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**A Critical Moment of Taiwan's Security – Taiwan Has to Sharpen Its
Cybercapacity in Response to China's National Rejuvenation**

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Abstract: Due to its geopolitical tensions with China, Taiwan has been famously labelled as ‘The most dangerous place on Earth’. This geopolitical volatility could arguably be reinforced by the Xi Jinping’s national rejuvenation campaign, under which China becomes increasingly eager to reunify with Taiwan. However, the security risk is not only manifested in the physical sphere, but could also exist in cyberspace. This essay argues that Taiwan should sharpen its cyberdefence capacity because under the national rejuvenation campaign, China could carry out more ambitious cyberwarfare. This essay first examines China’s national rejuvenation campaign. Next, it discusses the current cyberthreats faced by Taiwan. Then, it analyses the potential damages brought by cyberwarfare. Lastly, it argues that China could weaponize cyberspace to facilitate its physical expansion. This concludes that cyberwarfare could seriously threaten Taiwan’s national security, so Taiwan should sharpen its defence capacity promptly.

The Economist famously labelled Taiwan as ‘The most dangerous place on Earth’.¹ Such geopolitical volatility should not only be ascribed to its vulnerability to China’s military intervention, but also to the tremendous threat of cyber warfare targeted at Taiwan. According to Professor Chen Yi-Fan of Tamkang University, China wages an estimated 200 to 400 million cyberattacks at Taiwan each month.² A cyberspace crisis is imminent. This essay argues that Taiwan should sharpen its cyberdefence capacity because under the national rejuvenation campaign, China could carry out more ambitious cyberwarfare which could threaten Taiwan’s national security. The essay starts by discussing the urgency of enhancing Taiwan’s cyberdefence capacity by examining China’s national rejuvenation campaign. Next, The essay discusses the current threats of cyberwarfare to Taiwan to highlight the security risks. Then, the essay moves on to analyze the damages cyberwarfare could cast on Taiwan to justify that Taiwan must pay attention to its cybersecurity risks. Lastly, the essay argues that China could weaponize cyberspace to facilitate its physical expansion. This concludes that cyberwarfare could pose a serious threat to Taiwan’s national security, so Taiwan has to step up and enhance its defence capacity promptly.

National Rejuvenation

Although China had always been an imperial power in ancient times (e.g. Han, Tang) with a glorious five-thousand-year history,³ it has suffered from a collective point of desperation, also known as the ‘Century of Humiliation’, due to foreign aggressions since its defeat in the 1842 First Opium War.⁴ In Beijing’s eyes, since China has always been at the centre of international politics, it should *naturally* grow as a superpower and its active restoration of national strength is *legitimate*.⁵

To restore its wealth and power, China is eager to defend its territorial integrity, strengthen its national unity, and raise its international status. Since China has now risen as a leading power on

¹ The Economist, “The most dangerous place on Earth,” May 1, 2021, <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2021/05/01/the-most-dangerous-place-on-earth>.

² Ralph Jennings, “How China Could Cyberattack Taiwan,” *VOA News*, December 10, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/a/how-china-could-cyberattack-taiwan/6349594.html>.

³ Maria Adele Carrai, “Chinese Political Nostalgia and Xi Jinping’s Dream of Great Rejuvenation,” *International Journal of Asian Studies* 18, no. 1 (2021): pp. 7-25, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479591420000406>, 16

⁴ William A. Callahan, “National Insecurities: Humiliation, Salvation, and Chinese Nationalism,” *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 29, no. 2 (2004): pp. 199-218, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40645112>, 205.

⁵ See note 3.

the international stage, it believes it has the capability to expand its influence more assertively.⁶ The terms ‘China Dream’ and ‘Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation’ were therefore actively put forward to call for a revival of China’s prosperity and glory (although the terms remain vague).⁷

To advance its agenda of national strength restoration, China wants to regain its control over its lost territory Taiwan, where the Kuomintang retreated to when it was defeated by the Communist Party in the Chinese Civil War. Advocating the ‘One-China Principle’, China has continually denied Taiwan’s independence and pressured other countries (e.g. the Republic of Kiribati, Solomon Islands) to sever their ties with the Taiwan government.⁸ Particularly, since Xi Jinping’s rise, China has become more assertive on Taiwan issues.⁹ Xi stressed that ‘It is a historical conclusion drawn over the 70 years of the development of cross-Straits relations, and a must for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation in the new era’¹⁰ and reiterated that ‘[t]he historical task of the complete reunification of the motherland must be fulfilled, and will definitely be fulfilled.’¹¹ It is noteworthy that Xi has emphasized ‘we should not allow this problem to be passed down from one generation to the next.’¹² This shows China’s eagerness to achieve its reunification as soon as possible. A widely anticipated timeline for resolving the Taiwan issue would be 2049, which is the 100th anniversary of the People’s Republic of China and the expected time of completing its rejuvenation task.¹³ Meanwhile, although China prefers peaceful reunification, it has never renounced the possibility that it will achieve reunification by force.¹⁴ The possibility of a forceful reunification is, again, not ruled out in the White Paper on the Taiwan Question of 2022, which is

⁶ Carrai, “Chinese Political,” 7.

⁷ Carrai, “Chinese Political,” 12.

⁸ Thomas J. Shattuck, “The Race to Zero?: China’s Poaching of Taiwan’s Diplomatic Allies,” *Orbis* 64, no. 2 (2020): pp. 334-352, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2020.02.003>, 334.

⁹ Brendan Taylor, “Enhancing Taiwan’s Security and Reducing the Possibility of Conflict,” in *Asia-Pacific Regional Security Assessment 2022*, eds. Tim Huxley and Lynn Kwok (London: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2022), 60.

¹⁰ China Daily, “Highlights of Xi’s speech at Taiwan message anniversary event,” January 2, 2019, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201901/02/WS5c2c1ad2a310d91214052069.html>.

¹¹ BBC News, “China-Taiwan tensions: Xi Jinping says ‘reunification’ must be fulfilled,” October 9, 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-58854081>.

¹² Jinping Xi, “Working Together to Realize Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation and Advance China’s Peaceful Reunification,” Speech transcript, April 12, 2019, http://www.gwytb.gov.cn/wyly/201904/t20190412_12155687.htm.

¹³ Qiang Xin, “Having much in common? Changes and continuity in Beijing’s Taiwan policy,” *The Pacific Review* 34, no. 6 (2021): pp. 926-945, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2020.1773908>, 933.

¹⁴ Taylor, “Enhancing Taiwan’s,” 61.

published as a response to the United States House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan.¹⁵ Thus, with the deadline of 2049 coming, the geopolitical tension between the Taiwan strait will intensify.

Nonetheless, survey results have indicated that the majority of Taiwanese resist immediate reunification and prefer maintaining the current status quo (see Figure 1).¹⁶ Also, the victories of a relatively pro-independence party, the Democratic Progressive Party led by Tsai Ying-wen, in the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections have cast a shadow over the prospect of reunification.¹⁷ It has manifested Taiwan people's increasingly anti-China attitude. Tsai even claimed 'We are an independent country already and we call ourselves the Republic of China (Taiwan).'¹⁸ China, therefore, faced another setback in seeking the Taiwan government's acceptance of reunification peacefully.

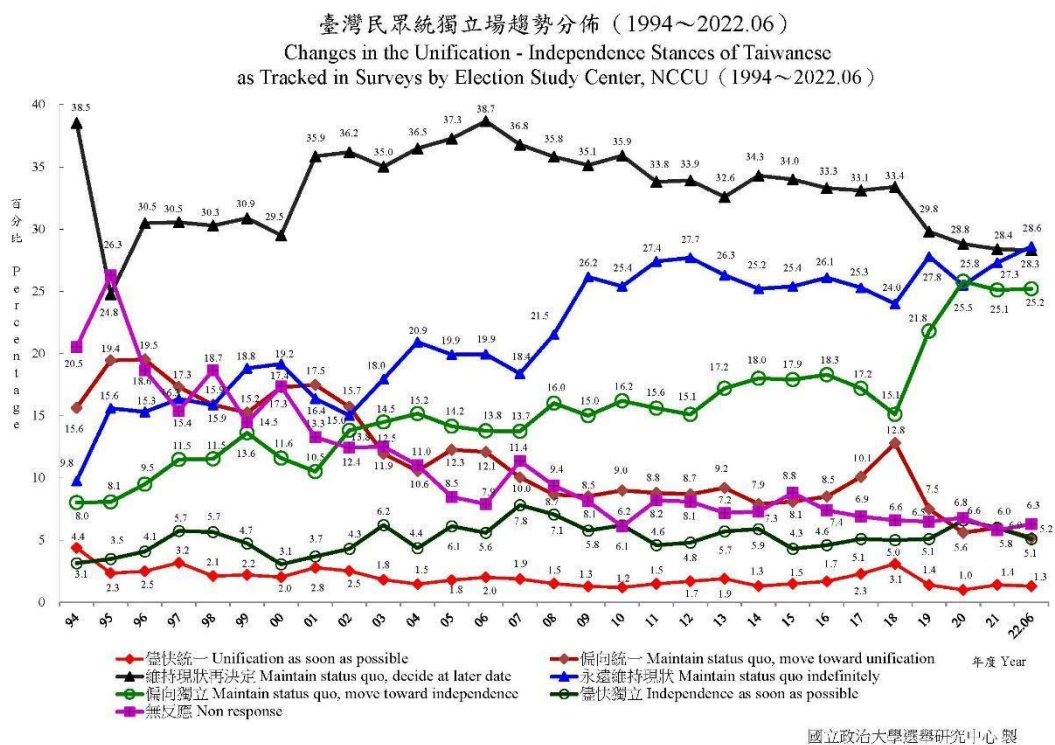


Figure 1: Taiwan people's views on unification and independence by Election Study Center, National Chengchi University

¹⁵ The Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council and The State Council Information Office, *The Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era* (Beijing: The Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council and the State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2022).

¹⁶ Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, "Taiwan Independence vs. Unification with the Mainland(1994/12~2022/06)," July 12, 2022, <https://esc.nccu.edu.tw/PageDoc/Detail?fid=7801&id=6963>.

¹⁷ Xin, "Having much," 927.

¹⁸ John Sudworth, "China needs to show Taiwan respect, says president," *BBC News*, January 14, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-51104246>.

Cyberwarfare Is Threatening Taiwan

The increasing eagerness of completing its unfinished business yet a growing anti-unification momentum could, however, imply that China will exert greater pressure on Taiwan to coerce Taiwan into reunification. One of the possible pressures could be manifested in the form of cyberwarfare.

China has continually advocated for the peaceful use of cyberspace,¹⁹ which refers to an interconnected network of different digital infrastructures, control systems, communication networks, and computer systems, where different information is being produced, processed, stored, exchanged, retrieved, and exploited.²⁰ Ironically, China is actively developing and even potentially adopting cyberwarfare in recent decades.²¹ For example, it has introduced guidelines on cyberwarfare activities or conducted exercises to practise cyberwarfare like espionage, information theft, dissemination of disinformation, hacking, and planting malware.²² Also, there are more than 450 million non-governmental cyber-warriors in China, who could be motivated by nationalist sentiments to attack foreign entities.²³ While the large number of cyber-warriors could imply China's potential to become a strong cyberpower, the prevalence of non-governmental online agents provides the Chinese government with the room to pretend to be ignorant of the cyberattacks and thus deny the responsibility for the damages caused by cyberattacks.

As early as 1999, Taiwan already faced cyberthreat from China.²⁴ Thousands of cyberattacks and unauthorized digital graffiti were launched against Taiwanese government websites when Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui defines the relations between Taiwan and China as 'special

¹⁹ Zhang Li, "A Chinese perspective on cyber war," *International Review of the Red Cross* 94, no. 886 (2012): pp. 801-807, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S181638311200082>, 803.

²⁰ Yuchong Li and Qinghui Liu, "A comprehensive review study of cyber-attacks and cyber security; Emerging trends and recent developments," *Energy Reports* 7, no. 1 (2021): pp. 8176-8186, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.egy.2021.08.126>, 8178

²¹ Jon R. Lindsay, "The Impact of China on Cybersecurity: Fiction and Friction," *International Security* 39, no. 3 (2015): pp. 7-47, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00189, 7.

²² Desmond Ball, "China's Cyber Warfare Capabilities," *Security Challenges* 7, no. 2 (2011): pp. 81-103, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26461991>, 84.

²³ See note above, 94.

²⁴ Hon-min Yau, "Critical strategy for Taiwan's cybersecurity: a perspective from critical security studies," *Journal of Cyber Policy* 4, no. 1 (2019): pp. 35-55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23738871.2019.1604782>, 35.

state-to-state relations', which is a pro-independence description.²⁵²⁶ Since then, Taiwan has been regularly threatened by cyberattacks from China.

Unfortunately, with time, China's cyberattacks did not slow down, but became more intense. Eventually, Taiwan faced cyberattacks from China basically every day.²⁷²⁸ While some attacks (e.g. digital attacks against Taiwanese government websites due to Pelosi's visit in 2022) might be launched by private individuals out of patriotism or political motives,²⁹ some (e.g. hacking the website of Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense in July 2004) appear to be commanded by government agencies (despite China's frequent denial).³⁰ These could be viewed as a gesture to show China's cyber capacity, pressure Taiwan not to advocate separatism, and threaten Taiwanese citizens to accept reunification.

Taiwan's Increasing Vulnerability to Cyberwarfare

Despite the already high intensity of cyberattack, cyber warfare will continue to threaten Taiwan at a more drastic pace because of Taiwan's ever-increasing digital connectivity and the pursuit of national rejuvenation by China.

Unlike physical attacks, cyberattacks are not bound by geographical constraints.³¹ Basically, all digital and electronic systems in this digital network are vulnerable to cyberattacks (e.g. hacking, virus, bot networks, and logic bomb) launched from any countries.³²³³ Also, the contamination and proliferation of cyberweapons like malware could be so fast that it spreads across different systems

²⁵ See note above, 38.

²⁶ Gary D. Rawnsley, "Old Wine in New Bottles: China-Taiwan Computer-Based 'Information Warfare' and Propaganda," *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 81, no. 5 (2005): pp. 1061-1078, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3569075>, 1063.

²⁷ Shannon Tiezzi, "Taiwan Complains of 'Severe' Cyber Attacks From China," *The Diplomat*, August 15, 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/08/taiwan-complains-of-severe-cyber-attacks-from-china/>.

²⁸ Michal Thim, "Taiwan's Invisible Frontier: Cyberspace," *Taiwan in Perspective*, September 5, 2015, <https://taiwan-in-perspective.com/2015/09/05/taiwans-invisible-frontier-cyberspace/>.

²⁹ Yimou Lee and Christopher Bing, "Attacks on Taiwan websites likely work of Chinese 'hacktivists' – researchers," *Reuters*, August 2, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/attacks-taiwan-websites-likely-work-chinese-hacktivists-researchers-2022-08-02/>.

³⁰ Ball, "China's Cyber Warfare Capabilities," 87.

³¹ Julian Jang-Jaccard and Surya Nepal, "A survey of emerging threats in cybersecurity," *Journal of Computer and System Sciences* 80, no. 5 (2014): pp. 973-993, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcss.2014.02.005>, 973.

³² Magnus Hjortdal, "China's Use of Cyber Warfare: Espionage Meets Strategic Deterrence," *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no. 2 (2011): pp. 1-24, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26463924>, 5.

³³ Li and Liu, "A comprehensive," 8178.

and sectors in cyberspace.³⁴ The potential damage of cyberweapons is therefore hard to control, especially when more digital systems are developed and interconnected.³⁵ Hence, greater digital connectivity implies a more serious threat of cyberwarfare.

Taiwan's government and its infrastructure (e.g. gas, water, and electricity) are highly digitalized, which provides a favourable environment for China to launch cyberwarfare to pursue its aim of rejuvenation. As the head of Taiwan's Department of Cyber Security Chien Hung-wei admits, the high digital connectivity of the network of the government and infrastructures could make Taiwan a vulnerable target of cyber attacks.³⁶ Taiwan's increasing digitalization could, therefore, encourage China to expand its cyberattacks against Taiwan to coerce Taiwan into reunification; thus enlarging Beijing's cyberthreat.

Intense cyberattacks could cause a loss of classified information, disrupt computer networks or destroy a country's infrastructure systems (e.g. banking system, electricity network, traffic control).³⁷³⁸³⁹ For example, destroying Taiwan's healthcare management system could trigger a public health crisis and delay the treatment of patients. Apart from creating terror among citizens, this could cause national crises and disrupt the government from organizing responses to China's threats, thus pressuring Taiwan to accept reunification.

Considering China's increasing eagerness to seize control of the island under the rejuvenation campaign, it is paramount for Taiwan to enhance its cyberdefence capacity. Not only should Taiwan strengthen its data and network protection mechanisms, but it should also keep track of China's progress in developing cyber operations. Otherwise, China could exploit Taiwan's technological deficiencies to coerce it into reunification in the face of high anti-China sentiment on the island.

³⁴ Rawnsley, "Old Wine," 1071.

³⁵ Yau, "Critical Strategy," 44.

³⁶ Eric Cheung, Will Ripley, and Gladys Tsai, "How Taiwan is trying to defend against a cyber 'World War III'," *CNN*, July 24, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/07/23/tech/taiwan-china-cybersecurity-intl-hnk/index.html>.

³⁷ Jang-Jaccard and Nepal, "A survey," 975.

³⁸ Lindsay, "The Impact", 29.

³⁹ Li and Liu, "A comprehensive," 8177.

Complementing Physical Wars

It is also noteworthy that it is increasingly important for China to use cyberwarfare to complement physical attacks to facilitate its national rejuvenation. Undeniably, China has a larger territory, population, and military expenditure than Taiwan,⁴⁰ which provides China with an edge when it attacks Taiwan to achieve reunification forcefully. However, this is insufficient in ensuring a certain victory in case a physical war breaks out. This is particularly because the United States is committed to guaranteeing Taiwan's peace, stability and defence under the Taiwan Relations Act.⁴¹ Also, the United States has provided Taiwan with military weapons to strengthen its self-defence capacity.⁴² The Taiwan-US cooperation could reduce China's likelihood of securing a victory without incurring great costs.

Admittedly, the United States has occasionally shown hesitance in fully committing to support Taiwan, resulting in a so-called 'strategic ambiguity'.⁴³ However, even if the United States is not intervening in the conflict between the Taiwan Strait, Taiwan could become more resilient against China's military attacks by equipping itself with appropriate defence weapons.⁴⁴ Taiwan may not be possible to win, but at least it could lengthen the war, causing the cost of physical war to rise, lowering the morale of China, and disrupting the progress of China's national rejuvenation.

Nonetheless, cyberwarfare could emerge as a powerful tool for China to put Taiwan vulnerable to its physical attacks. Critical infrastructure could be largely linked to Taiwan's defence system, especially under the aforementioned highly digitalized network. Therefore, the destruction of infrastructure could weaken Taiwan's defence capacity and paralyze the government's decision-making.^{45,46} For example, sabotaging the internet traffic management system could delay the formulation or coordination of strategies, mobilization of soldiers and deployment of weapons

⁴⁰ Yau, "Critical Strategy," 43.

⁴¹ Taiwan Relations Act, Pub. L. No. 96-8. § 2 (1979).

⁴² See note 40..

⁴³ Jared M. McKinney and Peter Harris, "Broken Nest: Deterring China from Invading Taiwan," *Parameters* 51, no. 4 (2021): pp. 23-36, <https://doi.org/10.55540/0031-1723.3089>, 23.

⁴⁴ See note above, 29.

⁴⁵ Rawnsley, "Old Wine," 1065.

⁴⁶ Lindsay, "The Impact", 25.

like missiles. Simultaneous use of physical attacks and cyberattacks or early use of cyberwarfare could therefore reduce the cost of a physical war and raise the possibility of a swift victory.⁴⁷ It is therefore possible that China would devote more resources to developing cyberwarfare for the sake of its rejuvenation. Taiwan should stay cautious about China's weaponization of cyberspace to prevent falling victim to cyberattacks.

Conclusion

China's ambition to gain control of Taiwan is unquestionable. Under the pursuit of national rejuvenation, China is likely to reunify Taiwan at a greater cost, so cyberspace will eventually emerge as a battlefield between Taiwan and China. Meanwhile, with a high digital connectivity, Taiwan is vulnerable to cyberattacks launched by China to pressure it to reunify. This provides a favorable circumstance for China to attack Taiwan's cyberspace. The threat of cyberwarfare continually grows, making Taiwan's cyberspace also one of the most dangerous places on Earth. Taiwan must not be overly optimistic about its own defence capacity, or become complacent about its robust technological development. A great awareness of and resilience against China's cyber operations will be vital to the survival and independence of the island. Thus, Taiwan should increase its spending on developing relevant infrastructure like firewalls and cultivating cybersecurity talents.

⁴⁷ Li and Liu, "A comprehensive", 8177.

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