

On Friday, representatives from several Taiwanese media organizations attended a cross-strait media summit in Beijing cohosted by China's Beijing Daily Group and the Taiwan-based Want Want China Times Media Group. At the closed-door Cross-Strait Media People Summit — also attended by Taiwan's United Daily News Group, Eastern Broadcasting Co and TVBS Media — Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference Chairman Wang Yang (王陽) called on Taiwanese media to promote a Taiwanese version of Hong Kong's "one country, two systems" model of governance, advocated by Chinese President Xi Jinping (習近平) in a speech on Jan. 2.

Participation at the event by Taiwanese media organizations — the contents of Wang's address was subsequently leaked to the wider Taiwanese media — is disturbing and should be viewed through the prism of Beijing's wider effort to influence public debate in Taiwan. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) calls this its "united front" strategy — a decades-long "whole of society" campaign to infiltrate and subvert Taiwan's open and liberal democracy, thereby achieving its goal of unification without the need to fire a single shot. The question is: What should the government do about it?

Predictably, the government has already issued several boilerplate statements criticizing the forum. On Saturday, the Mainland Affairs Council censured Wang for "using a cross-strait media summit as a platform for political propaganda." President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) has also weighed in, rebuking the CCP for interfering in Taiwan's internal affairs and the freedom of its press.

Tellingly, both statements refrained from directly criticizing the Taiwanese media organizations in attendance, instead focusing on the forum itself. This might be because officials believe that at least some of the organizations attended in good faith, but were ambushed by Wang's speech. Officials might also be wary of attacking individual media organizations, lest they are accused of encroaching upon freedom of the press.

However, there are signs that the government is moving toward tighter regulation of the media. Last month, Premier Su Tseng-chang (蘇貞昌) said: "We hope the media can regulate itself, but we have witnessed disconcerting developments, which the public has also condemned... Both self-regulation and laws are needed for effective regulation."

Neutralizing Chinese disinformation

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The Executive Yuan is drafting a bill aimed at regulating false reporting in the media, while National Security Bureau (NSB) Deputy Director-General Ko Cheng-heng (柯成興) yesterday told reporters his organization is keeping a close eye on domestic media that are either pro-China or share the CCP's values and are spreading disinformation to influence public debate.

The government is also looking at amending the Criminal Code to allow for the prosecution of individuals who help spread false information. This highlights a significant conundrum for the government: Beijing's "united front" campaign does not limit itself to traditional media. China is also using Facebook, YouTube and other social media platforms, through which much of the younger generation obtains news reporting, to influence public debate by spreading disinformation and fake news.

Nevertheless, the trend toward online media also presents the government with an opportunity. Beijing's social media influence campaign, to a large extent, rests upon its being able to fund pro-China content creators in Taiwan. It should be possible for the NSB to track and cut off funding sources linked to China.

However, the government must tread carefully. If it goes down the road of overt media censorship, it will begin to undo all of the progress made through Taiwan's democratic reforms and will be unwittingly assisting Beijing in its goal of unification by destroying the very freedoms that differentiate liberal Taiwan from totalitarian China.

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