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Inés Arco Escriche

The People's Republic of China and the intensification of its hybrid strategy in Taiwan: doctrine, practices and implications for the European Union

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Abstract:

This article analyses the intensification of the People's Republic of China's hybrid tactics and their growing relevance in the Taiwanese context, with the aim of altering the status quo without triggering an open conflict. Firstly, an overview is provided based on the evolution of Chinese military doctrine in relation to the concepts of hybrid conflict and its equivalents—such as the doctrine of the three wars or cognitive dominance operations. Next, the Taiwanese case is analysed, examining the growing use of coercive military manoeuvres, disinformation operations, cyberattacks, legal warfare tactics and economic instruments—whether used as incentives or punitive measures—as well as Taiwan's responses. Finally, the implications for Europe are explored, where Chinese hybrid threats pose growing challenges to democratic resilience and security. The Taiwanese case thus emerges as a laboratory for understanding the contemporary nature of hybrid threats to democratic systems.

Keywords: China, Hybrid threats, Disinformation, Taiwan, Three wars.

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Introduction

Beijing closed 2025 with two days of military manoeuvres around the island of Taiwan under the name "Operation Justice 2025". These manoeuvres simulated a blockade operation, encircling and controlling the island's maritime and airspace, demonstrating the People's Republic of China's (PRC) ability to assert its sovereignty over the strait and isolate the Republic of China (hereafter,Taiwan) internationally without the need for a direct invasion.

On 29 December 2025, during the first day of these exercises, the ultra-nationalist Chinese newspaper *Global Times* published a report stating that the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) was going to blockade the ports of Keelung (north), Tainan, Kaohsiung (south) and Hualien (east) in Taiwan. After several Taiwanese newspapers picked up the story, the non-governmental organisation Taiwan FactCheck Center issued a statement debunking the information (Qiu, 2025). In April 2025, also during another round of Chinese military manoeuvres in the strait, similar hoaxes regarding the blocking of natural gas imports to the island or the proximity of Chinese vessels to the Taiwanese coast were similarly circulated and debunked (Li, 2025). These examples demonstrate how, increasingly, Chinese military exercises are not only focused on kinetic aspects, but are accompanied by hybrid threats, such as disinformation, which seek to divide and manipulate public opinion, erode Taiwanese resistance and gain support within the island.

Beyond key moments of tension, the use of disinformation by Chinese actors has become ubiquitous in Taiwan. According to data published by the Taiwanese National Security Bureau (2026), in 2025 more than 2.3 million cases of disinformation were recorded on the island, an upward trend resulting from the increased cognitive pressure exerted by Beijing. Likewise, the use of other Chinese hybrid tactics against Taiwan has also increased, with more than 2.63 million cyberattacks on critical infrastructure per day in 2025 (Lee, 2026) and more than 4,000 air incursions into the Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) that same year (Taiwan Plus, 2025). All these operations share a single objective: to increase coercion to destabilise the island without triggering an open conflict, blurring the lines between war and peace.

Taiwan, considered one of the PRC's core interests, has become a testing ground for Chinese hybrid aggression (Aukia, 2023). Monaghan (2019: 87) defines hybrid threats as

"a wide range of non-violent methods targeting vulnerabilities across society to undermine the functioning, unity, or will of their targets, whilst degrading and subverting the status quo". Speaking of hybrid tactics rather than hybrid conflicts places the emphasis on everything that occurs outside an open armed conflict, including aspects such as diplomacy, the threat of military force, the economy, the law, the manipulation of information, or cyberattacks, capable of promoting a political agenda and objectives without resorting to force. This concept differs from the "grey zone", a term more commonly used in the American and Japanese contexts. According to Mumford and Carlucci (2022: 197), the "grey zone" defines the space of competition without open conflict, whilst hybrid tactics would be actions falling short of conflict that help an actor achieve their objectives gradually, whilst also reducing the capacity for a direct response.

Thus, Taiwan serves as a testing ground for understanding Chinese hybrid tactics, particularly as their use is on the rise worldwide. Domestic developments on the island are not merely a regional matter, but a testing ground for refining tactics of disinformation, economic pressure, military intimidation and cognitive manipulation that China subsequently exports globally, including to Europe. While Brussels has understandably focused on Russian threats, analysing how Taiwan has developed resilience to these threats allows us to anticipate and prepare for challenges that will intensify as China's strategic presence in our neighbourhood continues to expand.

This article analyses the growing challenge posed by China's use of hybrid tactics, particularly in Taiwan. First, it contextualises how Chinese analysts understand and define hybrid threats and how these differ from other perspectives, such as the Russian one. Secondly, it conducts a systematic analysis of how China employs these tactics in the Taiwan Strait, with an emphasis on long-standing challenges and new developments over the past year. Finally, it concludes with the implications for Europe and the existing mechanisms for countering Chinese hybrid threats.

Hybrid tactics with Chinese characteristics: definition, literature and differences with Russia

The Chinese perspective on hybrid warfare

The terminology of "hybrid conflicts" and the "grey zone" did not appear in Chinese strategic discussions until 2014, when it was imported from Western and Japanese debates (Lin, 2022: 11). Consequently, the dominant concern in Chinese literature has centred on the use of these tactics by its main rival, the United States, and on the development of defensive capabilities against them. For Chinese analysts, the origin of hybrid conflicts lies in Washington, through its "military operations, colour revolutions, regime change and defence documents, in countries such as the former Czechoslovakia, Iraq, Syria, Iran, Yemen, Libya, Afghanistan, Kosovo, Venezuela and Georgia" (Saalman, 2021: 96). For these authors, Western interest in this phenomenon stems from a shift in the direction of such practices, now that Europe and the United States are victims of these tactics rather than perpetrators.

In these writings, China perceives itself as a victim of US hybrid threats, which include trade wars, export controls, the manipulation of information, the use of espionage software, and the development of artificial intelligence (AI)-guided systems aimed at containing China's development and its military capabilities (Berzina-Cerenkova *et al*., 2025). Yet, if Washington is the origin, Russia is the master. According to Chinese experts, while both Moscow and Beijing have been victims of US destabilisation and encirclement, Russia has been able to learn from its victimisation and perfect these tactics in Ukraine and Syria.

By contrast, when China is accused of employing these hybrid tactics, its analysts deny any parallels between its actions and hybrid conflicts. However, Ong (2018) identifies two intellectual traditions that codify the hybrid as part of Chinese military strategies. Firstly, the influences of Sun Tzu and his *Art of War* (2019 [5TH century BC]) have inspired the continuous pursuit of relative advantage over the adversary, where the use of predictable and unpredictable tactics ultimately confuses, demoralises and, ultimately, deters the enemy from going to war. Secondly, the Maoist tradition of "people's war", which already integrated propaganda alongside military and civilian capabilities (particularly through militias) and their perpetual mobilisation in both times of peace and war, has been adapted to the current technological context. Thus, both historical and imperial examples

against northern invasions, as well as the victory in the Chinese Civil War (Baker, 2015), create a strategic *continuum* in which ambiguity, the deployment of state and irregular actors, and the fusion of military and non-military methods constitute fundamental doctrinal principles for achieving political objectives.

This vision was formalised in the PLA's "Three Wars" doctrine in 2003. In 1999, two Chinese colonels, Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, published the work *Unrestricted Warfare*, in which they concluded that military force was no longer sufficient to win conflicts and that, instead, an amalgam of military, political, economic, cultural, diplomatic, informational and cyber tactics was necessary to subdue the enemy. Hence, this new doctrine recognised the need to adapt to new forms of warfare in which public opinion, institutions and legal systems can be instrumentalised. Accordingly, the PLA has focused on developing psychological, media and legal warfare tactics that complement diplomatic, economic and military measures in order to shape a favourable strategic environment (PLA Daily, 2004).

These three domains—public opinion, psychological/cognitive and legal—were further defined in the manual *Science of Military Strategy* (Xiao, 2015), published by the PLA's National Defence University. First, public opinion warfare involves the manipulation of information across multiple channels to shape the will and perceptions of populations, both to improve China's image and to foster internal divisions in third countries. Second, psychological warfare seeks to exacerbate division and a sense of helplessness among populations and political and military elites in order to delay a decisive response. Finally, legal warfare aims to use domestic and international legal frameworks to delegitimise and constrain an adversary while advancing the hybrid actor's interests through legal means. An example is China's interpretation of the subordination of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea to the principle of sovereignty, in order to undermine the Hague arbitration ruling in favour of the Philippines. Thus, this contest based on ideas and perceptions illustrates the extension of competition from traditional domains of land, sea and air into non-material spaces, as well as the need for centralised coordination among multiple actors.

Since the late 2010s, the informational and cyber dimensions have gained prominence in Chinese military analysis under the concept of "cognitive domain operations". These operations aim to influence the perception and behaviour of other actors by appealing to

emotions and cognitive stimuli. To this end, they draw on cyber aspects—as a channel for spreading disinformation or conducting cyberattacks—and informational aspects—which focus on the form and control of information (Hung and Hung, 2022). Thus, technological advances have reinforced the idea that informational and cyber operations act as a "force multiplier", both when used in parallel with other kinetic elements—as seen in the introduction regarding the Taiwanese case—and also individually, due to their ability to influence public opinion through social media (Saalman, 2021: 99; Beauchamp-Mustafaga, 2024).

In this regard, the PLA has adopted a dual approach. Offensively, it deploys information attacks to deter, confuse the public and mislead policy-makers through coordinated social media campaigns and the use of *bots*, such as the dissemination of disinformation during military exercises. Defensively, it seeks to maintain a positive image and control narratives about China, with examples such as Chinese media coverage and diplomatic discourse during the Hong Kong protests (2019) or the COVID-19 pandemic. Although no known Chinese doctrine yet exists on how to instrumentalise social media, there is growing debate within Chinese military literature on how to use AI or big data to improve the dissemination of narratives to specific targets (*targeting*) (Berzina-Cerenkova *et al*., 2025: 40).

Beyond cognitive operations, cyber dominance has also become one of the pillars of Chinese hybrid actions, particularly through cyberattacks, intellectual property theft, and surveillance and espionage, such as in APT campaigns (Saalman, 2021). In parallel, advances in AI and China's technological inferiority vis-à-vis the United States have also fostered greater development of asymmetric capabilities, with a particular emphasis on unmanned vehicles and drones, as well as military AI—two areas set to dominate in the future. However, there is still no evidence of their use by the PLA beyond isolated sightings of drones in Taiwan or their use for reconnaissance and monitoring in the South China Sea.

What drives China's preference for hybrid strategies beyond its military tradition? First, growing rivalry with Washington at both regional and international levels, combined with China's military inferiority, encourages the proliferation of hybrid tactics that seek to advance certain objectives through small, repetitive *fait accomplis*, thereby avoiding escalation with the United States and its allies by remaining below the threshold of open

aggression (Mazarr, Heath and Cevallos, 2018), though they also open the door to tensions and clashes that could trigger a conflict. Second, the ambiguity of these measures allows China to signal explicit threats of retaliation to weaker actors—such as Taiwan or other parties in the South China Sea disputes (Insisa, 2023)—while maintaining plausible deniability to limit damage to its international image, although this second point has not been particularly effective. Third, the centralisation of power in China, particularly since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, enhances the capacity for coordination between different actors—from various ministries to the military and state-owned enterprises—for common purposes, especially on issues of great concern to the regime, such as Taiwan or Hong Kong. Progress towards civil-military integration is also facilitating these tactics, increasing the number of actors involved beyond state entities (Lin, 2023: 33). Finally, technological advances have multiplied and diversified channels and forms of subversion, expanding the scope of action, as well as offering new innovative techniques that allow power to be projected beyond conventional capabilities.

Learning from the master? Similarities and differences between Russia and China

The Sino-Russian strategic partnership, strengthened above all since the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, calls for an examination of the lessons learnt, similarities and differences between these two hybrid actors. Since 2014, Beijing has systematically analysed Russian operations in Crimea, disinformation campaigns in Europe and, more recently, both the effective tactics and the costly mistakes made by Russia in Ukraine. Understanding this process of learning, but also of differentiation, is essential to grasping how both actors operate and what lessons emerge in terms of providing a proportionate response to their actions.

To understand Sino-Russian convergences, it is necessary first to examine how Moscow conceptualises hybrid conflict. The Russian concept closest to the Western notion, *gibridnaya voyna*, aligns with the Chinese usage: both interpret it as a Western strategy directed against their respective states. Beyond this terminological usage, the Russian military and strategic community has developed two distinct ways of understanding hybrid conflicts. First, in line with the misnamed Gerasimov doctrine, contemporary conventional warfare must be preceded by a phase of political destabilisation underpinned by the exploitation of social grievances through unconventional methods, as occurred in Crimea.

Second, Russian elites have launched a political war against the West without any intention of invasion, but relying on hybrid tactics, such as disinformation or cyberattacks, to "divide, demoralise and distract" whilst Russia reaffirms its sphere of influence (Galeotti, 2018). From this, one can infer a Sino-Russian consensus regarding the transformation of conventional warfare into hybrid forms, the importance of information as an alternative to open military conflict, and the utility of these techniques in creating division among adversaries.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has demonstrated the growing cooperation and convergence between the two actors. Since the beginning of the war, there has been an increasing amplification of Russian narratives within Chinese disinformation ecosystems, particularly narratives seeking to delegitimise democracy, Western institutions or specific actors such as the United States, although these episodes have been opportunistic in sharing similar objectives of discrediting Washington (EEAS, 2025). However, the cutting of undersea cables in the Baltic and the Taiwan Strait by Chinese and Russian actors demonstrates growing coordination in acts of sabotage.

Nevertheless, there are also significant differences worth highlighting in terms of specific scenarios, tactics and objectives. Firstly, Russian hybrid threats have a longer track record and are more sophisticated in Europe (particularly in Ukraine), in the United States (as exemplified by the interference campaign in the 2016 presidential elections) and in Africa (linked to the presence of the Wagner Group), as well as in Central Asia. In contrast, whilst China is conducting a global campaign aimed at positively shaping global perceptions of its regime, its main theatre of operations remains Taiwan and its neighbourhood, where it has ongoing territorial disputes with Japan and countries in Southeast Asia. Although Brussels has also identified China as a growing threat, it is important to note that there are currently few documented cases of Chinese disinformation and interference in the European context, particularly when compared to Russia (EEAS, 2025; Bleyer-Simon *et al*., 2025). One notable example is *Operation Paperwall,* through which Chinese actors established a network of 123 fake media outlets worldwide (including in Europe) (Alaphilippe, 2024), aimed at creating and amplifying content aligned with Chinese interests.

Second, China demonstrates greater sophistication in the use of hybrid tactics than Russia, exemplified by a more calculated strategy that unfolds over time through

incremental measures, where the use of direct force is employed more as an instrument of coercion and deterrence than in the Russian case, which prioritises a more rapid escalation. However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and Moscow's inability to prevail quickly have influenced the perception of Chinese military elites regarding the effectiveness of emphasising unconventional measures in open conflicts, with the exception of cognitive domain (in this case, successfully applied by Washington and Kyiv) (Wang and Zakheim, 2025).

Third, Beijing prioritises controlling narratives to ensure they are favourable to it, whereas for Moscow, subversion and chaos carry greater weight (Wallis, 2019). In this regard, the European External Action Service report (2025: 20) highlights how China's information infrastructure focuses on reinforcing its narratives on issues sensitive to the regime—such as Xinjiang, Taiwan, Tibet, etc.—in an extremely coordinated, simultaneous and centralised manner, using various state-controlled media outlets and diplomatic figures, supported by Chinese public relations agencies. Russia, by contrast, is capable of a wider reach through multiple simultaneous campaigns serving different geopolitical objectives. However, new decentralised Chinese disinformation tactics are emerging in Japan and Taiwan, based on false and conspiracy-theory content that more closely resembles Russian techniques (Dixon and Beznosiuk, 2025). Thus, tactical cooperation between the two actors and mutual learning— particularly China's observation of Russian operations—suggest a progressive convergence that could intensify in the future.

Hybrid tactics in China's neighbourhood: the case of Taiwan

Although international attention regarding a possible military invasion of Taiwan by the PRC has been growing in recent years, this focus may prove limited in understanding the current hybrid dynamics defining this conflict. According to Cui Lei (Cui, 2021), a researcher at *a think tank* linked to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Beijing's strategy continues to be guided by Sun Tzu's maxim of "winning without fighting".

In this context, the Taiwan issue—characterised by contested sovereignty, identity tensions, US military backing and deep economic and social ties with mainland China—has become the prime arena for the deployment of hybrid tactics. Since the beginning of the 21st century, China's reunification strategy has systematically combined conventional

military measures with disinformation operations, cyberattacks, economic incentives and manipulation of the legal framework, with the aim of exploiting specific vulnerabilities within Taiwanese society. This combination of coercive and persuasive instruments reflects both the Chinese doctrine of the "three wars" (psychological, media and legal warfare) and the Western conceptualisation of hybrid threats.

It is worth noting that the implementation of this hybrid strategy requires cross-cutting inter-institutional coordination within the chinese state apparatus, involving the Taiwan Affairs Office, the United Front Work Department, the PLA (including the GGC and maritime militias) and the Propaganda Department, amongst other state and civilian actors (Hung and Hung, 2022; Grossman, 2025). This institutional architecture reflects the comprehensive nature of the chinese strategy, which transcends the purely military sphere to encompass multiple dimensions of state power.

In this context, three phases can be identified in China's hybrid strategy towards Taiwan, shaped by the preferences of the Beijing leadership, political developments in Taiwan, and the progressive increase in chinese power and capabilities. The first phase (1995–2008) was characterised by an openly coercive approach involving military and legal pressure, with episodes such as the third Taiwan Strait crisis (1995–1996). This stance moderated significantly with the coming to power of the candidate of the Chinese nationalist party, the Kuomintang (KMT), Ma Ying-jeou (2008–2016), whose willingness to engage with the mainland led to a period of relative détente. However, the election of Tsai Ing-wen in 2016 and her subsequent succession by Lai Ching-te in 2024 — both from the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) — marked the beginning of a third phase characterised by the intensification and diversification of pressure and interference measures. These range from military incursions into taiwanese airspace and maritime territory to economic coercion, disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks and manipulation of the international legal framework. Whilst a comprehensive analysis of these three phases would be impossible within the scope of this article, the following section analyses and highlights the main developments of recent years, as well as the continuity of certain measures since the beginning of this century.

Military measures

Since 2019, China has visibly stepped up its coercion towards Taiwan, when Chinese air force aircraft began routinely crossing Taiwan's ADIZ without prior communication or authorisation from Taipei. But the visit by Nancy Pelosi, then Speaker of the US House of Representatives, in August 2022 marked a turning point. In response to that visit, Beijing carried out unprecedented military manoeuvres to encircle and blockade Taiwan by sea and air, establishing six control zones around the island — extending extensively into the south and east of the island for the first time — thereby demonstrating for the first time its ability to impose a blockade on the island. Furthermore, the massive deployment of nearly fifty fighter jets violated both the ADIZ and the median line of the Taiwan Strait, an informal boundary that both sides had hitherto respected to avoid escalation. Furthermore, the PLA fired ballistic missiles into Taiwanese airspace for the first time, some of which landed in japanese waters (Grossman, 2025).

At the same time, drones were also sighted near various taiwanese islands for the first time in July and August 2022, before and after Pelosi's visit. Although the incursions continued for several weeks, accompanied by disinformation campaigns regarding Taiwan's inability to respond, with the aim of reducing support and fuelling a sense of humiliation among the population (DW, 2022), the shooting down of a civilian drone by the Taiwanese Armed Forces on 1 September 2022 brought all such deployments to a halt until 2024, when half a dozen incursions were recorded once again (Fan, 2025). Although in some cases these drones have subsequently been attributed to civilians, these activities are characterised by the ambiguity inherent in hybrid threats, where attribution is unclear, but which, in combination with other pressure factors, contribute to generating a sense of insecurity among the Taiwanese population.

Since then, the PLA has conducted similar exercises annually to combat "Taiwanese separatist forces" (Koh, 2025), progressively normalising this high level of coercion and threat. Notable among these exercises are the two manoeuvres carried out in 2024 as a direct response to high-level political events: President Lai Ching-te's inauguration speech in May of that year, and his subsequent speech on National Day in October. In both cases, the chinese military encircled the island of Taiwan, as well as the Matsu and Kinmen archipelagos, through the simultaneous deployment of naval and air forces, combined with multiple incursions into Taiwanese airspace. Significantly, these exercises

also prominently involved the GGC, which went so far as to conduct operations off the coast of Hualien, in eastern Taiwan, deliberately blurring the distinction between military and paramilitary forces (Grossman, 2025).

However, the most recent of these exercises, held on 29 and 30 December 2025, has set a new precedent. Unlike the previous ones, which were in response to internal Taiwanese political events, these military manoeuvres took place in response to the approval of the largest US arms package for Taiwan, valued at $11.1 billion (Hawkins, 2025), and amidst a diplomatic dispute between Beijing and Tokyo, following confirmation by Japanese Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae of Japan's potential military support for Taiwan in the event of an invasion. In this instance, the Chinese military imposed eight maritime blockade zones—the largest number to date—specifically aimed at controlling the island's main ports. The manoeuvres involved naval forces (without the participation of aircraft carriers, which were deployed in 2024 and April 2025), air forces and the Coast Guard, as well as four amphibious assault vessels and the launch of medium-range missiles (Military News Agency, 2025), demonstrating the capabilities required for an invasion of the island. On this occasion, a signal was sent to Tokyo and Washington: under the rhetoric of deterring "foreign interference", Beijing demonstrated its ability to completely isolate the island from any external support in the initial stages of a conflict. In this way, China manages to progressively reduce Taiwan's strategic space and the sense of threat without resorting to the direct use of force, whilst testing the limits of peace.

Non-military measures: *lawfare*, economics and disinformation

Whilst military coercive actions constitute a paradigmatic example of operations that blur the lines between war and peace without reaching open conflict, cross-strait relations are increasingly mediated by non-military activities with a clear cognitive component aimed at demoralising and deterring the Taiwanese population.

Firstly, Beijing has deployed multiple tactics of legal warfare (*lawfare*) by establishing domestic legal measures and advancing interpretations of international law designed to define the context of action and the cognitive framework for both Taipei and the international community. These measures pursue three main objectives: to frame relations between Beijing and Taipei as an internal Chinese dispute; to promote the

island's international isolation through diplomatic (de)recognition by other states; and to prevent any move towards Taiwanese self-determination (West and Insisa, 2024).

Specifically, the PRC's adoption of the Anti-Secession Law of 2005, at the height of the Taiwanese independence movement under President Chen Shui-bian (2000–2008), established two conditions for justifying the use of force against the island: (1) a formal declaration of independence by Taipei, and (2) the exhaustion of all peaceful means to achieve reunification. Whilst this measure does not legitimise the use of force under international law, it serves as a cognitive deterrent to domestic and international actors by setting out the consequences of any self-determination movement from Taipei, creating the equivalence that any action towards independence would inevitably trigger an armed conflict. The effectiveness of this *lawfare* strategy is evident in data from the Taiwan National Security Survey conducted by Duke University: by the end of 2020 (Duke University, 2020), 61.8% of the Taiwanese population believed that China would attack the island if independence were declared, demonstrating how the Chinese legal framework has shaped perceptions of risk within Taiwanese society.

Secondly, economic measures, both in the form of incentives and through the instrumentalisation of agencies, play a central role in China's hybrid strategy. During the period 2008–2016, relations across the Strait were marked by intense economic integration, with milestones such as the adoption of the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement in 2010, which reduced tariff barriers and sought to facilitate cross-Strait investment. However, the student mobilisation of the Sunflower Movement in 2014, which occupied the Legislative Yuan to prevent the ratification of the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement, and the subsequent election of the DPP's Tsai Ing-wen as president in 2016 brought this phase of rapprochement to an end.

Since then, the PRC has maintained a dual strategy: on the one hand, it has adopted various packages of measures to promote economic and cultural exchanges—such as the 26 measures of 2019 (Aspinwall, 2019) or the 11 incentives of 2020—which aim to co-opt the support of key sectors within Taiwanese society, particularly politicians, businesspeople and young people. These initiatives include preferential policies granting similar residency conditions to Taiwanese citizens residing on the mainland, or ensuring the same conditions for Taiwanese companies as for their mainland counterparts to participate in strategic projects such as "Made in China 2025" or the Belt and Road

Initiative (West and Insisa, 2024). On the other hand, Beijing has not hesitated to use trade as a punitive tool, particularly by imposing selective phytosanitary measures against agricultural and food products from regions more favourable to the PPD, such as the ban on pineapple imports in 2021 under the pretext of "food safety", although these have since expanded to cover more than 169 different products by 2024 (Attrill, 2025).

Whilst all these measures share the aim of eroding Taiwanese resolve to resist Beijing's manoeuvres and deepening existing social divisions, their effectiveness is closely linked to the information war and disinformation campaign ravaging the island. Although pro-China propaganda has been a constant feature since the 1950s, the nature of the information landscape has changed since 2018, when a disinformation campaign originating on the mainland propelled KMT candidate Han Kuo-yu to the mayoralty of Kaohsiung (Huang, 2019).

According to data from Taiwan's National Security Bureau (National Security Bureau, 2025), disinformation patterns in 2024 centred on three main themes: scepticism regarding the strength of US support, mistrust of the military, and opposition to the government of Lai Ching-te. These campaigns were launched in parallel with the Taiwanese elections in January 2024, during the two Chinese military manoeuvres in May and October 2024, and the US election campaign. For example, in the months leading up to the Taiwanese elections, disinformation increased by 40% ([1]), and continued after the elections with fake news about alleged electoral fraud (Taiwan FactCheck Center, 2024). Yu, a researcher at the Taiwan Information Environment Research Center, noted that over the past five years, Chinese actors had been spreading narratives to undermine the image of the United States on the island in areas as diverse as support for Ukraine, investments by the semiconductor company TSMC in Arizona, and visits by world leaders to the island. In this regard, rather than creating new narratives, the actors involved merely amplified local Taiwanese voices with like-minded messages; there is already a level of indigenous mistrust towards Washington's commitment prior to these disinformation campaigns. In 2025, the rise of generative artificial intelligence and the proliferation of actors—from *micro-influencers* to talk show guests—have amplified false

[1] Cited in '*In a savvy disinformation offensive, China takes aim at Taiwan elections*'. Available at: https://merics.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/MERICS%20Report%20Disinformation%20Taiwan%20December%202023.pdf

information, particularly regarding legislative proposals on the reinstatement of military courts or national budget cuts (Li, 2025).

To what extent has Beijing achieved its objectives through these hybrid tactics? The main successes lie in Taiwan's growing isolation (only thirteen countries recognise the island diplomatically) and the alteration of *the status quo* in the Strait through constant military escalation without a sufficiently deterrent international response or support for Taipei. However, it has failed to win over the hearts and minds of the Taiwanese: according to data from National Chengchi University, only 7.2% of the population wants reunification with China, whilst a large majority (81.7%) prefers maintaining the *status quo* as of December 2025 (National Chengchi University, 2025). In the realm of disinformation, the most visible campaigns in favour of nationalist candidates in the 2020 and 2024 elections failed to secure the presidency for the KMT. Hung and Hung (2022) demonstrate that pro-China messages serve only to solidify the support of those already sympathetic to Beijing, although they have fuelled internal division and polarisation, thereby fulfilling one of the strategic objectives of these operations.

How does Taiwan respond to China's hybrid threats?

This relative failure of Chinese operations can be attributed largely to the package of measures implemented by various Taiwanese stakeholders. In the military sphere, President Lai Ching-te has announced an increase in the defence budget to 3.3% of GDP by 2026 and 5% by 2030, as well as an additional extraordinary budget of forty billion dollars earmarked for the acquisition of equipment to facilitate an asymmetric strategy against China, including the development of an anti-aircraft system similar to the Israeli T-Dome (Lee, 2026). Furthermore, they have also reformulated the annual Han Kuang exercises to place greater emphasis on hybrid threats (Dotson and Harman, 2025). However, despite the commitments made to adopt a "porcupine" strategy, sections of the Taiwanese political and military elite remain fixated on traditional planning that prioritises heavy and conventional weaponry rather than investing more in mobile air and naval defences, or drones and unmanned vehicles (Grieco and Slingbaum, 2025). Furthermore, the opposition KMT and the Taiwan People's Party have sought to block and reduce the defence budget proposed for 2026 within the Legislative Yuan—Taiwan's parliament—thereby curbing President Lai's ambitions (Valentine, 2026).

But beyond defence, Taipei has become an international leader in the fight against disinformation and foreign interference. Firstly, the Lai administration has promoted measures for greater inter-ministerial coordination, as well as creating new agencies, such as the Centre for Research on Cognitive Warfare Tactics, attached to the Ministry of Justice (Sang, Thien and Nhi, 2024). Furthermore, although it has not yet materialised, Taipei proposed the creation of an international centre for the analysis and countering of Chinese disinformation in collaboration with other democratic partners around the world (Chan, 2024). Secondly, the Taiwanese authorities have adopted three laws—the Public Media Act (2018), the Social Order Maintenance Act (2019) and the Anti-Infiltration Act (2020)—aimed at combating disinformation and interference in the media, political actors and pressure groups, by imposing transparency measures and limiting financial donations to certain sectors. Thirdly, it has banned certain Chinese platforms, such as iQIYI (Baidu's equivalent of YouTube) and Tencent Video, on the island, though not without criticism regarding the implications for freedom of expression. Finally, it has also established a specific curriculum for media literacy in primary and secondary schools to familiarise the population with how to detect false information.

Taiwanese civil society is also becoming increasingly active. On the one hand, Taiwan has developed one of the most active ecosystems for fact-checking, with organisations such as the Taiwan FactCheck Center, CoFacts and Doublethink Lab. These self-funded groups have developed multiple strategies to address the challenge of disinformation, maintaining a presence on social media whilst working closely with the National Security Bureau, offering support in verifying disinformation campaigns once they have been identified (Zhang, 2020; Harper, 2025).

Furthermore, in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there has been a surge in civil society organisations dedicated to educating the Taiwanese public on how to prepare for and respond to the event of a war. These organisations focus on providing basic knowledge, covering military aspects, the use of weapons, the preparation of survival or first-aid kits, as well as psychological support through courses, talks and training sessions led by activists, retired military personnel and experts working in the fields of security and intelligence (Liu, 2023). In this regard, on 1 January 2022, the Tsai administration established the Total Defence Mobilisation Agency under the Ministry of National Defence, dedicated to enhancing the capabilities of reservists and improving the

population's preparedness for war beyond military structures, creating greater synergies with these civil defence groups and prioritising a *whole-of-society* approach (Liu, 2023: 110).

Conclusions and implications for the European Union

This article examines the intensification of China's hybrid strategy, both in terms of its theoretical and academic development and its increasing deployment in the Taiwan Strait. Through the repetition and escalation of military manoeuvres and the pervasive nature of disinformation campaigns aimed at demoralising the population, Beijing seeks to secure small victories, transforming the *status quo* whilst preparing for a possible blockade of the island. However, whilst China continues to operate within a context of unlikely war and impossible peace, this confrontation drags on without a clear victory, fuelling lessons for both sides: whilst Beijing learns from Russia and deploys similar tactics in other geopolitical scenarios, Taipei is also innovating in democratic resilience and response measures that limit Beijing's advances and interests — even if they cannot eliminate them entirely.

This case has significant implications for Europe. Democracies around the world face a rise in hybrid threats that strike at the heart of the democratic and security project. In the words of Kaja Kallas, the European Union's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, these attacks represent an "extreme danger" (Vinocur, 2025) from which we must protect ourselves and not accept as a "new normal" (Reuters, 2025).

Beyond European interests in Taiwan, ranging from semiconductors to freedom of navigation in the strait, the rise of hybrid threats on the island constitutes both a warning and a learning opportunity. On the one hand, Europe is no stranger to this reality or to the challenges posed by China's hybrid threats to the security and democratic standards of our continent, as demonstrated by explicit references to the use of influence operations and disinformation by Chinese actors by the European External Action Service (EEAS, 2025) or the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA, 2025). Brussels must prepare for future challenges, but it must also offer firm resistance to Chinese coercion, both within its borders and around the world, to enhance collective deterrence.

On the other hand, Taiwan can offer lessons (as well as learn from them) on how to cooperate and tackle these threats. Spurred on by Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the European Union has been preparing to respond to these challenges by establishing mechanisms for research and raising awareness of these threats, creating specialised units within the EEAS, and enhancing cooperation and coordination with NATO (Brunet, 2025). The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has only served to underscore the need to delve even deeper into this issue, which has led to milestones such as the creation of the EU Hybrid Toolbox (2022) to ensure greater coordination in joint European responses, or the adoption of sector-specific measures such as the NIS2 Directive to tackle cyberattacks, and the Digital Services Act, which contains specific measures to halt the spread of disinformation on social media. Nevertheless, the successful coordination of the *whole-of-society* approach, the creation of an international coordination centre to tackle disinformation, and the development of the population's capabilities through digital literacy offer examples of good practice to be explored in the European context.

In conclusion, the hybrid laboratory that Taiwan represents today not only anticipates the forms of coercion of the 21ST century, but also illuminates possible ways to counter them. Looking towards Taipei means recognising that democratic defence depends not only on traditional security, but on the strength of our societies, coordination between institutions, and the speed with which we are able to detect, resist and adapt to diffuse yet persistent threats.

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*Inés Arco Escriche**
Researcher, Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB)