

The Intelligence Connection between West Germany and Taiwan. An Unknown Chapter of the Cold War

by Chern Chen

/ Associate Research Fellow at Institute of European and American Studies

Introduction

In the early 1950s, as Cold War tensions deepened, and as the military threat Communist China posed to the rest of Asia increased, Taiwan's superior strategic position off the edge of the Euroasian continent grew in importance for both military and information gathering purposes as the West watched China. During this period, most other nations cooperated with Taiwan on intelligence matters, considered Taiwan an important source of intelligence on Communist China; West Germany was no exception.

Taiwan's international status was of little significance in West Germany's political considerations. However, its advantageous geographic position and anti-communist stance proved valuable in its relations with West Germany, which found itself short of intelligence on China, making China-related intelligence from Taiwan all the more valuable and opening the door to further bilateral cooperation in the gathering of intelligence.

Beginning of intelligence contacts

Intelligence cooperation between Taiwan and West Germany can be traced back to as early as 1953, when West German intelligence secretly made contact with the Taiwanese government representative in Frankfurt. After the establishment of the Federal Intelligence Service (BND) in 1956, German contacts with the Taiwanese intelligence organization, the National Security Bureau (NSB), became more frequent. This inter-agency contact formed the main political communication channel for West Germany and Taiwan from then onward. In 1958, the chief of the NSB visited West Germany and the two agencies reached a verbal agreement that would see German instructors train Taiwanese cryptologists.

Although many high-ranking Taiwanese intelligence officials visited West Germany between 1958-1960, it was not until 1961 that the BND officially sent representative to the NSB to arrange for bilateral cooperation and to start intelligence and military exchanges between West Germany and Taiwan. In March, 1961, the BND's chief ordered the Director of the Strategic Reconnaissance Division, Brigadier General Wolfgang Langkau, and the head of the Asia Department, Joachim Voelkel to undertake a secret visit to Taiwan. Apart from meeting with Chiang Kai-shek, their primary mission was to exchange information on intelligence gathering and negotiate an agreement concerning cooperation over electronic reconnaissance. The greatest achievement of the mutual visits of intelligence officials culminated in the agreement that the two countries would exchange intelligence via the highest intelligence organizations of both countries—the BND and the NSB.



BND delegation visiting Taiwan, April 1961. From left to right: Ching Kai-shek, Wolfgang Langkau, and Joachim Voelkel

As the matter of fact, the necessity of gathering intelligence on Communist China provided the immediate impetus for West Germany's intelligence contacts with Taiwan in the late 1950s. In addition, a shortage of intelligence experts familiar with Chinese affairs led West Germany to turn to Taiwan for information. Without a doubt, West Germany acted on the basis of its national interest. Later, the deterioration of diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and China in the 1960s, and the possible impact of this on the Soviet Union's policy towards West Germany, led the government in Bonn to realize the serious implications of their lack of information on Chinese affairs. In order to react effectively to internal and external changes involving Eastern Europe and China, West Germany found an ideal solution in establishing political and military intelligence exchanges with Taiwan, which shared much the same anti-communist stance. However, West Germany still wished for a flexible relationship with China in the future, and thus did not support further developing political ties with Taiwan.

Intelligence and military cooperation in undercover

Until the 1980s, the BND was the only channel for the West German government to acquire intelligence from Taiwan. Intelligence cooperation was conducted by the intelligence agencies of both parties to not only avoid diplomatic interference and awkwardness arising from the non-diplomatic relationship, but also to establish a direct channel between the high-level government servants on both sides, resulting in a successful model of cooperation for West Germany and Taiwan during the Cold War.

Compared to intelligence cooperation between Taiwan and the US, Taiwan's cooperation with West Germany was more practical, especially in the area of technology transfer, in that West Germany provided Taiwan with more concrete assistance. For example, the BND's help in erecting large wireless telecommunication stations in Taiwan in the 1960s not only improved Taiwan's efficiency and capacity in collecting intelligence on Communist China, but also ensured security and secrecy

in intelligence transmission. West Germany also exhibited greater reciprocity, compared to the US, in providing technology transfer of electronic intelligence analysis to cooperative countries. The BND not only worked with the NSB in Signals intelligence (SIGINT) on Communist China and acquired strategic and military intelligence beneficial to both parties, but also collaborated with Taiwan to develop advanced monitoring technology and equipment used to monitor and intercept Chinese civil and military communications.



President Chiang Ching-kuo talking to the chief of BND Dr. Klaus Kinkel, Taipei, November 1980

In addition, the BND provided cooperating countries with deals on weapons and electronic precision instruments. For example, the NSB's first supercomputer was purchased through Standard Electric Lorenz AG, Stuttgart (communications technology) by the Far East Commerce Company. In 1983, BND sold Taiwan's air force 62 retired F-104G Starfighter aircraft and other important parts including targeting systems through the company MBB (Messerschmitt-Bölkow-Blohm GmbH).

West Germany also responded to Taiwan's other plans for military exchanges, the most important of which was Taiwan's wish to have West German military advisors help train Taiwanese troops. In actuality, during Wolfgang Langkau's visit to Taiwan, Chiang Kai-shek personally requested that the West German government scout out qualified military advisors. With a view towards reinforcing intelligence cooperation with Taiwan, West Germany quickly accepted Taiwan's request and provided military advisors and training for Taiwanese military officers. These two items were integral parts of the intelligence cooperation pact, and expanded the scope of West German-Taiwanese partnership. This military cooperation was executed jointly by the BND and NSB, and lasted for 14 years until 1975.

The BND's intelligence cooperation with Taiwan grew ever closer as the Cold War intensified. West Germany orientated the priority of intelligence cooperation with Taiwan on Signals intelligence (SIGINT) and Communications intelligence (COMINT). Moreover, from 1978 onwards, with the approval of the West German government, cooperation between the two agencies advanced to the stage of satellite intelligence reconnaissance.

Conclusion

From the nature and content of the work between West Germany and Taiwan during the Cold War, it is clear that not only did it suit the national security strategies of both countries, but that both sides made a strategic choice to cooperate. However, realistic political considerations, especially those driven by West Germany's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, opposed further cooperation with Taiwan, meaning that the possibility of further diplomatic and political interactions with Taiwan was marginal from the start. Therefore, the BND's intelligence cooperation with Taiwan was kept under wraps and the BND fulfilled the terms of the agreement with Taiwan scrupulously while seeking to depoliticize their cooperation.

The divergence in the policies pursued by West Germany's diplomatic and intelligence departments with respect to Taiwan did, without doubt, serve the state's national interests. Although Taiwan's hopes of improving political relations with West Germany and recovering past diplomatic ties fell through, the intelligence organizations of both parties overcame diplomatic obstacles and became the only official communication channel between the two countries as they sought to form a new platform as the basis of future military interactions, making this cooperation a most important link in the circle of West Germany-Taiwan connections during the Cold War. Through this pattern of intelligence and military cooperation, both countries found the largest common denominator for their own interests and excavated a brand-new political space for post-war military and intelligence diplomacy, which not only successfully connected the two governments within the framework of international situation, but also gave this relationship a special historic meaning.

Source:

B 14-IIA7, Federal Foreign Office Political Archive (Berlin)

B 136/6244, German Federal Archives (Koblenz)

N 447/90, German Federal Archives-Military Archives (Freiburg)

01-070 NL Hans Globke, Archive for Christian Democratic Policy (Sant Augustin)