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Trump Doesn't Need to Be a Prop in Xi's Political Show

Whether he means to or not, the U.S. president is feeding China's active disinformation campaigns – especially on Taiwan.

By **Kolas Yotaka**
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Chinese President Xi Jinping and U.S. President Donald Trump shake hands during their summit at the White House, Sep. 24, 2026.
Credit: Official White House Photo by Daniel Torok

This September, I came across a post claiming that Hillary Clinton, the former U.S. senator and secretary of state, had urged Taiwan to surrender. With tens of thousands of likes and thousands of shares, the clip was spreading fast through Taiwan's Chinese-language social media. Something felt off, so I checked. The truth was revealing.

On September 10, the former U.S. secretary of state had appeared on "Morning Joe," the MS NOW program's September 11 anniversary special, to discuss U.S. President Donald Trump's national security strategy. Iran, she said, backed by China and Russia, was deftly draining the United States' capacity to defend its allies.

Here's what Clinton actually said (starting about 15 minutes into the interview): "We have to look at our potential dangers, especially what Xi is thinking, that they can't defend anybody anymore, because they don't have the capacity to defend. Maybe we can coerce Taiwan into just giving up because there's not going to be any support."

She was describing what she believed Xi Jinping might now be calculating – not making a call of her own. By the time it reached Taiwan, her words had been mistranslated and spliced into something else entirely: "Hillary Clinton urges Taiwan to abandon resistance to China."

I know this playbook well. For years, as a spokesperson for Taiwan's Cabinet and the Presidential Office, intercepting disinformation like this consumed most of my working hours. It is not a footnote to how Taiwan defends itself; it is the front line. We have learned, often the hard way, that 21st-century warfare runs on two tracks at once: the physical battlefield, where force is threatened or used, and the cognitive one, where information is weaponized to reshape how an adversary thinks, what it values, and what it believes to be true. Ideally for the attacker, cognitive warfare undermines the target from within before a kinetic attack is even contemplated.

In May, U.S. President Donald Trump suggested publicly that arms sales to Taiwan could be treated as a bargaining chip in negotiations with Beijing. Whatever his intent, the remark landed squarely inside a narrative Beijing has spent years constructing: that Taiwan is China's internal affair, and that outside powers – namely, the United States – have no legitimate role to play. Since then, Trump's words have been recycled as raw material for Chinese cognitive warfare, feeding a relentless undertow of narratives that "America will abandon Taiwan," "American troops are pulling out," and "resistance is futile."

As this happened, the U.S. government remained silent. The State Department’s Chinese-language spokesperson, asked directly about the arms package, declined to comment and referred reporters to the Department of Defense. White House officials, pressed by reporters, would only say that Trump would decide on the arms sale “soon.”

Beijing has spent years trying to push the United States out of the Indo-Pacific, and especially the Taiwan Strait. China has now effectively shifted the burden of keeping the peace onto Washington’s shoulders. What alarms me is that the Trump administration appears willing to accept that framing, treating Taiwan’s defense as something to be traded away. I believe this is a serious miscalculation.

Some will say Trump’s remark was just tactical posturing, not a genuine concession, and they may be right. But intent matters less than how Beijing hears it: ambiguity is interpreted as weakness. China’s playbook over the past decade shows that such statements are seized upon, amplified, and repeated until they harden into a settled narrative. Whether he meant it or not, Trump’s comment on arms sales compresses Taiwan’s room for defense while enlarging the stage for Beijing’s cognitive warfare, adding pressure across the Western Pacific.

China's cognitive warfare tied to Trump-Xi summits is a well-established fact. During Trump and Xi's meeting in Beijing this past May, Taiwan's National Security Bureau traced roughly 100 suspicious accounts spreading more than 9,000 coordinated messages across social media platforms, most of them dressed up as pleas for peace. "Taiwan is part of China," one read. "Taiwan is the real provocateur," read another. Timed to launch in lockstep with Beijing's own messaging, they were built to do two things at once: sow doubt about the United States' commitment, and paint Taiwan as the aggressor.

In September, as the next Trump-Xi summit approached, the same pattern surfaced again, almost move for move. Xi is using the meeting to restage Beijing's long-running "peace" narrative for three audiences at once: at home, to shore up his own standing; globally, to sell the line that Taiwan is part of China; and inside Taiwan itself, as a direct cognitive assault. Trump's hesitation on arms sales, whether he intends it or not, has bolstered those propaganda campaigns..

To Beijing, the United States has never been a friend, only an adversary to be defeated. Watching the once mighty Soviet Union collapse in 1991 badly rattled the Communist Party. Party leaders are convinced that Moscow did not simply fail economically or

politically; it was worn down by a deliberate U.S. ideological campaign that hollowed out Soviet identity until there was nothing left to hold the union together.

Whether or not that account is correct, it is what Chinese strategists believe. That is why Beijing has spent the decades since the Cold War studying U.S. information warfare and folding cognitive operations into its own military doctrine as a weapon to be used at home to secure the party’s grip, and abroad to advance its interests.

Xi is contending with mounting challenges to his authority at home. He needed a show that put him on equal footing with the president of the United States to rally support domestically and help secure his continued leadership at the Communist Party’s 21st National Congress in 2027. Trump just handed him exactly that.

Chinese state media have spent this week hailing the summit as “the first head-of-state reception of its kind in 60 years,” a “milestone” that cast Xi as the anchor of stability in China-U.S. relations. A CCTV program portrayed him as a great power leader steering the relationship “onto the right course.”

Quietly, Beijing has also dispatched scholars and researchers to place op-eds in major American outlets, repeating to American

policy circles a new narrative of “constructive strategic stability.” This messaging also subtly recasts Taiwan not as a democracy under threat, but as the problem that could drag China and the United States into war.

All this is happening at a pivotal moment for Taiwan’s own domestic politics. As Taiwan heads into local elections, Beijing and its local collaborators have intensified efforts to undermine confidence in Taiwan’s government, targeting both its domestic governance and its relationship with Washington. The goal is to manufacture a specific kind of anxiety: that Taipei cannot protect its own people, and that Washington will not help. China’s goal is not simply to sway one election. It is to paralyze Taiwan’s democratic system and lower the future cost of trying to invade the country.

Trump does not have to play the prop in Xi’s political show. He could be the lead in his own narrative. That would mean delivering the arms already promised to Taiwan without further delay and resisting the temptation to treat Taiwan’s defense as a bargaining chip in any deal with Beijing. It would mean recognizing that every ambiguous remark about Taiwan’s status is heard in Taipei or Beijing, where it translates as an opening that China will exploit.

Maintaining the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific is not a favor to Taiwan. It is the thing standing between a fragile peace and a war that would have unimaginable consequences, not only for the Taiwanese people.

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