

Hong Kong Is Dead, Taiwan Still Sleeps

Author: ButterflyMan

Abstract

The dismantling of Hong Kong's freedoms under the National Security Law offers Taiwan a stark preview of authoritarian consolidation. Yet many Taiwanese—especially segments of the business community—cling to illusions that economic interdependence with China can purchase peace. This article argues that such complacency reflects a dangerous passivity that undermines deterrence and democratic resilience. Synthesizing lessons from Hong Kong's collapse, Ukraine's whole-of-society resistance, and Israel's institutionalized defense model, I contend that Taiwan must transform free-riding and "outsourced security" into a durable civic defense culture and cross-party consensus. A practical, three-horizon roadmap is proposed to integrate societal will (à la Ukraine) with structural preparedness (à la Israel), while correcting the strategic pitfalls of a purely "low-profile" posture.

Introduction

In 1997, Hong Kong was promised "fifty years of autonomy" under the "one country, two systems" formula. Within two decades that promise was voided. The 2020 National Security Law extinguished core liberal institutions—judicial independence, free media, and the right to protest (Ma, 2020). For Taiwan, Hong Kong is not a distant cautionary tale; it is a mirror. If Taipei maintains illusions that commerce or paper guarantees can restrain a Leninist party-state, it risks discovering—too late—that freedom cannot be hedged with contracts. The question is not whether Taiwan prefers peace, but whether it is organizing its politics, economy, and society to deter coercion credibly.

The Death of Hong Kong: Three Non-Negotiable Lessons

Hong Kong's transformation crystallizes realities that Taiwan must internalize:

1. Authoritarian promises are non-credible. Beijing's commitments are instrumental, revocable, and subordinated to regime security (So & Chu, 2022).
2. Economic importance is not armor. Financial centrality did not shield Hong Kong's civil liberties; prosperity is leverage to be harnessed, not a liberty guarantee.
3. External pressure is insufficient. Diplomatic criticism and targeted sanctions could not halt the erosion of autonomy (Ma, 2020).

These lessons invalidate any Taiwanese strategy premised on “trade will moderate intent” or “international outrage will reverse faits accomplis.”

Taiwan's Persistent Illusions—and Their Costs

Despite the Hong Kong shock, three illusions persist in Taiwan's discourse:

- Market pacifism. Business elites prioritize access to Chinese markets and sometimes launder Beijing's narratives in public debate (Lin, 2022).
- Interdependence as peace. Economic ties are mistakenly equated with stability even though Beijing treats trade as coercive leverage, not a peace dividend (Swaine, 2021).
- Paper guarantees. “Peace agreements” are imagined as stabilizers, although Hong Kong demonstrates that authoritarian signatories devalue legal constraints when they clash with regime imperatives.

Culturally, these illusions map onto a collective free-rider psychology—a belief that allies will bear the hard costs while Taiwanese citizens preserve normalcy (Chen, 2021). Politically, they encourage outsourced security: reliance on U.S. or Japanese intervention in lieu of a visible, society-wide defense commitment (Cole, 2020). Strategically, they corrode deterrence by signaling equivocation about self-defense.

Authoritarian Resolve vs. Democratic Will

Authoritarian states mobilize through coercion. Democracies must mobilize through consent. Taiwan's pluralism is a strength, but it also produces coordination problems: young citizens value freedom yet resist extended conscription; parties polarize over defense procurement; and segments of society assume allies will fight in their stead (Cole, 2020). The paradox is acute: Taiwan's democratic quality is what makes it worth defending, yet democratic division can be exploited to sap the will to defend it.

The solution is not to mimic authoritarianism; it is to convert democratic liberty into democratic resilience: a shared conviction that defending one's home, community, and way of life is a civic—not purely military—duty.

Comparative Lessons: Ukraine and Israel

Two cases illuminate complementary pathways:

1. Ukraine—societal will at scale. When Russia invaded in 2022, Ukraine's rapid civil mobilization—territorial defense units, civilian logistics, medical and drone networks—created a moral and operational basis for massive Western support (Kuzio, 2022). The narrative was simple and contagious: defend home and family.
2. Israel—defense as a permanent institution. Since 1948, Israel has normalized security as a whole-of-society enterprise: universal conscription, deep reserves, dual-use innovation ecosystems, and a cross-party understanding that “no defense, no state” (Inbar & Shamir, 2019).

Synthesis: Survival in a hostile environment requires both societal will (Ukraine) and structural preparedness (Israel). Either alone is insufficient.

From Free-Riding to Civic Defense: Reframing the Narrative

Labeling public hesitancy as “selfishness” is cathartic but sterile. The task is narrative conversion:

- From nationalism to lived life. Defense is not an abstract flag; it is protecting parents, children, neighborhoods, and daily freedoms.
 - From time-tax to skill-stack. Service should build transferable skills—uncrewed systems, cyber defense, first response, infrastructure repair—so that young people view service as investment rather than penalty.
 - From soldier-centric to society-centric. Civilian roles in logistics, digital forensics, emergency medicine, information hygiene, and critical-infrastructure hardening are as essential as uniformed roles.
 - From suspicion to social contract. Veterans’ care, injury compensation, and employer protections must be reliable and dignified. Credible benefits reduce the perceived futility of sacrifice.
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Strategy Choice: “Low-Profile” vs. “Proactive Deterrence”

Taipei often defaults to a low-profile posture to avoid provocation. That approach can dampen short-term friction but carries structural risks if it delays reforms or projects ambivalence. In contrast, proactive deterrence—visible readiness without performative escalation—better aligns with alliance politics and denial strategies.

Comparative evaluation

- International perception: Low-profile reduces headlines; proactive deterrence signals resolve and attracts support.
- PRC reaction: Low-profile may postpone pressure; proactive steps may draw short-term coercion but raise long-term costs of aggression.
- Allied calculus: Allies discount partners who appear unwilling to self-defend; visible reforms unlock political will, funding, and interoperability.
- Domestic cohesion: Low-profile sustains complacency; proactive posture can catalyze identity and unity if paired with fair burden-sharing.

The optimal equilibrium is diplomatically low-key, defensively high-readiness.

A Three-Horizon Roadmap for Taiwan

To operationalize that equilibrium, Taiwan should move on three synchronized timelines. The aim is to make invasion unplannable, unfinishable, and unaffordable.

Horizon I — 0–12 months: Rapid deterrence and resilience

- Disperse and deceive. Pre-position fuel, food, and munitions in micro-depots; field decoys and camouflage to complicate targeting.
- Affordable denial fires. Prioritize mobile coastal anti-ship missiles, road-mobile rockets, naval mines, and expendable uncrewed “swarms.”
- Communications survivability. Multi-path C2 (microwave, satellite, HF), offline mission packages, and civilian redundancy plans.
- Reserve activation. Align reserve brigades with local civil-defense grids; monthly micro-drills; volunteer drone/observer units.
- Societal preparedness. Universal 72-hour kits; civil-defense demonstration sites per county; whole-of-government fact-checking with a four-hour response norm.
- Legal quick fixes. Update civil-defense and mobilization statutes to clarify local authorities’ wartime powers, requisition rules, and compensation standards.

Horizon II — 1–3 years: Scalable asymmetry and jointness

- Uncrewed tri-layer. Tactical micro-UAS (squad level), operational endurance and relay UAS (battalion/brigade), and strategic anti-radar/anti-ship UAS plus cheap decoys; domestic content where feasible.
- Localize sustainment. Munitions and spares co-produced with SMEs; dual-use components (motors, optics, composites) built for exportability.
- Runway-independent operations. Road takeoff/landing sites, expedient shelters, and rapid-repair materials.
- Blue Strait picture. Fuse coast guard, AIS from fishing fleets, civilian radars, and mountain observers into sharable, anonymized maritime awareness.
- Urban denial. Modular obstacles/mining overlays for ports, beaches, and road choke points; public works cadres train in peacetime.
- Cyber and critical-infra audits. Annual red-team exercises for semiconductors, finance, ports; create a resilience certification tied to tax/insurance incentives.
- Civic curriculum. 18 hours/year in high schools and universities: first aid, firefighting, information hygiene, basic drone ops.
- Alliance “quiet SOPs.” Pre-agreed protocols for port logistics, airspace deconfliction, SAR handoffs; economic-security linkages that auto-trigger collective responses to coercion.

Horizon III — 3–7 years: Structural deterrence and regional stabilizer

- Permanent joint command. A standing multi-domain HQ integrating armed forces, coast guard, and civil-defense; AI-enabled target-to-munition assignment.
 - Distributed air defense. Mobile short-/medium-range systems plus passive sensor webs (acoustic, passive RF, IR).
 - Deep logistics. Multi-node rail/road cold-chain networks; shared military-commercial repair capacity.
 - Defense-tech flywheel. Export-ready uncrewed systems, cyber tools, and energy storage; joint testing ranges and standards with partners.
 - Energy resilience. Microgrids for critical zones; 60–90 days strategic fuel stocks.
 - Talent policy. Fast visas and residency for defense tech, cyber, and emergency medicine experts.
 - Public-goods diplomacy. SAR, meteorology, and fisheries cooperation to demonstrate Taiwan as a regional stabilizer; expand “functional participation” in standard-setting bodies.
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Addressing the “Selfishness” Critique: From Vice to Virtue

Critics decry a “selfish mindset” in parts of Taiwanese society—free-riding on others’ sacrifices, resisting service, and prioritizing consumption over contribution. The policy response is to align self-interest with public defense:

- Make service useful. Skills learned—cybersecurity, UAV maintenance, emergency medicine—boost lifetime earnings and employability.
- Protect contributors. Robust veteran care, injury compensation, and employer protections reduce perceived individual downside.
- Lower activation costs. Micro-training and local volunteering shrink time burdens while growing the pool of capable helpers.
- Tell human stories. Center the defense narrative on families, neighborhoods, and concrete freedoms at risk.

When defense protects my life and my options, participation scales.

Policy Implications for Allies

For Washington, Tokyo, and European partners, the central message is not simply “spend more,” but “signal will and build absorptive capacity.” Assistance is politically sustainable abroad when Taiwan is visibly prepared to defend itself. That means privileging logistics, munitions production, air-defense density, uncrewed autonomy, and C2 resilience over prestige platforms, and expanding co-production and stockpiling on island to mitigate interdiction risks.

Conclusion

If Taiwan continues to indulge in illusions, its fate may mirror Hong Kong’s—freedom and autonomy lost without a fight. The alternative is clear:

- Diversify trade and reduce dependence on China.
- Embed civic defense into democratic life.
- Forge a permanent cross-party defense consensus.

Freedom cannot be purchased through commerce or secured by external promises. It must be defended at home. Hong Kong is dead. Taiwan still sleeps. Awakening is no longer optional—it is existential.

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