinformation campaigns of the past few years may overlook three critical points about the threat that China poses to Taiwan. In sum, these are: (1) Chinese goals are different from Russian ones, (2) the Taiwanese political system is different from, and better conditioned to handle, Chinese influence operations than are most democracies in the west, and (3) rather than a covert disinformation campaign, the most alarming threats from the PRC against Taiwan are in the open, and countering them needs to be part of any larger plan to preserve the integrity of Taiwan’s democratic institutions.

1. Declining vs Rising Powers: Nihilists vs Ideologues

First, the Russian strategy of information warfare as practiced in various democracies over the last five years is significantly different from the traditional Chinese strategy.⁴ Put simply, the Russians are nihilists. They are operating from a position of relative weakness, and their goal is to disrupt and degrade democratic institutions in any way they can. Russian disinformation campaigns have included actions such as spreading rumors about all major political figures among groups predisposed to believe falsehoods about them, starting online fights with divisive dialogue, sowing confusion and chaos in the public sphere, and generally

⁴ On this point, see Laura Rosenberger, “The Interference Operations from Putin’s Kremlin and Xi’s Communist Party: Forging a Joint Response,” The Asan Forum, May 8, 2018, available at: <http://www.theasanforum.org/the-interference-operations-from-putins-kremlin-and-xis-communist-party-forging-a-joint-response/> ; Peter Mattis, “Contrasting China’s and Russia’s Influence Operations,” War on the Rocks, January 16, 2018, at: <https://warontherocks.com/2018/01/contrasting-chinas-russias-influence-operations/> ; and Jake Wallis, “China and Russia Aren’t the Same When It Comes to Information Warfare,” at: <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/china-and-russia-arent-the-same-when-it-comes-to-information-warfare/>

undermining a shared belief in any kind of objective social reality. The Russian campaign during the 2016 elections in the United States poked at both the political left and right, and sought to amplify conspiracy theories of all kinds with fake online accounts and strategically-timed leaks of documents acquired through illegal hacking.

In contrast, the Chinese are ideologues. Despite the remarkable repurposing of Marxist-Leninist-Mao Zedong Thought to justify a system of state-led capitalism, and the mental gymnastics such a shift has required among the CCP’s propagandists, ideology in China is not dead. The Party continues to place great importance on uniformity of thought and message in public discourse, and the use of “correct terms” to describe what it is and what it does.⁵ The domestic internet behind the Great Firewall is a tightly regulated domain, with an enormous amount of state resources dedicated to monitoring and policing opinions even in its furthest reaches. And as China’s influence has expanded into public forums beyond its borders, the approach has been very different from the Russian one: Chinese actors work to enforce a clear, coherent message about China’s rising stature in the world, and the promotion of that message, along with the silencing of dissenting voices, is the primary goal. Perhaps the Chinese have been biding their time, waiting to unleash Russian-style “post-truth” disinformation campaigns when the moment is right, or perhaps they are learning from the Russians and will switch tactics. But it would require a revolutionary shift for Chinese actors to swear off policing ideological content entirely and simply promote whatever they think will be most destructive to perceived adversaries in a place as important to them as Taiwan is.

In fact, if we step back and think of each country’s place in the inter-state system, it is clear that their respective leaders should have very different strategic objectives. Russia is a declining power, whose global position has fallen dramatically from the days when it was the core constituent state of the Soviet Union. Russian-style disinformation campaigns are weapons of the weak: they are intended to sow distrust and confusion among much stronger adversaries in order to help improve Russia’s relative strategic position in the world, and to feed into domestic narratives that support Vladimir Putin’s continued rule. This is a goal they cannot accomplish through normal great-power competition or through “soft power” attraction to the Russian system. The more dysfunctional the EU and the United States are, and the more distracted by

⁵ Anne-Marie Brady, “On the Correct Use of Terms,” *China Brief* 19(9): at: <https://jamestown.org/program/on-the-correct-use-of-terms-for-understanding-united-front-work/>

internal problems and divisions, the easier it is for the Russian regime to promote itself to its citizenry as an equal to other great world powers, and to find cracks in the western front against Russia that it can exploit to its short-term advantage. Hence, undermining the global institutions that have been underpinned by western power since the end of the Cold War serves Russian interests. Russian actors are desperate enough not to care about the ideological content or the specific tactics used to promote these interests—to a declining power worried about domestic as much as foreign threats to its leadership, the means justify the ends.

China, in contrast, *is* a rising power. Its long-term national interest is not in tearing down global institutions—which, after all, have made the PRC’s rapid economic rise possible to this point. It is, instead, to subvert and reshape them, and to build new ones that it can control.⁶ Chinese leaders appear to believe they can afford to take the long view—that time is on their side, and that investing in new institutional arrangements now will pay dividends for Chinese interests far into the future. For instance, one can argue about the purpose, the content, and the ultimate consequences of the Belt and Road Initiative, but it is clearly an attempt to build something for the long haul, and it is backed by a powerful ideological and propaganda campaign that has a positive message at its core.⁷

More generally, recent Chinese influence campaigns abroad have been of a very different character than Russian ones. The CCP still uses a Leninist political concept, the United Front, to guide its strategy for influence campaigns.⁸ The goal of United Front Work (UFW) is to “co-opt and neutralize sources of potential opposition to the policies and authority of” the Party; UFW “uses a range of methods to influence overseas Chinese communities, foreign governments, and other actors to take actions or adopt positions supportive of Beijing’s preferred policies.”⁹ Under Xi Jinping, the United Front Work Department has been elevated to a privileged place in the party-state bureaucracy, and given an infusion of new funding and personnel—perhaps the most

⁶ On this point, see especially Evan Feigenbaum, “Reluctant Stakeholder: Why China’s Highly Strategic Brand of Revisionism is More Challenging than Washington Thinks,” *Carnegie Endowment*, April 27, 2018, at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/04/27/reliant-stakeholder-why-china-s-highly-strategic-brand-of-revisionism-is-more-challenging-than-washington-thinks-pub-76213>

⁷ Nadege Rolland, “A Concise Guide to the Belt and Road Initiative,” *NBR*, April 11, 2019 at: <https://www.nbr.org/publication/a-guide-to-the-belt-and-road-initiative/>

⁸ June Teufel Dreyer, “A Weapon without War: China’s United Front Strategy,” *FPRI*, February 6, 2018, at: <https://www.fpri.org/article/2018/02/weapon-without-war-chinas-united-front-strategy/>

⁹ Alexander Bowe, “China’s Overseas United Front Work: Background and Implications for the United States,” US-China Economic and Security Review Commission Staff Report, August 24, 2018, p. 3, at: <https://www.uscc.gov/Research/china's-overseas-united-front-work-background-and-implications-united-states>

visible manifestation of Xi’s recommitment of the CCP-led regime to ideological purity and orthodoxy.¹⁰ The foreign influence campaigns undertaken under the auspices of United Front Work have four distinguishing features.

First, their central objective is *control of the message* about the CCP in the public sphere. The Party under Xi Jinping still places great value on the specific ideological content of propaganda that promotes “China’s Rise,” the “China Dream,” and so forth.¹¹ Voices that reinforce the “correct” message should be amplified, and those that counter or criticize it, or that advance alternative, heterodox narratives should be drowned out, or preferably, silenced. (Note, again, the much greater emphasis on ideological content in Chinese versus Russian information campaigns.) One can also borrow a concept from the study of political communication and think of Chinese influence campaigns abroad, within pluralistic societies with a strong tradition of free speech and a marketplace of ideas, as an attempt to shift the “Overton window”—the spectrum of ideas considered acceptable to argue for in public at a given moment in time. For instance, in a society not subjected to a CCP influence campaign, discussion of the possibility of independence for Tibet and Taiwan might be a perfectly legitimate topic of debate. But in one that has been targeted and successfully influenced, these suggestions are no longer “mainstream”—they are “extreme” positions that fall outside the Overton window.

Second, to achieve this objective, United Front Work is aimed primarily at *mobilization*, not *persuasion*. Chinese information campaigns are not a sincere effort to change people’s minds via honest, open debate, but are instead about amplifying the voices of people who are already firm believers in the Party’s message, or at least not opposed to it, and intimidating into silence those who are avowed critics and opponents.¹² This emphasis on mobilization rather than persuasion is a critical distinction that sets UFW apart from other, legitimate efforts by foreign countries to influence public opinion in democracies: many of the activities that United Front actors undertake are illegitimate in democratic societies because there is an element of *coercion* involved. For instance, ethnic Chinese business owners might be asked by CCP officials to visit

¹⁰ Gerry Groot, “The Rise and Rise of the United Front Work Department under Xi,” *China Brief* 18(7), April 24, 2018.

¹¹ See John Garnaut, “Engineers of the Soul: Ideology in Xi Jinping’s China,” *Sinocism*, January 16, 2019, at: <https://sinocism.com/p/engineers-of-the-soul-ideology-in>

¹² For instance, see A. Odysseus Patrick and Emanuel Stoakes, “China’s Influence on Campus Chills Free Speech in Australia, New Zealand,” *Washington Post*, August 9, 2019, at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/chinas-influence-on-campus-chills-free-speech-in-australia-new-zealand/2019/08/09/3dad3a3c-b9f9-11e9-8e83-4e6687e99814_story.html

the Chinese consulate “for tea,” and “requested” not to advertise in Chinese-language outlets that do not conform to a pro-Beijing editorial line. If they conform to this request, they may end up on a list of “politically reliable” businesses approved for use by CCP-linked groups; if they do not, they may themselves lose business from other pro-CCP customers.

Particularly valuable in United Front Work abroad is the cultivation of foreign “soft supporters” of the CCP regime who, because of their prominent standing and apparent non-Chinese backgrounds, can make especially effective advocates for the Chinese message. One high-profile example is the former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, who often takes “anti-anti-China” positions in public forums. In June 2019, for instance, Rudd published an op-ed in the *New York Times* entitled “Trump Hands China an Easy Win in the Trade War,” which made several rhetorical moves that reinforced the CCP’s preferred talking points about the US-China confrontation over trade.¹³ Rudd positions himself as someone who better understands the Chinese (because he himself speaks fluent Chinese and has a half-Chinese granddaughter) and is therefore better-placed to interpret politics in Beijing than other foreigners. He references “the prism of Chinese history” to argue that Trump administration officials do not understand the deep cultural forces they are dealing with, and that their criticisms of the PRC are poorly targeted or will backfire. He reinforces the (arguably specious) claim that the Chinese leadership is in a strong position in a trade confrontation with Washington, and even willing to walk away from a deal they would have accepted months prior. He argues that the Trump administration’s pressure is merely ramping up nationalism in China. And he omits any discussion of the various problems in the US-China relationship that can be attributed to Chinese behavior over the last few years, thereby reinforcing the narrative that the blame for this confrontation lies only with one side.

It is plausible that Mr. Rudd believes every word in this op-ed, and that his advocacy on behalf of the PRC’s position (or at least, against the “anti-China” position of the Trump administration) is sincere. But that already is a win for United Front Work: a former prime minister of Australia is repeating CCP talking points in the editorial pages of the *New York Times*! What matters most is not what he says, but who he is and where he is saying it. If this were a level playing field in a contest for public opinion, then Xi’s critics within China and abroad would have equal opportunity to weigh in and counter Rudd. What the United Front’s

¹³ Kevin Rudd, “Trump Hands China an Easy Win in the Trade War,” *New York Times*, May 29, 2019, at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/29/opinion/trump-china-trade-war.html>

work has done, however, is make it exceptionally costly for those willing to give the other side of the argument to step up and do so. Thus, we get an asymmetric fight: western critics of Trump and the United States are prominently featured in western media, while Chinese critics of Xi are nowhere to be found. Whether he fully knows it or not, Rudd is playing a valuable role in a larger strategy of mobilization against the CCP’s perceived opponents.

Third, United Front work is most effective if it is at least partly *covert*. If it is common knowledge that a prominent opinion leader is receiving money from a controversial or threatening group, and then that person changes his message so he supports that group’s positions, people will discount that person’s speech. But if support (or intimidation) is *not* common knowledge, the change in tone and message has the capacity to persuade others based on who is saying it. To return to the Rudd example, it is precisely because he is *not* obviously linked to the CCP regime that his message carries so much force. Thus, much United Front Work in foreign countries proceeds through front organizations, such as Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Associations¹⁴ and Chinese Students and Scholars Associations¹⁵.

Finally, the use of coercion and covert operations in United Front work leads inevitably to attempts to *corrupt* democratic institutions. The use of front organizations, the deliverance of veiled threats through private meetings or intermediaries, the leveraging of economic influence to compel changes in political stances—these are all not only examples of illegitimate but also *illegal* behavior in democracies governed by the rule of law. Such behavior, if allowed to persist unchecked and to expand, risks undermining the legal foundations of democracy.

2. *Taiwan is a Very Different Target from the English-Speaking World*

The second point to keep in mind about the disinformation threat to Taiwan is that its political system is not nearly so vulnerable to traditional Chinese tactics as one might expect. The KMT-ROC party-state apparatus historically was very familiar with CCP United Front Work and political warfare operations. The KMT was on the front lines of an existential conflict

¹⁴ US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, “China’s Overseas United Front Work: Background and Implications for the United States.” April 24, 2018, at: https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/China%27s%20Overseas%20United%20Front%20Work%20-%20Background%20and%20Implications%20for%20US_final_0.pdf

¹⁵ Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, “China’s Long Arm Reaches into American Campuses,” *Foreign Policy*, March 7, 2018, at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/07/chinas-long-arm-reaches-into-american-campuses-chinese-students-scholars-association-university-communist-party/>

with the CCP for several decades after 1949, and it built up impressive expertise on the CCP’s structure, operation, goals and tactics and developed ways to effectively counter them within Taiwan.¹⁶

But with democratization in Taiwan, the terrain for this ideological conflict shifted dramatically. CCP messaging was less threatening in a democratic system, and it did not need to be systematically detected and censored because it simply had little appeal to a democratic citizenry newly aware of the growing differences between the two sides. As a consequence, the Taiwanese security establishment shifted away from a focus on political warfare, and much expertise was lost. In addition, Taiwanese political elites by and large endorsed a new consensus that it was inappropriate for a democratic society to continue to maintain party cells in security agencies, to secretly collect information on trends in public opinion for internal use only, and to pursue concerted campaigns to shape public opinion on topics considered important to “national security.”¹⁷

Nevertheless, despite the “unilateral disarmament” by the Taiwan side, the CCP was also fundamentally at a loss in this new environment about how to influence a democratic public in a way that furthered its own goals. Beijing’s attempt to intimidate Taiwan voters into backing a more pro-China candidate in the 1996 presidential election—the first direct election for that office—backfired when Lee Teng-hui won re-election by a surprisingly large margin. The PRC also struggled to adapt to the surprise election of a DPP president in 2000, and to craft a new Taiwan policy that could help arrest the growth of support for Taiwanese independence. It eventually settled on a strategy of “hard” threats—the passage of an “Anti-Secession Law” requiring the PRC to prevent Taiwanese independence, and by “non-peaceful means” if necessary—and “soft” inducements—the introduction of economic incentives targeted at important political constituencies such as farmers in southern Taiwan. The “soft” part of this strategy proved far more effective than the “hard” part, as public opinion toward the Chen Shui-bian administration soured and more voters were persuaded that benefits could be gained from greater economic integration with the Chinese mainland. Toward the end of the Chen Shui-bian era, Beijing even came to rely on Washington, DC, to communicate its messages, rather than

¹⁶ See Thomas A. Marks, *Counterrevolution in China: Wang Sheng and the Kuomintang* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

¹⁷ Yisuo Tzeng, “Depoliticizing Taiwan’s Security Apparatus,” in *Taiwan’s Democracy Challenged*, ed. Yun-han Chu, Larry Diamond, and Kharis Templeman (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2016), pp. 289-312.

attempting directly to threaten or cajole the Chen administration or Taiwanese voters. And when KMT candidate Ma Ying-jeou was elected president in 2008, Beijing kept quiet until after the results were safely in, not wanting to jinx his expected win.¹⁸

Thus, much like a patient exposed at an early age to an endemic disease, Taiwan’s democratic system has developed under the shadow of the Chinese threat since its birth, and it has grown up with it. The Taiwan body politic has developed antibodies that have been fairly effective to date against CCP efforts to distort and corrupt its political system. Chief among them is the early emergence of the “China question”—what should Taiwan’s relationship be with the People’s Republic of China across the Strait, and how should this relationship be managed?—as the singular, fundamental, and polarizing divide in Taiwanese politics. Many Taiwanese have decried this as a problem for democratic consolidation, but it has had the benefit of solidifying a large bloc of partisan DPP voters on the more pro-independence end of the political spectrum. These partisans are deeply suspicious of pro-China candidates, messaging, or activities, and attempts by public opinion leaders—politicians, media outlets, academics, and others—to promote a China-friendly line typically trigger heated counter-arguments and insinuations that those individuals are doing Beijing’s bidding. Taiwan’s political system is also well attuned to the threat to its democratic institutions emanating from across the Taiwan Strait, because the PRC has loomed over the political sphere for decades.¹⁹ Chinese influence operations in western democracies have been effective in large part because they have occurred almost entirely out of sight, targeted mostly ethnic Chinese groups and institutions, and extended control over Chinese-language media outlets that mainstream media does not pay attention to. In Taiwan, by contrast, the targets *are* the mainstream—and sensitivity is high among Taiwanese to sudden, unexplained changes in position or tone of major public figures. Political elites running for elected office need to signal credibly that they will not be beholden to Beijing if they want to appeal to the median voter—and that acts as a significant barrier to CCP messaging.

So, while it is possible that Beijing could launch a concerted disinformation campaign against Taiwan that mutates into a new and more virulent form that will simply overwhelm the island’s democratic defenses, we should not assume that that is the most likely outcome.

¹⁸ See Wu-ueh Chang and Chien-min Chao, “Managing Stability in the Taiwan Strait: Non-Military Policy towards Taiwan under Hu Jintao,” *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 38(3): 99-118.

¹⁹ For instance, see “DPP Gears Up to Fend Off Chinese Influence,” *Focus Taiwan*, July 17, 2019, at: <http://m.focustaiwan.tw/news/aip/201907170023.aspx>

Beijing’s preferred candidates and policies have done best in Taiwan when it does the least and remains quiet on the sidelines; actions that raise the specter of PRC interference in democratic processes tend to provoke a domestic backlash that hurts, rather than helps, Chinese strategic objectives. A disinformation campaign that can be clearly traced back to CCP-backed actors risks triggering precisely this kind of backlash in the run-up to 2020.

3. *What’s the Bigger Threat?: Covert vs Overt Campaigns*

Third, to date, the CCP’s *overt* attempts to shape Taiwan’s democratic system in a way that favors their long-term goals are already quite numerous, and clearly more consequential to date, than their *covert* attempts. Since Tsai Ing-wen was elected president in 2016 and refused to endorse the CCP’s preferred formulation of the “One China” principle, the PRC has put a whole-of-government squeeze on her administration, and has openly tied the increasing diplomatic, economic, and military pressure on Taiwan to the cross-Strait approach of Tsai and her Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). These steps include²⁰:

- Encouraging a switch in recognition from diplomatic allies of Taiwan (up to seven at the time of writing, including Sao Tome and Principe, Panama, Dominican Republic, Burkina Faso, El Salvador, and now the Solomon Islands and Kiribati).
- Suspending all cross-strait diplomatic communications, including the Taipei-Beijing crisis hotline established during the era of President Ma Ying-jeou.
- Blocking the participation of Taiwanese representatives in international bodies to which they had previously been admitted as observers, such as the World Health Assembly and International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO).
- Reducing and then halting visits by Chinese tourist groups to Taiwan, and more recently, shutting down the independent tourist permit program for PRC nationals to visit Taiwan.
- Extraditing Taiwanese nationals accused of telecom fraud from several countries, including Malaysia, Kenya, Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia, and Spain, directly to the PRC for prosecution over objections from Taiwan’s representatives.

²⁰ See “Monitoring the Cross-Strait Balance: Taiwan’s Defense and Security,” 2019 Taiwan Democracy and Security Project Workshop Report, Stanford University, September 2019, pp. 9-10.

- Introducing a new civilian flight route (M-503) near the midpoint of the Taiwan Strait, without warning or prior consultation with Taiwan’s aviation authorities.
- Rolling out a list of 31 new financial incentives to entice Taiwanese with special skills to move to the Chinese mainland for work.
- Pressuring foreign companies, including American air carriers and hotel chains, to list destinations in Taiwan as Chinese territory on their websites.
- Pressuring the members of the East Asian Olympic Committee (mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, Mongolia, North Korea, South Korea, and Japan) to vote to rescind the rights of Taichung to host the 2019 East Asian Youth Games, originally awarded to the city in 2015—all but Japan (which abstained) supported the switch.
- Detaining and eventually sentencing a visiting Taiwanese human rights activist and DPP member, Lee Ming-che, to five years in prison for “subversion of state power” via internet posts he had made while in Taiwan.
- Increasing military patrols in or near Taiwanese territorial air and sea space, including several circumnavigations of the main island and a possibly deliberate incursion of fighter jets across the midline of the Taiwan Strait.
- Blocking Chinese movie industry participation in the Golden Horse Awards, the Chinese-language equivalent of the Oscars, held in Taiwan every year.

In other words, a political warfare campaign that includes covert elements, while almost certainly underway right now, should be of secondary concern to what is already a multifaceted, *overt* pressure campaign on the current democratically elected government of Taiwan. Note again the contrast with the Russian goals and methods: these steps to squeeze the current Taiwanese government are those of a major power with increasing leverage, not one whose power is declining and which must resort to asymmetric “weapons of the weak.”

Thus, we should not assume that Chinese goals, strategies, and tactics will converge with Russian ones, and that it is only a matter of time before a Russian-style “post-truth” disinformation campaign hits Taiwan. It is certainly possible, and a well-executed campaign could do a great deal of damage to trust in democratic institutions. But it is also not obvious that Chinese leaders have the strategic urgency, the motivation, and the ideological flexibility and skill to support a Russian-style campaign in Taiwan in the run-up to 2020, nor that they believe

such a campaign would be the best way to advance the PRC’s long-term objective of bringing Taiwan under its control.

More likely, in my view, is more of the same, at greater quantity but not qualitatively different: the CCP will look for ways to promote the campaign of the KMT’s presidential nominee, Han Kuo-yu, and to undermine support for Tsai Ing-wen and the DPP. Beijing has taken a wide array of economic and diplomatic actions over the last three years to signal that supporting Tsai is a bad idea, including the rather risky move of poaching additional diplomatic allies within a few months of the election. This kind of tactic has backfired in the past, and it may well backfire again.

3. The Taiwan Target Environment: Strengths and Weaknesses of the Political System

Taiwan’s democratic political system is better prepared in some aspects than others to weather a concerned Chinese influence campaign. Among its strengths are:

- A low-tech, transparent, efficient, accurate and broadly trusted electoral management system that would be almost impossible to disrupt covertly;
- A well-institutionalized party system that is structured around Taiwan’s relationship with the PRC, and includes significant number of DPP partisans and independence supporters who are inherently suspicious of Chinese influence and make exceptionally difficult targets for traditional UFW tactics;
- A well-regarded system of prosecutors’ offices and other investigative bodies in the Ministry of Justice, National Security Bureau, and Ministry of National Defense that are empowered to investigate national security threats, including violations of electoral integrity (e.g. vote-buying), espionage, and organized crime activities;
- A relatively well-educated electorate accustomed to a loud, cacophonous media environment and unreliable single-source reporting;
- A large number of civil society organizations that are idealistic, motivated, well-equipped to detect and highlight influence operations and monitor government agencies and the press.

Among the most concerning weaknesses of Taiwan’s political system are:

- A fragmented, hypercompetitive, and unprofitable media environment, in which traditional even more so than social media is susceptible to Beijing’s influence;
- A weak campaign finance regulatory environment that still allows many ways for political figures to avoid financial transparency and conceal sources of political funding;
- A clientelist system of vote-brokering in exchange for monetary benefits that underpins traditional factional structures, which continue to operate in some parts of Taiwan, especially in rural areas and for local elections;
- Light regulation and monitoring of civil society organizations, particularly religious organizations, centered around temple associations, that have ties to mainland Chinese parent groups and are also nodes in local factional structures;
- An economy that remains closely tied to mainland China, giving the PRC significant leverage over businesses and key voting blocs in Taiwan.

Below, I discuss some of these strengths and weaknesses in more detail.

Election Management

Election management in Taiwan is a hidden strength of Taiwan’s democracy: it is virtually un-hackable.²¹ The problems of electoral malpractice and malfeasance that plague many other young democracies, and even old ones like the United States, are vanishingly rare in the Taiwanese case. The voter rolls are taken from household registration data and updated automatically. Polling stations are plentiful and well-marked, and voters rarely face a long wait to vote (the 2018 local elections were an exception, due to the addition of 10 referendum ballots). Separate ballots are printed for each race, and standardized in look and feel across each jurisdiction. Voters indicate their choice by stamping a chop included in each polling booth in the well-marked box beside the candidate’s name; this minimizes the spoiled ballot rate, which at between 1-2% is among the lowest in the world. Poll workers are well-trained volunteers, typically schoolteachers, and not connected to parties or campaigns. The voting procedure is standardized and spelled out clearly in regulations issued well before the elections by the CEC,

²¹ See Kharis Templeman, “Why the KMT Eliminated Electoral Fraud in Taiwan during Martial Law,” working paper. Available at: https://www.kharistempleman.com/uploads/1/5/8/5/15855636/templeman.taiwan_cec.20170829.pdf

and compliance by poll workers is almost universal. Elections are always held on Saturdays from 8am-4pm. Any member of the public is allowed to observe voters cast their ballots and to keep an eye on the ballot boxes, which are placed in a highly visible location in the polling station.

Once the polls close and the last vote has been cast, counting of the ballots is done at each polling station, and it begins immediately within plain view of anyone who wants to observe. Workers open the ballot box, pull out ballots one by one, show them to any onlookers, and shout out each result, which another poll worker records on a sheet visible to all. The ballots in each box are opened and recorded this way, systematically, until all ballots have been reviewed and counted. The final vote tallies for each candidate are then totaled up from the master sheets, and the counts posted and left up at the entrance to the polling place, while the poll-master calls in the results to the Central Election Commission. The whole process takes, on average, less than an hour at the typical polling place, and it is exceptionally low-tech, transparent, and efficient. One would be hard-pressed to design a less “hackable” voting system if one tried.

Thus, the traditional threats to Taiwan’s electoral integrity come not on election day, but before, during the election campaigns: through manipulation of the media environment, vote-buying and other forms of local clientelism, and rumor-mongering and slanderous attacks by candidates and campaigns against one another. None of these behaviors are particularly new, and Taiwan’s democracy has survived despite them. But in the face of a concerted campaign from outside to affect election outcomes, it is worth reviewing briefly here the potential vulnerabilities of key elements of Taiwan’s political system to this kind of threat.

Traditional Media

Much of the outside attention to Taiwan’s vulnerabilities has focused on the online media sphere, but conditions in the island’s traditional media environment are arguably even more problematic. First and foremost, television and print media as a whole are in an unprofitable industry with saturated markets and cutthroat competition.²² There are seven separate 24 hour news channels competing for viewers on an island with less than 24 million people. Print

²² For a good review of the history of Taiwan’s media industry post-democratization, see Chien-san Feng, “Press Freedom and the Mass Media,” in *Taiwan’s Democracy Challenged: The Chen Shui-bian Years*, ed. Yun-han Chu, Larry Diamond, and Kharis Templeman (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2016), pp. 291-240.

newspaper readership has declined steadily as well, like it has in most major democracies, and online versions of the legacy mastheads have not managed to replace much of the lost advertising revenue.

In this environment, journalistic ethics and adherence to professional codes of conduct—never a strong suit in Taiwan since the transition to democracy—have mostly fallen by the wayside. All major media outlets now publish explosive accusations made entirely by anonymous sources. The modal pattern of political reporting is simply to repeat what was said at a press conference called by a major political figure, or to write a story around competing political statements from two opposing sides of an issue. In many other cases, only one side is even reported. Other stories are built around leaks fed to reporters from sources who have clear ulterior motives. Political bias in most of the major newspapers and TV stations is obvious and consistent.

Moreover, with media companies consistently losing money over the last decade, paying for positive coverage²³, or even outright buying a media outlet with a broad reach, is relatively easy. That is exactly what the pro-CCP tycoon Tsai Eng-meng did in 2009, when his Want Want foods group purchased a controlling stake in the China Times media group. Once Tsai’s ownership team took control, the editorial line of the *China Times* newspaper and the news broadcast channels CTV and CtiTV swung away from the moderate, middle-of-the-road position they had long taken and sharply toward the pro-unification end of the political spectrum.²⁴ Their news coverage has followed suit; during the 2018 local election campaigns, for instance, the China Times Group outlets became open cheerleaders for the campaign of Kaohsiung KMT mayoral candidate Han Kuo-yu, providing him blanket coverage over several months and contributing—though it is hard to say just how much—to a meteoric rise in his popularity around Taiwan and his upset victory in the election.²⁵ He then rode that win and more fawning media

²³ I-mou Lee and I-hwa Cheng, “Paid ‘News’: China using Taiwan Media to Win Hearts and Minds on the Island.” *Reuters*, August 8, 2019, at: <https://in.reuters.com/article/taiwan-china-media/paid-news-china-using-taiwan-media-to-win-hearts-and-minds-on-island-sources-idINKCN1UZ0HF>

²⁴ A story in the Financial Times in summer 2019 reported what was already an open secret among those in the newspaper industry in Taiwan: the editorial leadership of the *China Times* was in near-daily contact with handlers at the Taiwan Affairs Office in Beijing, which would offer regular guidance about what news to promote and how to promote it. See Kathrin Hille, “Taiwan Primaries Highlight Fears over China’s Political Influence.” At: https://www.ft.com/content/036b609a-a768-11e9-984c-fac8325aaa04?FTCamp=engage/CAP/desktopapp/Channel_Bloomberg//B2B

²⁵ Shelley Shan, “Han Dominated TV Coverage of 2018 Polls: Study,” *Taipei Times* June 6, 2019, at: <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2019/06/06/2003716440>

coverage to the top of the polls for candidates for president, and was duly nominated by the KMT to be the party’s standard-bearer for 2020.

Whatever one’s view on the legitimacy of Mayor Han’s rise from obscurity into a leading contender for the presidency, everyone should be able to agree that Taiwan’s current media environment is not healthy. It is one in which damaging rumors and misleading accusations can easily metastasize into political scandals, or on the other hand, as the Han case shows, into a virtual cult of personality. At the same time, however, it is also an environment that has existed since well before the introduction of social media, and the problems that bedevil it cannot be addressed purely through online solutions such as more stringent message board monitoring or “fact checking” anti-fake-news websites.²⁶ For instance, the loudest voices pushing the conspiracy theory that Tsai Ing-wen’s Ph.D. from the London School of Economics is somehow invalid, or that her thesis was faked, are not shadowy, alternative websites but major media and political personalities—the former TV show host Dennis Peng, and the former DPP vice president Annette Lu, among others.²⁷ Even without any online news or social media platforms to boost the signal, these rumors would still get wide attention because of the decentralized, cutthroat and highly partisan Taiwanese media industry.

Radio also is an important but frequently overlooked media source for alternative news and viewpoints. Taiwan has a long tradition, going back to the martial law era, of illegal or unregulated, “guerrilla” radio stations, many of which broadcast in Hoklo Taiwanese rather than Mandarin, and often promoted strident pro-independence views. This tradition has continued through the present day, albeit with radio stations for the most part now operating as legally registered entities. United Front Work now appears to be targeting these stations as well; one report published in *Ketagalan Media* noted increased airtime in the last 18 months for Mandarin-language mainland Chinese songs, on-air exchanges with radio hosts in mainland cities, and promotion of the candidacy of Han Kuo-yu.²⁸

Social Media

²⁶ Hsin-fang Lee and Jonathan Chin, “Executive Yuan, Line to Target False News Reports,” *Taipei Times*, June 4, 2019, at: <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2019/06/04/2003716311>

²⁷ <https://www.storm.mg/article/1749507>

²⁸ “We Sell Drugs, and Taiwan: China’s Hold on Taiwan’s Radio,” *Ketagalan Media*, June 28, 2019, at: <https://www.ketagalanmedia.com/2019/06/28/sell-drugs-taiwan-chinas-hold-taiwans-radio/>

Taiwanese are among the greatest consumers of social media in the world. Facebook use is ubiquitous. One Facebook representative claimed to me that the platform had 16 million unique *daily* visits from Taiwanese in 2017, in a country with less than 24 million people. That number is undoubtedly an overestimate, but it should indicate just how widespread Taiwanese engagement is on Facebook, and how critical a platform it now is to Taiwan’s public discourse. Most elected officials, academics, and other prominent personalities have public Facebook pages where they post frequent statements on the events and controversies of the day. So too do political parties, civil society organizations, news groups, educational institutions, and so forth.

Thus, Taiwanese society is vulnerable to the same kinds of targeted influence campaigns on Facebook that the Russians used to disrupt the US 2016 presidential election, to considerable effect. But Facebook has gained considerable experience in combatting malicious actors on its platforms over the last four years, and it is better prepared now to identify and counter a state-led disinformation campaign in the run-up to a sensitive political event such as an election.

Facebook also has a couple advantages over other platforms: it requires users to register with their real names, and it has been quicker about identifying and taking down fake accounts used for online smear campaigns—as in, for instance, the campaign against protestors in Hong Kong.²⁹

The other major social media application in Taiwan is LINE, which was developed and is owned and operated by a Japanese company. I do not have numbers on hand for overall penetration of LINE apps, but it is clearly widespread. Unlike Facebook, many of its users are in closed groups, where sharing of photos, news stories, links, and gossip is easy and pervasive, and it is impossible for a centralized fact-checking and debunking operation to keep up. Some of the most damaging and malicious rumors to be circulated during the 2018 local election campaigns, for instance, were apparently shared initially through closed LINE accounts.³⁰ In the run-up to the 2020 election, the Tsai administration has prioritized combatting mis- and dis-information

²⁹ Cristiano Lima, “Twitter, Facebook Suspend China-Linked Disinformation Campaigns Targeting Hong Kong,” *Politico*, August 19, 2019, at: <https://www.politico.com/story/2019/08/19/twitter-facebook-disinformation-hong-kong-1468587>

³⁰ I-fan Lin, “Analysis: the China Fake News Threat,” *The News Lens International*, November 24, 2018, at: <https://international.thenewslens.com/article/108847>

sharing on the LINE platform, and has teamed up with LINE to introduce a “rumor-busting page” on LINE’s news feed.³¹

The third important social media outlet is decidedly old-school: Professional Technology Temple, or PTT, is a message board system popular among college students that operates a bit like Reddit does in the United States. To control quality and content, users police themselves, upvoting contributor accounts and posts for interesting material and comments, and downvoting malicious or unhelpful posts. It is also by far the oldest of any online forums still in use in Taiwan, and it maintains a dedicated following, particularly among the college-educated. To my knowledge, few researchers outside of Taiwan have paid much attention to the possibility of Chinese interference on PTT, though manipulation here appears both easier to execute, harder to detect and deter, and potentially more influential on broader public opinion than a campaign on other widely used platforms.

Party Organizations

Taiwan is fortunate to have two large, well-established political parties with reasonably disciplined, hierarchical organizations. Both have been around a long time—the KMT since before it was on Taiwan, and the DPP since 1986—and together they have dominated the political system for most of the democratic era. Both also get a sizeable share of their funding from public grants made available to parties based on their vote share in the previous legislative elections.

Nevertheless, party financing is a potential weak point in the political system. It has become especially problematic for the KMT, which traditionally enjoyed resource advantages that dwarfed all others.³² The party drew considerable revenue from party-controlled investment and business groups, and used earnings from these ventures to fund its election campaigns, including, in some cases, widespread vote-buying at the local level. It sold most of these ventures off in the mid-2000s, compelled in part by amendments to the Political Parties Act that forbid parties to engage in business activities. Since the DPP won a majority in the legislature for the first time in 2016, however, the KMT has been on the defensive. The DPP passed a new law

³¹ Hsin-fang Lee and Jonathan Chin, “Executive Yuan, Line to Target False News Reports,” *Taipei Times*, June 4, 2019, at: <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2019/06/04/2003716311>

³² Yu-fu Chen, and Jake Chung, “KMT Remains Wealthiest Party: Report,” *Taipei Times*, July 14, 2018, at: <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2018/07/14/2003696645>

giving the power to investigate KMT martial-law-era party assets that may have been acquired illegitimately, and that body at one point froze several of the KMT’s bank accounts, making it difficult for the party to meet payroll.³³ Thus, the KMT’s urgent need to raise money could make it more vulnerable to a PRC-backed campaign that provides funding with strings attached.

Some of the smaller parties are also potential conduits for CCP influence. The most prominent are two on the far right, pro-unification end of the political spectrum: the New Party, and the even more extremist China Unification Promotion Party (CUPP). Four members of the New Party were arrested in December 2017 on suspicion of sending along classified information about an espionage case to contacts in mainland China.³⁴ Five members of the CUPP were arrested and indicted the same month for attacking students at a protest against a pro-China music festival.³⁵

Despite the rather alarming fact that some of Taiwan’s political parties are working on behalf of Beijing’s interests, these parties remain a relatively small presence on the Taiwanese party system’s extreme pro-unification fringe, and their actions are not likely to have much appeal to swing voters. More worrisome would be a UFW campaign to sow division among the pro-independence left that is a natural constituency for the DPP. The creation of two fundamentalist, pro-independence parties that are also harshly critical of Tsai Ing-wen and the DPP in the summer of 2019 offers a fat target for a disinformation campaign directed from Beijing³⁶—but only if Chinese operatives can overcome ideological distaste for supporting and amplifying the messages of some of the most radical pro-independence voices in the Taiwanese political spectrum.

Here the most important step in recent years has been to tighten reporting requirements for political parties. In December 2017, the DPP-led legislature amended the Political Parties Act

³³ Stacey Hsu, “KMT Considers ‘Special Party Fee,’ *Taipei Times*, December 10, 2017, at: <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2017/12/10/2003683736>

³⁴ Chris Horton, “Taiwan Suspects Pro-China Party of Passing Information to Beijing,” *New York Times*, December 20, at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/20/world/asia/taiwan-china-new-party.html>

³⁵ Jason Pan, “Prosecutors Charge Five CUPP Members with Assault,” *Taipei Times*, December 2, 2017, at: <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2017/12/02/2003683283> ; see also John Pomfret, “The White Wolf of Taiwan,” *SupChina*, August 16, 2018, at: <https://supchina.com/2018/08/16/the-white-wolf-of-taiwan/>

³⁶ Tzu-ti Huang, “Pro-Independence Group’s Move to Form Political Party Draws Mixed Reaction in Taiwan,” *Taiwan News*, July 18, 2019, at: <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/3747151> ; Hsin-fang Lee and Jake Chung, “Independence Advocates to Form Party on August 18,” *Taipei Times*, August 4, 2019, at: <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2019/08/04/2003719895>

to mandate that parties submit a statement of their finances to the Ministry of the Interior each year.³⁷

Civil Society

Within Taiwan’s civil society sector, there are several vectors that a PRC-backed campaign might use to try to exert political influence. The most vulnerable targets are probably traditional temple associations, which have long served as nodes in local power structures in the more traditional parts of Taiwan. Many associations have connections to mainland Chinese temples and have gladly participated in ceremonies celebrating their common heritage and supporting pro-unification messages.³⁸ Some are also useful fronts for money-laundering operations and criminal organizations. Their status as religious organizations, and the often widespread power and influence in local communities they yield, provides them some cover from state agencies, and they are lightly regulated under Taiwanese law.

Some temple associations are also part of local factional structures, which traditionally competed for local elected office based on a clientelist logic. Many elected village or ward chiefs belonged to a particular faction that supported candidates for higher-level offices; those candidates would then return financial and regulatory favors for factional members lower down in the system. These neighborhood-level “vote brokers” would then use material incentives—sometimes outright payments for votes, other times gifts of useful household goods or food—to mobilize people in their neighborhoods to show up to vote for members of the faction.

While factional structures were once critical to understanding politics in Taiwan, their influence over election outcomes has weakened significantly over the last two decades. One reason is vigorous prosecution of vote-buying by the Ministry of Justice, which has made this once-common practice a risky tactic for winning elections. Another reason is administrative reforms in 2012, which merged several cities with their surrounding counties, creating four new

³⁷ Yu-fu Chen and Jake Chung, “KMT Remains Wealthiest Party: Report,” *Taipei Times*, July 14, 2018, at: <http://www.taipetimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2017/12/10/2003683736> ; Yu-fu Chen and Jonathan Chin, “Ministry Warns Political Parties to Declare Finances,” *Taipei Times*, January 11, 2019, at: <http://www.taipetimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2019/01/11/2003707733> ;

³⁸ For two examples, see Lawrence Chung, “Taiwan Bulldozes Illegal Communist Shrine at Buddhist Temple,” *South China Morning Post*, September 26, 2018, at: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/2165843/taiwan-bulldozes-illegal-communist-shrine-buddhist-temple> ; “Chen Yunlin Visits Dharma Master Yen in Hualien,” September 17, 2012, at: http://tw.tzuchi.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1030%3Achen-yun-lin-visits-dharma-master-cheng-yen-in-hualien&lang=en

special municipalities to join Taipei and Kaohsiung. Along with the elevation in administrative status came the elimination of direct elections to former township-level offices; these positions are now appointed by the city mayor, rather than elected from below. Because township heads were a key level in factions, this reform has inadvertently cut off access to resources and further weakened their influence. Finally, partisan voting has increased in local elections over the past decade, in part due to the merger of many separate local elections into a single, giant, 9-in-1 election day held once every four years. All these factors together have made factional support less decisive in critical elections in Taiwan. Thus, an influx of resources from CCP-linked groups intended to mobilize these factions behind pro-unification candidates, while still a major concern, would be harder to pull off today than in previous years.

Business

Businesses both large and small are a major target for Chinese influence activities. With Taiwan’s economy so deeply integrated with the mainland’s, Chinese actors ranging from regulatory agencies to business partners can exert considerable leverage over Taiwanese businesspeople trying to operate in the Chinese market. These pressures have led to widespread self-censorship and caution about being openly involved in political activities in Taiwan. In other cases, Taiwanese businesspeople have served as useful “soft supporters” of United Front Work who can be mobilized to support PRC goals.³⁹

The entertainment industry is a particularly prominent example of this kind of influence in action. Many Taiwanese singers and actors/actresses are major draws in China and owe much of their success to popularity in the mainland Chinese market. But the PRC has been aggressive about blacklisting entertainers who make public statements of support for Taiwanese independence or democracy, or other gestures such as waving the Taiwanese flag.⁴⁰ Thus, a significant share of the creative arts industry in Taiwan avoids many topics that could be construed as too political for mainland Chinese censors.

³⁹ Yimou Lee and James Pomfret, “Pro-China Groups Step Up Offensive to Win Over Taiwan,” June 25, 2019, at: <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-taiwan-china-campaign-insight/pro-china-groups-step-up-offensive-to-win-over-taiwan-idUKKCN1TR01D>

⁴⁰ Ryan Kilpatrick, “Hong Kong, Taiwan Artists Fall Foul of Beijing as List of 120 Songs Goes Public,” *Hong Kong Free Press*, August 11, 2015, at: <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2015/08/11/hong-kong-taiwan-artists-fall-foul-of-beijing-as-list-of-120-banned-songs-goes-public/>; “Musicians Banned from China for Being Pro-Taiwan,” *Generasian*, April 8, 2018, at: <https://generasian.blog/2018/04/08/musicians-banned-from-china-for-being-pro-taiwan/>

Other industries that are particularly vulnerable to Chinese pressure include tourism and agriculture. Beijing has used the expansion of Chinese tourism to Taiwan during the Ma Ying-jeou era (2008-2016) as a cudgel to try to punish the Tsai administration—it has successively cut off visits from large tour groups and, more recently, banned visits by independent travelers as well. Beijing has also attempted to use purchases of politically sensitive agricultural products, such as milkfish and pomelos, to further undercut support for independence among farmers in the DPP heartland of rural southern Taiwan. When Tsai Ing-wen took office, many of the preferential terms of trade by which these products were exported to the mainland were suspended or reversed, and state-controlled companies who had bought Taiwan-origin products for political reasons stopped doing so.

Education

The opening up of the educational sector in Taiwan to Chinese influence took place later than other sectors of the economy, and it has proceeded much more cautiously. Thus, higher education is less obviously vulnerable to pressure from the PRC than it is in many western countries, with their much greater reliance on Chinese student tuition dollars. In addition, Chinese students who are studying in Taiwanese institutions are a small minority and at a distinct disadvantage when the conversation turns to politics, and especially Taiwan’s relationship with the mainland. Thus, the kinds of intimidating, “patriotic” demonstrations against Hong Kong protesters organized by Chinese students at the University of Queensland in Australia in July 2019⁴¹, for instance, would not be feasible to attempt in Taiwan; if mainland Chinese students tried, they would quickly attract significant blowback.

More concerning is the exchange of faculty members with mainland Chinese universities. Taiwan’s Ministry of Education has considerably tightened up the restrictions on faculty taking joint appointments at PRC institutions, and stepped up enforcement against this practice.⁴² Thus, here too, Taiwanese institutions appear better attuned to the potential concerns associated with academic exchanges than most of those in the west.

⁴¹ John Power, “University of Queensland braces for protest over China’s Confucius Institute and free-speech concerns,” *South China Morning Post*, July 30, 2019, at: <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3020547/university-queensland-braces-protest-over-chinas-confucius>

⁴² Chia-nan Lin, “Ex-Researcher Says Academia Sinica Playing Politics,” *Taipei Times*, July 3, 2019, at: <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2019/07/03/2003718033>

4. Countering Chinese Influence Operations for 2020 and Beyond

Steps Taken So Far

Since Tsai Ing-wen took office in May 2016, the executive branch and the DPP-led legislature have together taken many actions to counter the threat that United Front Work poses to Taiwan’s democracy. The 2018 local elections were a major wake-up call for the Taiwanese security establishment⁴³; several sources have indicated the pace and onslaught of disinformation was an order of magnitude more than in past election cycles. Since those elections, the pace of regulatory and legal changes taken to counter influence operations has quickened considerably.⁴⁴

To combat disinformation, the Tsai administration has set up a task force to coordinate an inter-agency response. As Audrey Tang, the cabinet’s “Digital Minister,” noted in a public talk in Washington DC in April 2019, this response will require stepped-up monitoring and regulation of the media environment of a kind that Taiwan has not seen in the recent past. It has three key parts: false reports will need to be quickly identified, blocked and taken down, through the authority of the National Communications Commission (NCC)⁴⁵; if reports go viral, government officials will work with social media platforms to stop their spread and issue corrections; and those found responsible for dissemination of false information will be “dealt with according to the law.”⁴⁶

The NCC, in particular, appears to be poised to play a critical role in this response. In the wake of the 2018 elections, its efforts were widely criticized as insufficient to the task, and its chairwoman forced to step down. It has since taken a more active role in monitoring and, in at

⁴³ I-fan Lin, “Analysis: The China Fake News Election Threat,” *The News Lens International*, November 24, 2018, at: <https://international.thenewslens.com/article/108847> ; Hsin-po Huang and Sherry Hsiao, “Media Outlets ‘On the Same Path’ as China: Bureau,” *Taipei Times* May 3, 2019, at: <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2019/05/03/2003714464>

⁴⁴ Nick Aspinwall, “Taiwan’s Ruling Party is Getting Tough on China Ahead of 2020 Elections,” *The Diplomat*, May 20, 2019, at: <https://thediplomat.com/2019/05/taiwans-ruling-party-is-getting-tough-on-china-ahead-of-2020-elections/> ; “China Might Intensify Psychological Warfare for Elections,” *Taipei Times*, April 24, 2019, at: <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2019/04/24/2003713931>

⁴⁵ Shelley Shan, “NCC Asks Stations for Better Fact-Checks,” *Taipei Times* April 18, 2019, at: <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2019/04/18/2003713603>

⁴⁶ “Minister Discusses Combatting Fake News on US Visit,” *Taipei Times*, Thursday, April 25, 2019, at: <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2019/04/25/2003714016>

least two cases, fining news outlets for demonstrably fake reporting. This stepped-up role is something of a double-edged sword, however, because it opens the agency up to charges from the KMT, and from sanctioned media outlets themselves, that it is a partisan actor and threatening freedom of the press.⁴⁷

Less prominently, but probably more important for the long run, the Taiwan legislature has taken a growing list of other steps to counter the threat from United Front Work, including:

- Amending the Political Parties Act, requiring all registered political parties to report financial statements that meet regulatory standards;⁴⁸
- Passing a new Foundations Act, increasing oversight of private foundations which receive public money;⁴⁹
- Amending the Civil Servants Act, to lengthen the time after leaving government during which former officials cannot visit the PRC;⁵⁰

The executive branch has made regulatory moves as well, including:

- Imposing fines on Taiwanese who do not report acquiring PRC residency cards, and barring Taiwanese who hold such cards from running for office;⁵¹
- Raising penalties for falsifying country-of-origin labels to hide Chinese imports, and increasing enforcement;⁵²
- Banning government procurement of Chinese communications technology, including services and equipment from Alibaba, Huawei, and Lenovo;⁵³
- Stepping up monitoring, public shaming, and fines against media outlets for slanted reporting and failing to fact-check news stories that turn out to be false;⁵⁴

⁴⁷ Shelley Shan, “NCC Launches Probe of CtiTV, CTV,” *Taipei Times*, July 19, 2019, at:

<http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2019/07/19/2003718927>

⁴⁸ <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2019/01/11/2003707733>

⁴⁹ <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2018/06/28/2003695689>

⁵⁰ <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2019/05/18/2003715336>

⁵¹ <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2019/05/07/2003714704> ;

<http://focustaiwan.tw/news/aip/201902180026.aspx>

⁵² <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2019/05/16/2003715204>

⁵³ <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/China-tech/Taiwan-follows-US-in-shutting-out-China-s-top-tech>

⁵⁴ <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2019/04/11/2003713194> ;

<http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2019/04/04/2003712786>

- Raising fines for evading the Ministry of Economic Affairs review process for mainland Chinese investments in Taiwan;⁵⁵
- Converting Irrigation Associations positions to appointed rather than elected posts, controlled via the civil service system.⁵⁶

Conclusion: Protecting Taiwan’s Democracy for the Long Run

A disproportionate amount of attention in the United States and elsewhere in the west has focused on online threats to democratic processes, including corruption and degradation of the online information environment, the use of social media to foster confusion and distrust, and the general decay of a baseline shared understanding of basic social facts. There is now a growing recognition among groups and researchers focusing on these issues that Taiwan is on the front lines of these challenges, and very vulnerable to Chinese influence campaigns that are sparking such alarm in other parts of the democratic world. And there is much worry that Taiwan is woefully underprepared to meet the disinformation challenge from an ascendant and increasingly assertive China.

I share these worries, but would place the relative emphasis elsewhere. The threat to Taiwan’s democracy is real. But it comes in a different form, and in some ways is less destructive and insidious, than what many disinformation researchers are focused on. Social media is a vector for Chinese influence, it is true—but it is only one, and not the most important. It is the corruption of *traditional* institutions in Taiwan that should be front and center in any counter-influence campaign. Thus, to improve Taiwan’s democratic resiliency in the face of the China threat, its own democratic institutions need to be strengthened. Among the concrete recommendations for reforms, I will focus here on three.

First, Taiwan’s campaign finance regulations need to be strengthened, and enforcement stepped up. It is rather astounding that, until the passage of amendments to the Political Parties Act in 2017, party organizations did not have to make financial reports public or follow best accounting practices. The use of dark or illegitimate money to fund campaigns and other political activities has been an unfortunate fact of life for much of the democratic era in Taiwan, but it is

⁵⁵ <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2019/04/10/2003713117>

⁵⁶ <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2018/01/16/2003685852>

now a glaring security vulnerability. Along with greater scrutiny of party funding sources, it would help to increase public funding for political parties. The current public finance system is a good start, but if it were greatly expanded it would lessen the need for parties and candidates to seek out other, more problematic sources of funds that could come from mainland Chinese sources, and with obvious strings attached.

Second, Taiwan’s media environment is a major concern. But it is *traditional* media outlets that are more clearly compromised, and more obviously a direct threat to the integrity of the public sphere, than social media ones. The continued presence of a media group that is in clear and regular communication with the Taiwan Affairs Office is an affront to Taiwan’s democracy, and at a minimum the NCC should force it to reform its editorial board and establish stringent oversight mechanisms to ensure it maintains a greater degree of independence. Media freedom is a cherished value in Taiwan, but it is now threatened: not by too much heavy-handed regulation, but too little.

The media environment in Taiwan could also be improved over the long run by the development of a more robust public broadcasting service. Taiwan’s Public Television Station has so far remained a bit player in the media sphere, in part because it has few resources, and in part because it is not sufficiently independent of political meddling.⁵⁷ But a robust new funding stream, along with an independent board of directors, could help build public broadcasting into a much stronger, and much-needed, force for public education over the long term. Taiwan has a rich and positive legacy of competent, non-partisan management at state-owned agencies and enterprises. It is not completely unrealistic to imagine that an ambitious and visionary leader could draw on this tradition to create something similar in the media sphere.

Third, one of Taiwan’s foremost democratic strengths is the professionalism, independence, and tenacity of its local prosecutors. In the face of the ever-present China threat to Taiwan’s institutions and its rule of law, they play a critical role in defending democracy. They need to be given more resources, and empowered to step up enforcement of laws already on the books or about to be passed by the legislature.

I am optimistic that over the long run, Taiwan’s democracy will prevail in a struggle against the expansionary authoritarianism of the PRC. The Chinese regime’s vast propaganda

⁵⁷ See Huei-wen Lo, “It’s No BBC: 20 Dismal Years of Taiwan’s Underfunded PTS Public Broadcaster.” *The News Lens International*, August 15, 2018, at: <https://international.thenewslens.com/article/101997>

efforts paint a singular picture of an unassailable juggernaut that will inevitably assimilate Taiwan’s political system and its people. But it conceals a great deal of regime weakness behind that message. Taiwan’s best defense against this threat is to continue the long struggle to reform and strengthen its own democratic institutions and practices.