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Threatened by China, Taiwan Builds a Culture of Resilience

How civil society networks are mobilizing in the face of Beijing's growing threats of 'reunification'



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Facing increasingly hostile rhetoric from China, Taiwan aims to bolster its national defense capabilities.
(Halbergman/Getty Images)

A fissure in global history has cracked open. On Feb. 18, speaking at the Munich Security Conference, Wang Yi, director of the Foreign Affairs Commission of the Chinese Communist Party (CPC) Central Committee, delivered a startling tribute to the world of alternative facts. When asked about the United States shooting down a Chinese surveillance balloon, Wang denied the craft served any intelligence function and then described the moment as a “political farce” that was “unthinkable and hysterical.”

Two days later, U.S. President Joe Biden snuck into Kyiv, the Ukrainian capital. With air-raid sirens blaring in the distance, Biden and Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelenskyy paid their respects at a memorial for lost soldiers. No U.S. president had ventured to an active war zone not controlled by U.S. forces since Abraham Lincoln toured battle sites in Northern Virginia during the Civil War. The next day, in an aggrieved speech before the Russian National Assembly, President Vladimir Putin took time off from shelling civilian infrastructure in Ukraine to announce he was pulling Russia out of the final component of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START). Not content with butchering Ukrainians, Putin was alerting the world that nuclear weapons were now back in play as tools on the geostrategic chessboard.

While the world we know was unspooling in Europe, Taiwan stands as a second front in the evolving Russia/China vs. U.S./NATO dynamic. If Putin can obliterate Ukrainian towns with impunity, what’s to stop Xi Jinping from doing the same to Taiwan? Will Biden’s resolve to defend sovereignty in Europe deter Xi from invading Taiwan? Or will China embark on its long-stated quest to “reunify” Taiwan with the motherland?


To scan the international press, one might assume the invasion is coming any day. My desk is strewn with articles depicting the coming war:

- ◆ Channel News Asia warns: “US Must Prepare Now for China Invasion of Taiwan.”
- ◆ The Atlantic describes how “Taiwan Prepares to Be Invaded.”
- ◆ The National Interest details “The Scary War Game Over Taiwan That the U.S.

Loses to China Again and Again.”

- ◆ The New York Times chronicles how “An Anxious Asia Arms for a War It Hopes to Prevent.”
- ◆ Summarizing such discourse, The Economist dubs Taiwan “The Most Dangerous Place on Earth.”

I decided to cross-reference these rumblings with the vibe on the streets of Taiwan, to see for myself if war was indeed descending upon my friends and colleagues there. What I heard there was not a wave of terror about the next war, but a joyful commitment to improving Taiwan’s democracy, building bridges of solidarity with regional allies and international partners and living lives of conscientious decency. Putin may be raining bombs down on Ukraine; the CPC may be in full bluster mode and the locals are indeed immersed in the question of how to defend their sovereignty against China’s “reunification” threats. But my interviewees all made one thing clear: If war comes, they are ready, but they refuse to let the threat of an invasion leave them in suspended animation.

 On a gorgeous morning in central Taipei, I walked down Zhongxiao Road West, with the Danshui River glistening in the distance, to visit the offices of NextGen, one of the leading organizations in Taiwan’s blossoming community of NGOs. Like the working spaces of such groups in the U.S., NextGen’s office was stacked with tottering piles of reports, books and brochures, the corners crowded with boxes full of supplies, while a team of young people typed frantically on laptops. The boss here is Kuan-ting Chen, who showed up for our talk wearing a shimmery blue suit. Energetic, stylish and ready for the cameras with crisp answers, Chen has become a go-to source for international media. His media presence reflects how NextGen has evolved into a one-stop shop for world affairs, environmental thinking and community empowerment. In just the past year, NextGen has organized, hosted or otherwise been a leader in public panels and mini-conferences on such topics as “Supporting Democratic Resilience in Taiwan,” “Communicating the Climate Crisis,” “International Civil Society Cooperation” and “Democratic Resilience and LGBTQI+ Mainstreaming.”

I asked Chen to reflect on whether China was going to invade Taiwan. His answer, delivered without hesitation and with a pang of anger: “The CPC is already invading through cyber-intrusions and economic coercion. The invasion has already started.” We talked about how Taiwan has responded to China’s cyber-attacks with waves of media literacy workshops and the launching of a flurry of fact-checking organizations. These public efforts at debunking China’s disinformation machine serve as heartfelt forms of civic engagement and national defense, yet Chen was clear – echoing a sentiment shared by everyone I spoke to – that the key element in protecting Taiwan’s sovereignty is the perception of American resolve to defend the island in the case of an attack. Back in September, President Biden made headlines when he stated on “60 Minutes” that the U.S. would indeed defend Taiwan if China invaded. (He has reiterated this position several times. On each occasion, White House staffers try to walk it back in an attempt to placate Beijing, but Biden does not.) I asked Chen what he thought about the comment, which he called “perfect.” Like almost everyone I spoke to, he argued that the U.S. foreign policy machine needs “more strategic clarity, not more strategic ambiguity.”

In terms of building more “clarity” into cross-strait communication, Chen hoped Taiwan might explore more forceful language. “We need to deliver the message to the CPC, through our actions and our diplomacy,” he said, “that an invasion will be too costly. In both Taiwan and the U.S., we need to be clear that appeasement is not an option.”

The dilemma, of course, is that the U.S., China and Taiwan are locked in a political impasse, wherein each side sees the other’s actions not as deterrence or defensive, but as threatening. The blame for this blocked communication, Chen argued, falls squarely on the CPC. “They have set up all these preconditions. They won’t talk unless we agree to myths like the so-called One China Principle, or One Country, Two Systems, but those preconditions mean there can be no real dialogue. They want so many compromises to be made before any talks begin that there can be no productive negotiations.”

For a closing flourish, I asked Chen what he’d like the CPC to know. He said, “We are free and independent, so your reunification dream is not reality. Your China dream will not come true at the expense of Taiwan.”

The burgeoning NGO scene in Taiwan reflects a political culture experiencing dizzying transformations. Long the dominant political organization in Taiwan, the Kuomintang (KMT) was led for decades by Chiang Kai-shek (head of the Nationalist government on the mainland from 1928 to 1949, then head of the Chinese Nationalist government-in-exile on Taiwan until his death in 1975) and subsequently by his son Chiang Ching-kuo. Because of this link to the Chiang dynasty, the KMT was synonymous with Taiwan's era of political repression. Known as the "White Terror" and pursued in the name of fighting communism, the purges left tens of thousands of activists rotting in political prisons. The KMT's political machine was so comprehensive that up through the first years of the 1990s, according to the Taiwan scholar Ping-hui Liao, it controlled "some 40% of the stocks of the three major official TV channels," earned "15% of gross national product" and held "40% of national capital." Today, the KMT supports policies vis-a-vis the mainland that many believe are meant to lead toward a federation or possibly even "unification" with China.

The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), on the other hand, was born out of Taiwan's movement for democracy. Under the leadership of President Tsai Ing-wen, the DPP has led Taiwan to become the first nation in Asia to recognize gay marriage and LGBTQ rights. The DPP has launched a transitional justice commission, the Taiwanese version of a truth-and-reconciliation process intended to help uncover long-repressed facts about the "White Terror." Seeking to dismantle old KMT-style cronyism, the DPP has tried to embrace a more open and inclusive economic environment, focusing less on trade with China and more on building bridges with like-minded regional democracies.

Taiwan's NGOs maneuver within this tense political environment, where – not unlike in the U.S. – people claim the fate of the nation hangs in the balance with each election.

Over on the east side of Taipei, Xinyi Road is throbbing with energy. Hustling urbanites pack skyscrapers and subway stations, noodle shops and cafes, leafy parks and stores of every variety. With Taipei 101 (one of the world's tallest buildings) towering over the skyline, I tramp south down Anhe Road, past a foot massage joint, an Irish pub, an Italian bistro, a laundromat and a few Seven-11s to find the Shangri La Plaza East, a 40-story hotel complete with a heated rooftop pool and faux-Confucian sculpture in the marbled lobby. In the cavernous second-floor ballroom, Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) and

the Chinese Council of Advanced Policy Studies (CAPS) have assembled an all-star cast to consider the recent political drama. The room was full of leading scholars from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, the U.S. and several other countries.

Particularly in light of the chaos unleashed by the Donald Trump administration and the relentless bellicosity of the Chinese government, there is a longing for an elder statesman, a dignified figure who radiates poise and exemplifies reasonable discourse. For many, that figure is Chiu Tai-san, the Minister of Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council (MAC), an official government body focused on the Taiwan-China relationship. A fixture in the leadership of the Democratic Progressive Party for decades, Chiu has served his nation in the Legislative Yuan, as deputy mayor of Kaohsiung, deputy mayor of Taoyuan, Minister of Justice, and more. As the boss at the MAC, he leads Taiwan's efforts to manage relations with Beijing.

He has served in the trenches of Taiwanese politics for so long that he could be forgiven for becoming jaded. Yet he beams with an endearing warmth.

Echoing claims by Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen, Chiu began his speech by etching a red line: "The Beijing authorities should face up to the fact that the Republic of China exists. ... We have grown into a democratic and confident country. ... The people of Taiwan are committed to defending our sovereignty, dignity and democratic way of life."

The CPC has said for generations that any declaration of Taiwanese independence will trigger a war, yet here again – as has happened hundreds upon hundreds of times before – a representative of the Taiwanese government stated that Taiwan need not declare its independence, for it already exists. Chiu rendered these claims in a calm, matter-of-fact way, not so much announcing a radical policy shift as stating the obvious.

Chiu radiated gravitas. He spoke with authority and a controlled sense of purpose. Like everyone in the room, he hoped for peace, yet his longing was tinged with trepidation, for the CPC's aggressive flights into Taiwan's airspace, its naval encroachments and its cyberattacks all foreshadow war. It is hard to speak of peace in the shadow of an ever-present threat of invasion, and so Chiu ended his speech by calling for a common-sense first step:

We urge mainland China to lay down arms. ... Beijing should stop its saber rattling as it only deepens the gap between the two sides. We call on mainland China to resolve differences through a constructive dialogue without preconditions.

Chiu's message was clear, direct and unwavering: Taiwan is independent, China should recognize this fact, and then we can all get on with building the future.

Our heads spinning from a long day of discussions, a gaggle of conferees staggered to the bar, where the on-tap Gold Medal Taiwan Beer was half price and the Bee Gees' "Stayin' Alive" was blasting, laying down a strutting groove while serving as the perfect anthem for our collective hopes.

The next morning, I took a run through the miraculous Xiangshan Park, "Elephant Mountain," winding up steep stairways through the dense foliage, popping out at a viewing platform with the Xinyi business district unfolding beneath the hills. As I wound my way home, I passed a group of elderly women doing tai chi in a clearing in the tropical woods; one caught my eye because of her Ramones T-shirt and Yankees baseball cap.

With ideas about soft power and cultural transmission on my mind, I wandered southwest, across Roosevelt Road and down Chongqing South Road, looking for another of Taiwan's leading NGOs, the Center for Asia-Pacific Resilience and Innovation (CAPRI). Professor Syaru Shirley Lin announced CAPRI's launch at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland – a fact which says much about the organization's high-flying friends, international connections and elite ambitions. In our conversation, Lin describes CAPRI pursuing "non-partisan, evidence-based research to help improve resilience in the Asia-Pacific." Yet the organization's partners transcend the region, stretching from Taiwan to London to the Philippines to Davos to the U.S., where CAPRI partners with the University of Virginia, Harvard, the Brookings Institution and more. The brainchild of Lin – who recently returned to Taipei amid crackdowns in Hong Kong – CAPRI reflects her cosmopolitan vision.

Lin is a force of nature. When she enters a room, she is immediately its center. She vibrates with energy. She appears to know everyone. At the MAC/CAPS

conference, she was the speaker always surrounded by friends, students, old colleagues and new well-wishers. While CAPRI stands as an exciting new NGO on the world stage, the organization is more or less the embodiment of Lin's lifelong commitment to seeing a Taiwan embedded in the region as a leader that can both share its experiences with and learn from the international community.

Lin is the author of "Taiwan's China Dilemma," a book tracking the flow of commerce between Taiwan and China with an emphasis on how this complex economic dynamic affects the rising Taiwanese identity. The question addressed in the book, as in the corridors of power now, is how Taiwan can preserve its way of life even as the mainland stands among the island's top destinations for investments and exports. How does political autonomy entangle with commercial dependence? While recognized as an expert in such matters, Lin believes national security and high finance issues are being "overdone" in the NGO and think-tank community. "These days, everyone's a geopolitical expert," she wisecracked.

And so she is leading CAPRI to take a broader look at questions at the intersection of public health, economics and sustainability in an age of pandemics and catastrophes. With earthquakes, typhoons and COVID-19 ravaging Asian nations, and with the region's democracies under threat from both surging authoritarianism and ecological crises, Lin believes democratic resilience is the key issue. In short, how can emerging democracies thrive in the face of constant threats? How does civil society mature when bombarded with disinformation, cynicism and catastrophes both natural and human-engineered?

To ponder such questions, in November, CAPRI hosted a global health summit with World Economic Forum partners. Focusing on COVID-related issues, CAPRI released its first research report on vaccines and public health. In both cases, Lin and the CAPRI team make the case that fostering robust public debate around community health can help to map networks of trust and collaboration among healthcare providers, citizens, governments and the media. In this sense, conducting research on public health in an age of catastrophes amounts to improving democracy. Democratic resilience, then, points to the ability to respond to health crises, environmental disasters and political dilemmas in ways that embody the values of transparency, inclusion and fair deliberation. In this sense, CAPRI offers a vaccine against the world Trump, Putin and Xi hope to build.

But the flipside is true as well: Lin worries that creeping vaccine hesitancy and perhaps a larger fatigue about COVID prevention in general signal both a global threat to our collective health and, more worrying, a crisis in democracy.

For Lin, what underwrites these issues is a dilemma in trust. At the local level, she fears the combination of KMT political shenanigans, DPP mismanagement and mainland Chinese disinformation is producing a Taiwanese citizenry unsure of where to turn for safe, reliable information. “Political polarization,” she argues, especially when warped by the forces of know-nothing populism, makes it almost impossible to find a shared, common narrative with unimpeachable evidence. As in the U.S., vaccine hesitancy in Taiwan amounts to a public health crisis amplified by wavering trust in both political leaders and health experts.

This means CAPRI’s calling is to share independent and rigorous research to cut through the fog of disinformation and cynicism. The question, of course, is how to do this. What communication strategies will appear nonpartisan to a highly divided public? How can you energize communities sick and tired of COVID and weary of posturing politicians? Like the United Nations (which excludes Taiwan’s participation), the World Economic Forum, Human Rights Watch and Greenpeace, CAPRI aspires to answer big questions in the name of enriching civic deliberation – a daunting goal. Nonetheless, walking the streets of Taipei next to Lin, you get the sense that building strong networks of resilience is all in a day’s work. Like Chiu’s no-nonsense declaration of Taiwan’s already-established independence or Chen’s bold warning to Beijing that its China dream will not come true at the expense of Taiwan, so Lin marches on, confident and cheerful, assured that her vision and CAPRI’s work will come to fruition.

You can weigh the fate of the forever-threatened island for only so long before needing fuel, so I meandered up Zhongshan North Road, seeking refuge at one of my favorite cafes, the outdoor patio of the Taipei Film House. Built in 1926 during the Japanese occupation, the elegant building served as the U.S. Embassy up until 1979, when the Jimmy Carter administration, following through on processes initiated by President Richard M. Nixon, “normalized” relations with China – at the cost of severing official relations with Taiwan. After “normalization,” the building fell into disrepair, but its new owners renovated the grounds while opening a film house/cafe/gift store, complete with an outdoor patio serving delicious snacks and strong coffee. Nestled under the towering canopy that provides the side yard with blessed shade, my thoughts turned to

Karl Rankin, the intrepid U.S. ambassador who trod these grounds during the hottest, most dangerous days of the Cold War. Like the people at NextGen, MAC, CAPS and CAPRI, Rankin felt stymied by the question of how Taiwan's independence could thrive in the face of China's endless threats. During the Quemoy Crisis of 1954, when China was shelling Quemoy Island (now called Kinmen), Rankin wrote a memo to the White House wherein he observed, "We are faced by alternatives all of which are less than perfect. To put it in the worst terms, it is a question of finding the least bad solution."

Sometimes the "least bad" solution means stopping the bleeding. That thought led me to Enoch Wu, the founder of another of Taiwan's new NGOs. The Forward Alliance is tucked in a little back alley off Zhenjiang Street, behind the enormous Sheraton Hotel. To get there, I walked first past the Executive Yuan compound, home to the executive branch of Taiwan's government and the offices of the premier. On my last pre-COVID trip to Taiwan, I interviewed the then-premier, Su Tseng-chang. (Su has since stepped down from the premiership, with Chen Chien-jen now holding that role.) As I walked to meet Wu, I stopped outside the Yuan to salute Su, symbolically thanking one of Taiwan's elder statesmen while en route to meet the young man who has a plan for saving lives and building new bonds of community resilience.

Forward Alliance runs on the hard realization – confirmed in the streets of Ukraine each day – that a life can seep away in seconds. If you want to defend a nation's sovereignty, then a key aspect is empowering communities to help themselves. In our conversation, Wu spoke about crisis response as "one of the building blocks of resilience." That means bandages. That means knowing how to apply a tourniquet. That means knowing how to find the injured amid rubble. That means training grandmas to keep their cool in the face of calamity and training lawyers, bankers and vegetable stand operators how to network for the common good. Resilience, in this sense, is about citizens coming together after an earthquake hits or a Chinese missile strikes. In both cases, the life-or-death decision point is almost instant: If you can triage a neighbor's injury long enough to keep a pulse until the EMTs arrive, then you have just saved a life.

Enoch Wu was born in Chicago, where his father was pursuing a Ph.D. at the University of Chicago before returning to Taiwan with his family upon completing the degree. Like many of Taiwan's global-minded citizens, Enoch then came back to the U.S. to complete his bachelor's degree (at Yale University). Then he landed

in Hong Kong for a decade, before returning to the island to complete his mandatory national service. His parents were pro-democracy activists back when that kind of bravery landed people in prison, and soon Wu too worked his way into public service, supporting the DPP in a variety of tasks, including a stint on the staff of the National Security Council. He ran for a seat in the Legislative Yuan in 2020, hoping to flip a KMT seat to the DPP, but lost in a tight race. In the wake of that electoral defeat, and merging his interests in community service and national defense, he founded Forward Alliance.

In our conversation, I asked Wu his thoughts on China's offer of "One Country, Two Systems" as a means toward achieving peace in the Taiwan Strait, to which he guffawed: "That's impossible; it defies logic. Just look at what they did to Hong Kong." Like everyone I spoke to in Taiwan, the arguments China uses to try to appear moderate strike the democratic-minded locals as ridiculous. When I asked about Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taipei and China's militarized response in the summer of 2022, Wu was hopeful: "We've been living under China's threat our entire national life. But China is now using those same tactics against individuals and nations around the world. The international community now has the opportunity to work together to confront this shared challenge in order to maintain peace."

Wu is a realist. He knows neither Taiwan nor America can change Beijing's policies, so his immediate focus is on strengthening Taiwan as a resilient democracy. To model how to respond to calamity, Forward Alliance is training a volunteer corps across Taiwan. Everyone from children to grandparents is encouraged to attend workshops to learn the basics in field medical care, light search and rescue, communications, fire safety, navigation and sheltering. Wu told me that throughout Taiwan's urban centers, the national average for an ambulance response time is six minutes. But whether the harm is caused by a typhoon or a cruise missile, the first two minutes are the crucial hinge that determines life or death. In what he calls "the golden two minutes," while an injured neighbor awaits the professional care of EMTs – who are in short supply in Taiwan – a trained family member can make the crucial difference.

And so, collaborating with the Taiwan Medical Rescue Association, Forward Alliance is sharing with communities the skills and organizational tools they can use to help themselves until professional help arrives. This integrated "community emergency response" training aims to strengthen the frontlines of

national defense while building the community-level connections that drive civic life and a culture of democracy.

Back in 1954, with Quemoy under artillery bombardment from China, Ambassador Rankin counseled the White House to seek “the least bad solution.” Even while the specifics change over time, that advice still makes good sense. For Taiwan, for now, that means working on building resilience at the grassroots level while strengthening partnerships with the regional and international allies that can help defend Taiwan’s sovereignty, expand its markets and deepen its democratic habits. Washington can and should do more, albeit without engaging in the China-bashing that will only spur the Party’s sense of traumatized nationalism. In that narrative, China’s perpetual victimhood at the hands of imperial intrusions justifies aggressive nationalism to right the injuries of the past. It’s the same logic that underwrites Putin’s butchery in Ukraine. And that’s what makes the unraveling in Europe so worrisome for Taiwan: What lessons will Xi draw from Putin’s folly?

By early April, in response to President Tsai Ing-wen’s meeting in California with U.S. House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, China had launched hundreds of aerial incursions and naval intrusions violating Taiwan’s sovereignty. While encircling and menacing the island, Beijing’s propaganda machine kicked into high gear, announcing that by hosting the “splittist” President Tsai, “the U.S. government is ruining its own national credibility.”

Are Beijing’s outraged protests over Tsai’s visit just more bluster for domestic audiences, or are the military exercises precursors to an invasion?

While answers to such questions are elusive, we do know that with NextGen, Forward Alliance, the Center for Asia-Pacific Resilience and Innovation, the Mainland Affairs Council, the Chinese Council of Advanced Policy Studies and their allies driving Taiwan’s vibrant public sphere and deepening its culture of civic engagement, the free and independent island will continue to prosper.

Taiwan’s civil society actors share a sense of trepidation about the autocratic colossus to their west and the forever flip-flopping democracy to their east. The two main political parties, the DPP and the KMT, fight like schoolyard enemies through a shamelessly shoddy press. Chinese fighter jets come in waves over the

horizon. Yet Taiwan is not ruled by fear. It is driven instead by resolve and a tenacious commitment to making the place a little better each day.

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