



Defending Europe's Democracy Means Learning From Taiwan

Abstract

Europe is facing an onslaught of hybrid threats, from undersea cable sabotage to drone incursions. Countering these threats cannot be left to military departments alone. Grey-zone warfare is designed to operate just below the threshold of conflict and is designed to exploit the vulnerabilities inherent in liberal democracies that are geared towards peace, not war. In meeting this challenge, European policymakers should study Taiwan's 'whole-of-society' defence resilience strategy – which works across government, civil society, and the private sector to bolster preparedness. Using public forums, table-top exercises, and nationwide drills, Taiwan has engaged a range of government and non-government actors to test and improve resilience to hybrid threats. Learning from, and working with, Taiwan can provide valuable lessons for Europe.



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Introduction

European leaders are struggling to encapsulate the new reality of the continent's rapid exposure to grey-zone warfare. German Chancellor Friedrich Merz's description of Europe as 'not at war ... but no longer at peace' might be about as close as we have come to an attempted public reckoning.¹ With an onslaught of malicious activity across the continent – from cable sabotage in the Baltic Sea to arson attacks and cyberattacks on critical infrastructure – hostile states are exploiting the vulnerabilities inherent in liberal democracies that are geared towards peace, not war. As European policymakers grapple with these challenges, they would do well to aim to learn from, and work with, Taiwan. Taiwan – a self-governing democracy that China claims as its own territory – has not only withstood intense pressure from Beijing's escalating grey-zone warfare, but also consistently ranked among the most free and open democracies in Asia. Learning from Taiwan's successes – as well as its continued challenges – is critical for those seeking to preserve both Europe's security and its democracy.

Understanding Russia's and China's grey-zone warfare

Definitions of 'grey-zone' activities vary, but the term is generally used to encapsulate the broad range of actions that fall in the murky space between peace and open conflict. Grey-zone activities are designed to contain significant ambiguity around actors, methods, or intent and often make use of non-military means and proxy actors. The most effective grey-zone activities fall just below the threshold of acts of war (and hence are also sometimes referred to as 'sub-threshold' activities), maximising coercive effect while making it difficult for the opponent to respond without escalating into outright war.

Recent years have shown Russia and China to be particularly adept in exploiting grey-zone warfare to undermine the security of perceived adversaries. While in

¹ *The Guardian* (2025), 'Ukraine War Briefing: Europe "No Longer at Peace" with Russia, Says German Chancellor', World News, 30 September, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/sep/30/ukraine-war-briefing-europe-no-longer-at-peace-with-russia-says-german-chancellor>.

Russia's case, of course, these tactics are used alongside a conventional conflict in Ukraine, in other ways the tactics deployed by Moscow and Beijing increasingly mirror each other and even offer indications of complicity and coordination.

Firstly, both Russia's and China's grey-zone activities are designed to achieve maximum damage while minimising opportunities for retaliation. The sabotage of undersea cables – the critical infrastructure that underpins the internet – is demonstrative of this approach. A series of undersea cables in the Baltic Sea and the Taiwan Strait have been severed by commercial vessels acting in a highly suspicious manner – such as dragging anchors across the seabed for hundreds of nautical miles

while disabling AIS transponders (automatic identification system transponders are electronic devices used on ships and vessels to automatically broadcast and receive navigational data). A recent study found that out of the ten credible cases of suspected sabotage globally between 2021 and 2025 in which a suspect vessel had been identified, eight were ultimately linked back to Russia or China through vessel registration or ownership.² The involvement of multiple Chinese-linked vessels in suspected sabotage incidents in the Baltic Sea indicates that some level of cooperation or complicity between Russia and China is plausible.³ However, the difficulty of proving that such actions are deliberate sabotage rather than unfortunate accidents, as well as the added legal complexity of many such incidents having taken place in international waters, severely limit the ability of states impacted by sabotage to hold suspected saboteurs to account.

Secondly, both Russia's and China's grey-zone activities are designed to have impacts across both military and psychological domains. In practice, this means draining already stretched defensive resources while also bending public opinion towards desired objectives. Military incursions are a good example of this. In recent years China has conducted near-daily flights of Chinese military aircraft into Taiwan's air defence identification zone (ADIZ). While most flights do little more than cross the 'median line' dividing the strait before turning back, it is still costly to monitor and respond to incursions. Taiwan's Ministry of Defence was recently forced to change its response policy due to resource constraints, announcing



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² A. Yeh (2025), *Testing the Waters: Securing the UK's Undersea Cables Against Grey-Zone Threats*, China Strategic Risks Institute, <https://www.csri.global/research/testing-the-waters>.

³ Ibid.

that incursions would be intercepted only on an 'as needed' basis rather than every time.⁴ Such efforts are also designed to have a psychological impact. The notion that the Taiwanese government is unable to stop Chinese fighter jets from entering its ADIZ could undermine its credibility in the eyes of its citizens, and fuels defeatist narratives that Beijing seeks to promote. Similar tactics are likely at play with recent Russian drone incursions into Polish airspace, as well as drone appearances forcing the shutdown of Oslo's and Copenhagen's airports – causing havoc to flights across Europe.

Finally, both Russia's and China's grey-zone warfare tactics are designed to exploit vulnerabilities inherent in democratic models of governance. In particular, complex foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) operations take advantage of the free and open information environment maintained by democratic systems. Both Russia's and China's FIMI operations have used complex 'spamouflage' networks to spread disinformation and promote narratives beneficial to China. These techniques use thousands of fake or controlled accounts – likely assisted by AI technologies – to ensure that desired content is driven to the top of social media algorithms, while simultaneously drowning out competing discourses. Together with established traditional propaganda operations through state media outlets – of which operations in the Global South are particularly well funded – this means that Russia and China have formidable FIMI architecture. The speed at which Chinese information operations amplified pro-Russian narratives at the onset of the Ukraine war, and at which Russian information operations amplified Chinese disinformation on US bioweapons during the COVID-19 pandemic, also suggests some level of coordination between Moscow and Beijing, or at the very least tacit complicity.

Taiwan's 'whole-of-society' approach

Grey-zone warfare poses a novel challenge to Europe's defence architecture, much of which is primarily designed to counter conventional threats. The diversity of sectors that can be targeted by grey-zone threats – ranging from the cyber domain to critical infrastructure and social media – goes far beyond the remit of defence ministries and the armed forces. In view of this, adopting a whole-of-government approach – engaging both civilian and military departments – is critical to mounting an effective response. Moreover, engaging the private sector is also crucial, particularly given the important role that many private companies play in operating critical infrastructure, as

⁴ T. Shattuck (2022), 'The PLA Air Force Erases the Taiwan Strait Centerline', Global Taiwan Institute, 8 Sept., <https://globaltaiwan.org/2022/09/the-pla-air-force-erases-the-taiwan-strait-centerline/>.

well as their vulnerability to grey-zone threats such as cyberattacks. Civil society groups can also play an important role in resilience to grey-zone threats, with such groups often maintaining closer and more trusted relationships with citizens than government institutions.

Taiwan's 'whole-of-society resilience' concept attempts to meet the complexity of this challenge. Though still in its early phases, it provides a valuable model for Europe to learn from. The concept was first set out by Taiwan's President Lai Ching-te in June 2024, alongside the creation of a Whole-of-Society Defence Resilience Committee. In its initial conceptualisation, President Lai set out the rationale for building resilience across society for a range of adverse contingencies:

By thinking ahead and being prepared, we aim to make Taiwan stronger and instill greater confidence in our people. In times of national emergency or natural disaster, both the government and society will be able to maintain normal operations.⁵

The initial conceptualisation also set out the broad and ambitious objectives that the committee would work towards:

We need to conduct a comprehensive review and propose solutions to problems, strengthening our resilience in national defense, economic livelihoods, disaster prevention, and democracy. Our goal is to build a stronger and more robust democratic society where we not only safeguard national security, but also maintain regional peace and stability.⁶

The committee's work was later divided into 'five key areas' for enhancing resilience, providing more concrete avenues for discussion:⁷

- civilian force training and utilisation
- strategic material preparation and critical supply distribution
- energy and critical infrastructure operations and maintenance
- social welfare, medical care, and evacuation facility readiness
- information, transportation, and financial network protection.

The make-up of the committee – tasked with identifying gaps and opportunities for strengthening whole-of-society resilience – reflects this broad scope. Alongside representatives from the National Security Council, departments that do not traditionally focus on security issues are also well represented, including Ministers of Economic Affairs, Transportation and Communications, Health

⁵ Office of the President, Republic of China (Taiwan) (2024), 'President Lai Holds Press Conference to Mark First Month in Office', June, <https://english.president.gov.tw/News/6768>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Office of the President, Republic of China (Taiwan) (2024), 'President Lai Presides over Second Meeting of Whole-of-Society Defense Resilience Committee', December, <https://english.president.gov.tw/NEWS/6891>.

and Welfare, and Agriculture. However, what makes the committee unique is the involvement of individuals from outside government. At the time of writing, civil society groups represented include those working on countering disinformation, disaster relief, and civil defence education, as well as a number of religious groups. Think tanks, academics, and private sector experts include specialists on defence, critical infrastructure and energy, and cybersecurity.⁸

While in its early stages the committee largely served as a forum for representatives to discuss and make recommendations on issues around the topic of resilience and security, the committee has gone on to undertake several exercises designed to test and improve Taiwan's response to crisis contingencies.

- **Table-top exercises:** the committee hosted two non-scripted table-top exercises to test the preparedness of government agencies to address extreme situations. One simulated a high-intensity grey-zone operation, and the other simulated a state of being on the verge of conflict. The exercises were undertaken by government actors and observed by cross-disciplinary civilian experts.⁹
- **Field exercises:** drawing on issues identified in the table-top exercises, a series of 'field exercises' were designed to practice and test mobilisation of actions discussed in response to various contingencies. Exercise scenarios included giving public tsunami evacuation orders, responding to an unidentified explosion within critical infrastructure, a cyberattack on hospital systems, and 'cognitive warfare' information operations.¹⁰ Key recommendations arising from the exercises included expanding volunteer training programmes, pre-positioning medical supplies, and modularising the medical system for greater flexibility.¹¹
- **Nationwide drills:** the committee has been tasked with scrutinising the government's 2025 Urban Resilience Exercises, including nationwide air defence drills. These drills simulated an air raid, with alarms sounded, public transportation temporarily paused, and the public instructed to take cover in air defence shelters.¹²

⁸ Office of the President, Republic of China (Taiwan) (n.d.), 'Members, Whole-of-Society Defense Resilience Committee – Policy Vision', <https://english.president.gov.tw/Page/671>.

⁹ Office of the President, Republic of China (Taiwan) (2024), 'President Lai Presides over Second Meeting'.

¹⁰ Office of the President, Republic of China (Taiwan) (2025), 'President Lai Presides over Third Meeting of Whole-of-Society Defense Resilience Committee', March, <https://english.president.gov.tw/NEWS/6931>.

¹¹ K.-C. Hsu, C. Chu, and China Brief Notes (2025), 'Taiwan Bolsters Whole-of-Society Defense Resilience', April, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cj6700xr4zdo>.

¹² Office of the President, Republic of China (Taiwan), 'President Lai Presides over Fourth Meeting of Whole-of-Society Defense Resilience Committee', June, <https://english.president.gov.tw/NEWS/6978>.

The work of the committee, and the 'whole-of-society resilience' concept more generally, has had a number of limitations. Engagement with nationwide drills and other aspects of the programme has been variable, with some citizens choosing to ignore or not participate. This is broadly reflective of a lack of consensus about the threat or likelihood of war with China, both among Taiwan's political elites and in the wider public, and a lack of common understanding of the value of preparedness for war.¹³ More broadly, many of the vulnerabilities that the committee seeks to address are longer-term issues, on which progress has still been slow. For example, energy security remains a key concern, with Taiwan relying on imports for 97% of its energy needs, and with existing stockpiles of liquefied natural gas (which powers over 40% of Taiwan's electricity generation) sufficient for only 12 days of ordinary usage.¹⁴ While renewable technologies such as offshore wind could bolster resilience, take-up needs to be accelerated, while recent opposition-led attempts to re-start nuclear power generation failed in a recent referendum.¹⁵

Nonetheless, Taiwan's whole-of-society resilience model still offers some valuable lessons for European countries. Firstly, it conceptualises the challenge posed by grey-zone and hybrid warfare in the right way. Responses that focus solely on bolstering conventional military capabilities will be insufficient to meet the full range of grey-zone and hybrid threats that, as discussed above, are deliberately designed to use non-military or non-state actors, and that operate at a level below which military actors are able to respond without significant escalation. The whole-of-society model recognises the need to bolster resilience across civilian departments, the private sector, and civil society, as well as in the military .



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Secondly, Taiwan's Whole-of-Society Defense Resilience Committee provides a model for how European countries could promote engagement from a broad range of actors within their own resilience programmes. Chaired by the president, the committee has visible support from the very top, while the presence of ministers from a range of departments ensures a whole-of-government approach.

¹³ M. Kepe and S. W. Harold (2025), Building Taiwan's Resilience: Insights into Taiwan's Civilian Resilience Against Acts of War, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA3388-1.html.

¹⁴ J. Rickards, 'Taiwan Worsens Its Vulnerability to a Chinese Energy Blockade', *The Strategist*, 12 May, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/taiwan-lacks-clarity-on-energy-security/>.

¹⁵ W. Liu (2025), 'Taiwan's Nuclear Referendum Fails, Decision Shifts to the President', *CommonWealth Magazine*, August, <https://english.cw.com.tw/article/article.action?id=4294>.

Critically, the presence of think tanks, academics, and policy experts allows for outside insights, which can be both more creative and more critical than those operating within government. Engaging prominent religious groups and civil society groups secures further engagement from a larger segment of the broader public who might not normally engage with discussions at the policy level. Establishing similar committees in European countries would be a straightforward, cost-effective first step in beginning policy discussions around defence and resilience.

Thirdly, the whole-of-society resilience model has demonstrated considerable creativity, which European countries would do well to emulate. Most European countries have conducted only a handful of large-scale public drills or exercises to simulate responses to crisis scenarios, such as testing of sirens or emergency text-message alerts. Designing drills to simulate responses to major grey-zone or conflict scenarios would be valuable in raising public awareness of such threats and educating citizens on how to act in such events. Critically, these drills also enable government planners to identify gaps and areas for further improvement.

The challenge of preserving democratic values

Maintaining the integrity of democratic institutions, rights, and freedoms in the face of grey-zone threats is extremely challenging. As discussed above, Russia's and China's grey-zone operations are often designed to take advantage of the openness and freedoms inherent in democratic societies. Countering these efforts without resorting to government overreach or eroding democratic rights and freedoms is also an area where Europe can learn from both Taiwan's successes and its challenges.

Nowhere is the tension between countering grey-zone threats and upholding democratic values more pronounced than in the information space. Russia' and China's FIMI operations provide a real and genuine challenge to the security of democratic societies, both in Taiwan and in Europe, particularly as traditional media sources decline in reach and engagement. Yet countering different elements of FIMI operations presents various risks to democratic systems. Take disinformation campaigns – the spread of false information with the intent to deliberately mislead – as an example. While disinformation may be countered by the publication of counter-evidence or falsification, relying on the state to identify and counter disinformation risks establishing the notion of the state as the arbiter of truth. These are powers that could easily be exploited to undermine freedom of expression and media freedoms. Similar risks are posed by efforts to counter narratives beneficial to hostile states. Earlier this year, the Taiwanese government cancelled the visa of a

Chinese influencer living in Taiwan after she posted videos supporting the idea of China taking the island by force. The justification given was that the influencer's 'behaviour advocates the elimination of Taiwan's sovereignty and is not tolerated in Taiwanese society.¹⁶ While the concerns about the impact of such messages on public opinion and national security are valid, the justification could create worrying precedents for further crackdowns on freedom of expression.

To address these limitations on government-led efforts to counter FIMI, Taiwan has developed a growing ecosystem of civil society groups aiming to uphold the integrity of information spaces. For example, the nonprofit Cofacts has developed an open-source, citizen-driven, collaborative fact-checking platform that aims to combat disinformation and fake news. The platform allows users to forward news articles or social media content to a panel of fact-checkers, who can give their opinion on whether or not such information might constitute disinformation – with the rationale for their judgment also given. Integration with popular messaging apps allows for citizens to check information quickly and easily.¹⁷ Another example is the Taiwan Information Environment Research Center (IORG), which works with schools to develop media literacy skills among children and young people while also developing novel methods to monitor and detect information manipulation, such as the amplification of content by networks of fake or directed social media accounts.¹⁸



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European countries should learn from Taiwan's civil-society-led approach to countering FIMI threats. Not only can they offer more innovative, creative solutions, but by operating independently of the government, civil society groups can foster greater trust in public debates. In doing so, civil society groups can provide a robust and engaging response to FIMI risks, without the need for government overreach or missteps in attempting to control or regulate the information environment.

¹⁶ K. Ewe (2025), 'Taiwan Revokes Visa of Pro-Beijing Chinese Influencer', BBC News, 17 March, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cj6700xr4zdo>.

¹⁷ Cofacts (n.d.), 'Cofacts – Message Reporting Chatbot and Crowd-Sourced Fact-Checking Community', <https://en.cofacts.tw>.

¹⁸ IORG 台灣資訊環境研究中心 (n.d.), 'About IORG', https://iorg.tw/_en/about.

Conclusion and recommendations

Working with, and learning from, Taiwan presents a major opportunity for European governments looking to bolster defence against grey-zone threats. Taiwan's whole-of-society resilience model, while far from perfect, is a useful concept for understanding the complexity of the challenge faced and the breadth of actors that will need to be included in the response. At the same time, its implementation through the Whole-of-Society Defence Resilience Committee has proved an innovative means to practice, test, and improve cross-sector efforts to enhance resilience. As analysts have noted, despite the potential for Taiwan and Europe to partner on a range of strategic issues – in addition to being like-minded democratic partners – too often Taiwan has been treated as a 'second-tier partner' for European engagement in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁹ This paper recommends that the EU, Member States, and other European countries undertake a range of actions to bolster resilience, in partnership with Taiwan.

- European governments should launch forums modelled on Taiwan's Whole-of-Society Defence Resilience Committee, bringing together cross-departmental government representatives, businesses, civil society groups, and policy experts. Committees should aim to discuss, test, and improve coordination and capabilities in response to a range of crisis contingencies, including through table-top exercises, field exercises, and public drills.
- European governments should support exchanges between Taiwan and Europe at an official level to discuss and share best practices on whole-of-society resilience. These can take place through existing frameworks, including placing dedicated staff in representative or economic and trade offices maintained by European countries in Taiwan, and/or through the EU Economic and Trade Office in Taiwan; or through attending relevant sessions as part of Taiwan's Global Cooperation and Training Framework. Direct exchange between European government officials in civilian departments and their Taiwanese counterparts is commonplace among many European countries, and does not need to be restricted by the 'One-China' policies held by most European governments.
- European governments should support exchanges between Taiwan and Europe for civil society groups, think tanks, and policy experts working on key issue areas around resilience. Examples may include, but are not limited to, information integrity, media literacy initiatives, and disaster response.

¹⁹ L. Comerma, 'A Second-Tier Partner? Taiwan in the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy', February, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/388955411_A_second-tier_partner_Taiwan_in_the_EU's_Indo-Pacific_strategy.

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The European Liberal Forum (ELF) is the official political foundation of the European Liberal Party, the ALDE Party. Together with 56 member organisations, we work all over Europe to bring new ideas into the political debate, to provide a platform for discussion, and to empower citizens to make their voices heard. Our work is guided by liberal ideals and a belief in the principle of freedom. We stand for a future-oriented Europe that offers opportunities for every citizen. ELF is engaged on all political levels, from the local to the European. We bring together a diverse network of national foundations, think tanks and other experts. In this role, our forum serves as a space for an open and informed exchange of views between a wide range of different EU stakeholders.

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