

China's United Front Strategy and its Impacts on the Security of Taiwan and Asia-Pacific Region

By Michael M. Tsai, Former Minister of National Defense, Taiwan; Po-Chang Huang, Master's Candidate, The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University

Evolution of Strategy from Hard power to Soft power

In 1949, Mao Zedong, leader of the Communist Party of China (CCP), defeated Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang (KMT) troops and succeeded in establishing the communist dictatorship of the People's Republic of China out of the "barrel of a gun." At the beginning of its rule, the CCP believed that the use of violent instruments as provided by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) was in and of itself sufficient to both suppress "reactionaries" at home and defeat "invaders" from abroad.

In this vein, during the Korean War of the early 1950s, the CCP regime sent a million-strong "Volunteer Army" into the Korean Peninsula and fought against the U.S.-led United Nations forces, thus cementing the political division of Korea and its complications that linger to this day. Between 1958 and 1960, PLA troops heavily bombarded the Chiang Kai-shek-controlled island of Kinmen, resulting in significant casualties on both sides. Between the 1960s and 1980s, the PLA and militia troops engaged in a series of border conflicts and clashes with the Soviet Union, India, and Vietnam. Throughout this period, the CCP regime still believed that military force alone was sufficient to serve as the primary bargaining chip and policy instrument in its dealing with other states.¹

However, from the late 1980s to 1990s, the collapse of Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc marked the end of Cold War and the confrontation between two global superpowers. The CCP's strategy in the international arena evolved from an overreliance on hard military force to one that utilizes both "soft power" and the "carrot and stick."

From the Chinese perspective, the concept of "soft power" encompasses the exploitation of any policy or tool outside the traditional definition of "hard" military power to achieve its desired political, economic, and diplomatic objectives. Such exploitation takes place via political, societal, commercial, economic, legal, psychological, cultural, and other means. Mass media and even tourist groups could all be used as a means of penetration to funnel and support Chinese agents deep inside enemy territory and to create conditions that are conducive to achieving China's desired outcome. This is the essence of China's strategy of the "United Front."

This article examines the United Front strategy and the ways in which China's deployment of this strategy impacts the national security of Taiwan as well as neighboring countries such as

¹ For an analysis on the pattern of China's use of force during this period, see Allen S. Whiting, "China's Use of Force, 1950-96, and Taiwan," *International Security*, 2001, p. 103-131.

Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines, and even the United States.² The article concludes with proposed policy recommendations for how Taiwan can counter such strategies.

United Front Through Politics and Society

It is no secret that the People's Republic of China under the CCP regime has repeatedly declared Taiwan as part of its territory and vowed to "reunite" Taiwan by any means necessary. Starting in the 1990s, the CCP regime began to systematically invite Taiwan's politicians, legislators, businessmen, and other prominent public figures to visit China. During these trips, these "visitors" would receive extravagant receptions, which would serve as platforms for China to employ its United Front strategy against Taiwan. Many of these visitors were then asked to play an active role in opposing the Taiwanese independence movement and supporting Chinese reunification.³

In May 2000, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) candidate Chen Shui-bian won the presidential election and became the first non-Kuomintang Party (KMT) president of Taiwan, a milestone in the maturity of Taiwan's democratization. At the same time, however, China continued its United Front strategy by inviting disgruntled politicians such as then KMT chairperson Lien Chan, People First Party's chairperson James Soong, other legislators, public figures, and retired generals, to visit China. China then provided various forms of support and benefits to those that cooperated with such a strategy. In doing so, China was not only able to instigate and intensify the vicious partisan divisions in the politics of Taiwan, but also succeeded in creating distrust and disunity among the Taiwanese society. In the words of Mao Zedong, the essence of China's United Front strategy is to "collude with the secondary enemy in order to defeat the primary enemy."⁴

In 2008, KMT President Ma Ying-jeou came to power. Since then China has continued to expand the United Front by recruiting more segments of the Taiwanese society, often using financial benefits as incentives. Targets for recruitment include labor, farmers', and fishermen unions, heads of local villages, college students, Taiwanese aborigines and tribes, businesses of all levels, academics, singers, actors/actresses, volunteer police officers, firefighters, and others. It is estimated that the number of people that have been systematically recruited to "visit" China through such officially-arranged trips have reached upwards of 50,000 people a year. These recruits, who include representatives of various broad segments of the Taiwanese population, are then intended to serve as "Trojan Horses" to inject pro-China/pro-unification sentiments and political messages into Taiwanese society. Such manipulation constitutes what the CCP terms

² For a detailed discussion about China's use of United Front strategy against the United States, see Michael Pillsbury, *The Hundred-year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower*. Henry Holt and Company, 2015.

³ See Yimou Lee and Faith Hung, *Special Report: How China's shadowy agency is working to absorb Taiwan*, Reuters, Nov 26, 2014, at <<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-taiwan-china-special-report-idUSKCN0JB01T20141127>>.

⁴ The Chinese catchphrase "聯合次要敵人，打擊主要敵人" has now become a universally recognized quote commonly attributed to Mao, which derived its core idea from his writing in the 1939 article *The Communist*.

“psychological warfare on enemy’s politics and society” and is a cornerstone of China’s strategy of the United Front.⁵

United Front Through the Economy

Since the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997, China has been advocating that the same “one country, two systems” model be applied in Taiwan. To increase Taiwan’s economic reliance on China, CCP leaders from Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao have adopted the same “economy first, politics later” policy, with the priority placed on incorporating Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau into a “One China” common market and economic sphere. This process of economic integration would then leave Taiwan with no alternative but to accept China’s political control.

As part of the economic strategy of the United Front, the CCP has in the past decade passed a series of laws designed to attract Taiwanese businesses and high-tech sectors to invest in China. Today, there are approximately 1.5 million Taiwanese investors, managers, and technical experts, along with their spouses and children, settled across China. In the past years, around 40% of Taiwan’s annual total export volume have relied on China (this figure includes Hong Kong).⁶ Furthermore, 70% of Taiwan’s overseas investments are directed to China,⁷ and a large portion of the foreign manufacturing contracts received by Taiwanese businesses are outsourced to factories based in China before being exported again. These numbers serve as a painful reminder that China is succeeding in its attempt to incorporate Taiwan into its “One China” common market with serious side effects and consequences for Taiwan’s own economic diversification and trading relations with the rest of the world.

United Front Through Law

In 2005, the National People's Congress of the People’s Republic of China passed the Anti-Secession Law,⁸ which includes a clause stating that, “*Taiwan is part of China. The state shall never allow the ‘Taiwan independence’ secessionist forces to make Taiwan secede from China under any name or by any means.*” With this piece of legislation, the CCP sought to fabricate a legal justification to use force against Taiwan⁹.

The Anti-Secession Law provoked outrage among the majority of the Taiwanese people. In effect, this law altered the perceived status quo across the Taiwan Strait that had existed for

⁵ For an excellent analysis on China’s attempts at fostering and colluding with pro-China elements in Taiwan (even inside the pro-independent camp and the DPP), see Parris H. Chang, *Beijing’s strategy to ‘buy’ Taiwan: Coerced unification without firing a shot*, World Tribune, Feb 19, 2014, at <<http://www.worldtribune.com/10-beijings-strategy-buy-taiwan-coerced-unification-without-firing-shot>>.

⁶ 39.7% of Taiwan’s total export volume and 18.1% total import volume in 2014 came from China, according to Data from Ministry of Economic Affairs, Taiwan. Cited in Executive Yuan, 對外貿易與投資 - 進出口貿易量, March 23, 2014.

<http://www.ey.gov.tw/state/News_Content3.aspx?n=1DA8EDDD65ECB8D4&s=8A1DCA5A3BFAD09C>

⁷ Data from Investment Commission (MOEA), Ministry of Economic Affairs, Taiwan. Cited in United News Daily, 台商攻陸內需 不夠給力, Feb 21, 2016. <<http://udn.com/news/story/7334/1514633>>

⁸ For full text of the Anti-Secession Law see

<http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200503/14/eng20050314_176746.html>

⁹ Article 8 of the Anti-Secession Law specifically stipulates the use of “non-peaceful means” and “other necessary measures” to “protect China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity”.

decades, where both sides were relatively at peace with the other's existence and independence. The law explicitly denies Taiwanese people the right to maintain their democratic way of life, and directly contradicts the United Nations Charter, which upholds the principle of equal rights and self-determination of all people. At the time of its enactment, the Anti-Secession Law was condemned by various states, including the United States, Japan, and the European Union.¹⁰ Few states today recognize PRC's claim in the Anti-Secession Law that Taiwan is part of its territory, as the People's Republic of China clearly does not exercise sovereign control over Taiwan, nor does it have any legal basis to make such a claim.

United Front Through Mass Media

The CCP leadership understands that the majority of the people of Taiwan want to maintain their existing democratic way of life and to maintain their political independence from the PRC.¹¹ To overcome this, the CCP makes use of a "carrot and stick" strategy in which they rapidly develop and deploy various military capabilities such as ballistic missiles that threaten Taiwan, while at the same time developing "soft power" means that employ propaganda methods to recruit Taiwanese supporters for unification.

One of the most effective means of propaganda that China has developed is the control and manipulation of mass media in Taiwan to disseminate information conducive to China's strategy of the United Front. By covertly or overtly buying out and controlling the ownership of newspaper, television channels, and internet media in Taiwan, China is able to control a significant portion of Taiwan's mass media and to use them as a means to alter Taiwanese people's popular perceptions of the CCP government and its unification agenda.¹²

Over the past few years, a number of high profile cases have occurred in which Chinese companies or Taiwanese businessmen purchased several major Taiwanese mass media companies with close connections to the Chinese government.¹³ The purchases are notable not only because through them the CCP appears to be targeting the ownership of media that are politically neutral or lean toward supporting unification, but also media that are traditionally considered pro-independence. Media owners, managers, talk show hosts, well-known journalists, and writers are often lured with monetary incentives to switch sides and to adopt pro-China positions on political issues. Those with business involvement in mainland China are also constantly pressured to censor material critical of the CCP regime. In the CCP's view, buying off Taiwan's media is a much cheaper and more effective use of its resources than spending them on building weapons to conquer Taiwan by force.

¹⁰ See European Union's Resolution adopted in April 2005 in response to China's "Anti-Secession Law" at paragraph 33, p. 6, TA(2005)0132, <<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//NONSGML+TA+P6-TA-2005-0132+0+DOC+PDF+V0//EN>>.

¹¹ 2015 survey done by a Taiwanese think tank that found across-the-board support for eventual independence reached an all-time high of 70.9%. 新台灣國策智庫趨勢調查. July 2015. P. 42. Taiwan Brain Trust. <<http://www.braintrust.tw/userfiles/files/20150612.pdf>>.

¹² Hsu, Chien-Jung. *China's Influence on Taiwan's Media*. Asian Survey 54.3 (2014): p. 515–539.

¹³ Ibid., p. 532-537.

United Front Through Tourism and Education

China's rapid economic growth in the past two decades and the resulting increases in its per capita income have enabled increasing numbers of Chinese citizens to travel and study abroad. China's increased openness to the rest of the world is something that should be celebrated and encouraged. However, evidence has surfaced in recent years indicating that a number of the Chinese tourists and students coming to Taiwan have been given "missions" by the Chinese government beforehand, assigning them to various activities associated with China's United Front strategy against Taiwan.¹⁴ Specifically, many of them have been tasked with propaganda missions to disseminate pro-China, pro-unification, and anti-Taiwan independence messages. Some have been tasked with intelligence gathering missions and instructed to spy on Taiwanese military installations and other sensitive areas related to national defense.¹⁵

Since 2008, the pro-China Taiwanese President Ma Ying-jeou has introduced a series of policies that greatly eased the restrictions previously placed on Chinese tourists, students, and short-term workers. There is no longer an annual quota on the number of Chinese tourists and students that can enter Taiwan. In 2015, there were 10.4 million international tourists visiting Taiwan, of which 5.5 million came from mainland China. In 2015 there are 33,288 Chinese students, including short-term exchange students, studying in Taiwan, which comprises 38% of the total number of international students in Taiwan.¹⁶

The CCP is likely to attempt in Taiwan similar activities that have been part of the long-established policies toward China's ethnic minorities, systematically encouraging and injecting more Chinese migrants into the local areas of Tibet, Xinjiang, and Inner Mongolia. By doing so, the Chinese migrants help to dilute the percentage of local population that are ethnic minorities, and in turn help the CCP government gain greater control over the region.¹⁷

In the case of Taiwan, it is foreseeable that the CCP would exploit any available opportunity to increase the migration of mainland Chinese citizens into Taiwan. If successful, this scheme would increase the number of residents in Taiwan that are more receptive to China's influence, and who are less likely to oppose the CCP's unification strategy.

United Front and its Impacts on the Security of the Asia Pacific

Ancient Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu believed that winning the hearts and minds of the enemy was more important than attacking their castles.¹⁸ Following this line of thinking, the

¹⁴ Shiping, Fan. "A political-economic analysis on the impact of the mainland Chinese tourists traveling to Taiwan on the cross-strait relations". 秀威出版, 2010, p. 245-290.

¹⁵ For example, see a 2015 Taipei Times report by Pan, Jason. "Chinese espionage at military bases increasing." Nov 11, 2015. Taipei Times. <<http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2015/11/11/2003632174>>.

¹⁶ Hsin-Cheng Li, "90,000 - Record number of international students in Taiwan, mostly from China", Feb 6, 2015, The News Lens. <<http://www.thenewslens.com/post/123283>>.

¹⁷ For example, see Ohno Aikra, *Genocide on the Mongolian Steppe: Oral History of the Chinese Cultural Revolution*, Bachi Publishing, 2014, Taiwan.

¹⁸ Relevant quote from the Section III of Sun Tzu's *The Arts of War*: "...skillful leader subdues the enemy's troops without any fighting; he captures their cities without laying siege to them; he overthrows their kingdom without lengthy operations in the field."

classical Chinese military tradition stresses that one must first cripple the enemy's desire and will to fight before one attempts to attack the enemy's position. Today, the CCP leadership has clearly attempted to follow Sun Tzu's teaching by spending considerable efforts in exploiting the so-called "soft power" approach to neutralize Taiwan's resistance to the United Front strategy.

China's United Front through the economy has succeeded in attracting massive amounts of capital, resources, technology, and skilled workers from Taiwan in the past two decades.¹⁹ This strategy has also helped to accelerate China's own rapid economic growth, which has helped China's nominal GDP surpass Japan and the European Union. The Chinese economy is now second only to the United States. With over three trillion USD worth of foreign-exchange reserves, China also possesses the largest currency reserves in the world.²⁰

This growth in soft power in the form of economic wealth and foreign-exchange reserves has also enabled China to invest an increasing amount of its resources towards the development of its military, thus converting soft power into hard power. China's military spending has grown at almost double digits in the past 15 years. In 2015, it reached 145 billion USD in published figures alone, which exclude auxiliary or covert expenses such as the upkeep of militia or the research and development of strategically crucial military projects such as stealth technology.²¹ Moreover, with its rapid expansion in military hardware from ballistic missiles to submarine forces, China now poses a huge security threat to the Taiwan Strait and those countries to which it is strategically important, including United States, Japan, Vietnam, and the Philippines, among others.

China also exploits its newly acquired wealth and economic power to purchase large quantities of national debt from the United States, United Kingdom, and other European nations. In acquiring foreign government debts, China potentially gains powerful bargaining leverage over these governments on economic, diplomatic, and strategic issues. For example, China has repeatedly pressured the United States not to include advanced fighter jets and submarines in its arms sales to Taiwan.²² Until recently China has also frequently opposed or blocked attempts by the United States to curb the North Korean nuclear weapon program. All of this demonstrates China's exploitation of the benefits of the United Front strategy in pursuit of its goal of becoming the regional hegemon of the Asia-Pacific.

The experience China has acquired through the implementation of the United Front in Taiwan has helped it to formulate and apply similar operations in the United States.²³ Over the past 15

¹⁹ For example, see Hung, Chia Ko. Taiwan business people's contribution to China's economic development : 1979-2008. 2009. Quote: "From 1979 to 2008, Taiwan business people's total direct investment amounted to USD 122 billion, accounted for 14.34% of China's same time total direct foreign investment."

²⁰ Kujundzic, Petar. "China central bank deflects concerns over forex reserves", Reuters, February 28, 2016. <<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-forex-idUSKCN0W10PA>>.

²¹ See National Defense Report 2015 published by Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense (MND). <<http://report.mnd.gov.tw>>. P. 49.

²² For a detailed list of PRC oppositions to US-Taiwan arm sales in recent decades, see a joint report by U.S.-Taiwan Business Council and Project 2049 Institute: *Chinese Reactions to Taiwan Arms Sales*. April 16, 2012. <https://project2049.net/documents/2012_chinese_reactions_to_taiwan_arms_sales.pdf>.

²³ See Michael Pillsbury, *The Hundred-year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower*. Henry Holt and Company, 2015.

years, the Chinese government has invited U.S. Congressional members and staffers, retired U.S. Generals and senior officers, business leaders, think tank researchers, and scholars to visit China. As with those from Taiwan, these trips were often generously funded by the Chinese government. The American “guests” would receive lavish receptions so as to foster their positive impressions of the CCP regime, potentially helping influence the foreign policies of the United States.

Another well-documented example of China’s use of the United Front strategy targeting the United States is the large number of Chinese-funded “Confucius Institutes” attached to many of the top universities and colleges in the U.S.²⁴ These institutes offer a variety of scholarships and funding to American students who pursue studies in Chinese culture, language, politics, and other related areas. They also actively recruit American teachers, academics, and think tanks to help disseminate messages that are favorable to the CCP through conferences, research, and speeches under the guise of academic activity. It is all just one part of China’s extended use of the strategy of the United Front on the global stage.

As mentioned above, the essence of CCP’s United Front strategy as conceived of by Mao Zedong is to “collude with the secondary enemy in order to defeat the primary enemy.” The CCP also borrowed from ancient Chinese strategic teaching in “befriending the distant enemy while attacking a nearby enemy,”²⁵ a pattern which can be observed from China’s behavior in the international sphere during the Cold War. During the 1970s, China made numerous secret diplomatic overtures to the United States, a country that was at one time its primary ideological enemy. Hoping to recruit Chinese help in containing the Soviet Union in the Far East, the U.S. government provided China with much-needed assistance in developing its own economy and technology. To this end, China allowed the United States to build secret signal intelligence (SIGINT) stations in Xinjiang to monitor Soviet military activities in Afghanistan and Central Asia.²⁶

It is therefore no surprise that in recent years China has made numerous overtures to Ma Ying-jeou’s government in Taiwan, seeking to recruit Taiwan to join its United Front against Japan in the dispute over the sovereignty of the Senkaku Islands.²⁷ Similarly, China has also attempted to recruit Taiwan to form an alliance against Vietnam, the Philippines, and United States in territorial disputes in the South China Sea. In most cases, the Taiwanese government has rejected the Chinese proposals and has not yet been entrapped into participating in the United Front.

²⁴ For an overview of the controversies associated with Confucius Institutes and its connection to China’s United Front strategy, see Steven W. Mosher, *Confucius Institutes: Trojan Horses with Chinese Characteristics*, March 28, 2012, Population Research Institute, at <<https://www.pop.org/content/confucius-institutes-trojan-horses-chinese-characteristics>>.

²⁵ As one of the renowned “Thirty-Six Stratagems”.

²⁶ John C. K. Daly, *Feature: U.S., China - intel's odd couple*. UPI, Feb. 24, 2001, at <<http://www.upi.com/Archives/2001/02/24/Feature-US-China-intels-odd-couple/6536982990800>>.

²⁷ Dolven, Ben, Shirley A. Kan, and Mark E. Manyin. "Maritime Territorial Disputes in East Asia: Issues for Congress." Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, 2013. P. 25.

Policy Recommendations and Conclusion

This article recommends that the Taiwanese government actively reevaluate most, if not all, trade and investment agreements that have been signed and are currently in effect between Taiwan and China.²⁸ Efforts should be made to reduce Taiwan's overreliance on China's market and to reduce trade relations. It must avoid falling into the trap of the "One China common market" that is part of the economic aspect of China's strategy of the United Front. Furthermore, Taiwan should also actively pursue diverse trade and commercial relationships with international partners such as Europe, the United States, Japan, and the ASEAN nations.

The Taiwanese government should seek to renegotiate agreements with China that have been identified as unfair, unjust, and negatively impacting Taiwan's society and economy. For example, Taiwan should consider lowering the number of Chinese tourists that are allowed to enter Taiwan each year, and limit Chinese investments in Taiwan's sensitive industries such as mass media and high tech sectors. With effective enforcement, these regulations can reduce or neutralize China's efforts to control Taiwan's freedom of the press and freedom of speech, and to help mitigate the negative effects of Taiwan's economic reliance on China.

Random security checks and investigations should be imposed on visiting Chinese officials, tourists, family relatives, students, and short-term workers. This will make it more difficult for Chinese agents to infiltrate Taiwan and conduct covert operations detrimental to Taiwan's society and national security, including intelligence activities or terrorist plots. In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the United States has implemented a screening system for incoming foreigners administered by the Department of Homeland Security. Taiwan should consider adopting similar system.

The Taiwanese government should also hold public hearings and conferences to gather useful policy recommendations and advice on national security from experts, NGOs, think tanks, government officials, and bipartisan leaders and representatives. To defeat China's United Front, it is crucial for Taiwanese society as a whole to come together in forming effective responses and defenses against hostile takeover. Open forums will help to forge public consensus and support for policies designed to counter national security threats making Taiwan more resilient in the face of China's United Front strategy.

It is in Taiwan's best interest to preserve freedom of navigation in the Asia Pacific and to maintain peace, prosperity, and stability in the region. Taiwan should therefore work to settle existing sovereignty disputes in the East and South China Sea by actively communicating and cooperating with neighboring countries including the United States, Japan, Vietnam, and the Philippines. Taiwan should also work with these international partners to form effective cooperation on issues such as piracy, terrorism, and humanitarian aid. Doing so will deny China room for manipulation and agitation, thereby neutralizing the negative impacts from China's strategy of the United Front.

²⁸ The incoming Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) administration has promised to push for a stricter evaluation process and legislative oversight for future Taiwan-China agreements, but remains ambiguous as to the fate of existing agreements.

Ultimately, a successful defense against China's United Front requires the people of Taiwan to understand what is at stake and to make a concerted effort in preventing further encroachments by China. The international community also has a lot to learn from Taiwan's experience as China increasingly exploits the same stratagem to divide and weaken countries that it perceives as being its strategic rivals. China's United Front is difficult to counter as it seeks to dominate its opponent without firing a shot, but at the same time it also means that a counter-strategy does not require the use of force for it to be effective. As the old saying goes "united we stand, divided we fall." It is time for Taiwan and the countries in the Asia-Pacific to start working together and adopt appropriate defensive measures so that China's United Front will not succeed in dividing and conquering the region.