



TAIWAN'S INTELLIGENCE RECRUITMENT FACES A DOMESTIC SECURITY DILEMMA

BY CHO-HAN HSIUNG

Cho-Han Hsiung (joe941230@gmail.com) is Non-Resident Fellow at Dialogue China. He graduated from the University of Sydney and Georgetown University. His research focuses on Asian security, geopolitics and technology policy.

On June 14 Taiwan's chief intelligence agency launched an [online portal](#) inviting citizens in China to provide intelligence on Beijing's political, military, and economic developments. This initiative marks a strategic shift in Taipei's cross-strait posture, moving from defensive counterespionage toward an active attempt to impose reciprocal costs on the Chinese Communist Party.

However, answering this call carries severe risks for Chinese citizens. Beijing's Taiwan Affairs Office immediately [threatened criminal prosecution](#) for anyone caught supplying information to Taipei. Despite asking potential informants to assume this peril, Taipei's initiative lacks a critical operational component: a formalized legal safety net to protect and integrate these individuals. This oversight exposes a structural contradiction in Taiwan's defense strategy. While Taipei seeks to recruit Chinese allies, its necessary defenses against genuine Chinese infiltration have cast a shadow of political suspicion over Chinese immigrants. Caught between defending its democratic institutions from internal subversion and projecting intelligence capabilities abroad, Taiwan leaves the assets it hopes to enlist in a dangerous legal void.

The legal void

The [absence of an asylum framework](#) fundamentally limits Taipei's new intelligence ambitions. Taiwan currently lacks the institutional mechanisms to securely integrate, vet, and protect Chinese informants. Without a dedicated refugee or political asylum law, individuals seeking political asylum must navigate opaque, ad-hoc administrative channels. [Civic and human rights groups](#) consistently note that this discretionary system fails to guarantee asylum seekers

basic rights to employment, residency, or long-term identity protection.

Furthermore, Taiwan's standard immigration pathways contain structural flaws that endanger those fleeing Beijing's jurisdiction. Under [current regulations](#), Chinese nationals seeking to finalize Taiwanese citizenship must provide formal proof that they have canceled their Chinese household registration (*hukou*).

This administrative mandate creates a severe vulnerability, as demonstrated by the case of Taiwan-based publisher [Li Yanhe](#), known as Fucha. Despite contributing to Taiwan's democratic discourse by publishing works critical of the CCP, Fucha was detained and tried in secret for "secession" by Chinese authorities after traveling to the mainland to fulfill this naturalization requirement. His [continued imprisonment](#) signals to potential informants that Taiwan's naturalization process can inadvertently expose them to Beijing's state security apparatus.

The security paradox and domestic scrutiny

Reforming this framework presents a complex policy dilemma for Taipei. Relaxing naturalization rules or institutionalizing asylum is viewed by defense officials as a significant national security risk, as Beijing actively exploits Taiwan's democratic openness to [cultivate proxies](#).

This vulnerability is a recurring issue in Taiwanese politics, illustrating how the CCP attempts to weaponize naturalized citizens to build influence and monitor the Chinese immigrant community in Taiwan. For instance, Chinese-born spouse Hsu Chun-ying was indicted for allegedly acting on the [instructions of Chinese officials](#) to interfere in elections, with prosecutors accusing her of mobilizing immigrant voters and monitoring their political activities on behalf of Beijing. This strategy of co-optation extends to the legislative level, as demonstrated by the controversy surrounding Li Chen-hsiu, Taiwan's first China-born naturalized lawmaker. Before her eventual expulsion from office over her [failure to formally renounce](#) her Chinese nationality, investigations alleged that her political ascent was closely monitored by mainland officials aiming to embed pro-Beijing influence directly within the Legislative Yuan. Because

Beijing actively works to subvert the island from within, Taipei applies intense, systemic scrutiny to the Chinese diaspora. Taiwan's policy architecture remains caught between the need to protect Chinese intelligence assets and the necessity of blocking hostile proxies.

The feedback loop of suspicion

This pervasive atmosphere of domestic suspicion creates a feedback loop that can possibly undermine Taipei's strategic ambitions. For potential Chinese informants, the deterrents to cooperating with Taiwan extend beyond state prosecution; they involve profound risks to familial networks.

Taiwanese government agencies acknowledge that Chinese immigrants often retain extensive family ties in China. Beijing systematically exploits these transnational links to enforce silence or extract forced cooperation. Consequently, the vast majority of pro-democracy Chinese citizens and politically neutral immigrants in Taiwan choose to remain politically inactive to protect their relatives.

This self-imposed silence creates a political vacuum often filled by a vocal, [well-resourced minority](#) backed by the CCP's United Front Work Department. When these individuals rise to prominence and coordinate with Chinese officials, it reinforces the domestic narrative that the diaspora constitutes a "fifth column". Amid escalating military intimidation from Beijing, Taiwanese society naturally questions the allegiance of mainland spouses, which inadvertently stigmatizes a community of over 260,000 people.

This systemic alienation erodes the trust required to recruit Chinese intelligence assets. It is difficult to convince individuals inside China to risk their lives for Taiwan when the island's own domestic environment broadcasts inherent suspicion toward individuals of Chinese origin.

Bridging the gap

Taiwan's shift toward active intelligence-gathering is a logical evolution in its asymmetric defense. However, to effectively recruit Chinese allies, Taipei must recognize that robust institutional frameworks are as critical as operational portals. Relying on administrative waivers transfers geopolitical risks onto vulnerable individuals. To successfully enlist and secure high-value defectors, Taiwan requires comprehensive policy reform that addresses its legal and societal blind spots.

While [a policy introduced last year](#) allows certain individuals—such as those facing immediate safety or political risks—to sign a formal declaration in Taiwan waiving their Chinese household registration without returning to China, this mechanism remains narrow and discretionary. To successfully enlist and secure high-value defectors, Taiwan fundamentally requires a formalized statutory framework for political asylum seekers. Enacting a comprehensive Refugee Law is essential to systematically vet applicants, separate genuine cross-strait allies from embedded hostile operatives, and offer transparent, institutionalized legal protections that guarantee long-term safety.

Alongside this, Taipei needs to recalibrate its domestic security narrative to align its internal societal environment with its external strategic goals. While rigorous counterespionage and vigilance against gray-zone subversion remain undeniable necessities, state-level strategic communication should pivot away from the blanket categorization of the Chinese diaspora as an inherent security threat. Effectively countering Beijing's infiltration requires drawing a sharp distinction between the malicious actions of the CCP state apparatus and the potential goodwill of ordinary Chinese citizens. By fostering a more nuanced domestic environment, Taiwan can project itself as a credible alternative to authoritarian rule, thereby converting a perceived internal vulnerability into a potent asymmetric asset.

Ultimately, Taiwan cannot effectively wage a modern intelligence campaign while its asylum frameworks rely on outdated bureaucratic workarounds. Cultivating Chinese allies begins with demonstrating that Taiwan's democratic system can securely integrate pro-democracy Chinese citizens as partners in its defense. By bridging this institutional gap and anchoring its cross-strait outreach in clear statutory protections, Taipei can transform a perilous digital invitation into a resilient, institutionally backed pillar of its asymmetric defense.

The Pilot commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged. Please write to rob@pacforum.org for more information on how to contribute.