

US Bioweapons Story Reignites Concerns About Disinformation in Taiwan

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A UDN story alleged that the U.S. government had requested that Taiwan engage in bioweapon development.

Disinformation may be on the rise in Taiwan ahead of the 2024 elections next year. In recent years, much attention has gone to disinformation and misinformation as it is spread through social media networks as Facebook and Twitter, or messenger apps such as LINE. However, this may occlude the role that traditional media networks may play in spreading disinformation.

In that vein, [a recent news story](#) by the United Daily News (UDN) has drawn attention. The UDN is a newspaper of record, as one of the major daily newspapers of the pan-Blue camp. However, it is considered more objective and neutral in its reporting than others in the camp. For example, the China Times, which has been accused of [directly accepting orders](#) from China's Taiwan Affairs Office and [accepting funding from China](#).

The UDN story in question alleged that the U.S. government had requested that Taiwan engage in bioweapon development at the National Defense Medical Center (NDMC). The report cited anonymous sources that it claimed to be from within the Ministry of National Defense (MND), as well what was purported to be the minutes of a secret government meeting on June 23, 2022. It was alleged that the construction of a Biosafety Level 4 (P4) laboratory at the NDMC was in preparation for joint bioweapons development with the United States.

The [MND](#) and members of the Tsai administration have denied this story, with the [ministry noting that the wording](#) in the purported minutes does not accord with terminology it would have used. Former Premier [Su Tseng-chang](#), as well as former Minister of Health and Welfare [Chen Shih-chung](#), too, have denied that this took place. The Tsai administration stated that the P4 laboratory facilities were for researching the detection and treatment of infectious diseases.

Likewise, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) [issued an unusually strongly worded response](#) to the report, stating that "certain media" had been seeking to cast doubt about the reliability of the United States as an ally since 2022.

Pan-Blue presidential candidates have not yet commented on the UDN report, though at least Ko Wen-je was [asked about it](#) during a stream. Nevertheless, it will be interesting to see if the claims gain circulation during the campaign.

For its part, UDN has doubled down on [defending the report](#), stating that it verified the news before publishing. Nevertheless, it should be clear that the UDN report draws from existing disinformation already in circulation, largely relating to Chinese attempts to sow doubt about the origins of COVID-19. Namely, in response to Western claims that COVID-19 could potentially be a Chinese bioweapon that accidentally or deliberately escaped from [P4 facilities in Wuhan](#), the Chinese government has begun to suggest its own conspiracy theory: that COVID-19 actually had American

origins. This involved the suggestion that COVID-19 originated from [P4 laboratories at Fort Detrick in Maryland](#).

Far-fetched allegations of U.S. bioweapons are also a hallmark of Russian disinformation efforts. Recently, Russian media claimed that the [United States was developing and storing bioweapons](#) in Ukraine in an attempt to justify Russia's ongoing invasion.

In Taiwan, meanwhile, there has been a notable increase in disinformation narratives that frame the United States as endangering Taiwan through weapons sales or weapons development. In another recent case, similar narratives emerged around [the sale of Volcano landmine systems to Taiwan](#).

Pan-Blue legislators alleged that Volcano landmine systems violated international human rights conventions against anti-personnel landmines, although Taiwan was only planning on purchasing anti-tank landmines that would be visible with the naked eye. It was claimed that the use of the landmines would lead to Taiwan becoming littered with landmines, like Cambodia.

The recent discussion of [establishing munitions stockpiles](#) in Taiwan for the United States to use in the event of a Chinese invasion led to similar allegations. The suggestion was that the U.S. would turn Taiwan into a large stockpile of arms against China, even if this would lead to retaliation from China against Taiwan or otherwise prove dangerous to Taiwan itself.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs' response to the UDN story highlighted a number of reports from pan-Blue media that seek to sow doubt about Taiwan-U.S. relations. Some stories suggest ulterior motives for visits by U.S. politicians to Taiwan, such as the claim that a visit by former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was for [the sake of his firm Anarock](#), or that visits by U.S. representatives aimed to [sell Boeing 787s](#). This more broadly goes along with the claim that the United States sells Taiwan useless weapons in order to profit, but without actual gains for Taiwan's defense.

Another strand of such news reports claims that the United States would throw Taiwan overboard should war break out. Examples include reports that the U.S. would destroy TSMC in the event of a Chinese invasion, drawing on statements by [U.S. politicians](#) or [former defense officials](#). This dovetails with concerns that the construction of TSMC plants outside of Taiwan, [such as in Arizona](#), would lead to Taiwan losing its preeminent place in global semiconductor manufacturing, something that incentivizes Western powers to defend Taiwan. These narratives were epitomized in the fake claim that the Biden administration has [a "secret plan"](#) to destroy Taiwan in the event of an invasion to prevent it from falling into Chinese hands.

Analysts have noted that the pan-Blue camp has increasingly begun to lean into [lean into "U.S.-skeptical discourse"](#) (□□□□) in the past few years, questioning the reliability of the United States as an ally.

Such political narratives often originate from pan-Blue media outlets such as those owned by the Want Want Group. Want Want Group owner Tsai Eng-meng [has made no secret](#) of the fact that his interest in purchasing media outlets such as the China Times, CTV, or CtiTV was to depict China in a positive light in Taiwan.

Tsai has also sought to influence politics using his news outlets. Want Want Group threw its weight behind one preferred candidate for the KMT's presidential nomination in 2020, Han Kuo-yu, by ensuring that [70 percent of news stories](#) from CtiTV were about Han. CtiTV later [did not have its broadcast license renewed](#) by the National Communications Commission, with the commission citing violations in its coverage of KMT candidates, such as inflating the crowd count for Han's mayoral inauguration.

But it is alarming that UDN has also taken to circulating purported disinformation that echoes Beijing's preferred narratives. UDN is seen as a more respectable pan-Blue outlet compared to Want Want Group outlets.

That being said, UDN executives were present at [a media summit in Beijing in May 2019](#). This summit included high-ranking representatives of Chinese and Taiwanese news organizations including the People's Daily, Xinhua News, China Times, Want Daily, Taiwan Broadcasting Association, the Taiwan Radio and Television Program Association, and CTV. Wang Yang, then chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference National Committee, was present, and gave a speech attempting to convince Taiwan that the United States would not intervene in the event of warfare. At the summit, participants signed a cooperation agreement and were urged to promote the unification of Taiwan and China.

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