



February 8, 2024

## Taiwan's 2024 Presidential Election and Information Manipulation Research Project for the Risks in Information Sphere Implementation Report

On February 8, 2024, the Research Project for the Risks in Information Sphere at Nakasone Peace Institute held a discussion based on a report by Mr. Kawaguchi Takahisa, Principal Researcher at Tokio Marine dR Co., Ltd., about the manipulation of information that likely influenced public opinion regarding the Taiwan presidential election and Taiwan's countermeasures. The summary is as follows.

As a result of the January 13, 2024 presidential and legislative elections in Taiwan, Lai Ching-te, a member of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), was elected the eighth president of Taiwan. A close analysis of the election results shows that none of the candidates could be said to be a definitive winner or loser. Although the DPP was elected to an unprecedented third consecutive term in power, the number of seats it holds in the Legislative Yuan declined from 61 in its 10th term (from 2020) to 51 in its 11th term (from 2024). The Kuomintang (KMT) became the leading party in the Legislative Yuan, with a significant jump from 38 in the 10th term to 52 seats in the 11th term, and Han Kuo-yu was elected president of the Legislative Yuan. In addition to increasing its number of seats from five to eight while neither the DPP nor the KMT constituted a majority of seats, the Taiwan People's Party (TPP) will play a decisive role in the Legislative Yuan in the future.

In the 2024 presidential and legislative elections, there were notable cases of online information manipulation believed to be an attempt to influence public opinion. The issue in the 2024 election, on which the manipulation was based, was "whether to give the eight-year-long Tsai Ing-wen administration a third term." Because of a series of scandals and blunders, mainly sexual harassment and deception, that occurred in 2023 within the administration, the election issue became a battle over Taiwan's domestic politics, economy, and society, rather than one about cross-strait relations, Taiwan-U.S. relations, or Taiwan's positioning. This point is a crucial difference from the 2020 presidential election. However, the lineup of the opposition candidates against the DPP government was not finalized until November 24, 2023.

Information that undermined the credibility of the current ruling party DPP occurred in a multi-layered manner. For example, it is confirmed that a cross-platform network known as "Spamouflage" was used to spread disinformation that discredited President Tsai Ing-wen and candidate Lai Ching-te. "Hack-and-leak" operations were also observed, in which data obtained through unauthorized means was intentionally leaked. These operations can be broadly classified into two types: public trust-breach and high-value target exposure, the latter of which is often practiced in Russia. It is based on the "Kompromat-type" operation, through which images and photographs are leaked to discredit the targeted individual.

China appears to be involved in these operations, and it is possible to identify the channels and actors through which attempts toward “peaceful unification” between China and Taiwan are being executed and propagated. For example, the confirmed channels for China’s digital influence operations on Taiwan include the top-down “external propaganda” method using traditional media and social media accounts simultaneously; the bottom-up “nationalist” method through nationalist postings that are not directly controlled by the party or state; the “content farm” method, which uses a business model that maximizes the number of visitors and views through low-quality, radical content and search engine optimization techniques; and the “Taiwan local collaborator” method, through which local collaborators (pro-China figures and organizations) in Taiwan have been identified.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the Communist Party of China Central United Front Work Department (UFWD) and the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council (TAO), other actors include the Central Propaganda Department of the CPC, government media such as *Xinhua* and *Global Times*, and the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). It is not clear whether there is a coherent grand strategy for information operations or whether there is coordination among the actors involved.

In response to this manipulation of information by China, Taiwan has taken countermeasures to prepare for “wartime-type” information warfare. There are a number of civilian and private sector organizations fighting against uncertain information, including the “Kuma Academy,” a course that teaches awareness of disinformation and self-defense methods. Fact-checking is also conducted swiftly. During the release of treated water from Japan’s Fukushima nuclear power plant in summer 2023, news circulated in Taiwan asserting that “after the accident at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant in March 2011, a then Cabinet Official drank treated water with the intention of proving its safety at a press conference, but later he died of illness.” After inquiries and investigation in Japan, the information turned out to be disinformation. Under the Tsai Ing-wen administration, the government added legal amendments to the Disaster Prevention and Protection Act (Article 41) and the Presidential and Vice Presidential Election and Recall Act (Article 90) to deal with fake news and also enacted a new law called the Anti-Infiltration Act in December 2019, just before the 2020 presidential election.

It can be said that China clearly intervened in the recent Taiwan presidential and legislative elections from an anti-Lai Ching-te and anti-DPP position. This is because evidence of online Spamouflage, hack-and-leak, and other tactics that China has emphasized in recent years has been confirmed.

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<sup>1</sup> However, this is a confirmed penetration channel from the 2020 presidential election. Doublethink Lab, “Deafening Whispers: China’s Information Operation and Taiwan’s 2020 Election,” Medium, October 24, 2020, pp. 22-39; 沈伯洋 *Puma She*, “中國認知領域作戰模型初探：以 2020 臺灣選舉為例 *Zhongguo renzhi lingyu zuozhan moxing chu tan : Yi 2020 Taiwan xuanju wei li*” [The Chinese cognitive warfare model: the 2020 Taiwan Election], 遠景基金會季刊 *Yuanjing jijinhui jikan, Prospect Quarterly* : Vol. 22, No. 1 (January 2021), pp. 28-47.

It is unclear whether China has a grand strategy of election interference through the digital sphere or whether it involves coordination among various actors. However, election interference is characterized by China's targeting of political issues, social problems, and insecurity that already exist in the region. Since it is difficult to distinguish between foreign disinformation, spontaneous misinformation, and disinformation originating within the region, it is possible that China is deliberately resorting to such tactics.

Even if China fails to achieve the ideal outcome of the election through information manipulation, it can gain room to prevent its adversary's candidate or party from realizing its policies. It can also damage confidence in the opposing individuals or political systems, so medium- and long-term risks remain for the targeted party.

As a response to this problem, Taiwan has indeed seen various efforts by the civil and private sectors to fight information manipulation. In the public sector, countermeasures and laws against information manipulation were strengthened under the Tsai Ing-wen administration, but the reality is that there is still no definitive approach or tool to address this problem.