

Record-Setting Incursions into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone

The People's Republic of China's Psychological Operations Designed to Erode US Support for Taiwan

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Abstract

As the United States transitioned to strategic competition with the People's Republic of China (PRC), much has been written about Taiwan as a flashpoint for conflict. The debate surrounding Taiwan typically gravitates toward military capabilities, operational plans, and tactics, while the role of People's Liberation Army (PLA) psychological operations is often overlooked and underappreciated. Examining PLA actions in and around Taiwan through the lens of psychological operations adds a dimension to the debate that enhances US military planners and foreign policy experts' understanding of PRC intentions.

This article presents People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) incursions into Taiwan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ) from 1 to 4 October 2021 as a case study in PLA psychological operations. During this four-day period, the PLAAF flew a record-setting 149 sorties into Taiwan's southwestern ADIZ.¹ Moreover, a single force package on 4 October included 52 aircraft and set a record as the largest single incursion in history.² PLA demonstrations of this magnitude were clearly designed to deliver a message. Therefore, US military planners and foreign policy experts should discuss and interpret the purpose and intent behind PLA actions. Analyzing record-setting incursions through the lens of psychological operations provides this opportunity.

The PLA's use of Taiwan and airpower as historical symbols, synchronization with current events and global media attention, and targeting of a strategic opportunity with the Taiwan Relations Act indicate PLAAF incursions into Taiwan's ADIZ from 1 to 4 October 2021 were psychological operations designed to divide and deter the United States from defending the island. In response, US military planners and foreign policy experts should maintain the strategically ambiguous nature of US-Taiwan relations and increase awareness of PLA psychological warfare.

As the United States has transitioned into strategic competition with the People's Republic of China (PRC), much has been written about Taiwan as a flashpoint for conflict. The debate over what to do about Taiwan

typically gravitates toward military capabilities, operational plans, and tactics. While capabilities, plans, and tactics are extremely important, the role of People's Liberation Army (PLA) psychological operations is often overlooked and underappreciated. Examining PLA actions in and around Taiwan through the lens of psychological operations adds a dimension to the debate that enhances US military planners and foreign policy experts' understanding of PRC intentions.

Before delving into military actions around Taiwan, an explanation of psychological operations is useful. The United States has traditionally defined *psychological operations* as "operations planned to convey selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and ultimately the behavior of foreign governments, organizations, groups, and individuals."³ A succinct PLA definition is more difficult to ascertain. However, the idea of psychological warfare appeared in PLA writing at least as early as 1963 and was officially described in the "Political Work Guidelines of the People's Liberation Army" in 2003.⁴ PLA psychological warfare is guided by the doctrinal principles of "uniting with friends and disintegrating enemies" and promoting China's rise within a new international order.⁵ Put simply, the PLA conducts psychological warfare to deter an enemy from taking actions unfavorable to PRC interests, while influencing them toward more favorable positions.⁶

Psychological warfare is not an abstract concept but instead a tangible activity executed constantly by the PLA. Psychological operations, therefore, are the practical application of psychological warfare. They are designed to seize decisive opportunity, identify and exploit enemy internal political divisions, target adversary value concepts, force divisions in alliances and coalitions, and reduce enemy confidence.⁷ Within this context, PLA military demonstrations and exercises in and around Taiwan generate valuable meaning for US military planners and foreign policy experts.

Rather than reviewing a wide range of actions in and around Taiwan, this paper presents People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) incursions into Taiwan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ) from 1 to 4 October 2021 as a case study in PLA psychological operations. During this four-day period, the PLAAF flew a record-setting 149 sorties into Taiwan's southwestern ADIZ, a 28-percent increase over the entire month of September, which held the previous monthly record.⁸ Moreover, a single force package on 4 October included 52 aircraft and set a record as the largest single PLAAF incursion in history.⁹ PLA demonstrations of this magnitude were clearly designed to deliver a message. Therefore, US military planners and foreign policy experts should discuss and interpret the purpose and intent behind PLA actions. Analyzing record-setting incursions through the lens of psychological operations provides just such an opportunity.

At least three elements associated with psychological operations were evident amid PLAAF incursions. First, the intrusions tap into key symbols and societal undercurrents related to value concepts that promote China's growing power. The island of Taiwan and airpower are historically significant symbols that induce feelings and emotions related to national strength.¹⁰ Second, PLAAF actions coincided with influential current events and garnered mass media attention. Linking historical symbols to present-day action shifted the global narrative toward PLA military power and countered narratives that were unfavorable to the PRC. Third, PLAAF incursions seized upon an opportunity inherent in the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) to create greater political division within the United States. Collectively, these elements demonstrate that record-setting PLAAF intrusions were PLA psychological operations that threaten the status quo without fighting.

The PLA's use of Taiwan and airpower as historical symbols, synchronization of influential current events and global media attention, and targeting of a strategic opportunity within the TRA indicate that PLAAF record-setting incursions into Taiwan's ADIZ from 1 to 4 October 2021 were psychological operations. As such, PLAAF incursions were executed to sow seeds of division and deter the United States from defending the island. In response, US military planners and foreign policy experts should maintain the strategically ambiguous nature of US-Taiwan relations and increase awareness of PLA psychological operations.

PLAAF Record-Setting Incursions: A PLA Psychological Operations Case Study

The idea of PLAAF incursions as psychological operations should not be surprising. Political warfare is a vital component of the PRC's current security strategy and foreign policy.¹¹ Since at least 1963, the PLA's Political Work Department (PWD) guidelines included giving "full play" to what has become known as the "Three Warfare": public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare.¹² Early PLA writing on the Three Warfare included psychological operations focused on disintegrating enemy activity and preventing an adversary's efforts to incite discord.¹³ Since 1963, the PLA has advanced the concept of psychological warfare considerably, officially introducing the concept in the revised "Political Work Guidelines of the People's Liberation Army" in 2003.¹⁴ By 2005, the PLA incorporated Three Warfare concepts, including psychological operations, into the PLA's education, training, and preparation for military struggle.¹⁵ The advancement of psychological operations is more than conceptual. The PWD, which reports directly to the Central Military Commission, and PLA Base 311 in Fuzhou are dedicated to employing psychological warfare.¹⁶

In addition to conceptually developing and organizing for psychological operations, the PLA has a history of conducting them in and around Taiwan. Base 311 is an operational political warfare command that applies psychological operations and propaganda against Taiwan.¹⁷ Research indicates that Base 311 leaders support the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) Taiwan Propaganda Leading Small Group and oversee at least six regiments responsible for psychological warfare and propaganda targeting public opinion on Taiwan.¹⁸ Moreover, the CCP has applied psychological warfare to intimidate Taiwan at times of tension or crisis, especially during Tsai Ing-wen's presidency.¹⁹ The PLA's conceptual development of psychological operations and history of targeting Taiwan serve a strategic purpose for the CCP.

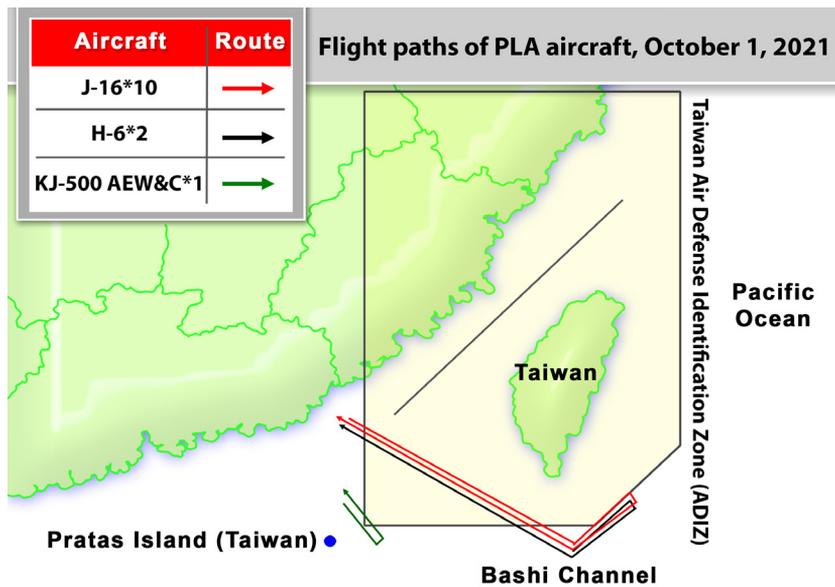
In general, the PLA conducts psychological warfare to "influence emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and behavior of foreign governments, organizations, groups, and individuals in a manner favorable to one's own political-military objectives."²⁰ Favorable terms include PRC doctrinal principles such as "uniting with friends and disintegrating enemies" and promoting China's rise within a new international order.²¹ Psychological operations also seize decisive opportunity to "undermine an adversary's combat power, resolve, and decision-making, while exacerbating internal disputes to cause the enemy to divide into factions."²² PLA experts Mark Stokes and Russell Hsiao note five distinct purposes of peacetime psychological operations; "identify and exploit divisions within an enemy's political establishment," "deter an adversary from taking actions inimical to Chinese interests," "ensure that PRC policies and military operations are cast in the proper light," target "an adversary's value concepts," and "seek to force divisions in alliances and coalitions and reduce confidence in an enemy's economy."²³ Within the contextual framework of influencing emotions, motives, and objective reasoning to achieve political-military ends, PLAAF incursions prove an instructive case study for US military planners and foreign policy experts.



Figure 1. Targets of PLA psychological operations

From 1 to 4 October 2021, the PLAAF flew 149 sorties into Taiwan's southwestern ADIZ.²⁴ At first glance, Chinese incursions into Taiwan's ADIZ are not particularly noteworthy; incursions happen almost daily, Taiwan's ADIZ is not sovereign airspace, and it overlaps with mainland China.²⁵ However, the sheer volume of sorties during this four-day window was staggering, clearly departing from normal operations. Moreover, the details surrounding PLAAF intrusions are valuable considerations for psychological operations. On 1 October, the PLAAF flew 13 aircraft through Taiwan's ADIZ, crossed the extended Taiwan Strait center line, continued to the back side of the island, and then returned via the same route.²⁶ On 4 October, the PLAAF flew 52 aircraft into Taiwan's ADIZ along a broad front, crossed the extended Taiwan Strait center line, and returned to mainland China.²⁷

In total, the four-day sortie count represented a 28-percent increase over the entire month of September, which held the previous monthly record for incursions at 116.²⁸ Additionally, the force package on 4 October included 52 aircraft, and set a record as the largest single PLAAF incursion in history.²⁹ It included two Shaanxi Y-8X maritime patrol aircraft, 12 Xian H-6 heavy bombers, 34 Shenyang J-16 multirole strike fighters, two Sukhoi Su-30 fighters, and a Shaanxi KJ-500 airborne early warning and control aircraft.³⁰ Through a lens of psychological operations, the target, sorties, and aircraft types take on important meaning for US military planners and foreign policy experts.



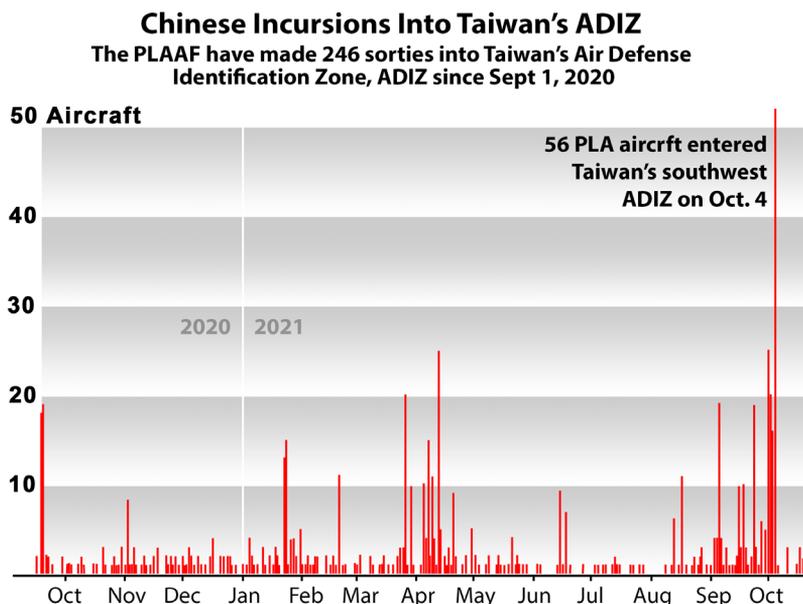
(Source: Ministry of National Defense Republic of China, "Air activities in the Southwestern ADIZ of R.O.C.," October 5, 2021; <https://www.mnd.gov.tw/Publish.aspx?SelectStyle=即時軍事動態&p=79139&title=國防消息>.)

Figure 2. Flight paths of PLA aircraft, 1 October 2021



(Source: Ministry of National Defense Republic of China, "Air activities in the Southwestern ADIZ of R.O.C.," October 5, 2021; <https://www.mnd.gov.tw/Publish.aspx?SelectStyle=即時軍事動態&p=79139&title=國防消息>.)

Figure 3. Flight paths of PLA aircraft, 4 October 2021



(Source: Gerry Doyle, Anand Katakam, Ben Blanchard, and Marco Hernandez, "The Skies Over the South China Sea," Reuters, October 20, 2021, <https://graphics.reuters.com/TAIWAN-CHINA/byvjrjmgvne/>.)

Figure 4. Chinese incursions into Taiwan's ADIZ

As psychological operations, PLAAF incursions leverage two important historical symbols that challenge societal undercurrents and advertise China's growing military prowess. The island of Taiwan and airpower are historically significant symbols that induce feelings and emotions related to national strength. According to the CCP, Taiwan is a symbol of China's power relative to external actors. In the 1660s, Taiwan was a Dutch colony.³¹ From 1683 to 1895, Taiwan paid homage to powerful dynasties from mainland China.³² Then, during the Sino-Japanese War, Japan took control of Taiwan, and it continued under Japanese rule from 1895 until 1945.³³ The CCP uses this history to further an important strategic narrative. Namely, when China was powerful, the mainland exerted control over the island. When the mainland was weakened at the hands of imperial powers, Taiwan was lost. The inconclusive nature of China's civil war further cements Taiwan as a symbol of national power and feeds a societal undercurrent of China's previously weakened position.

Although the CCP dominated mainland China, they were unable to exert control over Taiwan. During the Chinese Civil War, Mao Zedong and the PLA wrested control of mainland China from Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalists.³⁴ Chiang and the defeated Nationalists took refuge on Taiwan in 1949 and continued their fight against the CCP, attempting to reassert control over mainland

China. The Republic of China (ROC) used Taiwan as a redoubt from which to launch punitive attacks against the newly established PRC.³⁵ Mao and the PRC understood the threat a ROC-dominated Taiwan posed. As early as July 1949, Mao wrote to Zhou Enlai about the need to unify Taiwan with the mainland and gain control by the summer of 1950.³⁶ In an effort to finish the civil war and destroy what remained of the ROC Nationalists, the PRC massed troops across the Taiwan Strait.³⁷ However, the Korean War and Pres. Harry Truman's deployment of the 7th Fleet on 27 June 1950 deterred the PRC from taking further action across the Taiwan Strait.³⁸ Because Taiwan elicits feelings and emotions related to Chinese national power and the influence of foreign powers, it has become a symbol of China's power relative to the United States.

Taiwan's 70 years of de facto independence encourages the undercurrent of China's disadvantage at the hands of foreigners, specifically the US military. Since 1950, the United States has remained committed to the people of Taiwan, despite recognition of "One China" and vehement protests from the PRC.³⁹ US support for Taiwan has played a key role in deterring PRC aggression during all three of the Taiwan Strait Crises. In 1954, with Chiang challenging CCP authority on the mainland, Mao initiated an attempt to seize control of Taiwan. The PLA shelled the Kinmen islands in preparation for invasion.⁴⁰ The United States intervened on behalf of Taiwan, and the conflict ended in a cease-fire. In 1958, the PRC blockaded Taiwan and bombarded the Kinmen islands in a second attempt to subjugate Taiwan.⁴¹ Once again, the United States defended Taiwan by sending its army and navy to escort and protect ROC ships.⁴² Then, in 1996, the PRC conducted a series of surface-to-air missile tests and massed 150,000 troops in Fujian province across the Taiwan Strait.⁴³ As tension escalated, Pres. Bill Clinton sent the USS *Nimitz* into Taiwan waters along with the USS *Independence*.⁴⁴ In each instance of heightened tension, PRC attempts to gain control over Taiwan failed primarily due to US military involvement.

Rather than distancing themselves from Taiwan as a symbol of China's limited power, the CCP has embraced it. During the 19th National Congress in 2017, Xi Jinping highlighted that Taiwan "remains part of historical China" and the CCP "will never allow the historical tragedy of national division to repeat itself."⁴⁵ Xi's speech included resolving "the Taiwan question to realize China's complete reunification" as "the shared aspiration of all Chinese people."⁴⁶ He echoed this sentiment at the CCP Centenary Address in 2021, "resolving the Taiwan question and realizing China's complete reunification is a historic mission and an unshakable commitment of the Communist Party of China."⁴⁷ In addition, the PRC Constitution states "Taiwan is part of the sacred territory of the People's Republic of

China.”⁴⁸ Through history and rhetoric, the CCP has become inexorably tied to Taiwan as a fundamental undercurrent of national and military power.

The undercurrent of Taiwan as a symbol of China's national and military power is recognized internally and externally. In *Why Taiwan*, Alan Wachman asserts that “failing to take back Taiwan dooms China to less than great power status.”⁴⁹ As a symbol of Chinese power, the PRC cannot become a truly powerful nation without exerting control over Taiwan. Zhang Wenmu, a professor with the Institute of International Strategy at Beijing's University of Aeronautics and Astronautics, states, “the Taiwan issue still embodies a contest for power between China and the US.”⁵⁰ In the DOD's 2020 “Annual Report to Congress on China,” the United States similarly recognizes a fundamental challenge for the PRC to achieve the “rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” by reuniting with Taiwan.⁵¹ Although Taiwan is currently a symbol of China's limited national power and military weakness, a subjugated Taiwan would elevate perceptions of PRC power domestically and internationally.

PLAAF record-setting incursions from 1 to 4 October targeted Taiwan specifically because it elicits feelings and emotions of Chinese vulnerability. As psychological operations, PLAAF incursions challenge societal undercurrents of weakness and showcase PLA strength in the face of adversity. Psychological operations build on the foundation that is already present by attaching to an idea.⁵² In this case, PLAAF incursions attach to the idea of overcoming outside influences and promoting China's rise as a powerful nation. Flying 149 sorties into Taiwan's ADIZ in less than 96 hours overtly displays that the PLA can bring overwhelming power to bear in and around Taiwan. As the PLA demonstrates greater military power around Taiwan, there is an opportunity for the symbolism and associated undercurrent to change. Instead of symbolizing China's relative weakness compared to the United States, Taiwan advances the narrative of China's growing military power. As feelings and emotions of weakness transition to thoughts of growing national power and military strength, the undercurrent surrounding Taiwan can shift from one of US dominance to the inevitable rise of China. If China is to be seen as a national power peer of the United States, Taiwan is a remarkably useful symbol through which to communicate that change.

Taiwan is also a valuable symbol through which to challenge the United States' willingness to fight. If the size of the PLA compared to Taiwan on paper is not enough, record-setting incursions showcase Taiwan's inability to compete with PRC military capabilities. If ROC forces are unable to defend against a strong PLA, the US commitment remains Taiwan's best hope of maintaining independence from the CCP. No doubt PLAAF actions are intended to threaten Taiwan, but they also challenge US commitments by reinforcing the PRC's willingness to

fight. The shelling of the Kinmen islands and massing of troops in the 1950s established that the CCP was ready and willing to invade. As long as Taiwan retains de facto independence, the CCP must reaffirm that willingness. In March 2005, the PRC passed the Anti-Secession Law, which authorizes the use of force “in the event of a Taiwanese declaration of independence.”⁵³ In a 2017 speech, Xi implied the PRC will use any means necessary to achieve control over Taiwan by 2049.⁵⁴ PLAAF incursions are a tangible representation of the CCP’s commitment to fight for Taiwan and the strength Beijing now possesses relative to foreign powers. Taiwan is just one of the symbols PLAAF actions leveraged.

PLA record-setting incursions also employed airpower as a symbol of China’s growing military capability, undermining US historical combat advantages. Over the years, airpower played a meaningful if not decisive role in Taiwan’s defense and elicits similar feelings and emotions. As China’s civil war concluded on the mainland in July 1949, “PLA intelligence analysts estimated the Nationalists had 200-250 combat aircraft to defend against invasion.”⁵⁵ To gain air superiority, “PLA armaments plan called for a flying force of 300-350 combat airplanes.”⁵⁶ In 1949, the CCP did not have an independent airpower component and relied almost entirely on Russia for aircraft and training. It was not until May 1950 that the PLA “graduated its first class of flying professionals.”⁵⁷ The class included 89 pilots, 20 navigators, and 107 ground personnel to fly and support 30 fighters, 30 fighter-bombers, and 20 bombers.⁵⁸ The CCP was unable to generate the airpower necessary to launch an invasion; therefore, US airpower provided an effective deterrent.

In August and September of 1958, airpower again played a prominent role deterring the CCP from invasion. Along with US Army and Navy support at sea, ROC forces achieved dominance in the air. On 12 September 1958, ROC pilots flying American-made F-86 Sabres shot down a flight of PLA MiG-17 jets, “splashing four of them into the ocean with the new Sidewinder missile.”⁵⁹ Nationalist pilots proved adept at destroying CCP airpower, amassing “33 enemy kills in return for the loss of four of their own” in just a few days.⁶⁰ The CCP’s inability to achieve air superiority ensured that even the Kinmen islands remained under ROC control. By 6 October, US support and ROC airpower had forced Mao to back down, and he announced a cease-fire.⁶¹

As tensions increased in 1995 and 1996, airpower again came to the fore. This time conflict came on the heels of the Gulf War, where the United States displayed unparalleled command of the air. The 1991 Gulf War illustrated to the PRC how advanced US military capabilities and operational concepts could make an entire country vulnerable.⁶² The PLA was keenly aware of US airpower and its role in achieving military objectives.⁶³ In 1996, the United States came to Taiwan’s defense by deploying the USS *Nimitz*, an aircraft carrier, through the Taiwan Strait.⁶⁴ Each

time the PRC threatened invasion, airpower was prominent. Today, airpower continues to represent the gap between PLA and US military capabilities, eliciting feelings and emotions that harken back to foreign powers taking advantage of a weak China. To shift the symbolic meaning of airpower and change the associated societal undercurrent, the PLA chose to communicate through airpower.

PLAAF incursions showcase growing PLA military capability while simultaneously undermining US advantages. Considering China had 17 total aircraft in 1949, the sheer number of aircraft in the PLAAF by 2021 is remarkable.⁶⁵ Incursions from 1 to 4 October included 149 sorties over 72 hours, and a single force package of 52 aircraft.⁶⁶ The Y-8X maritime patrol aircraft, H-6 heavy bomber variant, J-16 strike fighters, Su-30 fighters, and a KJ-500 airborne early warning and control aircraft have all been fielded and modernized in the past 30 years. H-6 bombers can carry and launch cruise missiles.⁶⁷ One variant, the H-6K, can carry up to six land-attack cruise missiles.⁶⁸ J-16 multirole strike fighters incorporate modern avionics, upgraded electronically-scanned airborne radars, electronic warfare and electronic countermeasures capabilities with the ability to carry modern air-to-air and air-to-ground weapons.⁶⁹ Su-30 fighters show off enhanced avionics, advanced radar, and a retractable refueling probe with drastically improved air-to-ground capabilities.⁷⁰ The Su-30 can deliver both “smart” and “dumb” weapons and munitions.⁷¹ Finally, the KJ-500 integrates airborne early warning and control aircraft, enhancing the PLAAF’s ability to detect, track, and target threats under varying weather conditions.⁷² Modern weapon systems and capabilities were on full display during the fighter, bomber, patrol, and command-and-control aircraft incursions.

Through airpower, PRC psychological operations communicate the ability to bring dominant military power to bear in and around Taiwan, countering the undercurrent of US strength. The message PLAAF incursions communicate is clear. Gone are the days of asymmetric airpower advantages that allowed US political leaders to defend Taiwan at a relatively low cost. Instead, the PLAAF poses a credible threat to US air superiority and will impose great costs on defenders of the island.

This is particularly important because both the United States and China believe that an invasion, or credible threat of invasion, requires China to compete with US airpower. PLA war planners break down the Taiwan invasion into three phases, the first of which is a blockade coupled with bombing operations.⁷³ PLAAF air strikes are necessary to weaken Taiwan’s defenses and political resistance to occupation.⁷⁴ Given these requirements, it is appropriate to conclude that China is unlikely to invade Taiwan without a reasonable prospect that the United States could be deterred or delayed.⁷⁵ Not only does the PLAAF’s display of air-

power make the threat of invasion more credible, it challenges the undercurrent of US military superiority and sows seeds of doubt in the minds of US military planners and foreign policy experts about the relative costs and value of Taiwan.

The PLA's manipulation of symbols and use of societal undercurrents are informative. By attaching PLAAF actions to societal undercurrents, the PRC confronts feelings of Chinese national weakness and creates uncertainty regarding US military capabilities and resolve. Their actions then shed positive light on China's increasing military and national power requiring would-be defenders of Taiwan to pause and take notice. From a psychological operations perspective, symbols are not the only element PLAAF actions leverage.

The PLAAF's record-setting incursions were also expertly timed to garner mass media attention. PLA actions coincided with influential current events, linking historical symbols to present-day action. Psychological operations must be attached to current events because the message "would not reach anybody if it tried to base itself on historical facts."⁷⁶ Several very important strategic events took place related to Taiwan in September and October 2021. On 22 September, Taiwan bid for Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) membership, attempting to reduce reliance on China while increasing international standing and opportunity.⁷⁷ This was a clear move away from reunification with the PRC and toward greater independence. That same month, the USS *Carl Vinson* Carrier Strike Group passed through the Bashi Channel and later operated with Japanese defense forces in the South China Sea.⁷⁸ These two events coincided with major national holidays in both China and Taiwan. Each year on 1 October, the PRC recognizes National Day, which celebrates establishment of the PRC. And, on 10 October each year, Taiwan celebrates its own National Day. With Taiwan's CPTPP bid, ongoing US military operations, and National Day celebrations surrounding the intrusions, the timing was ideal for capturing global attention.

PLAAF incursions leveraged current events to increase the level of media attention and reach a much broader audience beyond Taiwan. The PLAAF's daily incursions into Taiwan's ADIZ do not receive international news coverage, and they are not viewed by millions of people worldwide. However, record-setting incursions into Taiwan's ADIZ from 1 to 4 October were something entirely different. PLA-orchestrated psychological operations translated into time and attention on almost every major news source, including Cable News Network, Fox News, British Broadcasting Corporation, China Central Television, China's Global Television Network, and Al Jazeera.⁷⁹ A basic Google search reveals dozens of stories across major and minor news sources. The amount of television coverage, internet content, social media reactions, and news articles written about

the incursions is staggering. Regional experts and critics are still deciphering the meaning and purpose of the PLAAF's record-setting incursions.⁸⁰

As psychological operations, the timeliness and media attention associated with PLAAF incursions served two purposes. First, it shifted the global narrative favorably for the PRC by usurping media cycle broadcasts of Taiwan and US geostrategic actions. Mass media no longer focused on Taiwan's CPTPP bid or US–Japan freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea. Instead, experts and pundits began talking about the PLA's increased military capabilities and disagreements about whether the PRC would invade Taiwan. Second, PLAAF military demonstrations directly challenged Taiwan's move toward greater independence by threatening the use of overwhelming force. PLA actions and their intended results exemplify psychological operations. PLAAF incursions employed symbols, timing, and mass media to shift the global narrative toward a more favorable position for the PRC while deterring adversaries from taking actions inimical to Chinese interests.

Finally, as psychological operations, PLAAF incursions seize on opportunity inherent in the TRA to generate political division and change behaviors without fighting. Neither the PRC nor the United States want war to determine the fate of Taiwan. Both parties have avoided war over Taiwan since 1949. In 2017, Xi noted, "We must uphold the principles of 'peaceful reunification' and 'one country, two systems,' work for the peaceful development of cross-Strait relations and advance the process toward the peaceful reunification of China."⁸¹ In 2021, Xi again stated, "We will uphold the one-China principle and the 1992 Consensus and advance peaceful national reunification."⁸² The United States shares this desire for a peaceful resolution. The TRA explicitly states the future of Taiwan is to be "determined by peaceful means."⁸³ Instead of kinetic action, the PRC deliberately employs psychological operations, such as the PLAAF incursions, to provoke political division over the TRA and change the status quo.

From 1913 through 1978, the United States formally recognized the ROC in Taiwan as the governing authority of China.⁸⁴ By the 1960s, this position was untenable. It became clear that "America's China policy of the 1950s and 1960s could not be sustained."⁸⁵ Taiwan was most certainly not the government of mainland China, and China was most certainly not the ruling authority over Taiwan.⁸⁶ In response to this untenable position, the United States sought a middle ground that recognized the PRC on the mainland, while maintaining support for the ROC on Taiwan. This tension bore the Three Communiques and the TRA, which recognizes the PRC's position and leaves the Taiwan question to be resolved through "peaceful means."⁸⁷

Since 1979, the United States has recognized only “One China,” the PRC.⁸⁸ Despite this recognition, the United States has maintained a strategic relationship with Taiwan through the TRA and subsequent “Six Assurances.” The TRA states that “peace and stability in the area are in the political, security, and economic interests of the US” and maintains “the capacity of the US to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of the people on Taiwan.”⁸⁹ In 1982, the United States further committed to the somewhat nebulous relationship by reaffirming the TRA and informing Taiwan that the United States “would not pressure Taiwan to enter into negotiations with China” and “would not formally recognize Chinese sovereignty over Taiwan.”⁹⁰ While the TRA and the “Six Assurances” cement US interests and position regarding the people of Taiwan, at no point does it emphatically state the United States will defend Taiwan. The United States’ simultaneous recognition of “One China” and support for the people of Taiwan appear to be at cross purposes.

PLAAF incursions target the seemingly ambiguous nature of the US–PRC–Taiwan relationship to foment disagreement among US military planners and foreign policy experts on whether the United States should defend the people of Taiwan. In 2014, Congressional testimony evaluating the US policy on Taiwan noted calls from the academic community for changes to the TRA.⁹¹ The hearings specified two opposing groups; those who believe the TRA “needs to be weakened” and those who say it “needs to be strengthened.”⁹² More recently, arguments between TRA critics and traditionalists have become “increasingly heated,” with prominent members of Congress taking sides.⁹³ Less than a month after the incursions, Admiral James Stavridis furthered the divide with a piece in *Time*, stating “the US urgently needs to clarify its strategic approach to the region.”⁹⁴ By their own account, PLA psychological operations target enemy “value concepts,” and “force divisions in alliances and coalitions.”⁹⁵ Clearly, PLAAF incursions sowed political discord within the United States: PLA psychological operations seek to create divisions, undermine US resolve, and enable the PRC to challenge US policy.

Ultimately, PLAAF incursions provide useful evidence of PLA efforts to threaten the status quo without fighting. The incursions illustrate that psychological warfare is not just conceptual; they include tangible operations executed by the PLA to achieve strategic objectives. Utilizing symbols to elicit feelings related to China’s growing national power, shifting societal undercurrents and global narratives, sowing doubt about US military capabilities and political commitment to Taiwan, and fomenting political division are evident during the PLAAF’s record-setting incursions from 1 to 4 October 2021. In response, US military planners

and foreign policy experts should pause and take notice, not just of military capabilities and China's growing power, but also of PLA psychological operations and their underlying intent.

Recommendations

US military planners and foreign policy experts must support the strategic ambiguity and flexibility inherent in the TRA rather than succumbing to PRC attempts to redefine the US–Taiwan relationship. PLA psychological operations that target the United States and Taiwan are evidence that the current relationship benefits the United States, not the PRC. The PRC would not conduct psychological operations to change the status quo if it benefited them. Strategic ambiguity within the TRA is in the best interest of the United States and Taiwan because it has worked well for 40-plus years. The TRA discourages Taiwan from declaring independence by providing support only “in the event of an unprovoked attack from the mainland,” while deterring the PRC from asserting control by threatening US military intervention.⁹⁶ In addition, the TRA allows US policy makers flexibility to adjust in real time as events unfold.⁹⁷ Under these conditions, Taiwan retains *de facto* independence, the PRC is deterred from invasion, the United States maintains political flexibility, and the undercurrent of US military strength is reinforced.

Redefining the US–Taiwan relationship would play directly into the CCP's hands by changing the status quo. On the one hand, a move away from supporting Taiwan would give the PRC freedom to employ whatever means necessary to achieve reunification, undermining US strength and destroying a key regional partner along the way. On the other hand, a strong commitment to Taiwan would irreconcilably ruin what remains of the US–PRC relationship and may “entangle the US in Taiwan independence.”⁹⁸ Moreover, unambiguously committing to defend Taiwan may have unintended consequences. Instead of attempting to change US behavior through psychological operations, the PRC may perceive war as inevitable and accelerate conflict. Finally, even if the United States clarifies a strategic position, there is no guarantee how the PRC will receive that message. As several regional experts suggest, “ambiguity is inevitable.”⁹⁹

While ambiguity is inevitable, US messaging need not be. US actions and messages have been relatively consistent over time, balancing Taiwan's *de facto* independence and PRC engagement since the 1940s. Instead of redefining the relationship, the United States should continue to support Taiwan in accordance with the TRA. US military shows of force, presence missions, arms sales, and political engagement through the American Institutes must all be sustained. Continued support and investment reinforce the US commitment to Taiwan internally and externally. There

is cause for optimism as Pres. Joe Biden has confirmed US support for Taiwan on multiple occasions. On 22 October 2021 during a CNN Town Hall, Biden stated the United States would defend Taiwan and has a commitment to do so.¹⁰⁰ Despite recent calls for strategic clarity, it does not appear PLA psychological operations have weakened the US commitment to Taiwan. However, there is always a risk of greater division among policy makers and US military planners.

To mitigate that risk, planners and policy experts have a responsibility to increase awareness of PLA psychological operations and their application. Knowledge of the PLA's use of history, symbolism, timing, and media attention to influence US politics is essential for effective military and foreign policy decision making. A valuable body of research exists, but it requires time and attention to understand through the PLA's lens. Planners and policy makers that understand PLA psychological operations can prevent strategic policy blunders that challenge the PRC and endanger countless lives. Moreover, awareness of PLA psychological operations enhances strategic planning by highlighting key objectives for the CCP and unveiling the means through which they choose to accomplish them.

Finally, an opportunity exists for the United States to counter PLA psychological operations. Harnessing symbolism, current events, and mass media to support the people of Taiwan can align US policy makers, military planners, and the domestic population. If the CCP intends to create division, the United States must respond with unity by fostering an undercurrent of domestic and international support for Taiwan. Effective US counter psychological operations would highlight solidarity with Taiwan, the long-term relationship benefits, and the current risks posed by the PRC, all while retaining the ambiguity that has effectively deterred the PRC. For the US domestic audience, President Lee Teng-hui's speech at Cornell in 1995 provides a useful illustration.¹⁰¹ He noted that Taiwan was "a small, free, liberal democracy facing a much larger, more powerful, tyrannical adversary."¹⁰² By framing Taiwan in this way, the United States can shift from a position of division to one of unity and commitment in the face of PRC threats and aggression.

PLAAF incursions were undoubtedly designed to target the United States. However, this is just one example, and psychological operations are seldom limited to a single operation or a single audience. Compelling arguments can be made that PLA psychological operations are designed to influence the Taiwanese population and political leaders, spur nationalism within the mainland's domestic populace, and to fuel international doubts about support. Many of these audiences have already been written about and others provide an excellent opportunity for future study. As an example, Robert Wang suggests PLAAF incursions were designed to "fuel doubts about US commitments to Taiwan," "isolate and undermine

the morale of the people of Taiwan,” and “coerce the people of Taiwan into accepting Beijing’s formula for political reunification.”¹⁰³ Wang’s argument is illustrative of many arguments today, and while not entirely incorrect, is too limited in scope. PLA psychological operations are much more than intimidation. They attempt to alter symbols, change societal undercurrents and challenge previously held assumptions. Future studies of PLA psychological operations must build and shape the understanding of psychological operations by applying PLA conceptual approaches across a variety of audiences and situations.

Conclusion

The PLAAF’s record-setting 149 incursions into Taiwan’s ADIZ from 1 to 4 October 2021 are an example of PLA psychological operations designed to challenge the status quo without fighting. PLAAF incursions utilized symbols to elicit emotions related to Chinese national power, shift societal undercurrents and global narratives, sow doubt about US military capabilities, and intensify US political division regarding Taiwan. Rather than succumbing to PRC attempts to redefine the US–Taiwan relationship, US military planners and foreign policy experts should support the current strategic ambiguity and flexibility inherent in the TRA.

Moreover, US military planners and foreign policy experts must take notice, not just of military capabilities and China’s growing power, but of PLA psychological operations and their underlying intent. By increasing awareness of PLA psychological operations, planners and experts can begin to recognize PRC strategic intentions, increase political solidarity, and avoid strategic policy blunders. In addition, the United States should counter PLA psychological operations by harnessing symbolism, current events, and mass media to extol the value of the TRA as an effective way to preserve the freedom of the people of Taiwan. Aligning US policy makers, military planners, and the domestic population thwarts PRC attempts to create division by fostering doubts about domestic and international support for Taiwan. 🌟

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