



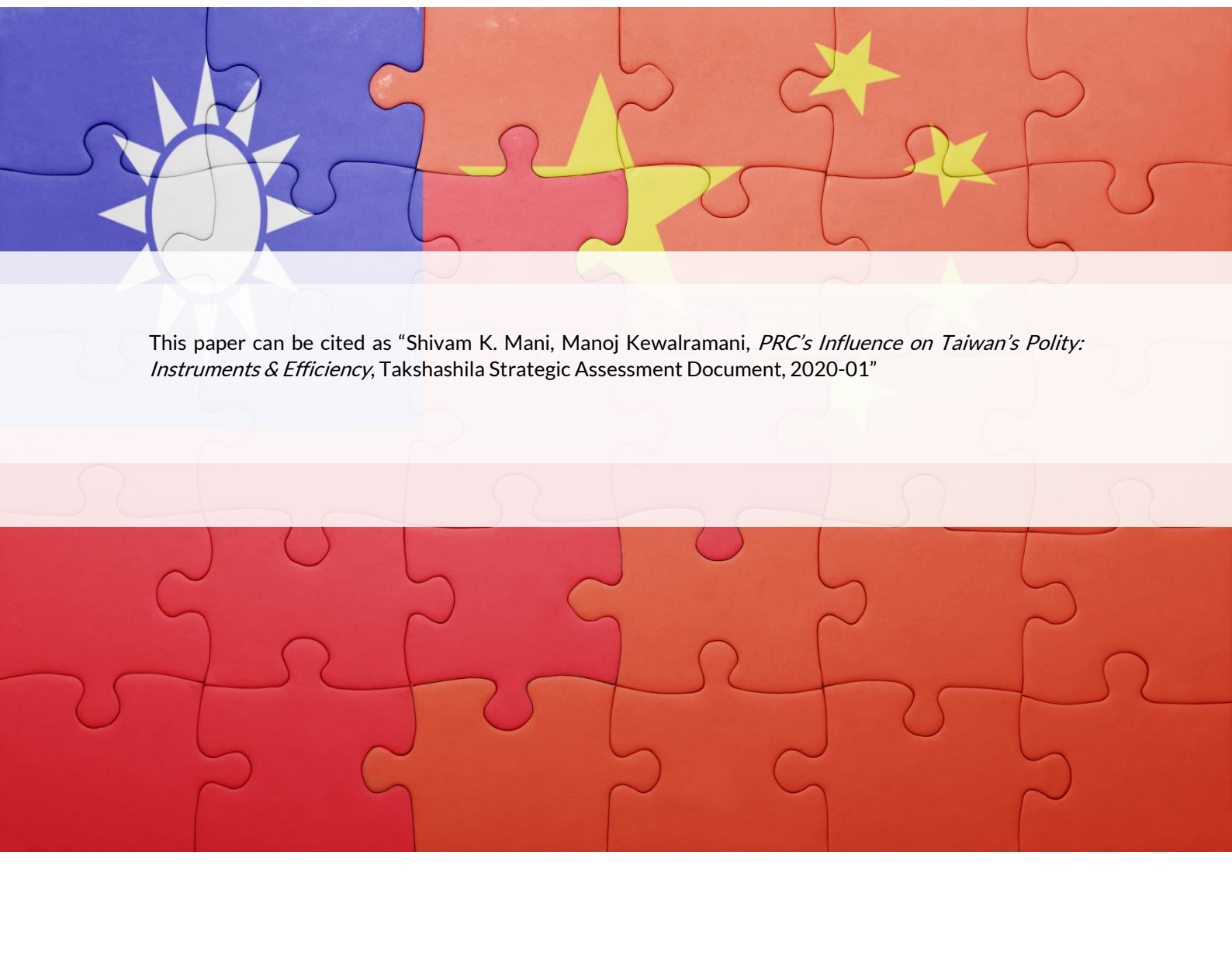
Takshashila Research Output

PRC's Influence on Taiwan's Polity: Instruments & Efficacy

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Shivam K. Mani | Manoj Kewalramani



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Executive Summary

Chinese President Xi Jinping has termed the *reunification* of Taiwan with the PRC as “a historic task” that is vital to the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. For the Communist Party of China, this is a core interest, underscored by the One-China Principle that goes to the heart of the legitimacy of its rule.

In pursuit of this goal, the PRC uses a number of instruments of statecraft to influence public discourse and political outcomes in Taiwan. This paper delineates these instruments and enumerates how the PRC uses them.

We identify six broad instruments:

1. Economic Coercion
2. Shows of Military Force
3. Soft Power and Information Campaigns
4. Cyber Warfare
5. Diplomatic Isolation
6. Corruption and Espionage

The final section discusses the efficacy of the PRC's approach in achieving its stated objective. This is done using public polling data along with the changes in Taiwanese economic and cybersecurity policies and legal frameworks regarding foreign interference and misinformation.

Based on the evidence, we argue that the PRC's recent attempts to influence Taiwanese policy, democratic processes and public opinion have not had the desired effect.

Introduction

On January 11th, 2020, the Republic of China (referred to as Taiwan hereafter) will go to polls to elect a new president and 113 members of the state legislature. The main candidates in the presidential race are the Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) incumbent Tsai Ing-wen, Han Kuo-yu from the Kuomintang (KMT), and James Soong from the People First Party. The legislature is currently controlled by the DPP, which earned its first majority in 2016, winning 68 seats against the KMT's 35.

A central issue being discussed in the run-up to election day is Taiwan's relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC). While there are nuances in the positions of each candidate, Han and Soong view the PRC favourably. The KMT and Han back the 1992 Consensus as the cornerstone of cross-Strait ties.¹ Soong's party, meanwhile, desires "political integration."² In contrast, Tsai as president has publicly rejected the 1992 Consensus and Beijing's One Country Two Systems formulation, while asserting Taiwanese sovereignty.³

Meanwhile, The PRC seeks *reunification*. Therefore, it has great interest in the outcome of the election, desiring a government that shares Beijing's vision for the future. In pursuit of this, the PRC uses a number of instruments of statecraft to influence public discourse and political outcomes in Taiwan. This paper seeks to delineate these instruments, enumerate how the PRC uses them and discuss the efficacy of the PRC's approach in achieving its stated objective. The paper will be looking at a time frame following Tsai's election victory in 2016.

PRC's Political Objectives

The Communist Party of China (CPC) views Taiwan as a breakaway province, with its *reunification* with the PRC being a core interest. President Xi Jinping has termed "reunification...a historic task," which is vital to the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.⁴ In other words, this is fundamental to the PRC's self-perception as a great global power. What also matters, however, is the strategic location of Taiwan from a military and economic perspective.⁵

Since the end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949, the PRC has used a mix of carrots and sticks to coax Taiwan. In many ways, Beijing's approach is schizophrenic. At one level, it seeks to impose economic and political costs by isolating Taiwan and does not rule out the use of military force. At another, it wishes to build a political

constituency of support and win over the people of Taiwan in order to achieve what is termed, *peaceful reunification*.

Analysts see a PRC invasion of Taiwan extremely costly, both financially and in terms of lives, and also unlikely, as Beijing currently lacks the naval capabilities.⁶ Additionally, the PRC believes that military action against Taiwan would likely elicit American military intervention.⁷ Therefore, it has resorted to deploying a diverse set of tools to influence Taiwanese politics and public opinion to be favourable towards the mainland. Over time, given the enhancement of the PRC's comprehensive national power, these instruments have grown far more potent.

The November 2015 meeting between Ma Ying-jeou, the then president of Taiwan, and Xi in Singapore suggested that the PRC was making some headway. This was the first time the political leaders from across the Strait met since the end of the civil war. Ma, as the chairman of the KMT, had worked to increase collaboration with the PRC. For him, the meeting was about maintaining status quo, and ensuring peace.⁸ For Xi, it was an opportunity to highlight ethnic solidarity and national unity.⁹ However, in the months that followed, a slowing economy and concerns over the KMT's policies regarding the PRC led to a landslide victory for the DPP's Tsai.¹⁰ The DPP is the main party of Taiwan's 'Pan-Green Coalition', a set of parties seen to prefer Taiwanese independence and/or sovereignty. Tsai's victory was a blow for the PRC. Consequently, the PRC has sought to undermine Taiwan's electoral processes heading into the 2020 elections, and influence public opinion to ensure that forces friendly to the PRC regain power. The key instruments that the PRC has used in this endeavour are discussed in the following section.

Instruments of Influence

A. Economic Coercion

Since the PRC's entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001, its economy has grown at a rapid pace. The PRC is the world's largest trading nation. Its GDP ranks second to the United States, roughly at \$14 trillion. The PRC has used this economic might for political purposes, leveraging its massive consumer market, labour force, and financial resources in diplomatic negotiations.¹¹ This is evident in case of Taiwan. PRC-Taiwan trade in 2018 was estimated at \$226 billion.¹² Taiwanese companies are also heavily invested in the mainland. Beijing has used

its economic heft and this interdependence to coerce Taiwan into an arrangement similar to Hong Kong and Macau's One Country, Two Systems.

For instance, last year, PRC banned individual tourists from visiting Taiwan, making it harder for Chinese nationals to travel to the island.¹³ The move was designed to impact the Taiwanese economy and tourism in order to hurt President Tsai's chances in the 2020 election. Assessing the decision, a DBS note in August 2019 argued that "that individual travel accounts for as much as 40% of the total number of Chinese tourists visiting Taiwan. And Chinese tourists contribute about 25% to Taiwan's total visitor arrivals. Hence, China's tourism ban can cause a significant loss in Taiwan's tourism revenues."¹⁴ Barclays estimated that the move could cost Taiwan 0.2% of its GDP.¹⁵

Another example is the changes in cross-Strait investment, which has been growing at a slower rate.¹⁶ Decreasing Chinese investment into Taiwan can be seen as a marker that Beijing seeks to remind the Taiwan's elite of their economic dependence on the mainland, warning that any shift towards more independence will come with severe economic consequences.¹⁷ These include market access restrictions and cutting Taiwan off regional trade agreements and supply chains. For instance, Tsai's presidential election win in 2016 was followed by the PRC decreasing agricultural imports from regions controlled by her party.¹⁸

Even in the high-tech industry, where the mainland companies rely on semiconductors manufactured in Taiwan, there has been a concerted effort to hurt Taiwanese businesses and workers. High-tech industry has been at the forefront of Taiwanese economic prosperity, but the PRC is working on making it harder for Taiwan to compete in the market with their low prices and larger infrastructure for mass production. For instance, the PRC has been cutting prices to force businesses in Taiwan to lower wages to compete with their mainland counterparts.¹⁹ The goal was to hit the living standards of Taiwanese workers by lowering their wages.²⁰

While employing economic coercion, Chinese officials frequently call for Taiwan to adopt the One Country, Two Systems model to reap the benefits of economic linkages with the mainland.²¹ The aim of this approach is rather clear: impose economic costs to pursue a political objective, i.e., cultivate a larger community in Taiwan that sees reunification with the mainland as an antidote for a slowing and isolated economy.

B. Shows of Military Force

In a 2019 speech titled “Message to Compatriots in Taiwan”, Xi Jinping made it clear that the PRC intends on reunifying Taiwan with the mainland, and is willing to use force to do so.²² The rhetoric marks a new era of brinkmanship by Xi. The PRC views the threat of Taiwan “separatism” growing and is therefore upping the ante.²³ However, as mentioned above, there are serious questions about the efficacy of a military invasion of Taiwan. These range from concerns around capabilities, international reaction and the possible fallout after occupation. While the latter two points remain in the realm of speculation, on the capabilities front, there has been a massive expansion of the PRC’s naval strength over the years. A record number of vessels have been inducted into service by the PLA Navy (PLAN) over the past few years. Analysts estimate that the Chinese navy now commands over 300 surface combatants, submarines, amphibious ships, and patrol craft.²⁴ In addition, there has been an expansion of the PLAN Marine Corps (PLANMC). The PLANMC is expected to expand to seven brigades with more than 30,000 personnel.²⁵

Perhaps the most visible examples of the PRC’s expanding naval capacity are its two aircraft carriers, the *Liaoning* and *Shandong*. The *Shandong* entered service in December 2019, and within a week, sailed through the Taiwan Strait.²⁶ Taiwan’s foreign minister termed the sail-through as a “military threat,” while Washington warned Beijing to “abstain from coercion.”²⁷ The fact, however, is that no criticism is likely to change PRC’s behaviour. Such shows of strength are reflective of the PRC’s growing military ambitions, and policy of warning Taiwan not to make any moves toward independence.

With the 2020 elections looming, the PRC also expanded military exercises in the region. The summer of 2019 saw repeated drills focussed on Taiwan.²⁸ At least one of these exercises involved both the air force and the navy.²⁹ Later in the year, the PLANMC conducted what were described as “comprehensive amphibious landing drills.”³⁰ All this took place amid a \$2.2 billion arms deal between Taiwan and the United States. Following the deal, China also called for sanctions on companies selling arms to Taiwan.³⁰

C. Soft Power & Information Campaigns

As the PRC's economy expands, allowing it to exert greater influence, Beijing is focussing intently on increasing its soft power.³¹ With regard to Taiwan, soft power is the tool by which the PRC seeks to boost favourable Taiwanese public opinion. Using common ethnic and historic roots as a starting point, most PRC campaigns concern what Taiwan and PRC share, such as commonalities in language, history, and tradition.³²

Taiwanese media has also been a tool through which the PRC has tried to influence the Taiwanese public. Reports of the PRC paying and/or trying to influence media in Taiwan have been extensive. Beijing has reportedly used its financial clout to plant favourable news reports, extolling the virtues of perks and incentives that the mainland offers Taiwanese businesses.³³ Placement of favourable stories has been accompanied by the spread of disinformation online.³⁴ In fact, a recent study by the V-Dem Institute at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, found that Taiwan was the territory most exposed to foreign disinformation.³⁵

Reports suggest that Chinese cyber groups were critical in engineering the “Han wave” that led to the then unknown Han Kuo-yu winning the 2018 mayoral race in Kaohsiung, which traditionally was the heart of the DPP's base.³⁶ This, however, is just the tip of the iceberg. A number of key Taiwanese media outlets are suspected to have direct links with the mainland's Taiwan Affairs Office.³⁷ Some allegedly also have inked formal contracts with the mainland body. This has resulted in multiple calls for a tougher government stance, which given Taiwan's democratic polity is a politically difficult proposition. The PRC is essentially using Taiwan's freedom of the press against it.

Another approach the PRC is using to expand its soft power is attracting Taiwan's youth to study in the mainland, with promises of lucrative careers, scholarships, and superior higher education.³⁸ Tax breaks and subsidies are also available to make studying and living in the PRC more alluring. Originally, in 2011, the PRC only accepted the very top of Taiwanese students; now, they allow anyone in the upper 50% to apply. This has opened the door for many students to study in the PRC, estimated at around 12,000 students as of 2017.³⁹ Beijing's hope is that these students will be more sympathetic to the mainland and its government going forward.

D. Cyber Warfare

Taiwan's government networks are attacked roughly 30 million times a month, and at least half of these attacks are suspected to come from the PRC.⁴⁰ Taiwanese networks are open, unlike the heavily censored Chinese networks. But this openness leaves Taiwan vulnerable to malicious attacks from foreign adversaries. Attacks on Taiwan's technology industry and other sectors have been increasing exponentially since 2017. Assessments show that a number of these attacks are focused on smart machinery, the semiconductor industry, and electronic components industry.⁴¹ Analysts believe that this is part of the intensified PRC efforts to steal Taiwanese and American intellectual property, as well as American trade secrets.⁴² This, in turn, will undermine the Taiwanese economy.

In addition, according to the Institute for National Defense and Security Research, a Taiwanese think tank, the '.tw' domain and other internet infrastructure could be damaged by Beijing. Hackers in the PRC could change the domain '.tw' to a variant of '.cn', to have ROC based websites be associated with the mainland. This would also allow for the PRC to engage in even more hacking and severely endanger Taiwan's links to the international community.⁴³ Moreover, the undersea international communication cables that connect Taiwan to the rest of the world come ashore at Tamsui, Toucheng, Fangshan, and Bali. The PRC could sever these cables. This move would seriously paralyse Taiwan and its ability to engage with the world and would compromise communications throughout the island.⁴⁴

E. Diplomatic Isolation

The PRC predicates diplomatic relations with other states on the basis of their recognition of the One China policy. The policy essentially implies that there is only one sovereign state that goes by 'China', i.e., the PRC. Consequently, states cannot recognize Taiwan and the PRC as sovereign states. Over the years, one-by-one, major powers have severed ties with Taiwan and recognised the PRC as China. In 1971, the PRC took over Taiwan's seat in the UN's General Assembly and Security Council. Few nations still chose to recognise Taiwan over the PRC, but this has been changing fast since Tsai's 2016 victory.

As the PRC's diplomatic and economic clout grew, more and more nations broke ties with Taiwan. During Tsai's presidency, multiple nations severed ties, most

recently El Salvador and Kiribati.⁴⁵ Other nations include Burkina Faso, Panama, the Dominican Republic, Sao Tome, and Principe. Only some small island nations in the Pacific Ocean, and some countries in Central and South America continue to recognise Taiwan. From 1990 to 2016, only six nations switched to the PRC; since Tsai's election three years ago, seven nations have severed ties.⁴⁶

China continues to use its influence to prevent Taiwan's access to international bodies such as the International Monetary Fund, the UN, and other global organisations. For instance, the IMF refers to Taiwan as "Taiwan Province of China" and the World Bank uses "Taiwan District". During the Olympics, Taiwan competes under "Chinese Taipei".⁴⁷ This is done in an effort to reduce the exposure Taiwan receives as an independent nation, and make it clear that Taiwan is a part of China--not a sovereign nation. China has been able to do this in part due to its massive influence on some of the leading international organisations, and its massive economy.

F. Corruption and Espionage

As the PRC's ambitions grow, the need for a network of spies and personnel in countries of interest is paramount. As mentioned above, there is much debate about the role that Chinese cyber-operatives played in the 2018 mayoral elections in Kaohsiung.

A recent scandal in Australia shed further light on how Beijing leverages its network of spies and financial clout to undermine electoral processes in democracies. Wang Liqiang, a suspected Chinese spy recently defected to Australia in late 2019. Revealing that he helped funnel cash into Han's 2018 mayoral and 2020 presidential campaigns, Wang, who is now seeking asylum in Australia, says he conducted operations in Hong Kong and Taiwan to suppress pro-democracy movements and aid the election of pro-Beijing candidates.⁴⁸ Wang says he mainly used collaboration with media executives to influence election results in Taiwan.⁴⁹

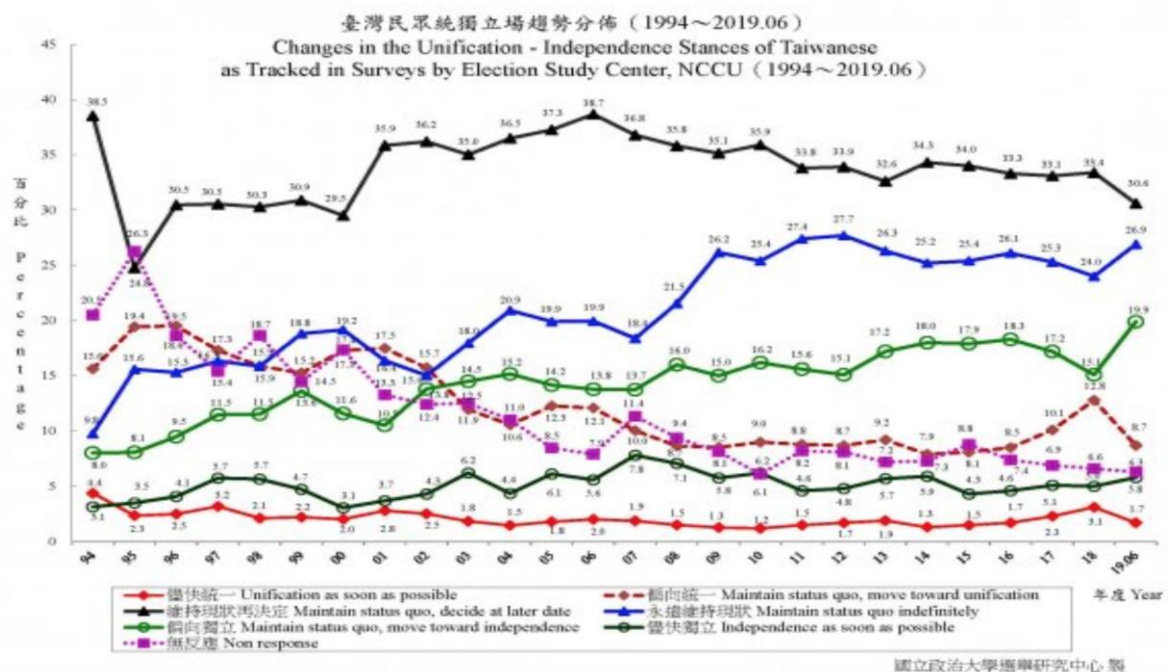
Another example of the PRC undermining democratic processes is the formal charges against two pro-Beijing Taiwanese politicians for taking money from the PRC. Chou Ching-chun and Zhang Xiuye were charged for using funds from the PRC on their campaigns and donating it to their party.⁵⁰ The two said they were unaware that they had to declare the funds, despite the fact that Taiwanese law states you must declare them within five months after the election.⁵¹ Even though

both politicians failed in their respective campaigns, the charges are proof of Beijing's meddling directly in the electoral process.

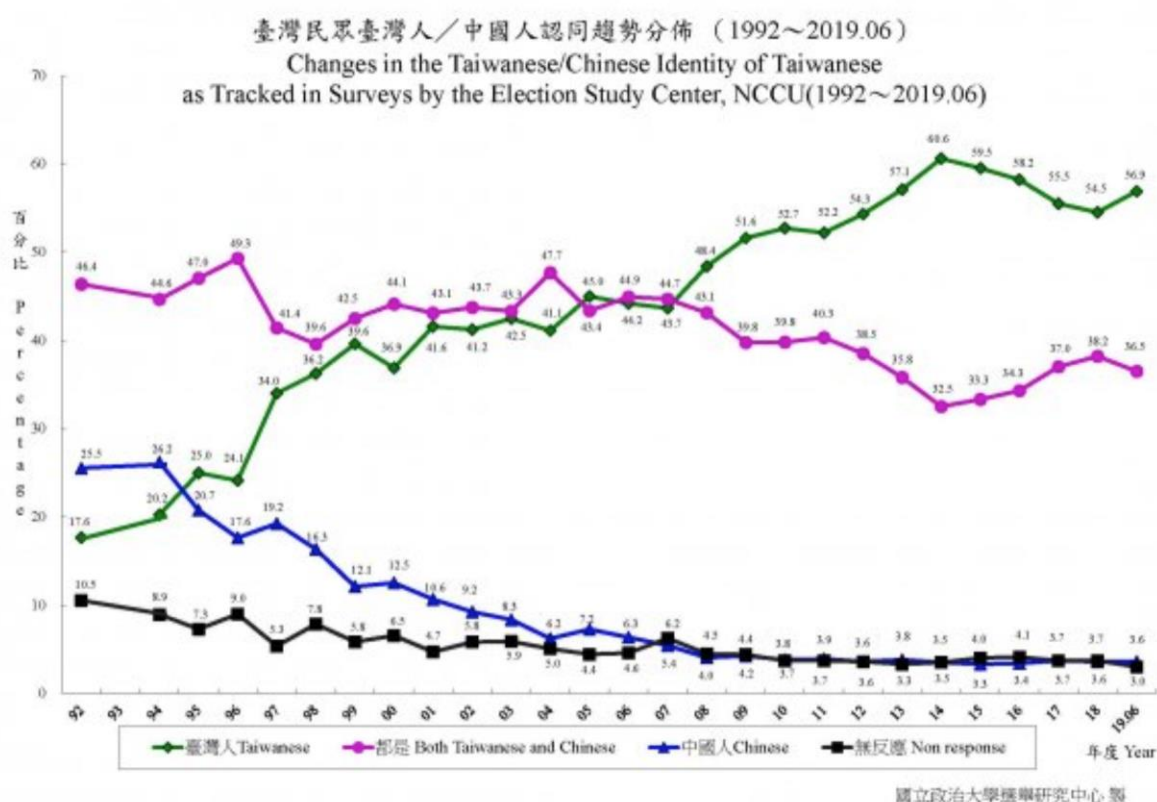
The Efficacy of PRC's Approach

The above discussion underscores that Beijing's goal vis-a-vis Taiwan is eventual *reunification*. The strategy adopted to achieve that objective entails a mix of carrots and sticks, shaping of elite interests and cultivating favourable public opinion about the PRC. This section examines the efficacy of the PRC's policies using public polling data along with changes in Taiwanese economic and cybersecurity policies and legal frameworks regarding foreign interference and misinformation.

On the face of it, public opinion data shows that PRC's meddling in Taiwan's democratic processes seems to have backfired. During the 2015 Ma-Xi meeting, 55% of Taiwanese believed that the talks were a good thing for cross-Strait relations.⁵² However, things have changed significantly since then. Data from the Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, shows that the appetite for independence is growing among the public.



In addition, there is a deepening sense of Taiwanese identity among the public. Latest survey reports state that 56.9% of the people polled now regard themselves as exclusively Taiwanese, while a record low regard themselves as Chinese.⁵³



Politically, these trends are likely to benefit the DPP and Tsai. In fact, December 2019 polling data showed that Tsai enjoyed a massive 30.6-percentage-point lead over her rivals.⁵⁴ A policy that was supposed to encourage the Taiwanese to vote for the more the PRC-friendly candidate, Han Kuo-yu, has resulted in outrage, pushing people to support Tsai for another term. Another example of the failure of Beijing's coercion has been Han's dodging of questions involving the PRC during his campaign. Voters are reportedly worried that his policies would endanger Taiwan's national security, and jeopardise its democracy, further contributing to his decline.⁵⁵

Xi's more assertive stance on Taiwan has also not played well with the Taiwanese public. Tsai capitalized on Xi's January 2019 speech to encourage more people to support an independent Taiwan.⁵⁶ Xi's brinkmanship and his threat of the use of force also appear to have backfired, with increased public support for the DPP.

What's also not likely to work in Beijing's favour is its heavy-handed reaction to the protests in Hong Kong. The DPP sees this as a failure of the One Country, Two Systems framework, and fears that Taiwan will end up with the same fate.⁵⁷ Analysts believe that the heavy-handed police crackdown against the protests in Hong Kong is bolstering support for the DPP.⁵⁸ In the past few months, hundreds of thousands of Taiwanese have marched in support of Hong Kong's protests, and resisting PRC influence.⁵⁹

Reports of the PRC influencing (and paying) Taiwanese media have also been the spark for protests, with many calling for the removal of 'red media' in Taiwan.⁶⁰ The Taiwanese government's response to this has been manifold: from supporting fact-checking enterprises⁶¹ to even passing a new Anti-Infiltration Law, which plugs loopholes related to election interference linked to political donations, misinformation and campaign events.⁶²

In terms of combating Chinese cyber-attacks, Taiwan is making positive moves to counter the PRC's hacking capabilities. This year, the United States cooperated with Taiwan by conducting cyber-attack drills, to fortify Taiwan's defences against attacks. The drills focused on training government agencies and even private companies against malicious communications, from within and out of the country.⁶³

Tsai's government has also recently created the National Cyber Security Centre, with hopes to improve Taiwan's capabilities against cyber-attacks (mainly from the PRC). The move has been widely praised, but the head of the centre is a politician, Chen Chi-mai. Many criticise this decision as Chen has no technology or cybersecurity experience whatsoever.⁶⁴ This has led many to question the effectiveness of the new centre in tackling sophisticated PRC cyber offensives.

Finally, Beijing's ability to impose economic costs to shape political outcomes with regard to Taiwan has been tempered owing to concerns over national security in Taiwan and the trade war with the United States. The trade war has provided some relief to the Taiwanese economy as businesses look for alternatives to the PRC. In addition, Chinese tech companies' dependence on Taiwanese suppliers also creates a point of economic leverage for Taipei as Sino-US tech competition deepens.

Specifically, with regard to tourism, arrivals from the PRC to Taiwan have fallen since the ban on individual tourists.⁶⁵ Taiwan's tourism revenue is also down by

0.6%.⁶⁶ But it is important to note that total visits from around the world are up to around 940,000, suggesting that Taiwan has been fairly successful in offsetting declining numbers of Chinese tourists by bringing in more tourists from other countries.⁶⁷ There is also a belief that the PRC's tourism ban will not have an extremely detrimental effect on the economy, as only hotels and major hotspots such as Taiwan will be affected.⁶⁸

Yet, there are, of course, economic challenges that Tsai faces. GDP growth is predicted to be below 2% in 2019 and 2020, a significant dip from 2018's 2.6% growth.⁶⁹ But what's important to note is that pre-election polling data shows that more Taiwanese are now concerned about national security, democracy, and sovereignty rather than the economy. The latest survey shows that 31% think strong economic performance is important, compared to 58% that believed national sovereignty was more imperative.⁷⁰

Conclusion

This paper sheds light on the PRC's multi-pronged approach to achieve its eventual political objective of the reunification of Taiwan with the mainland. The PRC views this as a core interest that lies at the heart of Xi's pledge to ensure national rejuvenation. In its pursuit, the PRC employs several instruments with varying degrees of effectiveness. However, increasingly, it appears that these efforts are failing to move the needle towards Beijing's desired outcome. Instead, they have led to hardened anti-Beijing policies and views in Taiwan.

Almost all pre-election polls in Taiwan show Tsai and the DPP enjoying a significant lead over their opponents. More importantly, there is a growing nationalistic sentiment and appetite for independence among the Taiwanese public. At the same time, Beijing's handling of the protests in Hong Kong has undermined the already limited allure of the One Country Two Systems formula. The evidence discussed above clearly suggests that the PRC's recent attempts to influence Taiwanese policy, democratic processes and public opinion have not had the desired effect for now. Looking forward, what will be interesting to note is Beijing's reaction to a win for the pro-independence pan-green coalition headed by the DPP and Tsai. The question to consider is whether Beijing will reorient its approach to seek talks with Tsai or will it double-down with greater militaristic intent.

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