



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on January 9, 2023

Taiwan Military Officers Suspected of Spying for China; China Increasing Disinformation Campaigns

SINGAPORE — Taiwan detained three active-duty officers and a retired Air Force officer suspected of spying for China, the Central News Agency (CNA) in Taipei reported. This case illustrates the degree of Beijing's espionage activities on the democratically governed island.

The former officer retired from the military in 2013 and began doing business in China, where he was hired to set up an espionage ring, the semi-official media outlet stated, without mentioning how it obtained the information.



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Prosecutors suspect he recruited six officers and was compensated with an amount between NT\$200,000 and NT\$700,000 via a shell company. He and three officers serving in the Air Force and Navy were nabbed in the southern city of Kaohsiung; the three other active officers were freed on bail.

Taiwan's defense ministry was alerted to the case by individuals in the military, spokesman Sun Li-fang revealed at a briefing on Thursday, Jan. 5. The ministry will work with prosecutors as they investigate, he added.

For years, Taiwan has been grappling with the problem of China infiltrating its military to spy on the island. The island says that such spying activities are part of a long-standing espionage campaign spearheaded by Beijing to weaken Taiwan's armed forces and foment division in the ranks, as China regards Taiwan as a renegade province and a "sacred" part of its territory, and Beijing has indicated that it would use military force to reunite the island with the mainland, if necessary.

The United States — Taiwan's largest military supporter — has long expressed concerns about the island's ability to prevent technology and other state secrets from falling into Beijing's hands. In 2022, Taiwan reported some 1,700 Chinese warplane incursions into a sensitive air-defense identification zone (ADIZ) and over 660 ships in nearby waters. In December 2022, U.S. lawmakers agreed to a \$1.7 trillion spending bill that enables up to \$10 billion in arms sales to Taiwan.

In November, Taiwan's Defense Ministry admitted that China's spying posed a "serious threat." That was amid an investigation by Taiwanese authorities of an infantry officer for reportedly receiving NT\$40,000 a month from China to garner intelligence and surrender if a war ever erupted, CNA had earlier reported.

Even the highest echelons of Taiwan's military have not been spared from the spying problem.

For example, former Vice Defense Minister Chang Che-ping — once Taiwan's third most important military official — was investigated in 2021 due to allegations about contact with a Chinese spy ring. He was declared innocent, and became a witness in a case that resulted in the indictment on spy charges in June of a retired general and lieutenant colonel.



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Also in November 2022, Taiwanese prosecutors said that they had charged a senior military officer with corruption and undermining state security after they said he took bribes from a Chinese agent to be a spy. The accused even signed a letter pledging to surrender to China.

The prosecutors' office in southern Taiwan's Kaohsiung city told Reuters they were seeking a 12-year sentence for an army colonel who had over the last four years received NT\$560,000 in bribes from a Chinese agent who was also a retired Taiwanese officer.

The retired officer convinced the colonel, who had been considering his departure from the armed forces, to remain in service so he could eventually ascend the ranks and act as a spy, the office added, and the colonel signed a letter to pledge that he would surrender should Taiwan be involved in a war with China, the office said.

Reuters was unable to obtain contact details for the colonel, who the prosecutors named as Hsiang Te-en, or a legal representative for comment. Taiwan's Defense Ministry claimed that the officer was suspected of breaching national security and anti-corruption laws and that the ministry would continue to assist in the investigation.

"This case highlights that the Chinese communists have become a serious threat against us when it comes to infiltrating, recruitment, collection of intelligence and theft of secrets," the ministry said. It added that it will continue to boost counter-intelligence education for officers and soldiers and enhance security investigations.

On another note, during Taiwan's municipal elections toward the end of 2022, the island faced fake news hailing from the communist mainland. This was not the first time Taiwanese faced disinformation campaigns.

"The Taiwanese are better informed about fake news now," said Summer Chen, chief editor of the Taiwan FactCheck Centre (TFC), a nongovernmental group that provides fact-checking services. "We have made progress in recent years because Taiwanese civil society has been working really hard to fight misinformation and disinformation," she elaborated.

Taiwanese officials and scholars have long blamed China for spreading untruths online to affect local politics. At the previous municipal elections in 2018, it was widely alleged that pro-Beijing players sought to thwart the local elections by spreading disinformation online.

"It is not an exaggeration to say that Chinese disinformation campaigns played an important role in shaping the results of the 2018 local elections in Taiwan to the favor of Beijing-friendly political parties and candidates," Professor Chen Ching-chang, an international politics expert at Ryukoku University in Japan, told *The Straits Times*.

For instance, these moves led to the then-unknown Kaohsiung mayoral candidate Han Kuo-yu of the China-friendly Kuomintang clinching an upset victory at the time, he said. "In just a few months, pro-Beijing TV news coverage and social media campaigns, which often referred to disinformation produced by Chinese content farms, were able to ... brand Mr Han as a down-to-earth and capable grassroots representative who dared to challenge the 'hegemonic' Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) administration," he added.

Days before the 2022 municipal elections, both the TFC and Cofacts — another Taiwanese civic group that provides fact-checking services — told the media that they witnessed an increase of online disinformation.



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According to Chen, many of the fake news campaigns hope to weaken pro-democracy Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen and her party.

For instance, a video circulating on social media misappropriated a U.S. Department of Defense press briefing clip and attached Chinese subtitles to make it seem like then-Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby said that Tsai would abandon the people and escape to the U.S. if China ever reclaimed the island.

Another widely circulated Facebook post said that infighting among DPP members had become so grave that Tsai engaged in a physical wrestling match with Taiwanese Vice President William Lai.

While it is challenging to ascertain if such posts definitely came from China, there have been some revealing hints.

“Sometimes, the text is written in simplified Chinese characters, or the posts were first shared on Chinese social media platforms such as Weibo or Kuaishou,” said a Cofacts spokesman. In Taiwan, Chinese is written using traditional characters, unlike the simplified version used on the communist mainland.

Beijing has hitherto dismissed allegations of meddling in Taiwan’s elections. In the lead-up to the island’s 2020 presidential and legislative elections, China’s Taiwan Affairs Office had said that such claims were “fake news.”

“Every time there is a Taiwan regional election, various fake news is ‘created’ to make rumors about and smear the mainland,” the office remarked in a statement to Reutersback then.

However, this kind of disinformation is not spread online only during the election period.

When Covid-19 lockdowns were in full swing, as well as in the days following then-U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s high-profile visit to Taipei in August 2022, which Beijing regarded as a grave infringement of its sovereignty, Taiwan was the victim of many disinformation campaigns, Chen said.

For instance, Facebook posts claiming to be published by news organizations said that President Tsai and other senior government officials had all contracted Covid-19 and kept it from the public, and a well-read online forum post alleged that Pelosi had been paid millions of dollars by the Tsai government to visit Taiwan.

In September 2022, Tsai pointed out how Beijing’s rising bellicosity toward the island in recent times has not been restricted to its military moves. “China also conducted cognitive warfare, using false information to create disturbance in the minds of people,” she said.

According to a March 2022 study by the V-Dem Institute, a research institute based in Sweden’s University of Gothenburg, Taiwan ranked as the No. 1 target for foreign governments to circulate disinformation in 2021. Latvia ranked second place, and Palestine was third.



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