

Taiwan seeks satellite solutions after undersea cables cut

April 13 2023, by Yan Zhao and Jack Moore with Amber Wang in Taipei



The vulnerability of Taiwan's communications was highlighted after two undersea telecoms cables connecting the tiny Matsu archipelago were cut in February.

Taiwanese hostel worker Wang Chuang-jen's business took a hammering

when undersea telecoms lines serving tiny Matsu archipelago were cut in February.

"It was very inconvenient," said the 35-year-old from Matsu's Beigan island, where customers struggled to book or pay online due to slow connectivity. "We all heavily depend on the internet."

The cut-off not only caused headaches for businesspeople such as Wang, it also highlighted Taiwan's digital vulnerability at a time of heightened menace from China.

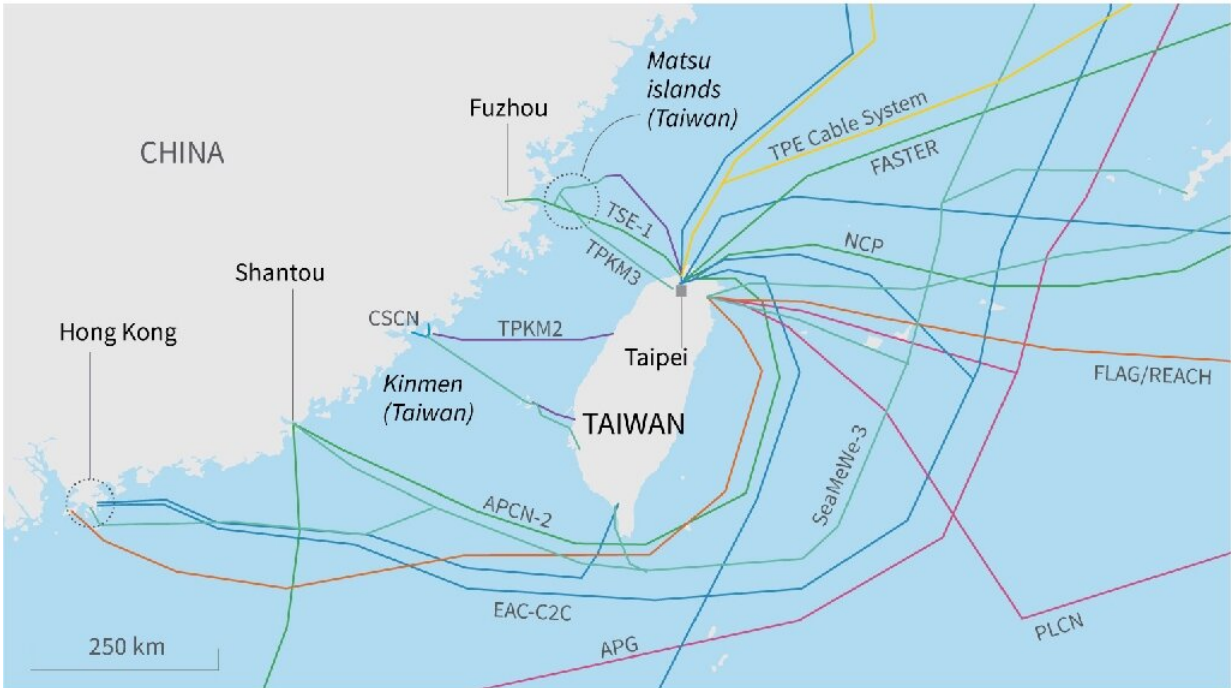
The two [cables](#) were severed about 50 kilometers (30 miles) from Matsu in the Taiwan Strait within days of each other.

Locals, as well as Taipei's Communications Commission, said Chinese fishing vessels or sand dredgers—which often drop anchor or scrape the seabed in Taiwanese waters—may have done the damage.

"I think China is aware of the situation... it would have been easy to restrain such an act of sabotage but it didn't," senior lawmaker Cheng Yun-pen from the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) told AFP.

For its part, China describes itself as a responsible fishing country and Beijing's foreign ministry has denied the involvement of its fishing crews.

Taiwan's undersea cables



Source: TeleGeography



The vulnerability of Taiwan's communications was highlighted after two undersea telecoms cables connecting the tiny Matsu archipelago were cut in February.

There have been nearly a dozen such incidents since 2021, and Taiwan's authorities are seeking solutions.

"If an internet outage can happen for Matsu, could a similar incident happen for (the rest of) Taiwan?" said Lii Wen, director of the DPP's Matsu office.

While cables linking Taiwan's outlying Matsu and Kinmen islands are shallow enough to be threatened by fishing vessels, experts say that even the more deeply laid cables along the main island's north, west, and south

are susceptible to sabotage.

Undersea cable repair requires specialized crews and can cost several million dollars.

While its lines were cut, the Matsu archipelago—home to about 10,000 people and only a few miles from the Chinese mainland—relied on a patchy mountain-based microwave backup system until repairs in late March.

Authorities are seeking a sturdier alternative on a Taiwan-wide scale.

Taipei's digital ministry told AFP it has a two-year, \$18 million plan to place satellite receivers in 700 places at home and abroad, to maintain government communications "during emergencies such as natural disasters or wars".



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The ministry said it was "willing to cooperate with any qualified satellite service provider".

Recent war games around the island by China—which sees self-ruled Taiwan as its territory, to be taken by force if necessary—underlined the urgency.

The drills came after Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen's visit to the United States, where she met House Speaker Kevin McCarthy.

During that trip, two US lawmakers reportedly talked with Tsai about the island using Elon Musk's Starlink satellite system—which has been deployed in Ukraine since its invasion by Russia.

SpaceX did not respond and Taiwan's presidential office declined a request for comment.

Digital disruption

Experts say the disruption in places such as Matsu has already furnished Beijing with invaluable intelligence.

"It definitely offers an opportunity for China to observe the digital resilience of the military and civilians in Matsu," said Tzeng Yi-suo, a military expert in Taipei.



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Fishermen in Matsu, who rely on [digital signals](#) to take customers' orders, described the frustrating disruption.

"The (internet) speed was very, very slow, or the messages even couldn't get through. When people called me, the line was cut before I could finish even one sentence," said Wang Chia-Wen, 45.

The weeks-long drop in communications there also gave a flavor of what life would be like for Taiwan's 23 million people—including its political and military elite—if they were cut off.

Analysts say the main island's undersea cables could be cut by unmanned Chinese submarines, and their terrestrial terminals attacked with rockets or special forces.

"China's invasion would try to pick off Taiwan's communication settings," said Richard Hu, a retired general and military expert at the National Chengchi University.

"The incidents this time have increased the doubt concerning Taiwan's readiness level."

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