

THE POLITICAL SPLIT AT THE HEART OF TAIWAN'S STRUGGLE AGAINST FOREIGN DISINFORMATION

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Taiwan's struggle against foreign disinformation and concerns about China's impact on its 2024 election has received much international attention recently. This issue brief examines the domestic and international politics behind Taiwan's struggle against foreign disinformation. A significant push towards dealing with foreign disinformation has been undertaken during the eight-year rule of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), both in terms of strengthening democratic resilience and seeking support and cooperation from international partners. This push has launched Taiwan's issue onto the international arena, in line with the DPP's strategy for closer cooperation with other "like-minded" democracies. However, Taiwan's domestic split between the DPP and Kuomintang (KMT) on how to manage relations with China will remain a significant obstacle. Without closer convergence on how to approach the issue of foreign disinformation between the DPP and the KMT, the issue will remain prone to becoming politicized in domestic political competition. This keeps Taiwan's struggle against foreign disinformation from transcending party politics and translating into national security on a bipartisan foundation.

Introduction

Taiwan has garnered a reputation as the number one target for disinformation in the world.¹ The topic gained a substantial amount of attention ahead of Taiwan's 2024 presidential election on January 13, amid heightened concerns over influence operations from The People's Republic of China (PRC) seeking to affect its democratic process.² In

recent years, China has notably intensified military intimidation towards Taiwan and employed both economic coercion and incentives to emphasize the stakes in Cross-Strait relations.³

In line with its ambition to bring Taiwan and its citizens closer to the idea of unification with the PRC, Beijing has developed a multifaceted

approach to influencing Taiwanese public opinion.⁴ In step with increasing technological capabilities, these efforts have reportedly included propaganda campaigns, cooperation with Taiwanese public opinion survey companies and the spreading of disinformation.⁵ In turn, a sophisticated response to counter attempts to sway public opinion has been mobilized in Taiwan. During the eight-year consecutive rule of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), significant innovations and strides in cyber security and democratic resilience have been undertaken to safeguard Taiwan in the digital age.

In recent years, disinformation perpetuated by authoritarian states has emerged as a significant challenge for democracies across the world.⁶ NATO categorizes both China and Russia as “malicious actors” working against the alliance and its members.⁷ The organization has emphasized the priority foreign disinformation that “tears at the fabric that holds our societies together” should have in terms of individual countries national security.⁸ In the digital age, with an open internet, instant access to information and widespread use of social media, domestic divides in democratic societies are targets for influence operations. Authoritarian states like Russia and China have an inherent advantage in the global information infrastructure

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as their non-democratic systems are designed around repression of information. Democracies, on the other hand, all face the challenge of striking a balance between free speech and national security.

Both Taipei and Washington have emphasized the need for “like-minded countries” to come together and collaborate on the issue of authoritarian disinformation.⁹ But Taiwan’s domestic politics, where relations with China play an outsized role, are much more partisan in the battle against disinformation than what seemingly straight forward calls for international cooperation would suggest.¹⁰ Cross-Strait politics in Taiwan have come to increasingly revolve around maintaining the status quo as this notion has strong support among its citizens.¹¹ Its parties are incentivized by voters to maneuver around this notion rather than a straight forward pursuit of either independence or unification. As such, Taiwan’s political parties can be seen as having gradually moved towards a tacit agreement about the need to maintain the status quo with China. Where the parties across Taiwan’s political spectrum instead sharply diverge is on how to best manage those Cross-Strait relations to ensure Taiwan’s security.

Beijing, on the other hand, views unification with Taiwan as imperative, by military means if necessary. It was reported in November 2023 that Xi Jinping had told U.S. President Joe Biden that Cross-Strait relations must move towards a general resolution of the issue.¹² “Peaceful unification” is however, far more desirable than the prospective costs of a military conflict over Taiwan. An increasingly significant avenue of creating conditions favorable to Beijing is to impact the information Taiwan’s citizens are exposed to in their daily lives through misinformation and disinformation to sway public opinion. Against a backdrop of diverging strategies between Taiwan’s political parties to secure Cross-Strait stability, their politicians have engaged with the issue of foreign disinformation from different angles. What lies ahead after its 2024 election is a difficult path towards political convergence in the

face of a threat to which the only lasting solution is greater unity.

Mobilization and Innovation against Disinformation

Given the disparities in power between Beijing and Taipei, efforts to counter disinformation in Taiwan have necessarily been defensive in nature, focusing on countermeasures.¹³ Facing disinformation seeking to undermine public faith in its political system and affect electoral outcomes, the government of Taiwan and its civil society have mobilized to rise to the challenge.¹⁴

In September 2023, to specifically target the spread of false information ahead of the 2024 presidential election, the Taiwan Supreme Prosecutors Office established AI-generated and deep-fake disinformation investigation centers in six different special municipalities.¹⁵ The Ministry of Justice Investigation Bureau, in turn, dedicated itself to tracing foreign funding related to social media influencers, allegedly involved in election interference.¹⁶ Employing a long-term perspective, the government in Taiwan has sought to strengthen media literacy education and amend relevant laws. As an example of its emphasis on digital matters and democratic resilience, the DPP government established the Ministry for Digital Affairs (MODA) in 2022, responsible for “driving Taiwan’s digital development”.¹⁷

Taiwan’s government and civil society have also invested in establishing digital third-party fact-check platforms.¹⁸ These platforms have enabled netizens to use fact-checking services independently to verify potential disinformation before sharing content, safeguarding users from potential influence campaigns, and helping them from mistakenly perpetuating the spread of false information.¹⁹ In addition, recent years have also seen the establishment of independent fact-checking organizations to help Taiwan in the struggle against disinformation. Altogether, these

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measures have garnered recognition for making Taiwan, its democracy and its citizens more resilient in the digital age.²⁰

Measures taken by the DPP government in its pursuits to strengthen Taiwan’s resilience have, however, also received domestic criticism. The Ministry of National Defense revised the draft of the All-out Defense Mobilization Readiness Act, intended to combat disinformation by potentially giving the government more control of media and information networks.²¹ This measure, in turn, drew criticism from the oppositional Kuomintang (KMT) for putting the government in the position of simultaneously being “a player and the referee”.²² In a democracy where opinions on how to manage Cross-Strait relations vary between parties and voters, questions regarding the lengths the DPP has gone to in order combat foreign disinformation from its own definition of the problem have risen.

Navigating a Powerful Precedent

Both the KMT and the TPP (Taiwan People’s Party) have had to navigate an environment where the DPP has, for almost a decade, been in the stronger position to shape Taiwan’s international narrative around foreign disinformation. During its mandate, the DPP has advanced its view of Chinese disinformation as part of “cognitive warfare”

against Taiwan and has embarked on domestic and international paths towards strengthening countermeasures and resilience.²³ As the party most closely associated with the notions of a separate Taiwanese national identity and independence, it is the most inclined to view pro-Chinese narratives and influence as a tangible threat to Taiwan. From this position, it has found strong motivation to seek out international support and collaborative efforts against Chinese disinformation.²⁴

The opposition KMT views pro-Chinese narratives and influence from a different angle. As the party that oversaw the 1992 consensus with Beijing, the KMT comes from a perspective of pragmatism towards China and its influence. The TPP and its Chairman Ko Wen-je have attempted to strike a middle path, both acknowledging the problem in the DPP's terms of "cognitive warfare" whilst also leaning into the KMT's pragmatism towards China during the 2024 election campaign.²⁵ In opposition to the DPP, which has not been able to establish communication with China since 2016, both the KMT and TPP have viewed resumption of dialogue with Beijing as crucial to stability

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in the Taiwan Strait.²⁶ Instead of engaging with foreign disinformation as per the DPP's definition, the KMT has engaged with the topic of Chinese influence. Its efforts can be understood in part because of what has been called "media wars", waged between the Green DPP and its sympathizers against the Blue KMT and its sympathizers.²⁷ Significant polarization of the discourse landscape in media and open forums has also further widened the gap between the two sides on how to relate to China and its influence.

Ahead of the 2024 election, both the KMT and the TPP accused the DPP of attempting to discredit the other parties and candidates by painting its opposition with a "red brush" (抹紅), linking them to the PRC.²⁸ KMT legislative candidate, Li Mingxuan, having previously studied in China, was criticized with accusations by DPP-loyal netizens of ties to the Communist Party Youth League. She in turn downplayed such links and went on to question whether the DPP was serious about wanting any Cross-Strait exchanges or if it sought to stigmatize all students choosing to go to China.²⁹

In December 2023, it was reported that KMT Vice Chairman, Andrew Hsia, was expected to meet with senior officials of China's Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO). The KMT stated that such claims were "misinformation and disinformation" and accused the DPP of "working with the news media to spread false information and demonize a casual and legitimate trip organized to visit Taiwanese businesspeople".³⁰ As the KMT has sought to defend its engagement with China, it has been inclined to instead view the DPP as the agent of disinformation in domestic political competition.

From the DPP's perspective, narratives that imply that Taiwan has gotten closer to the prospects of war with China under its eight-year rule have been problematic for voters who largely favor the status quo in Cross-Strait relations.³¹ The notion that Taiwan stands at the brink of war and anxiety-

inducing narratives around such prospects have been linked to foreign disinformation efforts by independent fact-checking organizations.³² However, the DPP's main opposition in the 2024 elections, Hou Yu-ih of the KMT, campaigned in international media by portraying himself as the presidential candidate capable of averting war with China.³³ Such dynamics emphasize a particularly fine line between fact-checking and politics in Taiwan as attempts to mitigate narratives causing fear and anxiety and attempts to avert war can both be seen as legitimate concerns from different perspectives.

Narratives undermining the U.S. reliability as a security partner for Taiwan have also been connected to foreign disinformation efforts by independent fact-checking organizations.³⁴ While the DPP generally favors stronger ties with the U.S., the KMT's position has been that Taiwan cannot only depend on the U.S. for its security and should also have better ties with China for the security of Cross-Strait relations.³⁵ In Taiwan's polarized political climate and the struggle about how to best maintain the status quo, foreign disinformation has turned into a lopsided and partisan issue.

An Avenue for “Like-minded” Cooperation

After winning Taiwan's 2016 elections, the DPP shifted away from the formerly ruling KMT's focus on cultivating closer economic relations with China. Instead it prioritized closer relations with the U.S. and other “like-minded” countries, notably in Europe.³⁶ In line with its strategy, the DPP government has attempted to solidify Taiwan's position as an attractive partner for other democracies to collaborate with on issues of mutual interest.³⁷ Combating authoritarian disinformation has emerged as a challenge for democracies across the world and has thus become a prominent avenue for potential collaboration among like-minded partners.

“To strengthen cooperation with other democracies, Taiwan has organized workshops on disinformation and related issues with countries such as the U.S. and Sweden under the Global Cooperation and Training Framework (GCTF). U.S.-Taiwan cooperation on foreign disinformation rests on a clear mutual underpinning definition and assessment of Chinese influence operations as a threat.

To strengthen cooperation with other democracies, Taiwan has organized workshops on disinformation and related issues with countries such as the U.S. and Sweden under the Global Cooperation and Training Framework (GCTF).³⁸ The Director of the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT), Sandra Oudkirk, has emphasized the need for cooperation between the U.S. and Taiwan on matters of cybersecurity. Ahead of Taiwan's 2024 election, she stated that dealing with online misinformation from foreign actors is a top priority. However, on the same occasion she also stated that: “the United States is not taking sides in Taiwan's election, we do not have a preferred candidate, and we know very well that we do not have a vote”.³⁹

Dealing with foreign disinformation along with like-minded partners on such issues is also intimately connected with Taiwan's domestic divergence on how to manage relations with China.⁴⁰ U.S.-Taiwan cooperation on foreign disinformation rests on a clear mutual underpinning definition and

assessment of Chinese influence operations as a threat. The DPP government and Washington has found collaboration against Chinese disinformation to be of mutual interest. As Taiwan's political parties diverge on how to relate to China, the definition of Chinese disinformation as part of "cognitive warfare" and cooperation under such an assessment was at stake when Taiwan's citizens went to the polls.

In the U.S.' increasingly pronounced rivalry with China, Taiwan is an essential part of the American Indo-Pacific puzzle.⁴¹ There is also a shared understanding in Taipei that U.S. military support is crucially important to Taiwan's national security. Domestic debates in Taiwan are instead about how to balance ties with China and the U.S. to create security and stability. Therefore, a degree of rebalancing relations with the two great powers can be expected to follow regime changes in Taiwan.⁴²

The KMT has for years been advocating for more pragmatic relations with China.⁴³ Although the KMT and the TPP are different enough to both attract significant votership, they are currently close enough to have formally discussed joint collaboration for the 2024 election.⁴⁴ As the DPP seeks stronger U.S. relations and the KMT seeks to reestablish dialogue with China, the TPP's position

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in between Taiwan's two main parties could be gleaned in a media appearance from its Chairman, Ko Wen-je. When prompted, he laughingly stated that the AIT had called his party asking if China had been involved in the KMT-TTP discussions on collaboration, saying that Taiwan was stuck in "the struggle between big powers".⁴⁵

From the KMT's perspective, viewing the DPP's strategy as amounting to Cross-Strait instability, overlaps in how both the party and Beijing have portrayed the risk of war under the DPP's rule have been politically motivated. As such, the party is inclined against viewing the risk of war as part of disinformation. From the DPP's perspective, however, Chinese influence operations that have sought to undermine its rule and make Taiwan's citizens more receptive to the idea of unification have been an urgent issue to handle with the support of like-minded partners. The battle against foreign disinformation has simultaneously been a means towards elevating Taiwan's international profile of being a "like-minded", democratic partner to collaborate with.

The Challenge of Bridging the Gap

In light of increased tensions between authoritarian and democratic states, "like-minded countries" is a term that is often employed to motivate democracies to band together. This naturally extends to the issue of combatting authoritarian disinformation as all democratic societies are vulnerable to influence operations seeking to exacerbate existing domestic divides. The democratic problem of defining the nature and extent of foreign influence in a polarized political climate is increasingly relevant. Another example of such dynamics at play could be observed when former U.S. President Donald Trump dismissed concerns about Russian election interference in 2020 as a "hoax" perpetrated by his opposition in the Democratic Party.⁴⁶

It is evident that authoritarian states use the internet's open information infrastructure and social media in the digital age to their advantage.⁴⁷

Democratic nations all face problems of building consensus around the nature of foreign influence in systems that are prone to debate and division by design.⁴⁸ Taiwan's divide around how to manage Cross-Strait relations serves as a reminder that at the heart of the struggle against foreign disinformation lies not only looming foreign threats but also the domestic political competition it seeks to exploit. Taiwan is at the frontlines of the global struggle against authoritarian disinformation, not just because it offers sophisticated solutions and innovations, but because it has some of the most pronounced challenges to overcome.

Taiwan's domestic split and polarized climate has likely served as a driving force behind its push towards dealing with foreign disinformation, simultaneously spurring on civil society innovation and catapulting the issue onto the international arena. The DPP has laid down a powerful precedent on how to deal with foreign disinformation as Taiwan's parties have braced against each other on how to manage Cross-Strait relations. But this political split is also at the heart of its challenges moving forward, standing between both international collaboration across regime shifts and a solid, bipartisan national security. Taiwan's domestic debate suggest that the KMT is far removed from joining the ruling DPP on its path of combatting "cognitive warfare" from China. Instead, Taiwan's polarized political climate is more likely to continue keeping the two sides apart. With the TPP having acknowledged the importance in both sides' perspectives, it may be uniquely positioned in between the two main parties after the 2024 elections.

As the DPP secured a historic third term in Taiwan's 2024 presidential election, it also lost the majority in the Legislative Yuan, which it had held since 2016. In his winning speech, DPP's Lai Ching-te spoke about potential collaboration with the other parties to work in unity for Taiwan's future.⁴⁹ Although Lai Ching-te secured the presidency, most Taiwanese people ultimately did not vote for the DPP this time. The KMT and the TPP

The crux for Taiwan now lies in bridging the gap around an issue that has been one of the primary differentiators in its elections, rooted in a political divide and sensitive to polarization. In order for the issue of foreign disinformation to transcend party politics, greater domestic convergence on how to define foreign disinformation is necessary.

secured 33 percent and 26 percent, respectively, to the DPP's 40. Together, the two opposition parties constitute a strong domestic counterweight in the now divided Legislative Yuan. In a prospective parliamentary coalition between the KMT and the TPP, the DPP could face more domestic obstacles than before in its efforts to combat foreign disinformation than when it controlled both the executive and legislative branches of government.⁵⁰ Which way the TPP will ultimately lean would be significant as it could either try to be a bridge between the KMT and DPP or work to play them against each other.

The crux for Taiwan now lies in bridging the gap around an issue that has been one of the primary differentiators in its elections, rooted in a political divide and sensitive to polarization. In order for the issue of foreign disinformation to transcend party politics, greater domestic convergence on how to define foreign disinformation is necessary. Otherwise, the tools to counter foreign disinformation will have the built-in risk of becoming politicized. And most importantly, as long as Taiwan remains divided on how to relate to

Chinese influence, it will be vulnerable to foreign disinformation seeking to exacerbate that divide. Unless the underpinning divide around how to manage relations with China can be mitigated by approaching an inter-parliamentary convergence, it is likely to remain a partisan issue.⁵¹

Very little suggests that China will relent in its efforts in trying to bring Taiwan and its citizens closer to the idea of unification or stop using the digital realm to strengthen narratives favorable to the CCP.⁵² As such, China can be expected to continue its digital pursuits to keep Taiwan divided. How to utilize fact-checking and related laws to proactively counter the spread of authoritarian disinformation to safeguard democracy and national security will be a significant challenge moving forward. No matter how sophisticated the tools to counter foreign disinformation get, they cannot compensate for Taiwan's underlying political split on how to manage relations with China. As the future will hold no shortage of potential international partners to collaborate with against authoritarian disinformation, Taiwan's decisive battle on this matter will not be taking place on the international arena, but between the parties in its Legislative Yuan.

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