

Get Tough on China-Linked Sabotage of Subsea Infrastructure

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Taiwan's domestically produced corvette class vessel Ta Chiang is paraded to demonstrate its combat readiness during a drill on the seas off the northern city of Keelung, Taiwan, on Jan. 7, 2022. Sam Yeh/AFP via Getty Images



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Commentary

Apparently, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) wants to slow down the internet in Taiwan and make folks in the Baltics chillier this winter.

[Three China-linked ships](#) allegedly cut subsea fiber-optic communications cables and a gas pipeline recently. The two incidents in Europe and the latest on Jan. 3 near [Taiwan](#) have alarmed maritime security officials. Russia was also allegedly involved in the Baltic sabotage.

Why the regimes in China and Russia would want to upset people with such antics is unclear. It squanders what little soft power remains to them and to no positive effect, even for their illegitimate goals. Their strategies are apparently based on the erroneous assumption that “gray zone” tactics like sabotage will prove their resolve and intimidate the United States and our allies into giving up on Taiwan and Ukraine. The latter country has made clear that even under frequent nuclear threats from Russia, free countries do not submit without a fight. A cable here or there will only steel their resolve (excuse the pun).

Rather than helping Russia and China, gray zone tactics become an annoyance and useful talking point for the United States and allies when marshaling forces against the aggressors. The regimes in Beijing and Moscow often try to hide their gray zone aggressions, but this fools few. Their subterfuge simply exposes the depths of their criminality.

The tactics’ uselessness is demonstrated by the workarounds that responsible countries use to overcome them. When a main fiber-optic internet cable is cut somewhere, for example, internet traffic is typically automatically rerouted through other cables, slowing everybody down just a bit but not hugely affecting any one user. Now, everyone in Taiwan and the Baltics who has slow internet, whether or not it was caused by the CCP, can blame that party.

And there is plenty to blame. The CCP is getting away with this type of illegality with minimal consequence. In the Taiwan case, the Shunxing 39 cargo ship allegedly damaged a subsea internet cable by

deliberately dragging its anchor. It reportedly traveled in a zig-zag pattern for apparently no good reason near the port of Keelung for almost a month leading up to the Jan. 3 incident.

While others were spreading holiday cheer over the internet, what should be renamed the “Grinch 39” was apparently looking to cut those greetings short by dragging its anchor. The practical Taiwanese response was to increase the number of not only its submarine cables but also [microwave and satellite](#) transmission capabilities that would be impervious to the CCP’s clumsy attempts at intimidation. The Whos in Whoville kept on singing.

The other two cases of anchor dragging also include allegations of China-linked ships, one of which reportedly dragged its anchor for up to [100 miles](#) and cut two cables—the first between Sweden and Lithuania and the second between Germany and Finland.

U.S. and allied attempts to investigate and prosecute the alleged criminality are difficult. The types of actions under investigation are often undertaken by old “ghost ships” in the dark fleet that turn off their location transceivers when they commit crimes and are flagged in countries unrelated to their histories.

So the throwaway ships are hard to find, and enforcement is hard to deliver. Once found, they are not easily boarded on the high seas due to international law. International lawyers can claim that boarding them requires permission from the country where the ship is registered. While authorities scramble to obtain such permissions, any criminals on board can hide evidence behind locked doors that they refuse to open for investigators.

Taiwan’s Coast Guard searched for nine hours for the Shunxing 39 but then did not board or block the vessel from departing the scene for South Korea. Taiwan instead claimed that bad weather did not allow boarding and asked South Korean authorities to assist.

Nobody wants to provoke a war with China, but weak responses such as this only invite more illegality, gray zone aggression, and

incrementalism on the part of Beijing. Decisive enforcement backed by allied militaries in the case of the Shunxing 39 would have proven to the CCP that we will defend our interests and values. That is better deterrence of future aggression than repeatedly appeasing Beijing. The Shunxing 39 could have been blocked until better weather arrived, after which it could have been boarded by Taiwan backed by the naval ships of its allies.

If international lawyers tried to get in the way, a legal argument could be made that in the context of the CCP's persistent violation of international law, its rights and the rights of suspect ships that it controls have diminished. For the safety of global shipping and subsea infrastructure, U.S. and allied boarding and investigations should proceed immediately after a suspected crime while the evidence of wrongdoing is fresh.

Authoritarian regimes that routinely break international law lack democratic legitimacy and, therefore, should not have the same rights on the high seas as democracies and allied countries that follow the basic norms that make international commerce so vibrant. If Taiwan and its allies cannot even protect their subsea cables because they are intimidated by the CCP, they will not be able to protect Taiwan itself.

The Shunxing 39 incident is yet another wake-up call that Taiwan and its allies need to improve our military defenses against the People's Liberation Army so we have what it takes to stand up and defend every inch of our subsea fiber-optic cables, just as we would every inch of our territories. Unfortunately, only that will fully deter Beijing's gray zone irresponsibilities.

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