



THE CALM THAT CONCEALS: STRATEGIC AMBIGUITY, CITIZEN WELLBEING, AND TAIWAN'S UNEQUAL DISTRIBUTION OF RESILIENCE

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In 2023, nearly [two-thirds of Taiwanese](#) reported being worried about armed conflict—a figure that had risen steadily since 2021—and willingness to fight for the island remained above two-thirds of the population even after the People's Liberation Army's live-fire drills following US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's 2022 visit. Nevertheless, life on the island looks almost entirely ordinary. Given what Taiwanese citizens know, why does daily life look so undisturbed?

Part of the answer is policy, and part of it is access to the things that make the threat bearable. Taiwan's government has maintained a policy of strategic ambiguity for decades, sitting permanently in what security scholars call an "in-between area:" neither peacetime nor contingency, designed to avoid forcing Washington, Beijing, or Taipei into commitments none of them could safely make. What is less understood is how unevenly the tools for living with that ambiguity are distributed.

One tool is material conditions. Taiwan's GDP per capita surpassed [South Korea and Japan](#) in 2025, driven by semiconductor growth and AI-related demand; unemployment has [stayed below 4%](#) for years; and universal [National Health Insurance](#) covers virtually the entire population. When material conditions are reliable, existential threats tend to remain cognitive rather than physical.

That material stability, however, is not evenly built across Taiwan's sectors and regions, in the sense that material stability isn't shared equally across sectors or regions. Sectorally, the [national average wage](#) is pulled upward by the semiconductor and finance industries, so median wages sit well below it—most workers are not in the industries producing the headline growth. Regionally, the gap isn't simply capital versus countryside: Hsinchu, the semiconductor hub, [out-earns Taipei](#) for technical roles, while rural regions lag behind both on pay and job availability. The calm is priced differently depending on which industry you work in and where you live.

Informational literacy functions as a buffer for the same reason material stability does. Malicious information operations are [less effective](#) in societies with high media literacy, social cohesion, and institutional trust, and media literacy interventions have been shown to [measurably improve](#) resilience to misinformation. When citizens can accurately evaluate what they are told, a geopolitical threat is more likely to remain something they have weighed and understood, rather than something that can be exploited to either terrify or falsely reassure them.

That buffer, however, is also unevenly distributed. A study of Taiwan's [2018 local elections](#) found susceptibility to disinformation skewed toward neutral voters, young men, women, and lower-income citizens. Some citizens have processed the uncertainty and kept living deliberately; others have simply not been reached by the tools that would help them do the same.

Taiwan has not been passive here. It has been rated the country [most affected by disinformation](#) for 11 consecutive years by V-Dem, and Doublethink Lab recorded [over 10,000 pieces](#) of suspicious PRC-aligned content ahead of the 2024 election alone. The response has been dense: mandatory national defense education, a fact-checking ecosystem ([TFC](#), [MyGoPen](#), [Cofacts](#)), a 2023 [media literacy white paper](#), and [platform partnerships since 2019](#). However, infrastructure built does not guarantee that it reaches everyone. There is a need for a solution to close that gap in the buffering effect.

Recommendation one: The material buffer

The people most in need of this buffer are defined by geography and age together: rural, aging residents of counties like Yunlin, Chiayi, Taitung, and Pingtung, where [outflow employment ratios](#) rank among Taiwan's highest (29.86% in Taitung and 28.75% in Chiayi compared to under 10% in Taipei, New Taipei, and Taoyuan). These same counties have aged fastest as a result: Chiayi, Nantou, Yunlin, and Pingtung all reached "[super-aged society](#)" status by 2023.

The goal for a solution should be a material buffer reaching citizens regardless of region, not concentrated in Hsinchu and Taipei. Prosperity there has not translated into comparable opportunity elsewhere, and the resulting outmigration is now self-reinforcing. Taiwan already has a policy for this: the [National Strategic Plan for Regional Revitalization](#), launched in 2019 and now in its third phase, aims to encourage young Taiwanese to [return and stay](#) in their hometowns, with the current 2025-2028 phase backed by [NT\\$6 billion](#). Part of its strategy has been to help individual townships build a [distinctive local product](#) or cultural draw attractive enough to bring people—and investment—back to their hometowns. Despite this, the plan is failing for a structural reason. Its [few celebrated successes](#)—Nanzhuang's Hakka-culture tourism and B&B industry, Gukeng's coffee cluster, Wutai's Indigenous cultural tourism—are wins in a narrow sense: they raised income and visibility for those specific townships, but most others saw no comparable transformation. An [effectiveness assessment](#) found this pattern was the exception rather than the rule, delivering a blunt verdict: "most townships lack distinctive features; limited funding unable to fundamentally transform industrial structures; transportation and medical infrastructure can't be solved through creativity alone." The policy treats rural decline as a branding problem rather than the structural labor-market gap it actually is.

Japan confirms that scaling up this approach will not fix it: despite investing roughly [¥1.5 trillion](#) over ten years in "Chihō Sōsei," the model Taiwan's policy is based on, net inflow to greater Tokyo still expanded in 2024, driven by towns competing for the same shrinking pool of movers and subsidy-dependent branding replacing real local capacity. In 2025, Japan pivoted toward cultivating "related population" instead—people who maintain economic ties to a region without living there, via remote work, tourism, or *furusato nōzei*, a hometown tax-donation program.

Taiwan should adopt the same redirection. A Taiwan-specific tax-donation mechanism built on Taiwan's own local-branding successes, like Gukeng and Wutai, would channel spending toward these counties without requiring anyone to move. This should be paired with remote-work incentives for tech and finance employees willing to be based there, targeting income transfer directly rather than hoping branding alone reverses a decade-long trend. The limitation is that Japan's pivot is young and unproven at scale, so this is the most promising available direction, not a guaranteed fix.

Recommendation two: The informational buffer

Nearly half of Taiwanese adults aged 70 and older are entirely outside the country's digital-first informational infrastructure—not a matter of degree, but definition. TWNIC's 2025 report found internet usage among this group at [just 53.80%](#), and willingness to get online among those still offline is falling, not rising. No digital tool can reach a population that isn't online at all. The goal state is that no demographic group becomes a soft entry point for eroding

trust in Taiwan's democracy simply because of their information environment.

Taiwan's response here is civic, not digital. Since 2018, [Fake News Cleaner](#) has run in-person literacy sessions in churches, temples, and parks for seniors. In 2021, [Google.org funded](#) a three-year "Taiwan Media Literacy Education Initiatives" program naming seniors as a target group. However, the scale of these programs doesn't match the need. Fake News Cleaner runs on one employee and volunteers, refusing government funding to preserve neutrality, while the Google grant was time-bound, not permanent. A 2025 Global Taiwan Institute assessment is direct: civil society leads on this work, but "without broader support, their [reach remains uneven](#)," and calls for "sustained public investment" instead.

Finland is the strongest comparative case: its goal state matches Taiwan's, framing media literacy as building "[societal resilience](#)" against "malign foreign actors," for the same reason Taiwan does—a hostile, larger neighbor. The result: eight consecutive years [ranked first](#) on the European Media Literacy Index of 41 countries. What makes this transferable is the mechanism: Finland routes literacy through institutions seniors already trust—[public libraries](#) and elderly care organizations—coordinated nationally by KAVI, a government body with a [permanent mandate](#), not a grant.

Taiwan already has the equivalent infrastructure sitting unused for this purpose. Long-Term Care 2.0's Tier C network—over [1,603 neighborhood care stations](#) that are tax-funded and reachable within a 30-minute drive—already delivers meals and home visits to the same population TWNIC shows is offline. Adding media literacy modules there, rather than relying on an unfamiliar NGO or an expiring grant, would replicate Finland's actual mechanism: literacy delivered through an institution seniors already trust, funded permanently.

Conclusion

Taiwan's calm is not evidence that all citizens handle the crisis well; rather, it is evidence that some citizens have the buffers to hold that threat at a distance, while others do not. Both gaps can be traced back to the same dynamic: prosperity and protection concentrate wherever the state's attention is already strongest and drift no further without deliberate redirection. This is not a Taiwan-specific problem. Any state asking its population to live for decades inside genuine geopolitical uncertainty—the Baltic states relative to Russia, states across the Indo-Pacific relative to China—will find the same pattern beneath its own version of calm. Managing an external threat is inseparable from managing the internal distribution of the tools that make it survivable. A government can hold a threat at bay diplomatically for decades and still fail its citizens, quietly, in the space between who has the buffer and who does not.

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.