

Taiwan is becoming an intelligence-sharing power

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The recent selection of Tsai Ming-yen as Taiwan's new National Security Bureau (NSB) chief has surprised analysts in Taiwan. It represents the second consecutive surprising appointment for the island's intelligence czar, both of which came under the tenure of Taiwan's incumbent president, the independence-leaning Tsai Ing-wen. Like the previous appointment, Tsai Ming-yen's ascension could reflect a shift in Taiwan's approach to intelligence collection and sharing, which has responded to escalating and rapidly evolving threats to the island's security.

Tsai Ming-yen's accession came after the sudden resignation of former chief Chen Ming-tong. Chen's appointment, as with Tsai's, riled critics of the administration, given both were selected from outside Taiwan's military and intelligence establishments. Perhaps shedding light on the reason for this, an official announcement stated that it was hoped Tsai would continue Chen's efforts to 'reform' the bureau.

Why Tsai?

But why was Tsai Ming-yen deemed the best candidate?

Firstly, while technically an outsider, Tsai was better qualified than Chen on the security/intelligence front. Tsai received his doctorate from King's College's Department of War. He was also a member of Taiwan's National Defence Report advisory committee and an advisor for several Quadrennial Defence Reviews (2004-2016). Most importantly, he served for three years as Deputy Secretary of the National Security Council (NSC) – the inner circle responsible for directly advising the president on national security issues and whose members include the NSB's director-general.

Secondly, Tsai, like his predecessor, is a well credentialed China expert. As with Chen, Tsai has been affiliated with the Mainland Affairs Council (MAC), having served as an advisory committee member. He served a similar role in the ruling Democratic Progressive Party's China Affairs Committee and has advised the Straits Exchange Foundation – a technical and operational arm of the MAC.

But perhaps Tsai's most valued credential has been something different – his success in foreign affairs and diplomacy. Tsai was undersecretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs before his appointment in the NSB. Before then, he served as Taiwan's representative to the European Union (2020-2022). His role in the latter was deemed highly successful, coinciding with the European Parliament passing legislation favourable to Taiwan, Foreign Minister Joseph Wu visiting European parliament members in Brussels, and Lithuania allowing Taiwan to set up a pseudo-consulate. Since then, the new president-elect of the Czech Republic, Petr Pavel, defied Beijing by talking on the phone with Taiwan's president.

Diplomacy, intelligence sharing, and ‘integrated deterrence’

In welcoming his appointment, the administration’s spokesperson, Huang Chongyan, [said](#) Tsai would be tasked with handling ‘diplomacy,’ in addition to ‘regional security... international strategy and security policy.’ This broad purview – and in particular, the emphasis on diplomacy – may appear peculiar. But it reflects the shifting approach to security that is propelling the administration’s attempts to reform the bureau.

While serving as Taiwan’s European representative in early 2022, Tsai Ming-yen [told](#) the BBC that Taiwan was looking to implement the recently developed American concept of ‘integrated deterrence.’ This involved, according to Tsai, coordinating with other democratic nations and exploiting political as well as traditional security tools. As [highlighted](#) by Secretary of State Antony Blinken, integrated deterrence involves reinforcing partners’ strengths in areas including economics, technology, and diplomacy. Actualizing this in the intelligence sphere would require shifting beyond narrower, conventional purviews of national security, bringing Tsai’s broader experiences and insights into geopolitics into play. As a recent [article](#) by the Center for a New American Security noted, this will require a diplomatic effort to strengthen international coordination and facilitate ‘sharing sensitive information with allies and partners.’

Tsai reportedly has experience sitting in on intelligence exchanges with American and Japanese representatives. But Taipei may have seen particular value in Tsai’s connections and reputation in Europe. While Europe has been a target of intensifying Taiwanese diplomatic efforts over several years, the continent’s response to the Russia-Ukraine War is contributing to the view that Europe – incorporating both Western and CEE (Central and Eastern Europe)–is becoming a ‘[new pillar](#)’ for Taiwan’s security.

One reason this is so is because of the intelligence and propaganda value of the Russia-Ukraine War, which Taiwan analysts see as a valuable tool for helping deter or fight back a potential Chinese invasion.

Shortly after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine began, Taiwan’s president directed the NSC – which includes the NSB’s director general – to form a ‘workgroup for responding to the situation in Ukraine.’ On March 10, 2022, it presented a report titled ‘An analysis of the Russia-Ukraine War and the [security] situation in and around the Taiwan Strait.’ In addition to further official updates, Taiwan has since seen an extraordinary number of symposiums, conferences, and publications focusing on the war and the parallels with its own security challenges.

Helping feed these events have been the fruits of diplomatic efforts to organize non-conventional pathways for information exchange. A surprising coup was the National Defence University’s ‘[Nato Generals Class](#)’ in 2022, which hosted military officials from twelve countries, including Italy, Lithuania, Czech Republic, and was designed to encourage an exchange of views on the Russia-Ukraine War. This was also a key theme in the [2022 Taipei Security Dialogue](#), hosted by the INDRS in November, whose attendees included analysts from Germany, Ukraine, Lithuania, and Turkey. It was also recently [revealed](#) that a Taiwanese pilot attended a NATO training program aimed at providing ‘military and civilian officials with senior-leader education on NATO issues’ and ‘networking opportunities.’

But much more was done with Ukraine itself. Taiwan’s administration embarked on a flurry of diplomatic activity/assistance after the invasion, including supplying Ukraine with [Revolver 860 combat drones](#) and other equipment, signing MOUs on energy assistance, providing humanitarian supplies, sending the [digital minister](#) to Ukraine to assess assistance needs, and having the foreign minister conduct videoconferences with Ukrainian mayors and even the [primate of the Orthodox Church](#). New pathways for intelligence sharing were potentially opened when Ukraine’s parliament subsequently launched a bipartisan Taiwan Friendship Group, followed by a [meeting](#) between a Ukrainian parliamentarian and Taiwan’s president. Last year the INDRS hosted Yurii Poita, a visiting scholar from Ukraine’s Centre for Army Conversions and Disarmament Studies, who [shared](#) information on the organizational structure and efficacy of Ukraine’s Territorial Defence Forces. These developments are likely to be the tip of the iceberg.

But the Russia-Ukraine War has had a wider impact on Taiwan’s growing efforts to deepen its ties with Europe and emphasize Europe’s stake in Taiwan’s security challenges. The prominent Sinologist Linda Jakobson, in a recent event in Sydney, said anger in Europe is growing at Beijing’s refusal to condemn Russia’s actions. Resonating with Washington, Taiwanese officials have exploited this to publicly [promote](#) the notion of a

'global democratic alliance' and a Russia-China axis, and have prosecuted the argument that an invasion of Taiwan will [impact](#) Europe. In line with this, in mid-2022, NATO, for the first time, [identified](#) China as a 'security challenge,' and a recent NATO [report](#) on the Indo-Pacific mentioned Taiwan almost fifty times while noting that China's 'stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge our interests, security and values.' More recently, former NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen [suggested](#) that Taiwanese troops should join NATO exercises in Europe, adding that NATO should react 'determinately if China were to attack Taiwan' through military intervention and 'profound and comprehensive economic sanctions.'

On this front, Taiwan's greatest gains have arguably been in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) – including the former Soviet Union states most directly threatened by Russian aggression. This region has traditionally been seen as a potential impediment to a coordinated NATO or EU response to Chinese aggression against Taiwan, such as participation in an American-led economic sanctions regime. A 2021 [Carnegie report](#) highlighted China's attempts to exploit state fragility in that region to extend its influence at the expense of European unity and cohesion. Yet a [2022 report](#) from the Centre for European Policy Analysis argued that some of those same states (in particular Lithuania and the Czech Republic) were already 'ahead of the curve' in identifying and wanting to mitigate the threats China poses. Ties with Taiwan were at the front and center of the report's explanation for this shift. China's waning influence in the region, at times intertwined with disputes on CEE states' engagements with Taiwan, has seen the Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European (C-CEE) agreement shrink from seventeen to fourteen members. At the same time, some narratives from CEE intelligence analysts are converging with those of Taipei and Washington. The Foreign Intelligence Service of one former C-CEE nation, Estonia, released a report in 2021 [warning](#) that Beijing was cooperating with Russia, seeking to divide Europe from the United States, and threatening to facilitate a 'dismantling of the world order that has allowed Estonia to regain its independence.' Reflecting a connection between Taiwan's predicament and its own vulnerabilities, as well as the tenets of the integrated deterrence doctrine, a recently released Estonian report directly addressed Taiwan's existential challenges and [acknowledged](#) that 'the unity and resilience of the West and like-minded countries against China,' along with sanctions, access to Western markets and Western technology, might be needed to deter an invasion of Taiwan.

Taiwan's understated value as an 'intelligence sharing-lite' partner

The growing purview of both the domains of intelligence and partners that Taiwan is reaching out to under the reforms of Chen and Tsai Ming-yen's tenures speaks to the effectiveness of the new diplomacy-led approach. It also draws lessons from Taiwan's frustrated attempts to strengthen intelligence sharing with its core partners, Japan and the United States, which continue to be [mired by](#) institutional resistance, legal/regulatory incompatibilities, and an unfortunate trust deficit due to historic issues of leaks, political conflicts, and concerted Chinese espionage campaigns targeting the NSB. The problems associated with committing to comprehensive agreements have been skirted around by an evolving 'integrated-lite' approach that exploits diplomatic outreach and informal engagements, leverages executive discretion, acknowledges and explores the security value of intelligence in non-traditional domains, prefers ad hoc arrangements for micro-sharing intelligence on areas of mutual concern, and that retains state autonomy/discretion by keeping participation voluntary and on a case by case basis.

For like-minded nations that share Taiwan's concerns about threats to regional or national security stemming from China, the potential benefits of Taiwan's ongoing intelligence reforms cannot be understated.

The potential benefits of intelligence sharing with Taiwan extend beyond assessing or deterring threats to peace across the Taiwan Strait. One particular area is cybersecurity. Taiwan has long been a testing and training ground for China's offensive cyber efforts – many coming from the Fujian-based Strategic Support Force Unit 61716. As a result, Taiwan is not only a repository of enormous amounts of intelligence on Chinese cyber activities but has become a centre of innovation on how these can be countered. In 2015, the NSB established a cutting-edge cyber security office. Since then, efforts have been made to strengthen coordination between this office and the Ministry of Digital Affairs' Administration for Cyber Security, the National Security Council's National Information Security Office, and the newly formed National Communications and Cyber Centre – Taiwan's 'iron triangle of cyber security.' These developments, directions to form new agencies by the Executive Yuan's National Information and Communication Security Taskforce, the establishment of the Division of Cyber Security and Decision-Making Simulation in the INDSF, and the

development of the Information, Communications and Electronic Force Command as a fourth branch of the military, reflect President Tsai's [commitment](#) that 'cybersecurity is national security.' Not only do Taiwan's reforms provide lessons for other nations, but they could also position Taiwan to become a global leader on Chinese cyber threats and information warfare. On this front, it is worth noting that a 2022 Legislative Yuan [report](#) on Taiwan's state cybersecurity development recommended strengthening international outreach and cooperation, as well as advancing 'technological diplomacy' and international cooperation on talent development.

There are also wider benefits to be had. Taiwan has been the target of an extensive range of non-traditional threats to its security and sovereignty that manifest the full spectrum of pre-kinetic measures outlined in Beijing's 'Three Warfares' doctrine. Knowledge of these tactics brings into play the China expertise of Tsai Ming-yen, the China-focus of Taiwan's intelligence community, and the island's [innate advantages](#) in terms of its geographic, linguistic, and cultural proximity with the People's Republic of China. While criticized for their scope and severity, Taiwan's recently devised [five national security laws](#), alongside specific legislation such as the [Anti-Infiltration Act](#), reflect Taiwan's comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted measures directed at the island by China, ranging from political interference, acquiring shares in media and other strategic assets, co-opting or infiltrating civic, industry and criminal groups, leveraging systemic/market power, up to the use of civilian intelligence gatherers and commercial surveillance drones. Given ongoing concerns in many countries about some of these issues, there is considerable value in tapping into Taiwan's intelligence resources to understand, identify and forecast such non-conventional threats to national security.

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