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Editors' Note

It is a stubborn, immutable fact of history that peace is never self-executing, and security—particularly in the Indo-Pacific—must be cultivated with vigilance, ingenuity, and resolve. This thematic issue of the *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* (vol. 8, no. 1 [Spring 2025]) has been curated and edited in collaboration with the Global Taiwan Institute (GTI), a Washington, DC-based think tank. In this issue we confront the exigencies of Taiwan's defense—and, by extension, the imperatives of regional stability—through a series of incisive articles that leave no room for complacency in the face of Beijing's increasing pressure on the democratic island.

LtGen Wallace “Chip” Gregson, USMC (Ret.), opens the discussion with a compelling case for Taiwan's civil society engagement as a force multiplier in national defense, offering the thesis that whole-of-society mobilization is as critical to deterrence as conventional military assets. In his article, guest co-editor John Dotson of GTI offers an overview of Taiwan's evolving defense posture from 2000 to the present, sketching out the policy debates within Taiwan itself—debates conducted as Taiwan faces an ever-growing threat from China, as well as frictions with US interlocutors over the need to adopt a more “asymmetric” defense posture.

Dr. Kerry K. Gershaneck and Eric Chan provide an unflinching analysis of China's political warfare, the insidious campaign that both precedes and will outlast any kinetic engagement. Their assessment dovetails with Dr. Gregory J. Moore's forensic examination of Xi Jinping's strategic calculus—a sobering reminder that the CCP's Taiwan policy is not a capricious gambit but a meticulously measured trajectory toward forcible unification.

In a stroke of both irony and strategic brilliance, CAPT Andrew Faulhaber, US Army, turns Maoist doctrine against its progenitors, outlining a scenario in which Taiwan—through protracted insurgency—could force Beijing into a quagmire of its own making.

The volume's perspectives are punctuated by a critical examination of cognitive warfare from Commander Jeremy (Yen-ming) Chen of the ROC Navy, whose appraisal of information operations in the Taiwan Strait reveals a battle already well underway. Meanwhile, Dr. Jared M. McKinney's review of recent scholarship on cross-Strait relations serves as a reminder that theoretical constructs, however erudite, must withstand the brutal reality of power politics.

Finally, in a pair of trenchant commentaries, K. Tristan Tang assesses the PLA's persistent incursions into Taiwan's airspace, arguing that these maneuvers signify a fundamental shift in China's operational doctrine. Finally, Maj Nicholas Stockdale, USAF, offers a rigorous analysis of the competing air orders-of-battle in a Taiwan

contingency, reinforcing the notion that air superiority remains the linchpin of any successful defense.

Taken together, these essays form not merely a compendium of strategic analysis but a call to intellectual arms. The challenge before Taiwan and its allies is neither distant nor hypothetical; it is immediate, exigent, and fraught with consequences that extend far beyond the Taiwan Strait. It is our hope that the insights herein contribute, however modestly, to the clarity and resolve required in this precarious moment.

—the Editors

Taiwan Can Strengthen the Human Component of its Armed Forces through Greater Civil Society Engagement

LTGEN WALLACE “CHIP” GREGSON, USMC, RET.

Abstract

Taiwan’s security is not solely a military challenge; it is a national imperative that demands whole-of-society engagement. This article argues that Taiwan must leverage its strengths as a technologically advanced and highly networked society to modernize its defense doctrine and strengthen the human component of its armed forces. Drawing on historical lessons from island defense and the transformation of warfare through technological revolutions, the article underscores the necessity of adapting military doctrine to contemporary challenges. Taiwan faces an adversary that excels at information warfare, asymmetric strategies, and long-term strategic coercion. As Ukraine’s experience demonstrates, civil-military integration and the mobilization of private-sector innovation are critical in modern conflict. By engaging a broader segment of society—including youth, academia, and the private sector—Taiwan can build a more resilient national defense. Hard power remains the foundation of deterrence, but its effectiveness depends on a dynamic, forward-looking doctrine shaped by the entire nation.

Nations make war the way they make wealth. In both endeavors, diverging from proven ways leads to disaster.

Taiwan faces both a challenge and an opportunity: the challenge is well known, the opportunity less so. Taiwan is uniquely positioned to capitalize on the epochal shifts reshaping both the global economy and modern warfare. Its security forces have been largely isolated for nearly five decades, yet during that time, Taiwan has led in developing new ways to generate wealth. The opportunity lies in applying these innovations to its defense strategy—enhancing its ability to deter and, if necessary, defeat aggression. This must be a whole-of-nation effort; the armed forces and security structure cannot do it alone, and every citizen of Taiwan has a stake in the island’s survival.

Change is constant, often disruptive and disorienting—but the scale of today’s transformation rivals that of the agricultural revolution 12,000 years ago, when nomadic tribes formed settled communities and, inevitably, made war. In the eighteenth

century, the Industrial Revolution enabled mass production of war materials, ushering in an era where mass destruction became the prevailing method of warfare. Taiwan must now adapt to the ongoing revolution in information and technology to ensure its security in this new era.

We are now grappling with the revolution in information and its application to both war—a political condition—and warfare—the conduct of armed combat. In 1956, Nikita Khrushchev declared to Americans, “We will bury you,” and followed this in 1957 with the launch of Sputnik. At the time, another shift was occurring largely unnoticed: by the late 1950s and early 1960s, knowledge workers in the United States began to outnumber factory workers for the first time, signaling a profound transformation in the nature of wealth creation. This development, later termed the “knowledge economy,” ushered in an era of rapid expansion in information processing, computerization, big data analytics, and automation. Developed economies now rely more on intellectual capital and specialized skills, and less on traditional industrial production.

This shift has also redefined the battlespace, extending beyond the traditional domains of air, land, sea, and undersea warfare to include space, cyberspace, the electromagnetic spectrum, and the information realm. The consequences have been far-reaching: enhanced surveillance capabilities, precision-strike weapons, and increasingly sophisticated disinformation campaigns designed to shape public perception and manipulate elections.

In such an environment, adaptation is not optional—it is imperative. General Charles Krulak, during his tenure as Commandant of the US Marine Corps, illustrated this point with a historical lesson. In a 1997 speech to the National Press Club—well known to many Navy and Marine officers—Krulak recounted the story of the Roman consul Publius Varus. Having previously triumphed over Germanic tribes, Varus entered battle again in 9 CE, expecting the same results. However, this time, the Germanic warriors employed asymmetric tactics that confounded the Romans, leading to the annihilation of three legions in the Teutoburg Forest. The Germanic tribes had adapted; the Romans had not. Varus’ final words are said to have been *Ne Cras, Ne Cras*—“Not like yesterday.”

Consul Varus was not the first—and will not be the last—commander to be outmaneuvered by an enemy that adapted faster and more effectively to shifting battlefield conditions. His story serves as a cautionary tale for military leaders: complacency in one’s own capabilities is a grave mistake, and failing to adapt invites disaster.

General Krulak delivered his remarks to a nation, and a national security establishment, still riding high on its victory in the First Gulf War (August 1990–February 1991). The overwhelming success of that campaign fostered a sense of confidence—perhaps even overconfidence—within the US defense community.

Krulak understood that to break through bureaucratic inertia, he had to craft a story that resonated with policymakers, force planners, and budget officials across the US government. He also knew that America's potential adversaries were studying the Gulf War just as closely, analyzing every detail to identify weaknesses and develop counterstrategies.

Taiwan and the Historical Legacy of Island Defense

China has long waged campaigns of propaganda, intimidation, and subversion against Taiwan. These efforts aim not only to weaken Taiwan's resolve but also to persuade its allies—especially the United States—that China's eventual annexation of the island is inevitable.¹ Under Xi Jinping, Beijing's rhetoric has grown more pointed, suggesting that force may be used not just in response to a Taiwanese declaration of independence but to compel unification outright. During his summit with President Joe Biden in San Francisco in November 2023, Xi reportedly stated, "Look, peace is . . . all well and good, but at some point, we need to move toward resolution more generally."²

Conventional wisdom holds that China's geographic expanse, economic power, and massive military buildup make its victory over Taiwan a foregone conclusion. History suggests otherwise. In 1940, Britain stood alone. Nazi Germany had overrun France, and the British Expeditionary Force had been forced into retreat. Though the evacuation at Dunkirk saved many soldiers, the British Army needed time to rearm and rebuild. Germany appeared unstoppable—yet it failed to achieve the air and sea superiority necessary to invade the British Isles.

A similar story unfolded in the Mediterranean. Malta, a British possession consisting of three small islands, was left with only six outdated biplanes for defense as the British homeland came under attack. Circumstances and sheer resolve allowed Malta to hold out, while the nearby island of Crete fell to German forces. Against the odds, Malta remained a British stronghold—proof that determined defenders can defy expectations.

Taiwan had a similar experience in World War II. The United States initially planned to invade Taiwan in support of its wartime ally, the Republic of China. Code-named *Operation Causeway*, the invasion would have been the largest amphibious campaign of the Pacific Theater and the most extensive sea-air-land engagement in history. However, deterred by the potential costs and complexities,

¹ John Dotson, *The Chinese Communist Party's Political Warfare Directed Against Taiwan: Overview and Analysis* (Washington: Global Taiwan Institute, (May 2024), <https://globaltaiwan.org/>.

² Matt Pottinger, ed. *The Boiling Moat: Urgent Steps to Defend Taiwan* (Washington: Hoover Institution Press, 2024), 8.

the United States and its allies opted instead for the invasions of the Philippines, Iwo To (then Iwo Jima), and ultimately Okinawa.

The battle for Okinawa would become the largest sea-air-land engagement of the war. Imperial Japanese Army Lieutenant General Mitsuru Ushijima's mission was to prolong the ground battle as much as possible, buying time for Japanese air forces—bolstered by waves of suicide pilots—to inflict heavy losses on the US Navy invasion fleet. He executed this strategy with ruthless efficiency. On the ground, his forces made extensive use of *reverse slope defense*, a tactic in which defenders position themselves on the far side of a hill or ridge rather than directly facing an approaching enemy. This technique not only concealed defensive positions but also forced attackers to crest the ridge, exposing themselves to concentrated fire at close range. The effectiveness of this method contributed significantly to the brutal attrition of American forces.

At one point during the battle, Admiral Chester Nimitz traveled to Okinawa to meet with Lieutenant General Simon Bolivar Buckner, the US Army commander overseeing ground operations. Nimitz, frustrated by the slow progress against the well-entrenched Japanese defenses, urged Buckner to push forward. Buckner, in turn, questioned the admiral's qualifications to dictate ground combat strategy. Nimitz's response was blunt: he was the one “losing a ship-and-a-half a day,” and if Buckner did not accelerate the offensive, he would be replaced.

Although China's military power may seem overwhelming, history demonstrates that well-defended islands are formidable targets. Taiwan's leadership possesses the means to strengthen its security, but it must act decisively. Diplomatic, economic, and informational tools all play a role in national defense, but they cannot substitute for hard power. Deterrence depends on military strength, and Taiwan's efforts must contend with both the rapid evolution of warfare and the institutional inertia of doctrine—both formal and informal.

The Tragic Costs of Drawing the Wrong Lessons: The French Military Experience in the Twentieth Century

Other examples of the consequences of failing to adapt have been far more costly. In *The Seeds of Disaster: The Development of French Army Doctrine, 1919–39*, Robert Doughty (Colonel, US Army) examines how strategic and tactical thought in the French Army evolved from the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 through the early days of World War II. The French attributed their defeat in 1870 to a lack of aggressiveness and an inability to maneuver effectively. Determined not to repeat that mistake, they developed a doctrine that emphasized rigorous training, unit-level *esprit de corps*, and an offensive mind-set built around mobility, maneuver, and attack.

Yet in the years between 1870 and 1914, technological advances fundamentally changed the nature of the battlefield. Improved steel production led to more powerful artillery, while the introduction of poisonous gas and the replacement of black powder with cordite and smokeless powder made warfare deadlier than ever. The battlefield of World War I became a lethal environment, defined by massed artillery barrages, interlocking machine-gun fire, and the widespread use of chemical weapons. Maneuver—once seen as the key to victory—had become a near-suicidal endeavor.

The result was catastrophic. French military doctrine, built on an outdated understanding of warfare, persisted far into the conflict. The cost was paid in blood. Infantry units were repeatedly ordered “over the top,” charging directly into entrenched positions under withering fire. The casualties speak for themselves: out of a military-age population of 13.35 million, France mobilized 8.41 million troops. Of these, 1,382,400 were killed or went missing, and another 3,549,880 were wounded. In total, nearly 60 percent of the French Army and 35 percent of the eligible population became casualties—a staggering price for failing to recognize the reality of modern war.

In response to the catastrophic failures of World War I, the French Army adopted a methodical warfare strategy during the interwar years—one centered on fortifications designed to blunt initial enemy offensives and inflict heavy casualties. These defenses, once they had absorbed the enemy’s first assault, would serve as fire bases for counterattacking forces advancing deliberately under the cover of rolling artillery barrages and armored support. Crucially, French planners deemed the Ardennes Forest impassable and thus saw no need to extend their man-made fortifications to the east—a strategic miscalculation of the highest order.

France, like much of the world, failed to grasp the full implications of technological advancements between the wars. The rapid evolution of three critical technologies—internal combustion engines, aircraft design, and radio communications (or “wireless” as it was called at the time)—should have dispelled the illusion of static defense. Instead, these innovations transformed warfare, vastly expanding the battle space and enabling unprecedented coordination of forces across land, sea, and air. Technology had returned maneuver to the battlefield with a vengeance, and France would pay the price for ignoring it.

The Challenge of Doctrine

Military doctrine defines how armed forces contribute to campaigns, major operations, battles, and engagements. A coherent doctrine clarifies what military means should be employed, how forces should be structured, where they should be deployed, and how different branches and services should coordinate their efforts. “Joint doc-

trine” extends this concept to multinational and interservice operations, ensuring a unified approach to warfare. Whatever its limitations, doctrine is an essential framework for any large organization—particularly one charged with the application of violence in defense of national security.

Doctrine, however, is only as effective as the assumptions underpinning it. When those assumptions go unchallenged, doctrine becomes obsolete—often with disastrous consequences. As history has repeatedly shown, failure to adapt doctrine to new realities invites strategic failure. Thus, revising and refining military doctrine is not merely an administrative exercise but a strategic imperative. This process must encompass both *formal doctrine*—the officially codified principles governing military operations—and *informal* or *cultural doctrine*—the ingrained habits, traditions, and unspoken assumptions that shape military thinking and decision-making. Cultural doctrine, often more deeply entrenched than formal doctrine, can be the most resistant to change and the most insidious when flawed.

A thorough reassessment of doctrine presents a significant opportunity. It must not be confined to closed circles of defense officials but should draw insight from across the government and the broader national security community. Moreover, it should involve civilian institutions, including universities and the private sector, leveraging the high rate of civil participation that has historically strengthened U.S. defense innovation. Deterrence cannot function in secrecy; doctrine that is openly debated and widely understood—both within and beyond the military—can serve as a powerful tool of strategic signaling. As many young minds as possible, whether in uniform, government service, academia, or industry, should be engaged in this effort. The stakes demand nothing less.

Contemporary conflict—most notably the war in Ukraine—offers a stark illustration of the critical role information technologies, largely provided and secured by private-sector companies, play in modern warfare. While SpaceX’s Starlink has garnered the most attention, numerous other firms have contributed capabilities in ways few anticipated.³ The battlefield is increasingly shaped by the proliferation of small unmanned aerial and maritime systems. Frontline troops now rely not only on military command structures but also on direct interaction with civilian technicians, who rapidly adapt signals and algorithms to counter Russian electronic warfare measures.

Taiwan must absorb these lessons with urgency. Protecting its national data infrastructure—an essential pillar of sovereignty—requires rigorous study and action. Securing and exploiting tactical data is equally vital: how it is gathered,

³ Matt Kaplan and Michael Brown, “The Private Sector on the Frontline: Big Tech and the Risky Blurring of Commercial and Security Issues,” *Foreign Affairs*, 31 January 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/>.

transmitted, and leveraged will determine the effectiveness of operational and tactical decision-making. The ability to outpace an adversary in the information domain could be decisive in any future conflict.

Taiwan should actively involve its younger generations in this doctrinal reassessment. Doing so would not only bolster public commitment to national defense but also inject fresh, innovative thinking into military modernization efforts. A broader, more engaged base of participation could yield unconventional yet highly effective adaptations to collective security doctrines—ensuring that Taiwan is not merely prepared for future threats but positioned to deter them outright.

Conclusion

Taiwan stands at a pivotal moment in its security evolution. As history demonstrates, the ability to adapt doctrine, technology, and strategy to emerging threats determines the fate of nations. Taiwan must move beyond traditional defense paradigms and embrace a whole-of-society approach—one that integrates its technological advantages, civilian expertise, and the energy of its younger generations into a modernized defense posture.

The ongoing revolution in information warfare, automation, and networked defense systems has already reshaped the battlefield. Ukraine's resilience against Russian aggression underscores the decisive role played by private-sector innovation, flexible command structures, and a deeply engaged civilian population. Taiwan must learn from these experiences and institutionalize them into its own national defense strategy. Sovereignty in the twenty-first century is not just a matter of physical territory but also of information dominance, public resolve, and the ability to outmaneuver an adversary in both military and cognitive domains.

A future conflict in the Taiwan Strait will not be won by military force alone. Deterrence—and if necessary, defense—will depend on Taiwan's ability to harness its full national potential. This means strengthening civil-military cooperation, safeguarding critical data infrastructure, and fostering a strategic culture that prizes adaptability and innovation over bureaucratic inertia. The goal must not only be survival but strategic advantage.

Taiwan's future security will be shaped by the choices made today. To preserve its freedom, Taiwan must embrace change—not as a reaction to crisis, but as a deliberate and continuous process of strengthening its resilience. The lesson of history is clear: the nations that endure are those that prepare not for the wars of yesterday, but for the conflicts of tomorrow. ★

LtGen Wallace “Chip” Gregson, USMC, Ret.

Lieutenant General Gregson is the former Assistant Secretary of Defense, Asian and Pacific Security Affairs (2009–2011). As a Marine Corps officer, he served in multiple senior command positions, including commanding general of the III Marine Expeditionary Force in Japan (2001–2003) and commanding general of Marine Corps Forces Pacific and Marine Corps Forces Central Command (2003–2005).

Taiwan's Defense Policies in Evolution

JOHN DOTSON

Abstract

Taiwan stands at the center of great-power rivalry, confronting an increasingly belligerent China while navigating a security relationship with the United States. Yet amid the drumbeat of the People's Liberation Army's territorial incursions and Washington's strategic hedging, Taiwan's own defense policies remain an underexamined variable in the Indo-Pacific equation. This article dissects the island's evolving military posture in recent decades, tracing its transformation from a Cold War-era force to one struggling to modernize and transform itself in the face of a growing Chinese military threat. It scrutinizes the conscription debate, the struggle to reconcile conventional and irregular defense postures, and the bureaucratic inertia that stymies many efforts at reform. It also addresses the gaps in threat perception between many in Taiwan's defense establishment on the one hand, and foreign critics of Taiwan's defense policies on the other, which fuel the competing arguments for either a more conventional or more asymmetric defense posture.

China has grown increasingly aggressive toward Taiwan over the past five years, using both hostile rhetoric and menacing military activity, most notably large-scale and provocative exercises around the island.¹ As a result, many international observers have focused attention on the growing capabilities of the People's Liberation Army (PLA).² Debate has also intensified over whether the United States should adjust its Taiwan policy in response to China's actions, and whether the United States and other countries should support Taiwan in the event of a military attack.³

¹ Many examples of such exercises could be cited. However, for summary discussions of some of the more prominent PRC military exercises around Taiwan in 2022 and 2023, see: John Dotson, "An Overview of Chinese Military Activity Near Taiwan in Early August 2022, Part 1: Exercise Closure Areas and Ballistic Missile Launches," *Global Taiwan Brief*, 24 August 2022, <https://globaltaiwan.org/>; John Dotson, "An Overview of Chinese Military Activity Near Taiwan in Early August 2022, Part 2: Aviation Activity, and Naval and Ground Force Exercises," *Global Taiwan Brief*, 7 September 2022, <https://globaltaiwan.org/>; and Eric Chan, "Operationalizing Symbolic Encirclement: a Comparison of PLA Exercises Following Recent High-Profile Visits," *Global Taiwan Brief*, 19 April 2023, <https://globaltaiwan.org/>.

² For arguably the most comprehensive public treatment of this subject, see: *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China* (Washington: US Department of Defense, October 2023), <https://media.defense.gov/>.

³ For examples of this discourse, see: Emma Ashford and Matthew Kroenig, "Is Defending Taiwan Worth the Risk?," *Foreign Policy*, 8 October 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>; and Christopher Preble, Zack Cooper, and Melanie Marlowe, "Debating the Defense of Taiwan," *War on the Rocks—Net Assessment Podcast*, 5 January 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/>.

Despite this extensive commentary, far less attention has been given to military developments and policy debates within Taiwan itself. Amid the changing threat environment in the Asia-Pacific region, the Republic of China (ROC, Taiwan) government and armed forces have themselves been engaged in an ongoing, iterative series of changes in defense policy—which have major implications for the island’s ability to mount an effective defense in the face of PRC aggression. This article provides an overview of the evolution of Taiwan’s own defense policy in recent years, highlighting ongoing and significant debates regarding the island’s defense strategy—which in turn inform vital decisions made by Taiwan’s civilian and military decision-makers regarding budgets, personnel policy, and force structure.

Legacy Trends in ROC Defense Policy

The Republic of China (ROC) armed forces, historically dominated by the ROC Army, emerged from the legacy of the Kuomintang (中國國民黨, KMT) party-state, with the ROC armed forces organized as a KMT party-army. This continued in the decades past the KMT regime’s retreat to Taiwan in 1949, with the officer corps of the military tied to the ruling party. The armed forces also played a direct political role, with the Taiwan Garrison Command (臺灣警備總司令部)—a military-controlled security and secret police agency—enforcing martial law, conducting surveillance on native Taiwanese, and suppressing dissidents.⁴

Although martial law ended in 1987 and Taiwan transitioned to democracy in the late 1980s and 1990s, this history left a complicated legacy for civil-military relations. Tensions persist, particularly between the ROC armed forces and the Democratic Progressive Party (民主進步黨, DPP), whose founding members—many of them human rights activists and Taiwan independence supporters—were frequently targeted during the martial law era. These tensions worsened in 2018 when the DPP-led Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) administration, backed by the party’s Legislative Yuan majority, reduced military pension benefits.⁵

The ROC armed forces also face legacy issues with an outdated organizational structure, originally shaped by heavy US influence during the early Cold War. Whether this structure was ever optimal for Taiwan’s defense remains debatable, and today, its effectiveness faces renewed scrutiny. Some critics have argued that

⁴ National Human Rights Museum (Taiwan), “White Terror Period,” n.d., <https://www.nhrm.gov.tw/>; and “Telegram from the Embassy in the Republic of China to the Department of State, Taipei, December 14, 1967,” Office of the US State Department Historian, <https://history.state.gov/>.

⁵ Agence France-Presse, “Taiwan Passes Controversial Bill Cutting Veterans’ Pensions,” *France 24*, 21 June 2018, <https://www.france24.com/>.

Taiwan's military should give a greater role to territorial defense and civil defense organizations, rather than adhering solely to legacy conventional force models.⁶

The historical legacies of the ROC armed forces have also been the subject of criticism (including from this author) on the grounds of hide-bound command structures and unrealistic training.⁷ Despite adopting many outward aspects of US military structure, Taiwan's armed forces have failed to integrate key elements of *organizational culture*—such as decentralized decision making and lower-echelon initiative—that make the US and Israeli militaries tactically superior. Instead, Taiwan's command system remains rigid, more akin to the hierarchical, top-down structures seen in Russia and many Arab states.

Defense Policies Under the Chen and Ma Administrations

The early twenty-first century brought major changes to the ROC military's force structure. Both the DPP-led Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) administration (2000–2008) and the KMT-led Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) administration (2008–2016) sought to reduce the size of the armed forces. Their motivations differed—Chen's administration harbored distrust of the military's KMT legacy, while Ma prioritized closer ties with Beijing—but both pursued a transition to an all-volunteer force and a smaller military. The KMT, however, pushed for a faster shift than the DPP.⁸

During this period, Taiwan steadily reduced conscription, cutting mandatory service for young men—always deeply unpopular—from two years to one, and then from a year down to four months.⁹ The government also emphasized transferring primary operational duties to the active-duty force while integrating conscription more closely with the reserve system. This idea was captured in a slogan from the Chen administration: “The first-line force will rely on recruited troops; the reserve force will rely on conscripts” (常備部隊以募兵為主, 後備部隊以徵兵為主).¹⁰

⁶ Lee Hsi-Min and Michael A. Hunzeker, “The View of Ukraine from Taiwan: Get Real About Territorial Defense,” *War on the Rocks*, 15 March 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/>.

⁷ See, for examples, discussions of Taiwan's annual Han Kuang (漢光) military exercises in: John Dotson, “The Highlights of Taiwan's 2022 Han Kuang Military Exercise,” *Global Taiwan Brief*, 10 August 2022, <https://globaltaiwan.org/>; and John Dotson, “An Overview of Taiwan's 2023 Han Kuang Military Exercise,” *Global Taiwan Brief*, 9 August 2023, <https://globaltaiwan.org/>.

⁸ Lin Chieh-yu, “Chen, Lien Debate Conscription Issue,” *Taipei Times*, 7 March 2004, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/>.

⁹ Paul Huang, “Taiwan's Military Is a Hollow Shell,” *Foreign Policy*, 15 February 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>.

¹⁰ Hong Jin-Cheng (洪錦成) and Shih I-Huei (施奕暉), *History, Change, and Outlook of R.O.C's Military Service System* (我國兵役制度的演進, 變革與展望) (Taipei: ROC Ministry of the Interior, June 2013), 32.

Chen's defense policy also introduced the controversial "Decisive Battle Offshore" (決戰境外) strategy, which shifted emphasis away from ground forces in favor of air and naval power.¹¹ This approach also encouraged the development of longer-range indigenous missile systems, and sparked unofficial discussions about striking Chinese military bases in the event of a conflict—or even targeting major infrastructure sites like the Three Gorges Dam as a deterrent strategy.¹²

Ma's administration rejected Chen's doctrine in favor of what became widely known—at least in US defense policy circles—as the "Hard ROC" concept.¹³ This framework, as articulated by US Naval War College professor William Murray, emphasized "the asymmetrical advantage of being the defender" and championed a "porcupine strategy" to resist a Chinese attack:

Taiwan must rethink its defense strategies. Rather than trying to destroy incoming ballistic missiles with costly [surface-to-air missiles], Taiwan should harden key facilities and build redundancies into critical infrastructure and processes so that it could absorb and survive a long-range precision bombardment. Rather than relying on its navy and air force (neither of which is likely to survive such an attack) to destroy an invasion force, Taiwan should concentrate on development of a professional standing army armed with mobile, short-range, defensive weapons. To withstand a prolonged blockade, Taiwan should stockpile critical supplies and build infrastructure that would allow it to attend to the needs of its citizens unassisted for an extended period. Finally, Taiwan should eschew destabilizing offensive capabilities, which could include, in their extreme form, tactical nuclear weapons employed in a countervalue manner, or less alarmingly, long-range conventional weapons aimed against such iconic targets as the Three Gorges Dam.¹⁴

¹¹ "Taiwan Scholars Discuss Chen Shui-bian's Defense Policies" (台灣學者談陳水扁的國防政策), *Radio Free Asia*, 14 May 2001, <https://www.rfa.org/>.

¹² Jimmy Chuang, "Taiwan Developing More Advanced Offensive Missiles," *Taipei Times*, 27 April 2007, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/>.

¹³ Jim Thomas, John Stillion, and Iskander Rehman, *Hard Roc 2.0: Taiwan and Deterrence Through Protraction* (Washington: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, October 2014), <https://csbaonline.org/>.

¹⁴ William S. Murray, "Revisiting Taiwan's Defense Strategy," *Naval War College Review* 61, no. 3 (2008), <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/>.



Figure 1. Then-President Ma Ying-jeou meeting with personnel of the ROC Air Force 601st Brigade at a 2010 Lunar New Year reception, 13 February 2010. (Source: ROC Presidential Office, “中文（臺灣）：總統（馬英九）與陸軍航空601旅官兵代表會餐,” Wikimedia Commons, 13 February 2010, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/>.)

The Ma administration's interpretation of the “Hard ROC” concept accelerated efforts to downsize the ROC armed forces and transition to an all-volunteer military. Under the “Courageous and Steadfast Program” (勇固案), the government aimed to cut nearly 100,000 personnel, targeting an end strength of 170,000 to 190,000 personnel.¹⁵ Plans also included streamlining command structures by reducing the number of flag-level officers (generals and admirals) while increasing pay and benefits. However, legislative resistance, and the higher costs of recruiting and maintaining an all-volunteer force, stalled many of these initiatives.¹⁶

Both the Chen and Ma administrations also faced persistent challenges in relations with the United States, particularly over arms sales. The United States, then as now, remained Taiwan's sole major arms supplier, despite intense pressure from

¹⁵ Lu Chao-lung (呂昭隆), “Military Affairs Legislators Postpone ‘Firm-Steadfast Plan’ / Slap in the Face to Ma Ying-jeou” (軍系立委暫緩勇固案 打臉馬英九), *China Times* (中時), 9 March 2015, <https://www.chinatimes.com/>.

¹⁶ Fu S. Mei, “Taiwan's Defense Transformation and Challenges Under Ma Ying-Jeou,” *China Brief*, 22 April 2011, <https://jamestown.org/>.

Beijing to sever military ties. Political considerations frequently disrupted arms transfers, and the Bush and Obama administrations both delayed or withheld sales out of concern for the impact on relations with the PRC. The Bush Administration had a particularly frosty relationship with the Chen Administration, with the former sometimes viewing the latter as taking needlessly provocative actions in the cross-Straits realm. Furthermore, Taiwan's own Legislative Yuan at times refused to fund purchases agreed upon by the executive branch.¹⁷

Throughout this period, the absence of official diplomatic relations between the ROC and the United States compounded these issues. With much of US-Taiwan bilateral engagement centered on arms sales, strategic dialogue between the two remained limited—further deepening misalignments in defense policy at a time of mounting Chinese military threats.

Defense Policies under the Tsai Administration

The Tsai administration (2016–2024) implemented significant changes in defense policy amid escalating tensions with the PRC. Beijing labeled the Tsai administration—and the DPP more broadly—as “separatist” and severed official cross-Straits dialogues with Taiwan's government. The PRC also intensified coercive military pressure against Taiwan, with 2020 and 2022 marking particularly significant benchmarks in such escalations.¹⁸

In this environment, the Tsai administration prioritized strengthening unofficial relations with the United States—including closer defense ties—and with other Western countries, often invoking shared ideological values and promoting Taiwan's status as part of the international democratic community.¹⁹ The administration benefited from a DPP majority in the Legislative Yuan, avoiding legislative gridlock that had hindered defense policy changes in prior administrations.

Tsai's administration pursued measured but steady improvements in Taiwan's military capabilities. The most significant developments occurred in three areas: defense budgets, conscription policies, and indigenous weapons production, as discussed below.

¹⁷ Shirley A. Kan, *Taiwan: Major U.S. Arms Sales Since 1990* (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 29 August 2014), <https://sgp.fas.org/>.

¹⁸ John Dotson, “Diplomatic Visits, New Arms Sales, and PLA Provocations Raise Tensions in the Taiwan Strait,” *China Brief*, 19 October 2020, <https://jamestown.org/>; Dotson, “An Overview of Chinese Military Activity, Part 1”; and Dotson, “An Overview of Chinese Military Activity, Part 2.”

¹⁹ For one representative example, see: “Remarks by Minister Jaushieh Joseph Wu at the Future of Democracy: High Level Forum on Defending Against Authoritarianism” (speech, Vilnius, Lithuania, 10 November 2023), <https://en.mofa.gov.tw/>.

Increases in the Defense Budget

Taiwan's annual defense budgets remained relatively stable from 2008 to 2019, dipping slightly in the early years of the Tsai administration in 2017–2018. However, defense spending rose considerably in 2020—a year marked both by the start of Tsai's second term and by significantly increased pressure from the PRC.²⁰ From 2019 to 2023, defense spending grew at an average estimated rate of nearly 5 percent per year, raising expenditures from 2 percent to 2.5 percent of GDP.²¹

The baseline defense budget (主管預算) for 2024, announced in August 2023, totaled NTD 440.6 billion (approximately USD 13.8 billion)—a 7.7 percent increase from the 2023 budget and the seventh consecutive year of growth in defense spending. When including expenditures from supplemental defense budgets (特別預算), the overall planned budget for 2024 rose to NTD 606.8 billion (approximately USD 19.1 billion).²²



Figure 2. ROC Premier Chen Chien-jen (陳建仁) (fifth from left, center) and other officials hold a press conference in Taipei (24 August 2023) to discuss the Tsai administration's proposed budget for 2024. In the displayed pie chart, military expenditures (國防支) represent 15 percent of the overall government budget. (Source: "Taiwan's defense spending to reach record NTD\$606.8 billion in 2024," Focus Taiwan, 24 August 2023, <https://focustaiwan.tw/>.)

²⁰ Hung Shih-chen, "2024年國防預算6068億再創新高" ("The 2024 Defense Budget Is 606.8 Billion, a New High"), *PTS News*, 26 August 2023, <https://news.pts.org.tw/>.

²¹ Caitlin Campbell, "Taiwan: Defense and Military Issues," *In Focus*, 7 May 2024, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/>.

²² Central News Agency, "Taiwan's Defense Spending to Reach Record NT\$606.8 Billion in 2024," *Focus Taiwan*, 24 August 2023, <https://focustaiwan.tw/>; and John Dotson, "Taiwan Announces an Increased Defense Budget for 2024," *Global Taiwan Brief*, 20 September 2023, <https://globaltaiwan.org/>.

The Increase in Conscripted Military Service Obligations—and the Problem of Military Manpower

The issue of conscription has always been controversial in Taiwan, and the program of universal compulsory conscription for young men has long been unpopular. The previously mandated two-year period of military service was gradually reduced, ultimately shrinking to four months during the Ma administration. This abbreviated service became widely derided as a “summer camp” experience, offering little meaningful training and perceived as a waste of time for those who experienced it.²³ Following this brief term of service, reservists were only required to attend five to seven days of refresher training every other year—a program broadly criticized as inadequate, and with deferments readily available. The absence of a robust conscription and reserve force management system fueled both domestic and foreign criticism, reinforcing the perception that Taiwan was not serious about its own defense.²⁴

In December 2022, the Tsai administration announced a policy to restore the length of male conscripted service to one year, effective in 2024. (This announcement, made ahead of an election year, proved controversial and may have cost the DPP support among young voters in the January 2024 elections—though the exact impact remains difficult to quantify.) The program commenced in January 2024, with plans to train 9,127 recruits over the year, with the majority (7,514) intended for service in the ROC Army.²⁵ Interviews conducted by the author with interlocutors in Taiwan in late 2024 confirmed that approximately 9,000 conscripts had entered training that year. This relatively low figure, compared to the available pool of manpower, reflects the continued prevalence of deferments, particularly for higher education.²⁶

Announcements by the Ministry of National Defense (MND) in December 2022 and January 2024 emphasized that conscripted soldiers would primarily serve as “garrison troops” (守備部隊)—as distinct from the “main battle troops” (主戰部隊) of the volunteer force—and would focus on infrastructure protection and territorial

²³ SBS Dateline, “Former Soldier Wants Taiwan Ready for China Attack,” YouTube, 6 September 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/>.

²⁴ Paul Huang, “Taiwan’s Military Is a Hollow Shell,” *Foreign Policy*, 15 February 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>; and Michael A. Hunzeker, “Taiwan’s Defense Plans Are Going Off the Rails,” *War on the Rocks*, 18 November 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/>.

²⁵ John Dotson, “Taiwan’s ‘Military Force Restructuring Plan’ and the Extension of Conscripted Military Service,” *Global Taiwan Brief*, 8 February 2023, <https://globaltaiwan.org/>; and John Dotson, “Taiwan Initiates Its New One-Year Military Conscription Program,” *Global Taiwan Brief*, 7 February 2024, <https://globaltaiwan.org/>.

²⁶ Interviews by the author, Taipei, November 2024.

defense.²⁷ This division of roles echoes the Chen administration's earlier slogan: "The first-line force will rely on recruited troops; the reserve force will rely on conscripts." The messaging clearly aimed to reassure the public that conscripted soldiers would be assigned to less demanding or dangerous roles.

Despite these changes, the adjustments to conscription policies, though necessary and overdue, are unlikely to resolve the military's chronic undermanning problem. As of 2023, Taiwan's armed forces were authorized 215,000 personnel billets, but only about 169,000 had been filled by volunteer troops.²⁸ An MND report to the legislature in May 2024 revealed that the armed forces' staffing rate stood at 89 percent in 2020 and 88% in 2021, but fell to 80 percent in both 2022 and 2023. Some commentators suspect that the shortfall is even more severe within the "main battle troops" combat units, which would bear the brunt of any conflict.²⁹

This manpower shortage poses a quiet but serious crisis for the ROC armed forces, especially as the threat from the PRC continues to grow. While Taiwan's low birthrate contributes to the problem, a deeper cultural issue exacerbates it: the military's low social status and the general lack of enthusiasm among Taiwan's youth for military service. Addressing these underlying perceptions remains a formidable challenge for Taiwan's defense establishment.³⁰

²⁷ Dotson, "Taiwan's 'Military Force Restructuring Plan'"; and Dotson, "Taiwan Initiates Its New One-Year Military Conscription Program."

²⁸ *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2023* (Washington: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 19 October 2023), 147, <https://media.defense.gov/>.

²⁹ Aaron Tu and Jonathan Chin, "Armed Forces at 80% Strength, Report Says," *Taipei Times*, 29 May 2024, <https://www.taipetimes.com/>. See also: Huang, "Taiwan's Military Is a Hollow Shell."

³⁰ This is a factor difficult to quantify—and the reasons for it are complex—but will quickly be encountered by any visitor to Taiwan concerned with defense issues. The author has himself encountered many conversations with Taiwanese people who expressed scorn for the idea of military service.



Figure 3. “Good Men Fight Together to Protect Our Home”—a 2023 government-produced graphic promoting the new one-year conscription policy. The graphic lists the four broad categorizations of service for military personnel under the new plan: “main battle troops” (for the volunteer, active-duty force), “garrison troops” (one-year service conscripts), the “reserve system,” and the “civil defense system.” (Source: Image source: ROC Executive Yuan, 16 January 2023, <https://www.ey.gov.tw/>.)

Indigenous Weapons Production and Shipbuilding

Taiwan remains dependent on the United States as its sole supplier for several advanced weapons systems. This dependency has complicated Taiwan’s defense planning in recent decades, particularly when proposed purchases were either denied or delayed due to political considerations in both Washington and Taipei—a pattern evident during the Chen and Ma administrations. Although many of these political obstacles eased during the Tsai and Trump administrations, with more open arms sales policies continuing under the Biden administration, a significant backlog remains. As of April 2024, the estimated value of undelivered US weapons to Taiwan stood at USD 19.7 billion, including major items such as the delivery of 66 F-16V fighter aircraft.³¹

³¹ Eric Gomez and Benjamin Giltner, “Taiwan Arms Backlog, April 2024 Update,” *CATO at Liberty* (blog), 2 May 2024, <https://www.cato.org/>.

While US arms sales have continued, the Tsai administration's military budgets and procurement plans accelerated a shift toward greater indigenous production. One of the most notable examples was a special budget allocation—separate from the baseline defense budget—introduced in autumn 2021. The “Sea-Air Combat Power Improvement Plan Purchase Special Regulations” (海空戰力提升計畫採購特別條例), presented to the Legislative Yuan in October 2021, provided for a five-year supplemental budget of NTD 240 billion (approximately USD 8.6 billion). This amount was slightly more than half the projected baseline defense budget of NTD 471.7 billion (USD 16.9 billion) for 2022. Most of the supplemental budget supported the production of indigenous antiship and anti-aircraft missile systems, as well as domestic naval shipbuilding.³²

Indigenous shipbuilding has also become a major focus of Taiwan's defense planning in recent years. The most prominent effort has been Taiwan's accelerated program to produce domestically manufactured diesel submarines under the “*Hai Chang* Program” (海昌計畫), launched in 2016. The prototype vessel's manufacturer estimated its cost at NTD 49.3 billion (approximately USD 1.6 billion), with the *Hai Kun* (海鯤) intended as the first of eight planned submarines. The *Hai Kun* was launched in early 2024, with sea trials expected to begin in April 2025.³³

However, this high-profile—and costly—program is only one part of Taiwan's broader domestic shipbuilding initiatives for the ROC Navy. Less publicized but equally significant are ongoing efforts to produce smaller, more mobile surface combatants. This includes the production of the *Tuo Chiang* (沱江) class of 685-ton guided missile patrol craft (PGGs), designed to counter larger vessels with indigenously developed *Hsiung Feng* (HF, 雄風) HF-II and HF-III antiship cruise missiles (ASCM).³⁴ As of autumn 2024, six *Tuo Chiang*-class vessels had entered service, with a total of 11 scheduled for delivery by 2026.³⁵

³² John Dotson, “Taiwan's New Special Defense Budget Emphasizes Indigenous Anti-Ship Weapons Production,” *Global Taiwan Brief*, 3 November 2021, <https://globaltaiwan.org/>.

³³ Tso-Juei Hsu, “Taiwan's New Submarine Ready For Sea Trials Following Delayed Optronic Mast Delivery,” *Naval News*, 24 May 2024, <https://www.navalnews.com/>; and “Military Rejects Reports of Submarine Power Supply Problem,” *TaiwanPlus News*, 26 February 2025, <https://www.msn.com/>.

³⁴ John Dotson, “Taiwan's Naval Shipbuilding Programs Point towards an Evolving Direction in Defense Policy,” *Global Taiwan Brief*, 30 November 2022, <https://globaltaiwan.org/>.

³⁵ “海軍沱江級艦第二艘量產艦下水 命名富江軍艦” (“The Navy's Number Two Produced Tuo Chiang Class Ship Enters the Water / Named Fu Chiang”), *CNA*, 21 September 2022, <https://www.cna.com.tw/>; and “Navy to take delivery of 2 more Tuo Chiang-class corvettes,” *Focus Taiwan*, 2 March 2024, <https://focustaiwan.tw/>.



Figure 4. Then-President Tsai Ing-wen poses with shipbuilding personnel and ROC Navy personnel of the newly-formed 256th Submarine Squadron crew to commemorate the launch of Taiwan's first indigenously-built submarine, the Hai Kun, 28 September 2023. (Source: Image source: ROC Presidential Office, "總統主持「潛艦國造原型艦命名暨下水典禮」," Wikimedia Commons, 28 September 2023, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/>. For discussion of the 256th Submarine Squadron, see: "Navy Forms Unit for New Sub: Source," Taipei Times, 13 July 2023, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/>.)

The Direction of Defense Policy under Lai Ching-te

While it is too early to fully assess the defense policies of the Lai Ching-te (賴清德) administration, which took office in May 2024, significant continuity with the preceding eight years of the Tsai administration appears likely. At the same time, the Lai administration has shown a reformist streak, exemplified by the appointment of Minister of National Defense Wellington Koo (顧立雄). As a civilian—an encouraging sign for reform in a position historically dominated by retired generals—Koo announced plans in early June to modernize training practices, including the elimination of archaic legacy practices such as bayonet drills and goose-step marching for recruits and military cadets.³⁶

The Lai administration's first year in defense policy has largely focused on two major issues. The first is an emphasis on civil defense and efforts to enhance co-

³⁶ "Civilian Defense Chief Ends Decades-Long 'Formalities' in Armed Forces," *Taiwan Focus*, 9 June 2024, <https://focustaiwan.tw/>.

ordination between government agencies and civil society groups, particularly in areas such as logistical support and emergency medical care. This focus materialized most visibly in the creation of the “Whole of Society Defense Resilience Committee” (全社會防衛韌性委員會, WSDRC) under the National Security Council (國家安全會議). The WSDRC aims to “serve as a platform for social participation, a bridge for social communication, and an engine for policy effectiveness” by fostering collaboration between government and civil society. Comprising 27 representatives from both government agencies and nongovernmental organizations (NGO), the committee has convened twice so far—in September and December 2024.³⁷



Figure 5. Taiwan's current president, Lai Ching-te (himself a former doctor), takes part in a civil society disaster response drill (November 24, 2024). The Lai administration has emphasized civil defense preparedness as a significant element of its overall national security policy. (Source: Image source: TaiwanPlus News, “President Lai Attends Taiwan Civil Defense Training Amid Threats from China,” YouTube, 24 November 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/>.)

President Lai has invested considerable political capital in the WSDRC and the broader push for civil society preparedness, even making personal appearances at civil defense and disaster relief training events. Despite these efforts, the initiative remains in its early stages and faces considerable challenges. Those familiar with the WSDRC's initial meetings have noted only limited progress in improving government–NGO coordination.³⁸ Nonetheless, the effort represents a critical step toward leveraging civil society's capabilities to support government responses in the event of an invasion

³⁷ “Whole-of-Society Defense Resilience Committee--About the Committee,” ROC Office of the President, n.d., <https://english.president.gov.tw/>.

³⁸ Interviews by the author, Taipei, late 2024.

or other major crisis—a concept inspired, in part, by the effective mobilization of civil society in Ukraine following the Russian invasion.

The second major issue has been the ongoing controversy surrounding the defense budget. Following the Tsai administration's pattern of steadily increasing defense spending, President Lai has called for further budgetary expansion. At a press conference on 14 February 2025, Lai pledged to raise Taiwan's defense spending from approximately 2.5 percent to more than 3 percent of GDP, stating that his administration would "prioritize special budget allocations" to achieve this goal.³⁹ This language suggests a willingness to pursue supplemental budgets—similar to the Tsai administration's "Sea-Air Combat Power Improvement Plan Purchase Special Regulations" of autumn 2021—rather than relying solely on the standard defense budget process.

However, as of late February 2025, the defense budget—and the broader government budget—remains stalled due to a political standoff between the Lai administration and the legislature. Unlike the Tsai administration, which benefited from a DPP majority in the legislature, the Lai administration now faces an opposition-controlled legislature. Following the January 2024 elections, an alliance between the KMT and the Taiwan People's Party holds a majority and has rejected the administration's proposed budget. The opposition has instead pushed a plan to reallocate significant funds from the central government to local administrations—a move that would severely constrain defense spending.⁴⁰ The future direction of the Lai administration's defense policies will depend heavily on its ability to negotiate a budget agreement with the opposition. For now, the path forward remains uncertain.

Continuing Controversies and Challenges in Taiwan's Defense Orientation

Amid ongoing debates over defense policy, Taiwan's defense establishment continues to face criticism from both international and domestic observers, who argue that the country's defense preparations remain insufficient given the threat posed by the PRC. These critiques unfold against the backdrop of increasingly provocative "gray zone" military operations conducted by the PRC—actions that have, in turn, sharpened debates over Taiwan's optimal defense strategy, driven by differing assessments of its most urgent security challenges.

³⁹ "President Lai Holds Press Conference Following High-Level National Security Meeting," ROC Presidential Office, 14 February 2025, <https://english.president.gov.tw/>.

⁴⁰ Ben Levine, "Leveraging Legislative Power: The KMT's Strategy to Regain Influence in Taiwan / Part 1: Shifting Financial Resources to Local Governments," *Global Taiwan Brief*, 22 January 2025, <https://globaltaiwan.org/>.

Debates over Defense Strategy and Force Structure

Taiwan's defense establishment has faced sustained criticism for several years, particularly from foreign observers—primarily in the United States—who argue that the island has neither allocated resources commensurate with the threat posed by the PRC, nor applied those resources effectively. Critics contend that Taiwan has overinvested in traditional, big-ticket conventional systems—such as ships, tanks, and aircraft—at the expense of more “asymmetric” capabilities, like highly mobile antiship missile systems, that could more effectively disrupt a hostile invasion force.⁴¹

The case for a dramatic shift in Taiwan's defense posture was advanced by former ROC Chief of General Staff Admiral Lee Hsi-min (李喜明), who served from 2017 to 2019. Lee promoted the “Overall Defense Concept” (ODC, 整體防禦概念) as a framework for Taiwan's military strategy. The ODC emphasized force preservation, prioritized warfare in the littoral zone—the sea lanes leading to Taiwan, and its landing beaches—and called for the development of asymmetric capabilities to offset the ROC military's growing resource disadvantages relative to the PLA. Central to this approach was a focus on smaller, dispersible, and more mobile platforms—implicitly advocating less reliance on larger, more vulnerable systems that might not survive a sustained PLA strike campaign.⁴² After his retirement, Lee went even further, proposing the creation of a militia-like territorial defense force for Taiwan.⁴³

These ideas have gained considerable traction in US defense policy circles but have encountered strong resistance within Taiwan's defense establishment. The ODC's proposals clash with long-standing institutional culture, bureaucratic interests, and prevailing threat perceptions regarding the most significant dangers to Taiwan's security. Following Lee's departure, the ODC quickly lost momentum, and more traditional concepts returned to the MND's policy documents and official discourse.

The MND's current officially articulated military strategy, as outlined in the 2021 edition of Taiwan's Quadrennial Defense Review (*QDR*, 四年期國防總檢討), is “Resolute Defense and Multi-Domain Deterrence” (防衛固守, 重層嚇阻). According to the English edition of the *QDR*, “resolute defense” seeks to “ensure the security of our [command and control] nodes, critical assets, and critical information infrastructure, and improve our force protection and preservation.” “Multi-domain deterrence,” the second pillar of the strategy, employs “joint capabilities to deter the

⁴¹ For merely one such example among many that could be cited, see: Michael A. Hunzeker and Alexander Lanoszka, “Real Friends Twist Arms: Taiwan And The Case For Conditionality,” *War on the Rocks*, 27 July 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/>.

⁴² Lee Hsi-min and Eric Lee, “Taiwan's Overall Defense Concept, Explained,” *The Diplomat*, 3 November 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

⁴³ Lee and Hunzeker, “The View of Ukraine from Taiwan.”

enemy's aggression in multiple domains. . . . If the enemy launched [an] attack to invade Taiwan, our guiding principles [are] to 'resist the enemy on the opposite shore, attack it at sea, destroy it in the littoral area, and annihilate it on the beach-head' . . . so as to ultimately defeat its aggression."⁴⁴

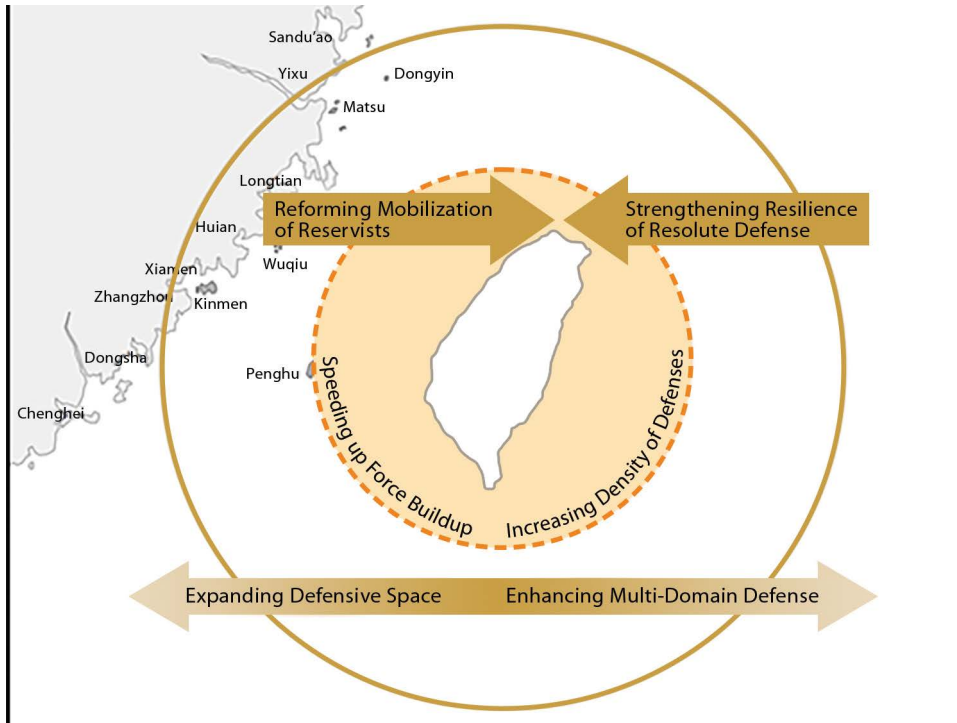


Figure 6. A graphic displaying areas for Taiwan's armed forces to engage in "strengthening resilience of resolute defense" and "enhancing multi-domain deterrence," as depicted in a graphic from the ROC National Defense Report 2023. (Source: ROC National Defense Report 2023 [Taipei: ROC Ministry of National Defense, September 2023], 64, <https://www.mnd.gov.tw/>.)

To foreign critics of this strategy—including this author—"Resolute Defense and Multi-Domain Deterrence" is too vague and all-encompassing a strategy, lacking clear prioritization. It seems to advocate confronting the PLA across all domains without a focused allocation of effort or resources. This approach risks violating the principle famously articulated by Frederick the Great: "He who defends everything, defends nothing."

⁴⁴ 2021 *Quadrennial Defense Review* (四年期國防總檢討) (Taipei: ROC Ministry of National Defense, March 2021), 19 (English edition), <https://www.mnd.gov.tw/>. The Chinese edition is available at <https://www.mnd.gov.tw/>.

Differing Perspectives in Threat Perception

Differences in institutional culture and interests account for much of the gap in attitudes between Taiwan's defense planners and foreign critics pressing for rapid change. However, a significant factor underlying these contrasting views—particularly regarding the push for *asymmetry* versus a more conventional approach—lies in differing threat perceptions. Much of the US defense discourse on Taiwan (which dominates foreign commentary) focuses on the threat of a full-scale invasion. In such a scenario, Taiwan's conventional force structure could face swift destruction, making mobile and survivable asymmetric forces—as well as a citizen militia defense force—appear more practical than investing in larger platforms like ships and planes.

Conversely, both Taiwan's official defense documents and discussions with defense officials highlight a greater concern with PRC actions short of outright invasion. These concerns encompass gray-zone (灰色地帶) operations, “cognitive warfare” (認知戰) aimed at undermining public morale, and the threat of a blockade. For instance, the *ROC National Defense Report 2021* (中華民國110年國防報告書)—a biennial publication by the MND that assesses Taiwan's threat environment and defense strategies—articulates these priorities, reflecting a defense posture shaped by a broader spectrum of PRC coercive tactics:

In recent years, the gray zone threats frequently posed by the PRC on us are highly diversified and orchestrated generally through [both] military and non-military approaches. The military approaches can be explained by PRC military planes' frequent intrusions into the southwestern corner of our Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ)... while the non-military approaches [are] PRC speedboats' ramming our coast guard vessels and its sand pump dredgers' illegal operations in our neighboring waters. These approaches have normally exploited the limbo between peace and war... The PRC is... gradually escalat[ing] the threat level by manipulating these salami tactics, and is using its political and military power to shape a posture to its advantage... [with intent] to alter or challenge the status quo in the Taiwan Strait to ultimately achieve its goal of “seizing Taiwan without a fight.”⁴⁵

Similarly, the 2023 edition of the *ROC National Defense Report* places greater emphasis on these problems than it does to an invasion—devoting, for example, eight pages to the issues of “normalized harassment and incursions” and cognitive warfare

⁴⁵ *ROC National Defense Report 2021* (Taipei: ROC Ministry of National Defense, October 2021), 45 (English edition), <https://www.mnd.gov.tw/>.

conducted by the PRC.⁴⁶ These concerns differ fundamentally from the prospect of a full-scale cross-channel invasion, which has typically shaped the primary focus of defense policy analysts in Washington. This divergence in thinking between Washington and Taipei is crucial: if an invasion by a more powerful adversary constitutes the primary threat, then a mobile, asymmetrically oriented force is necessary; however, if territorial gray-zone incursions pose the primary threat, then a more conventionally oriented force capable of competing in that territorial space makes more sense.

Conclusions: A Shift Toward a Hybrid Defense Strategy for Taiwan?

However, some signs indicate a gradual convergence between the two perspectives. This shift has occurred as foreign audiences develop a deeper understanding of the PRC's coercive gray-zone operations and subversive political warfare against Taiwan,⁴⁷ and as audiences in Taiwan have grown more attentive to the prospect of an actual invasion following Russia's 2022 attack on Ukraine. ROC Vice President Hsiao Bi-khim reflected this concern in June 2024 remarks at Chatham House, stating, "We are learning from Ukraine's defence, where smaller combat forces have proven nimble and adaptable."⁴⁸

This gradual shift is also evident in MND documents. For example, the 2023 edition of the *ROC National Defense Report* includes a section titled "Achieving Multi-Domain Deterrence Through Applying the Thinking of Asymmetrical Operations," which states:

Based on concept of Taiwan defense operation [sic] and lessons learned from the Russo-Ukraine war, the Armed Forces will ensure command, control, surveillance and reconnaissance functions and fighting capabilities with enhanced mobility, dispersion, concealment, redundant and decentralized command during the course of operation[s]. Using [an] "eluding its strength and exploiting its weakness" asymmetric approach, it will monitor obvious indicators of enemy invasion and preemptively strike its mobilizing invasion forces and centers [of] gravity to disrupt its operational tempo and delay its actions... During [the] enemy's most vulnerable straitcrossing phase, helped by Taiwan Strait geographical advantages, [we] will further reduce enemy

⁴⁶ *ROC National Defense Report 2023* [Taipei: ROC Ministry of National Defense, September 2023], 34–42, <https://www.mnd.gov.tw/>.

⁴⁷ John Dotson, *The Chinese Communist Party's Political Warfare Directed Against Taiwan: Overview and Analysis* (Washington: Global Taiwan Institute, May 2024), <https://globaltaiwan.org/>.

⁴⁸ Arpan Rai, "Taiwan Says It Is Learning from Ukraine How a Smaller Country Can Stand Up to Invasion," *The Independent*, 20 June 2024, <https://www.independent.co.uk/>.

strength by attack it [sic] with “mobile, long-range, precision” sea-tolerant high performance naval vessels, mobile anti-ship missile launchers and unmanned vehicles.⁴⁹

While still somewhat broad and vague, this concept of operations appears to shift further toward the asymmetric approach advocated by both foreign critics and domestic mavericks such as Admiral Lee. A move toward a hybrid strategy—one that balances a force-on-force conventional posture with a David-versus-Goliath asymmetric approach—is also evident in Taiwan’s indigenous naval production of submarines and light, mobile surface combatants. However, many questions remain about how these platforms and concepts might be operationalized in concrete terms, and to what extent aspirational statements of doctrine must contend with bureaucratic interests and inertia.

As Taiwan faces an escalating threat from a revanchist and imperialistic PRC, the choices it makes in shaping its force structure and defense strategy will be critical to the survival of both its de facto independence and its democratic society. A robust debate on these issues has taken place within Taiwan itself, and defense officials in the United States and elsewhere would do well to develop a deeper understanding of these trends and competing ideas as they formulate their own policies to promote peace and security in the Indo-Pacific region. 🌐

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⁴⁹ *ROC National Defense Report 2023* [Taipei: ROC Ministry of National Defense, September 2023], 64, <https://www.mnd.gov.tw/>.

Political Warfare against Intervention Forces

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ERIC CHAN

Abstract

Political warfare plays a central role in Chinese military operations. China is currently conducting a deliberate, multi-layered campaign designed to weaken Taiwan's resolve and preempt US intervention. Through the "Three Warfares"—public opinion, psychological, and legal—Beijing employs influence operations, economic coercion, and military intimidation to shape the strategic environment in its favor. Rather than seeking a conventional military confrontation, the Chinese Communist Party aims to isolate Taiwan diplomatically, destabilize its internal politics, and deter foreign support through disinformation and gray-zone tactics. Should conflict arise, China's political warfare will intensify, targeting US force mobilization, alliance cohesion, and domestic morale. The objective is clear: to make Taiwan's subjugation appear inevitable and US resistance seem futile. Countering this strategy requires early recognition of China's asymmetric approach and a proactive effort to harden Taiwan and US regional positions against coercion before Beijing sets the terms of engagement.

"All battles are won or lost in the mind."

—Joan of Arc

Political warfare is the art of achieving strategic objectives through influence, subversion, and coercion. George Kennan, in a 1948 policy memorandum for the US Department of State, defined it as "the employment of all the means at a nation's command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives."¹ His warning was aimed at Soviet operations, which he called "the most refined and effective of any in history." But even as Kennan wrote this memo, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was proving that his definition was incomplete. The Party secured victory in

Note: This article is an adaptation of Prof. Gershaneck's earlier article in the *Journal of Advanced Military Studies*, Vol 15, No 2, entitled "China's 'Second Battlefield': Political Warfare in Combat Operations."

¹ Kennan, "The inauguration of organized political warfare." US Department of State, Policy Planning Staff Memorandum, 4 May 1948, <https://history.state.gov/>.

the Chinese Civil War through battlefield successes empowered by political warfare, including the use of ideological subversion, propaganda, and coercion.²

With the fall of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s and the subsequent dismantling of America's own political warfare capabilities, Beijing has refined and expanded its political warfare strategies and tactics, securing strategic gains with little resistance. The militarization of the South China Sea is a textbook case. Declaring sovereignty over vast swaths of international waters, constructing artificial islands, and turning them into forward military bases—all accomplished without provoking a meaningful global response.³ Former US Assistant Secretary of Defense Wallace C. Gregson described it as “a feckless global response,” a verdict reinforced when the Obama administration failed to act after Xi Jinping publicly reneged on his 2015 pledge not to militarize the region.⁴ Beijing's island-building campaign sent an unmistakable message: the United States was unwilling to confront the PRC in the South China Sea. The artificial islands, now fortified military outposts, serve a dual purpose: complicating US and allied access to the region while advancing the CCP's broader objective of pushing the United States out of the Western Pacific.

This, in turn, sets the stage for Taiwan's isolation and coercion into so-called “re-unification”—an outcome Xi has declared essential for the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (中華民族偉大復興). The fall of Taiwan, whether through capitulation or after a failed US intervention, would reverberate far beyond the Taiwan Strait. It would fracture America's global alliance network, hand the People's Liberation Army (PLA) a dominant position in the First Island Chain, and cement PRC hegemony over the Indo-Pacific.⁵ Integrating Taiwan's advanced semiconductor and technology sectors would supercharge China's industrial base, narrowing the technological gap with the United States and accelerating Beijing's challenge to American primacy on a global scale.

² The PRC is a party-state under the control of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP); so, the terms PRC and CCP are used interchangeably in this article. The existential threat to democracies today stems from the CCP's ideology, paramount leader Xi's highly adversarial outlook, and a party apparatus that supersedes the nation itself—not from “China” or the Chinese people per se.

³ J. Michael Dahm, “South China Sea Military Capabilities Series Studies,” John Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory, 2020. <https://www.jhuapl.edu/>.

⁴ LtGen Wallace Gregson, USMC, ret., interview by Kerry Gershaneck, 2 July 2022. Gregson stated, “While (the US) and the rest of the world chose to treat this as some sort of peacetime operation, one can argue that this Chinese action was essentially a daring attack to seize territory, and then fortify it, taking advantage of diplomatic, economic, and political preparation over years that set the conditions guaranteeing a feckless global response.”

⁵ David Santoro and Ralph Cossa, eds., “The World After Taiwan's Fall,” *Pacific Forum* 23, no. 2 (January 2023), <https://pacforum.org/>.

Yet Xi understands that political warfare alone may not be enough to bring Taiwan to heel—particularly after the CCP’s heavy-handed crackdown on Hong Kong’s 2019 protests reinforced Taiwanese skepticism of Beijing’s promises. The CCP has steadily dropped references to “peaceful reunification” from its official lexicon, signaling a shift in strategy. Instead of a high-risk full-scale invasion, Xi has pursued military coercion as a subset of political warfare, leveraging *gray-zone tactics*—constant pressure through military maneuvers, economic coercion, and disinformation—to wear down Taipei’s resistance while avoiding outright war. Since 2012, Beijing has refined this strategy, calibrating its actions to probe US and allied resolve while steadily tightening the noose around Taiwan.

Beijing’s early forays into gray-zone warfare were crude but effective—relying on fishing boats as proxies to maintain plausible deniability. Taiwan was not the initial target. Instead, China tested its coercive tactics on weaker regional actors. In 2012, at Scarborough Reef, the People’s Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM) swarmed the area, blocking Philippine naval access while the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) loitered nearby, ready to escalate if necessary. In 2014, a similar script played out when China deployed the Hai Yang Shi You 981 oil rig in contested waters near Vietnam. PAFMM vessels, again under CCG protection, rammed Vietnamese ships attempting to intervene.⁶

Beijing escalated its pressure campaign further in November 2013 by declaring an air defense identification zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea, covering the Japanese-administered Senkaku Islands and overlapping existing ADIZs from South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan.⁷ The move was more than symbolic. It laid the foundation for an aggressive airspace harassment campaign: People’s Liberation Army (PLA) incursions into Japan’s ADIZ surged from 96 in 2010 to 851 by 2016.⁸

Taiwan now bears the full weight of China’s gray-zone warfare. Over-fishing and sand-dredging degrade maritime resources, CCG “law enforcement patrols” assert Beijing’s claims, and PLA warplanes probe Taiwan’s defenses with near-daily ADIZ incursions. Joint coercion exercises, increasingly sophisticated and large-scale, send an unmistakable signal: China has calibrated its military posture to provide

⁶ Eric Chan, “Escalating Clarity without Fighting: Countering Gray Zone Warfare against Taiwan (Part 2),” *Global Taiwan Brief*, 2 June 2021, <https://globaltaiwan.org/>.

⁷ Brent Stricker, “East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone: a Primer,” *Center for International Maritime Security*, 10 November 2022, <https://cimsec.org/>.

⁸ Mercedes Trent, “Over the Line: The Implications of China’s ADIZ Intrusions in Northeast Asia,” *Federation of American Scientists*, 1 January 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

Xi with a menu of escalatory options, with the ability to credibly threaten full-scale war at short notice.⁹

This strategy elevates political warfare to a central pillar of PLA operations, a fact often overlooked in conventional military assessments. This article examines the key facets of the PRC's political warfare doctrine—particularly how Beijing might weaponize these tactics to disrupt and degrade US and coalition forces in the event of a Taiwan contingency.

Countering Intervention as a PLA Priority

During the 1995–1996 Third Taiwan Straits Crisis, the CCP suffered deep humiliation when the PLA could not detect the presence of a US aircraft carrier battle group in the Taiwan Strait. Since then, the PLA has prioritized being able to find, fix, and counter US intervention forces in a Taiwan invasion scenario.¹⁰

To overcome what it perceives as US superiority in technology and human capital, the PLA has developed a redundant system-of-systems operational concept designed not to destroy but to paralyze its adversary. This doctrine, known as *systems destruction warfare* (系統破壞戰), shifts the focus from attrition to disruption.¹¹ While analysts have extensively covered the PLA's kinetic threats to an intervention force, its political warfare goals and methods receive far less attention. Yet within the CCP, political warfare is a strategic imperative.. It is a critical component of systems destruction warfare, albeit with distinct coercive objectives.

⁹ Amrita Jash, “China’s Military Exercises Around Taiwan: Trends and Patterns,” *Global Taiwan Brief*, 2 October 2024, <https://globaltaiwan.org/>. For a general overview of Xi’s acceleration of preparations for war, see John Pomfret and Matt Pottinger, “Xi Jinping Says He Is Preparing China for War: The World Should Take Him Seriously,” *Foreign Affairs*, 29 March 2023. For a detailed CCP overview, see this essay in *Qiushi*, the top theoretical journal of the CCP, authored under the byline “Jun Zheng” (a homonym for “military government” and assumed to refer to the Central Military Commission or Ministry of Defense): “Under the Guidance of Xi Jinping’s Thought on Strengthening the Army, We Will Advance Victoriously,” *Qiushi (Seeking Truth)*, 1 March 2023. The essay’s theme is “dare to fight, dare to win!” For the Xinhua perspective, see Ryan Woo, “China’s Xi Tells Military to Deepen War, Combat Planning, Xinhua Reports,” *Reuters*, 6 July 2023. For an example of the CCP’s threats via its propaganda organs, see Yang Sheng, “Taiwan Separatists Panic as Mainland Drops ‘Peaceful’ in Reunification Narrative,” *Global Times*, 23 May 2020. Regarding increased PLA military coercion, see ROC Ministry of Defense, *ROC National Defense Report 2021* (110”棲僑邀禎晚) (Taipei: ROC Ministry of National Defense, 2021), 43–46; and Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2023: Annual Report to Congress* (Washington: US Department of Defense, 2023), x, 41, 136–37.

¹⁰ Minnie Chan, “Unforgettable humiliation led to development of GPS equivalent,” *South China Morning Post*, 13 November 2009, <https://www.scmp.com/>.

¹¹ Joel Wuthnow, “Systems Destruction Warfare and the PLA,” *Institute for National Strategic Studies*, March 2023, <https://keystone.ndu.edu/>.

This approach is encapsulated in the “Three Warfares” (三戰): public opinion warfare (輿論戰), psychological warfare (心理戰), and legal warfare (法律戰). These tactics combined with the physical presence of the PLA, constitute the essence of Beijing’s gray-zone operations against weaker regional neighbors.

Coercing weaker states, however, differs from coercing the United States. The CCP frequently conflates *coercion* and *deterrence* under the term *weishe* (威懾)—a concept that implies compelling an adversary into submission.¹² In places where the PLA cannot yet exert credible coercive pressure, the CCP relies more heavily on influence campaigns to execute the Three Warfares. These efforts aim to cultivate willful blindness, capture elite decision makers, and instill complacency.¹³

Meanwhile, before risking full-scale confrontation, the CCP must ensure that its armed wing—the PLA—can achieve its political warfare objectives. These include maintaining friendly morale, generating domestic and international public support, weakening the enemy’s will to fight, and shaping the adversary’s strategic assessments.¹⁴ Even more fundamentally, Xi must be certain of the PLA’s political loyalty. This imperative is codified in the CCP’s 2017 phrase, “The Three Whethers” (三個能不能), the first of which asks “whether the PLA can maintain the party’s absolute leadership.”¹⁵

The recent prolonged purge of senior PLA leadership demonstrates Xi’s ongoing concerns over the military’s vulnerability to political warfare. More significantly, it underscores his willingness to accept short-term disruption in exchange for greater Party control.¹⁶

Thus, if the CCP chooses to launch an all-out assault on Taiwan, it will do so only because Xi is confident in two things: the state of PLA modernization relative to the United States and the CCP’s ability to wage political warfare across all phases of the operation.

¹² Dean Cheng, “Chinese Views on Deterrence.” *Joint Force Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (2011): 92–94, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/>.

¹³ House Committee on Oversight and Accountability, “CCP Political Warfare: Federal Agencies Urgently Need a Government-Wide Strategy,” 118th Cong., 2nd sess. (Washington: US House of Representatives, 27 October 2024), <https://oversight.house.gov/>.

¹⁴ Mark Stokes and Russell Hsiao, *The People’s Liberation Army General Political Department: Political Warfare with Chinese Characteristics* (Arlington, VA: Project 2049 Institute, 2013), 3–7, <https://project2049.net/>.

¹⁵ Dennis Blasko, “PLA Weaknesses and Xi’s Concerns about PLA Capabilities,” *Testimony before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, 7 February 2019, <https://www.uscc.gov/>.

¹⁶ “Xi Jinping is obsessed with political loyalty in the PLA,” *The Economist*, 6 November 2023, <https://www.economist.com/>.

Countering Force Generation

The first step in forced unification is to ensure Taiwan's isolation—both physically and psychologically. At the strategic level, this means employing the Three Warfares to break Taiwan's will to resist and to deter US intervention. Failing that, it means delaying American force generation long enough to make intervention politically or militarily untenable. The CCP aims to accomplish this by shaping the narrative surrounding the conflict through a series of deliberate actions:¹⁷

- Control the incident's framing. Beijing requires a “controlled crisis” to drive the narrative. An attack will not come as a “bolt from the blue” but will follow a carefully orchestrated sequence of events, each designed for maximum public opinion advantage. The CCP will ensure a steady flow of polished messaging—broadcast, online, and in print—to legitimize its actions.
- Set the terms of resolution. PRC officials will issue “minimum benchmarks” to preemptively frame the boundaries of negotiation.¹⁸ In essence, this will amount to a call for Taiwan's surrender, packaged as a reasonable compromise.
- Sever external communication. The CCP views crisis hotlines and alternative communication channels not as mechanisms for de-escalation but as tools for adversarial narrative control. As a result, when crises escalate, US officials, journalists, and academics frequently find their Chinese counterparts unwilling to engage. A case in point: during the August 2022 crisis—manufactured by Beijing in response to US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan—the PLA refused to answer calls from senior US military officials and canceled the China-U.S. Theater Commanders Talks.¹⁹

During the crisis phase, social media will be saturated with relentless, coordinated messaging. The core narrative is already well established, drawn from years of speeches by Xi and other senior CCP officials:

¹⁷ Stefan Halper, *China: The Three Warfares* (Washington: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2013), 73–74.

¹⁸ Friend and Thayer, *How China Sees the World*, 119–20.

¹⁹ Laura Seligman and Alexander Ward, “Pentagon Chiefs' Calls to China Go Unanswered amid Taiwan Crisis,” *Politico*, 5 August 2022; and Guermantes Lailari, “What Does Taiwan Have to Do with the G20 Meeting in Bali?,” *Taiwan News*, 14 November 2022.

- “Compatriots on both sides of the Taiwan Strait are brothers and sisters of the same blood.” (兩岸同胞是血脈相連的骨肉兄弟), a phrase used by Jiang Zemin²⁰ and Xi.²¹)
- A crisis is the result of a collusion between Taiwan separatists “relying on foreign powers to seek independence” (挾洋謀獨), and the United States is “using Taiwan to control China” (以台製華).²²
- “Reunification” has entered “an irreversible historical process” (不可逆轉的歷史進程), which cannot be stopped by anyone, let alone an America in terminal decline.²³

This framework will be systematically tailored to target audiences using a system-of-systems approach, ensuring maximum saturation. A range of Party and military entities will coordinate the effort, including the Ministry of State Security (MSS, 國家安全部), which specializes in covert overseas espionage operations and domestic counterintelligence; the PLA’s 311 Base (311基地), specializing in political warfare against Taiwan); and the United Front Work Department (統一戰線工作部), specializing in political warfare against overseas Chinese and other foreigners. Two primary focal points will be US military base communities and overseas Chinese, particularly Chinese Americans.

The goal of this information campaign is not necessarily to persuade but to drown out competing narratives. The CCP will flood digital spaces with state-sponsored content, amplified through botnets, disinformation hubs, and algorithmic tweaking of social media platforms they control.²⁴ Beyond digital propaganda, China may resort to direct physical disruptions—one clear indicator of impending aggression would be the severing of Taiwan’s undersea internet cables, cutting off global access to real-time developments.²⁵

²⁰ Jiang Zemin, “Build a Well-off Society in an All-Round Way and Create a New Situation in Building Socialism with Chinese Characteristics—Report to the Sixteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China,” *CSIS Interpret: China*, 8 November 2002, <https://interpret.csis.org/>.

²¹ Xi Jinping, “Speech at the Conference to Commemorate the 150th Anniversary of the Birth of Dr. Sun Yat-Sen,” *CSIS Interpret: China*, 11 November 2016, <https://interpret.csis.org/>.

²² Cao Qun, “The Taiwan Strait Game Between China and the United States: Risk Variables and Crisis Management,” *CSIS Interpret: China*, 13 May 2022, <https://interpret.csis.org/>.

²³ Liu Jieyi, “Reunification Has Entered an Irreversible Historical Process,” *CSIS Interpret: China*, 18 August 2022, <https://interpret.csis.org/>.

²⁴ Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, “How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, not Engaged Argument,” *American Political Science Review* 111, no. 3 (2017): 484–501, <https://gking.harvard.edu/>.

²⁵ Newsham, *When China Attacks*, 3–19.

Beijing's influence campaign will also leverage micro-targeting, drawing on personal data obtained from large-scale cyber breaches. At the strategic level, the business community will face pressure to oppose US intervention under the threat of corporate data leaks, property seizures, and sanctions. Politicians may find themselves co-opted or blackmailed, with Beijing threatening embarrassing disclosures—a tactic already documented in Australia and New Zealand by Professor Anne-Marie Brady.²⁶

Operationally, military base communities will be a priority target. Expect waves of false orders, fabricated threats of kinetic strikes, and psychological pressure directed at military dependents—warnings about the safety of their loved ones designed to foment uncertainty and disrupt force mobilization. In short, the CCP does not merely prepare for war; it prepares to define reality itself.

In the same vein, overseas Chinese, including Chinese and Taiwanese Americans, will be explicitly targeted to sow distrust and division. Under Xi, the CCP has intensified efforts to transform the Chinese diaspora from a “brain drain” liability into an exploitable asset—both wittingly and unwittingly.²⁷

However, according to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), nationality, not ethnicity, is the key factor in the PRC's success in recruiting intelligence assets and covert operatives within the United States. A CSIS analysis of 224 publicly reported cases of Chinese espionage against the United States from 2000 to 2023 underscores this point: roughly 90 percent of cases involved PRC citizens, while only 10 percent involved non-Chinese actors, including Americans of Chinese descent. The true scope of Chinese espionage is undoubtedly larger, but the report's findings are instructive: “Chinese nationals who come to the United States to work or study are fertile ground for recruitment. Often they intend to return to China or have close family members resident in China, making them more susceptible to coercion. In contrast, Americans of Chinese descent are very unlikely to be recruited.”²⁸

Despite this challenge, Beijing views such recruits—especially those with military ties—as uniquely valuable. A RAND study warns that in a conflict, “one of China's first targets of disinformation on social media will be ethnic Chinese US military officers and service members,” using their families and social networks as

²⁶ Anne-Marie Brady, “China in Xi's ‘New Era’: New Zealand and the CCP's Magic Weapons,” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 2 (April 2018): 68–75, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/>.

²⁷ Eric Chan, “Fifth Column Fears: the Chinese Influence Campaign in the United States,” *The Diplomat*, 24 September 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

²⁸ “Survey of Chinese Espionage in the United States Since 2000 to March 2023,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 29 March 2023.

indirect vectors to spread doubt and division.²⁹ Chinese security services have multiple avenues of exploitation: espionage, sabotage, and even the disruption of military cohesion through the strategic exposure of low-level operatives—whether real or fabricated. The CCP is acutely aware of American sensitivities surrounding racial profiling. If investigations into ethnic Chinese service members or government officials become public during a crisis, the PRC will seize on the opportunity, amplifying accusations of discrimination as part of its Three Warfares strategy.³⁰

The PLA has long recognized its deficiencies in personnel quality and officer capability compared to the US military—what it calls “The Two Inabilities” (兩個能力不夠).³¹ Undermining adversary trust and morale from within is one way to close that gap.

Senior US leaders must anticipate that force generation in a crisis will be conducted under sustained assault—not just through cyberattacks or kinetic strikes but through a relentless psychological campaign. The ultimate goal is to fracture American confidence: in their military, their government, and, most insidiously, in each other.

Historical Vignette: CCP Political Warfare during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The CCP’s handling of COVID-19 was a demonstration of its political warfare methodology.³²

First, defensive political warfare to suppress domestic dissent and establish CCP control over the narrative. In December 2019, as the virus spread in Wuhan, the local Party’s first priority was not containment but information suppression—silencing and arresting whistleblower physicians. By early March 2020, as cases in Wuhan initially plateaued, state media pivoted from scapegoating local officials to lavishing praise on Xi’s leadership.

Second, offensive political warfare to drown out competing international narratives. Xi’s highly publicized, triumphalist visit to Wuhan in March

²⁹ Scott W. Harold, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Jeffrey W. Hornung, *Chinese Disinformation Efforts on Social Media* (Santa Monica: RAND, 19 July 2021), 5–6, <https://www.rand.org/>.

³⁰ Nomaan Merchant and Eric Tucker, “Spy Agencies’ Focus on China Could Snare Chinese Americans,” *Associated Press*, 16 June 2022.

³¹ Dennis Blasko, “The Chinese Military Speaks to Itself, Revealing Doubts,” *War on the Rocks*, 18 February 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/>.

³² Eric Chan and Peter Loftus, “Chinese Communist Party Information Warfare: US-China Competition during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 3, no. 2 (Summer 2020): 146–58, <https://media.defense.gov/>.

2020 marked the launch of a global propaganda campaign designed to deflect blame for pandemic mismanagement, reframe China as a *responsible great power*, and assert the supposed superiority of the CCP's governance model over the West.

Chinese diplomats officially emphasized “scientific uncertainty” to cast doubt on the origins of COVID-19 with a veneer of respectability, countering allegations that the virus may have leaked from the Wuhan Institute of Virology. Meanwhile, they unofficially trafficked in conspiracy theories via personal social media accounts—most infamously, the claim that COVID-19 was introduced to Wuhan by the US military during the October 2019 Military World Games.

By July 2021, these theories had coalesced into an official state-backed disinformation campaign, with Beijing pushing the narrative that the virus originated at the US Army's Fort Detrick research facility. In parallel, the CCP co-opted the #StopAsianHate social media movement, using botnets and inauthentic actors to smear challenges to its COVID narrative as “racist.”³³

Throughout this period, Beijing stonewalled World Health Organization (WHO) investigators seeking access to China,³⁴ while successfully pressuring WHO leadership to repeatedly issue laudatory statements clearly provided by the CCP.³⁵

The CCP's pandemic response was not just a public health crisis—it was a global case study in the CCP's ability to manipulate perception, control information, and weaponize narratives to its advantage.

Countering Force Deployment

The CCP views political warfare as a critical tool for obstructing enemy force deployment and will likely employ a range of measures toward this end. The first is lawfare and the use of paramilitary forces to obscure aggression. As US forces

³³ Albert Zhang, “#StopAsianHate: Chinese diaspora targeted by CCP disinformation campaign,” *The Strategist*, 1 July 2021, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/>.

³⁴ Emily Rauhala, “WHO chief, U.S. and other world leaders criticize China for limiting access of team researching coronavirus origins,” *Washington Post*, 30 March 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.

³⁵ Hinnerk Feldwisch-Drentrup, “How WHO Became China's Coronavirus Accomplice,” *Foreign Policy*, 2 April 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>.

begin deploying to Asia, first contact may not be with the PLA. Instead, Beijing will likely escalate its gray-zone “cabbage strategy,” pushing the PAFMM and CCG to the forefront. The objective: maintain the fiction that the PRC is engaged in domestic law enforcement or a health-related “quarantine,” rather than executing a military blockade against a sovereign state. Operationally, PAFMM and CCG units—straddling the line between military and civilian status—will serve as shields, daring Taiwan, the United States, and allied forces to initiate kinetic action.

The PLA Navy will likely employ similar deceptive measures through the operational use of civilian roll-on/roll-off (RORO) ships, in violation of the law of armed conflict. Analysts have long noted that the PLAN lacks sufficient amphibious lift for a Taiwan invasion, despite China’s vast shipbuilding industry.³⁶ However, these assessments often overlook the massive expansion in civilian RORO ship production—nominally for China’s booming car export market.³⁷ Since 2016, these vessels have been designed to meet military sealift requirements and have participated in PLA exercises.³⁸ While they have minimal self-defense capabilities and do not train for defensive operations, that is largely irrelevant. Their primary shield is *perception*—they appear as noncombatant civilian ships. This suggests that the PLA either assumes these vessels will not be attacked or, more likely, that Beijing considers the propaganda value of “innocent Chinese civilian ships” under attack to be worth the operational risk.

Second, active measures short of war to spread chaos. These operations will likely be conducted before the initiation of a Joint Firepower Strike campaign to maintain plausible deniability that hostilities have begun. Beijing has already demonstrated a willingness to exploit fifth columnists and co-opted overseas Chinese students for intelligence gathering and harassment. PRC-affiliated buyers have acquired tracts of land near US and Japanese military installations—positions that could be leveraged for sabotage or disruption.³⁹ Meanwhile, civilian UAVs could be deployed in non-kinetic roles to distract defenders, disrupt operations, and increase paranoia within military communities. The documented use of Chinese

³⁶ Lonnie Henley, “Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Hearing on Cross-Strait Deterrence: PLA Operational Concepts and Centers of Gravity in a Taiwan Conflict,” 117th Cong., 1st sess., 18 February 2021, <https://www.uscc.gov/>.

³⁷ Matthew P. Funaiolo et al., “China Accelerates Construction of ‘Ro-Ro’ Vessels, with Potential Military Implications,” *ChinaPower*, 11 October 2023, <https://chinapower.csis.org/>.

³⁸ Conor M. Kennedy, “China Maritime Report No. 4: Civil Transport in PLA Power Projection,” *China Maritime Studies Institute*, December 2019, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/>.

³⁹ Grant Newsham, *When China Attacks: A Warning to America* (Washington: Regnery Publishing, 2023), 3–19.

university students in the United States to surveil military bases,⁴⁰ combined with the recent surge in UAV incursions across the United States and Europe, should be viewed as adversary test runs.⁴¹

Closer to the theater, active measures will become more aggressive, specifically targeting allied and partner nations to fuel anti-American sentiment. These operations will likely be conducted through cutouts, particularly Chinese and transnational organized crime syndicates.

For decades, the CCP has maintained a symbiotic relationship with criminal networks in Hong Kong, Macau, Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam, operating under an unspoken agreement: Beijing turns a blind eye to illicit activities in exchange for keeping violent crime outside PRC borders.⁴² This arrangement periodically expands into direct cooperation. During the 2019 Hong Kong protests, the CCP leveraged local triads to attack prodemocracy demonstrators, offering plausible deniability while simultaneously broadcasting footage of gang violence as “proof” that the unrest—allegedly instigated by the United States—had devolved into chaos.⁴³

This model of political-criminal collaboration has since expanded into Taiwan and the Philippines. In the Philippines, Chinese criminal syndicates running scam operations were exposed for attempting to insert a PRC influence agent into local mayoral elections.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, in Taiwan—particularly on the outlying island of Kinmen, located just five miles from the PRC—organized crime groups have been fully co-opted into Party-aligned political tools. Members of Taiwan’s infamous Bamboo Union gang (竹聯幫), with PRC funding and logistical support, have openly organized as the Chinese Unification Promotion Party (CUPP, 中華統一促進黨), acting as a direct proxy for Beijing. These groups have also engaged in violent targeting of pro-democracy activists and Hong Kong dissidents who sought refuge in Taiwan.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Associated Press, “5 Chinese nationals charged with covering up midnight visit to Michigan military site,” *CNN*, 2 October 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/>.

⁴¹ Haley Britzkey, “Drones continue to buzz over US bases. The military isn’t sure why or how to stop them,” *CNN*, 21 December 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/>.

⁴² USIP Senior Study Group on Transnational Organized Crime in Southeast Asia, “Transnational Crime in Southeast Asia: A Growing Threat to Global Peace and Security,” *The U.S. Institute of Peace*, 13 May 2024, <https://www.usip.org/>.

⁴³ Gerry Shih, “China’s backers and ‘triad’ gangs have a history of common foes. Hong Kong protesters fear they are next,” *Washington Post*, 23 July 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.

⁴⁴ Kathleen Magramo, “Who is the real Alice Guo? Fugitive mayor accused of spying for China faces legal reckoning after weeks on the run,” *CNN*, 6 September 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/>.

⁴⁵ Benjamin Sando, “Taiwan’s Underworld, Part 2: The Chinese Communist Party and United Front Work,” *Global Taiwan Institute*, 18 September 2024, <https://globaltaiwan.org/>.

During a crisis, the CCP can be expected to activate these criminal networks to disrupt US and allied logistics. This could include sabotage operations, targeted harassment, and even direct attacks on US and allied bases. By outsourcing these operations to deniable actors, Beijing can maximize disruption while minimizing attribution, further complicating the battlespace for Washington and its partners.

Historical Vignette: Party Political Warfare during the Chinese Civil War

The Chinese Civil War serves as the foundation of the CCP's modern political warfare concepts.⁴⁶

Direct fighting in the early 1930s between the CCP and the Nationalists—Kuomintang (KMT, 國民黨)—nearly led to the CCP's destruction. The KMT's blockhouse strategy, designed to encircle and strangle Communist-held areas in south-central China, almost succeeded. The CCP barely escaped through the Long March to Yan'an in Shanxi, where Mao consolidated control over the CCP and its forces.

The 1937 Japanese invasion of China provided the time and space the CCP needed to rebuild. As Japan captured the KMT's coastal urban strongholds, hyperinflation and economic collapse weakened the Nationalist government's legitimacy. Meanwhile, Mao carried out the Yan'an Rectification Campaign (延安整風運動), a mass purge that eliminated internal dissent and solidified his control over the Party.

By the end of World War II, Mao faced a precarious but opportunistic landscape. The United States maintained a significant presence in China—50,000 US Marines stationed in the north, the US Navy's 7th Fleet headquarters in Shanghai, and a US Army Advisory Group in Beijing. The KMT military, superior in numbers and equipment, was armed, trained, and logistically supported by the United States. However, Nationalist legitimacy was fragile, propped up by US economic assistance and reliant on the co-operation of local elites.

⁴⁶ Mariah Thornton, "Countering United Front Work: Taiwan's Political Warfare System," *LSE Ideas*, 21 March 2023, <https://lseideas.medium.com/>.

Recognizing that a direct military confrontation would be disastrous, Mao instead concentrated his 1945–1946 strategy on consolidating Communist strength while systematically undermining US political will to support the KMT. His first move was a diplomatic campaign targeting the United States, spearheaded by Zhou Enlai, whom he appointed as chief negotiator in US-led mediation talks for a unity government. As the architect of the CCP's intelligence apparatus, Zhou had a talent for telling the Americans what they wanted to hear—a skill he would later employ during negotiations with Nixon and Kissinger over US–PRC normalization. To cultivate the image of a willing peace partner, he was authorized to concede isolated and militarily indefensible Communist base areas.

Simultaneously, Mao ordered a covert guerrilla campaign against US Marines in northern China. These attacks served a dual purpose: to test Washington's commitment to defending the KMT and to chip away at US domestic support for intervention. Mao also leaned heavily on United Front influence campaigning, leveraging widespread economic hardship and dissatisfaction with KMT governance to rally popular support as “rural reformers”.

Mao's strategy proved devastatingly effective. The failure of US-led mediation—inevitable, as Mao never intended to share power—was placed squarely on the KMT by President Harry Truman. In response, Truman froze military aid just as Nationalist forces launched their offensive. Meanwhile, mounting public opposition to US involvement in China led to the withdrawal of Marines from the north, ostensibly to prevent further “escalation.”

Deprived of critical US support, the KMT advanced but failed to deliver a decisive blow against the Communists. Overextended and increasingly isolated, Nationalist forces found themselves vulnerable to piecemeal destruction. As the war dragged on, its economic toll proved unbearable—hyperinflation and internal discontent triggered widespread defections. One defeat bled into the next, and by 1949, the Nationalists had no choice but to retreat to Taiwan, leaving the mainland firmly in Communist hands.

In the present-day, Xi has made a concerted attempt to revive Chinese Civil War-era slogans (“Carry forward the Yan'an Spirit,” “Emulate the Yan'an Rectification Campaign,”) and propaganda organizations such as the United Front Work Department.

Fighting the Protracted War

A prolonged conflict poses a significant threat to the CCP. The PLA's concept of "war control" (控制戰爭) emphasizes the need to manage war objectives, methods, intensity, and scope to ensure favorable outcomes. Predictability is paramount. Beyond the obvious economic and societal strains, an extended war risks triggering multifront crises—what the PLA terms "chain reaction warfare" (連鎖反應戰爭).

In such a scenario, the CCP's strategic imperatives will shift to consolidation and risk management. Its first priority, regardless of war duration, will be to eliminate Taiwan's elected government and install an "interim government." This regime would likely consist of criminal syndicate members and pro-unification hardliners from the "deep-blue" faction of the KMT. The CCP is well aware of the legitimacy crisis this would create for its influence campaign against Taiwan. However, by the time the war has escalated into a drawn-out conflict with coalition intervention, the CCP will see its decades-long investment in Taiwan's "emotional integration" (情感融合) as a sunk cost. Instead, it will pivot to a more immediate solution: overwhelming Taiwan's information space with a "flood the zone" propaganda strategy aimed at eroding the island's will to resist and inducing war fatigue among intervening forces.⁴⁷

The "interim government" would act quickly to declare authority over Taiwan's military and order its surrender. Deception operations would feature PLA forces dressed in Taiwanese military uniforms to create a false narrative of domestic compliance. These forces would also play a key role in shaping the optics of a blockade and starvation campaign, ensuring that surrendering military personnel and civilians appear to be capitulating to a Taiwanese, rather than PLA, authority. Beyond its coercive function, the "interim government" would exert political pressure on the intervention coalition, forcing them to prioritize humanitarian aid over weapons shipments in contested supply lines. It is worth noting that *every single one of these techniques were used by the CCP in the Chinese Civil War*.⁴⁸

Beyond Taiwan, the CCP's second priority will be to turn international opinion against the United States and obstruct US military operations through United Front work. The CCP's vast global political warfare network, led by the United Front Work Department (UFW), will mobilize to shape elite opinion in key countries—particularly in the region and among nations capable of influencing the conflict's

⁴⁷ Ying Yu Lin, "China's Hybrid Warfare and Taiwan," *The Diplomat*, 13 January 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

⁴⁸ Gary J. Bjorge, "Moving the Enemy: Operational Art in the Chinese PLA's Huai Hai Campaign," Leavenworth Paper, No. 22, Combat Studies Institute Press, 2003, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/>.

outcome. The goal will be twofold: securing global legitimacy for the PRC's war objectives while undermining Washington's ability to leverage its alliance network.

The UFWD specializes in outreach and subversion. During the Chinese Civil War, the UFWD was instrumental in co-opting warlords, intellectuals, ethnic minorities, and rival political factions through appeals to nationalism and "temporary pragmatic cooperation."⁴⁹ This strategy was originally designed to "defeat enemies one by one" (各個擊破) before absorbing them into the CCP's orbit. Under Xi, the UFWD has been revitalized, placed under direct Party Central Committee control, and assigned an expanded foreign influence mission.⁵⁰ It now oversees a sprawling infrastructure of Party-linked organizations, with every CCP member expected to contribute to its operations.⁵¹

During the 2019 Hong Kong protests, the UFWD played a central role in the CCP's efforts to break the will of demonstrators. It refined and deployed new counter-mobilization tactics designed to neutralize the decentralized, flash-mob-style protests. These efforts included undermining civil organizations through contested patronage, coercing business elites into compliance, weaponizing media narratives to discredit the movement, and leveraging criminal syndicates as deniable enforcers. The campaign was a testbed for integrating political warfare with coercive force—methods that will be scaled up in the event of a broader conflict.⁵²

In a protracted war, the CCP will expand these tactics globally, seeking to fracture US alliances and disrupt Washington's ability to concentrate military power. The PLA, in coordination with the UFWD, will conduct "disintegration work" aimed at eroding the political cohesion of coalitions, destabilizing societies, and sowing division within defense establishments. At the operational level, the UFWD will play a key role in restricting US military access and freedom of movement, using its extensive influence networks to exert pressure on foreign businesses, civil institutions, and international organizations. These efforts will be designed to isolate the United States, degrade alliance structures, and ensure that any intervention in Taiwan becomes politically and logistically untenable.

The CCP is already conducting these activities today, laying the groundwork for a broader campaign in the event of war. Current efforts include:

⁴⁹ Lyman P. Van Slyke, "The United Front in China," *Journal of Contemporary History* 5, no. 3 (1970): 119–35, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

⁵⁰ Russell Hsiao, "Political Warfare Alert: CCP Updates United Front Regulations Expanding Foreign Influence Mission," *Global Taiwan Institute*, February 2021, <https://globaltaiwan.org/>.

⁵¹ Clive Hamilton and Mareike Ohlberg, *Hidden Hand: Exposing How the Chinese Communist Party Is Reshaping the World* (Melbourne: Hardie Grant Books, 2020).

⁵² Edmund W. Cheng, "'United Front Work and Mechanisms of Counter-Mobilization in Hong Kong,'" *China Journal* 83 (January 2020): 1–33, <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/>.

- Leveraging PRC businesses to gather intelligence on US port usage and logistics;⁵³
- Pressuring foreign companies in joint ventures with Chinese firms to sever logistical and industrial ties with the United States while compelling them to lobby on behalf of the CCP;⁵⁴
- Engaging in political subversion within allied and partner nations to delay or deny US military access;⁵⁵
- Co-opting international organizations—including the United Nations, the World Health Organization, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and Interpol—to isolate the United States diplomatically and cast it as the aggressor.

These efforts will intensify dramatically in wartime, mirroring the CCP's escalation in Hong Kong's 2019 protests, but on a global scale.

Third, the CCP will seek to break American political will through threats of unconstrained war. Western strategic thinking often assumes nuclear escalation is the primary coercive tool available to Beijing. While nuclear signaling will remain an option, it is unlikely to be the CCP's first resort, as it introduces an unacceptable level of uncertainty—especially in a scenario where the CCP is already managing political instability following operational failure. The CCP will seek to credibly threaten *unconstrained* war while ensuring that the war does not become *uncontained*.

Other coercive tools will include hostage diplomacy, as demonstrated by the 2018 detention of Canadian citizens following the arrest of Huawei's CFO on a US extradition request.⁵⁶ The CCP may also engage in mistreatment of prisoners of war—historical precedent suggests this would serve as a deliberate pressure tactic. PLA Rocket Force salvos targeting civilian infrastructure in Japan, Alaska, or US territories could also serve as a means of psychological warfare, aimed at eroding public support for continued intervention, as seen in Russia's strikes against Ukrainian nonmilitary targets. None of these actions would be designed to achieve

⁵³ Elaine Dezenski and David Rader, "How China Uses Shipping for Surveillance and Control," *Foreign Policy*, 20 September 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>.

⁵⁴ Simon Denyer, "Command and Control: China's Communist Party Extends Reach into Foreign Companies," *Washington Post*, 28 January 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.

⁵⁵ Alex Joske, *The party speaks for you: Foreign interference and the Chinese Communist Party's united front system*, Report No. 32 (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2020), <https://ad-aspi.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/>.

⁵⁶ Scott Kennedy, "Beijing Suffers Major Loss from its Hostage Diplomacy," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 29 September 2021, <https://www.csis.org/>.

battlefield victory, but rather to fracture the political will of the United States and its democratic allies.

Ultimately, the CCP's objective will be to make the conflict politically untenable for Washington, imposing global costs and forcing US policy makers to view Taiwan as a lost cause. For the CCP, *off-ramps to conflict involve the strategic breaking of US morale, and not simply imposing operational costs.*

Historical Vignette: Party Political Warfare through POWs

The PLA has a long history of integrating political warfare into operations as an offset to quantitative and qualitative inferiority. One example of this from the Chinese Civil War is the leveraging prisoners of war (POW) as instruments of political warfare, a tactic that proved crucial to its success.⁵⁷

During the conflict, the outnumbered PLA relied heavily on defections and surrenders to replenish its ranks. To facilitate this, the CCP implemented the “Lenient Treatment Policy for Enemy Prisoners of War,” which emphasized humane treatment and light indoctrination—deliberately contrasting with the harsh conditions faced by KMT conscripts. Political commissars played a key role in this effort, tasked with persuading captured soldiers to defect while releasing those who refused to join.⁵⁸

This strategy paid dividends. In the brutal fighting of 1948, the PLA absorbed hundreds of thousands of KMT prisoners, enabling it to sustain a high operational tempo at a time when KMT morale was collapsing. The rapid integration of surrendered forces proved decisive, allowing the PLA to maintain its momentum and outmaneuver an adversary already weakened by internal discontent and wavering support.

During the Korean War, approximately 75,000 UN and South Korean soldiers fell into the hands of PRC and North Korean forces. Initial PLA attempts to apply the “Lenient Treatment” approach largely failed—captured US and UN personnel came from vastly different backgrounds than the KMT conscripts who had been susceptible to defection.

⁵⁷ Bjorge, “Moving the Enemy.”

⁵⁸ Wu Qu, “A Cold Conflict amid a Hot War: US-Chinese Indoctrination Contest over the Prisoners of War during the Korean War,” *LibraETD* (blog), 17 April 2023, <https://libraetd.lib.virginia.edu/>.

By 1951, the strategy shifted. Prisoners were subjected to intense indoctrination and psychological coercion designed to induce lasting behavioral changes and serve the CCP's broader propaganda campaign.⁵⁹ They were forced to write propaganda leaflets, issue appeals for peace, denounce the United States, and falsely attest that US forces had deployed biological weapons against Korean civilians. The goal was not only to manipulate individual prisoners but to create a stream of propaganda that could be exploited both domestically and internationally.⁶⁰

These coerced statements became central to the CCP's domestic propaganda efforts, framing the United States as a continuation of the imperial Japanese atrocities of World War II. By invoking deep-seated historical grievances, the CCP sought to stoke nationalist sentiment and solidify domestic support for the war effort.⁶¹

On the international stage, the CCP weaponized prisoner "confessions" to disrupt US military operations. Zhou Enlai, now premier, warned that captured USAF pilots would be treated as "war criminals," an implicit threat aimed at deterring US air campaigns.⁶² Mao, however, saw a broader opportunity. In coordination with the Soviet Union, the CCP transformed these accusations into a global propaganda offensive designed to fracture United Nations Command cohesion and expand influence in Cold War battlegrounds such as India and Pakistan.⁶³

While this campaign has largely faded from Western memory, the CCP has not forgotten its effectiveness. It is no coincidence that both during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the lead-up to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the PRC and Russia pushed disinformation accusing the United States of

⁵⁹ *Communist Treatment of Prisoners of War: A Historical Survey* (Washington: Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, 92d Cong., 1972), 12–17.

⁶⁰ James Angus MacDonald, Jr., *The Problems of U.S. Marine Corps Prisoners of War in Korea* (Washington: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, US Marine Corps, 1988), <https://www.marines.mil/>.

⁶¹ Sei Jeong Chin, "The Korean War, Anti-US Propaganda, and the Marginalization of Dissent in China, 1950–1953," *Twentieth-Century China* 48, no. 1 (January 2023): 23–47, <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.

⁶² Conrad C. Crane, "Korean War Biological Warfare Allegations Against the United States: A Playbook for the Current Crisis in Ukraine," US Army War College Press, 11 March 2022, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/>.

⁶³ Milton Leitenberg, "False Allegations of U.S. Biological Weapons Use during the Cold War," in *Terrorism, War, or Disease?: Unraveling the Use of Biological Weapons*, ed. Anne L. Clunan, Peter R. Lavoy, and Susan B. Martin (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 120–43, <https://spp.umd.edu/>.

developing biological weapons. In a future conflict, similar accusations will almost certainly resurface—alongside the use of captured POWs for indoctrination and coerced propaganda, both to shape domestic narratives and to influence international opinion.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This article provides a brief overview of how the PRC will conduct political warfare in wartime. The scale and intensity of the CCP's political warfare in peacetime is already unprecedented, often proving highly effective. In war, it will escalate even further. Given this clearly foreseeable threat, it is imperative that US national security leaders incorporate political warfare considerations into operational-strategic planning. To that end, we recommend the following actions for senior DOD leadership:

- Direct the establishment of professional military education courses on adversary use of political warfare. The PRC draws extensively on historical precedent to inform its political warfare operations. Understanding this history—how political warfare has been used, what vulnerabilities have been exploited, and what countermeasures have worked—will provide the foundation for preempting or mitigating future adversary actions. This is particularly critical given that the US military has not faced large-scale targeted political warfare since the Cold War era. Technological, societal, and political shifts since then have only heightened US vulnerabilities. Additionally, a deeper understanding of political warfare is essential in shaping America's own offensive strategies, determining when and how to leverage political warfare to maximum effect in a crisis.
- Wargame PRC political warfare operations against operational forces and home bases. These wargames should inform the development of counter-political warfare campaign plans, both country-specific and coalition-wide. Political warfare planning should not be confined to assessing threats—it must also identify opportunities. Misreading adversary capabilities can be just as dangerous as underestimating them. Prior to 2022, Western assessments of the Russian military often took Russian propaganda at face value, leading to inflated capability estimates (e.g., “Russia will decapitate Ukraine’s government in two days”) that only served to self-deter.⁶⁴ Are current worst-case assessments of the PLA,

⁶⁴ Karen DeYoung et al., “Russia could seize Kyiv in days and cause 50,000 civilian casualties in Ukraine, U.S. assessments find,” *Washington Post*, 5 February, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.

particularly the PLARF, suffering from similar analytical flaws? Do assumptions about PLARF capabilities in the opening days of a war account for the CCP's political warfare imperatives—such as dividing coalitions, controlling escalation, and deterring strikes on the mainland? To what extent is the US military self-deterring or engaging in suboptimal force posture decisions due to over-inflated assessments—thereby doing the PLA's job for them?

- Engage with allied/partner militaries on best practices against political warfare. After its defeat in the Chinese Civil War, the KMT undertook sweeping military and political reforms, incorporating lessons learned from its experience with CCP political warfare. This resulted in a comprehensive framework linking psychological and material aspects of warfare, providing Taiwan with a durable defense against decades of PRC coercion. The United States and its allies should engage in systematic exchanges on political warfare experiences, share best practices, and coordinate strategies to counter gray-zone coercion. Strengthening coalition defenses against political warfare not only enhances collective resilience but also imposes costs on the PRC and presents it with a united front—turning its own tactics against it.

A failure to anticipate and counter PRC political warfare would represent a critical vulnerability in any future conflict. While the United States continues to focus on conventional deterrence, the CCP is waging a parallel campaign designed to shape the battlespace long before shots are fired. The PRC's ability to manipulate narratives, erode alliances, and fracture domestic political cohesion poses an asymmetric threat that, if left unchecked, could make conventional military superiority irrelevant. Winning this contest will require a paradigm shift—one that places political warfare at the center of strategic planning, not as an afterthought to traditional military considerations.

The battle for Taiwan will not be decided by missiles and warships alone. It will be fought in the information space, in the corridors of political power, and in the minds of those tasked with defending US and allied interests. If the United States fails to recognize and counter the PRC's political warfare campaign, it risks walking into a conflict already lost before the first engagement. Confronting this challenge requires more than just resilience; it demands a proactive strategy that leverages America's own strengths in influence, coalition-building, and strategic communication. The choice is clear: shape the narrative, or be shaped by it. 🌀

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Xi Jinping's Taiwan Dashboard

Considering Xi's Calculus for a Possible Move on Taiwan

DR. GREGORY J. MOORE

Abstract

Xi Jinping's calculus on Taiwan is not guided by mere opportunism but by a structured assessment of strategic, political, and military realities—his metaphorical “dashboard.” This article dissects 13 key indicators shaping Beijing's decision on whether and when to invade Taiwan, alongside four enduring factors reinforcing China's long-term objective to acquire Taiwan. The analysis finds that 11 of the 13 indicators favor near-term action, suggesting a closing window of opportunity that could drive Xi toward a military solution sooner rather than later. While China's military readiness remains a consideration, the dynamics of US commitments, Taiwan's shifting identity, and China's economic and demographic pressures weigh heavily on the timeline. Coupled with Xi's personal ambitions and his directive to the PLA to be ready for action by 2027, the balance tilts toward military escalation. Ignoring these hard truths invites peril; understanding them is imperative for policymakers navigating what may be the most volatile flashpoint in US foreign policy in the coming few years.

What is Xi Jinping thinking about Taiwan? Is he seriously considering the use of force to, as he sees it, reunite Taiwan with the “motherland”? If so, is an invasion imminent? Would the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) military readiness be the decisive factor in Xi's calculus? Or are other variables shaping his decision-making on a possible attack? These are the questions this article seeks to address.¹

The broader context—the reasons China might consider invading Taiwan—has been analyzed extensively and will not be reexamined in detail here. Suffice it to say, most analysts agree that bringing Taiwan under Beijing's control remains one of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) core objectives, an unshaken priority from Mao to Xi. This is not a matter of serious debate. What is debated, however, are the conditions under which China's leadership might abandon their current strategy and resort to force. It is worth noting the relative emphasis, however—past CCP leaders,

¹ This article is based on a presentation with the same title given on 7 December 2023, at the US Air Force Academy (Colorado Springs, Colorado), under the auspices of the Institute for Future Conflict at the USAFA.

from Deng to Jiang to Hu, were prepared to wait. Xi, by contrast, has dramatically intensified pressure, signaling a sense of urgency unseen in previous decades.

This article introduces the idea that Xi Jinping operates with a “dashboard” of indicators as he weighs his options regarding Taiwan. Naturally, Xi does not have a literal dashboard. The term is used metaphorically to illustrate how he assesses key metrics before making a decision.

A dashboard, in its traditional sense, is a cluster of gauges on a car or airplane that informs the operator about speed, direction, altitude (in aircraft), and other critical system functions. More broadly, the term has come to signify a collection of indicators that provide real-time data on essential conditions. Xi's decision-making process regarding Taiwan can be viewed through a similar lens—one in which a range of geopolitical, military, economic, and internal stability factors serve as his key dials and readouts.

Framing Xi Jinping's decision-making through the dashboard metaphor, what indicators dominate his Taiwan dashboard today? Put differently, what key factors shape his calculus on when to shift from the current phase of multiple daily PLA Air Force and/or Navy incursions to full-scale military action? The argument here is that while military readiness remains a crucial variable, it is far from the only one. Xi must navigate a complex matrix of strategic, political, and economic factors—13 key variables in total—alongside four additional considerations that weigh heavily on his timeline. Each of these will be examined below.

A close analysis of these 13 variables—Xi's dashboard dials—and the impact of four supplementary factors suggests that an invasion of Taiwan is likely within the next one to three years. The reasoning is stark: for 11 of these 13 key indicators, delaying beyond that window would leave Xi and China in a weaker position rather than a stronger one. In short, 11 of 13 dials on Xi's dashboard flash warnings that time is not on his side. They signal closing windows of opportunity and reinforce the logic of striking sooner rather than later. Table 1 outlines these 13 indicators, followed by a detailed discussion and an examination of the four additional pressures accelerating Xi's timeline.

A Deeper Look at the 13 Indicators on Xi's Dashboard

Let us examine the 13 indicators. The first two indicate an opening window of opportunity, marked with the “<” symbol, meaning that time works in China's favor—waiting benefits Beijing. The remaining 11 represent a closing window of opportunity, denoted by the “>” symbol, signaling that the present is more favorable than the future. For these factors, delay brings diminishing returns, making the situation progressively less advantageous for Xi Jinping. Each will be analyzed in turn. Table 1 provides an overview of the 13 indicators presented in this study.

Table 1. The dials. The dials on Xi's Taiwan dashboard should include the following opening and closing windows of opportunity (" + > " meaning a closing window, an inducement to go because the longer one waits, the less advantageous it will be for Xi, so sooner is better; and " - < " denoting a reason not to go soon and/or the longer one waits the more advantageous it will be for Xi), so here later is better:

Indicator	Symbol	Implication
Opening Window of Opportunity (Later Is Better)		
PLA preparedness	- <	Waiting improves China's military readiness.
China's struggling economy	- <	Economic difficulties discourage near-term aggression.
Closing Window of Opportunity (Sooner Is Better)		
Taiwan's identity drifting further from Mainland	+ >	Delaying increases risk of losing Taiwan's cultural and political ties.
China's demographic decline	+ >	Fewer fighting-age individuals over time increases difficulty of military recruitment.
Importance of Taiwan's semiconductor industry	+ >	Seizure of Taiwan's semiconductor dominance now benefits China more than later.
Growing importance of semiconductors to China	+ >	China's current lack of access makes Taiwan's semiconductor sector even more valuable.
Growing US commitment to Taiwan	+ >	Trend means delaying allows the US to deepen its support for Taiwan.
US commitment to Taiwan still lacks joint exercises and interoperability	+ >	Present advantage diminishes as US-Taiwan coordination improves.
China's advantage in ship-killer hypersonic weapons	+ >	Current US vulnerabilities make the present a more favorable time for action.
US working to develop hypersonic weapons and defenses	+ >	Delay allows the US to close offensive and defensive technological gaps.
State of US-China relations is now poor	+ >	With relations at a low, Xi faces fewer diplomatic consequences now.
Xi's perception of US intentions as increasingly hostile	+ >	Belief that greater US hostility increases US support for Taiwan, so China must act sooner.
Taiwan's 2024 election, DPP victory	+ >	Pro-independence DPP government accelerates Taiwan's drift from Beijing.

Indicator 1: PLA preparedness (more time to prepare means better chance of success, more tools, etc.)

From a military preparedness standpoint, time is almost always an asset. It enables the development and acquisition of critical capabilities, extends training for personnel, and ultimately increases the probability of success. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has embarked on an unprecedented modernization campaign, rapidly expanding its arsenal.² It has bolstered its fleet of warships, landing craft, helicopters,

² US Department of Defense, "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 2024," *Annual Report to Congress* (14 December 2024), <https://media.defense.gov/>.

missiles, and unmanned systems while integrating lessons from twenty-first-century conflicts, particularly those unfolding in Ukraine and Russia.

Yet despite this buildup, the consensus—both among Chinese analysts (based on open-source material) and Western military observers—is that the PLA remains unprepared for a full-scale invasion of Taiwan.³ While nationalist sentiment in China favors the use of force to bring Taiwan under Beijing's control, military experts contend that the PLA still lacks the capability to seize and hold the island.⁴ The argument here is straightforward: Xi needs more time to maximize his chances of success. The longer he waits, the stronger his forces will become. However, as discussed in factor #2 in the “Other Factors” section below, delay presents its own risks.

Indicator 2: China's economy is struggling (lends itself to caution in regard to military moves)

Another argument for delaying an invasion lies in China's increasingly troubled economy. Officially, Beijing reported 5.2 percent growth in 2023, according to the *National Bureau of Statistics of China*.⁵ Independent assessments, however, suggest the real figure is closer to half that.⁶ A leading Chinese economist—recently censured after speaking at a Washington economic forum—publicly challenged the government's numbers. Meanwhile, China's housing market continues its decline, with new home sales plunging 28 percent from January to April 2024.⁷ China's youth Unemployment presents another red flag. Youth unemployment surpassed 21 percent as of August 2023, after which Beijing stopped publishing the data—an omission that only deepens concerns.

Structural pressures are also mounting. Europe's push for “de-risking” and Washington's ongoing “decoupling” are constraining China's economic prospects. Beijing's growing isolation—fueled by industrial espionage, intellectual property theft, alignment with Moscow in the Ukraine war, and deepening domestic

³ Adam Y. Liu and Xiaojun Li, “Assessing Public Support for (Non)Peaceful Unification with Taiwan: Evidence from a Nationwide Survey in China,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 33, no. 145 (2024): 1–13, <https://doi.org/>.

⁴ Mark F. Cancian, Matthew Cancian, and Eric Heginbotham, *The First Battle of the Next War: Wargaming a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan* (Washington: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2023); and US Department of Defense, “Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 2024.”

⁵ “National Economy Witness Momentum of Recovery” (press release, National Bureau of Statistics of China, 17 January 2024), <https://www.stats.gov.cn/>.

⁶ Daniel H. Rosen et al., “After the Fall: China's Economy in 2025,” *Rhodium Group*, 31 December 2024, <https://rhg.com/>.

⁷ Lingling Wei, “Xi Jinping Muzzles Chinese Economist Who Dared to Doubt GDP Numbers,” *Wall Street Journal*, 8 January 2025, <https://www.wsj.com/>.

authoritarianism—further compounds the problem. Given these trends, China faces increasing difficulty sustaining the economic growth it once enjoyed.

That said, economic distress could also drive Xi toward risk-taking. If he believes seizing Taiwan would revitalize China's economy—by securing critical industries or rallying nationalist support—he may see invasion as a gamble worth taking (see points 5 and 6 below).

Indicator 3: Taiwan people's identity (drifting away from Beijing)

A closing window of opportunity for Xi and China is Taiwan's shifting national identity. Public sentiment on the island has moved decisively away from any identification with China, as Table 2 illustrates. By 2022, only 3.6 percent of Taiwanese identified as Chinese, while 61 percent saw themselves exclusively as Taiwanese—now the dominant self-conception. From Beijing's perspective, this trend is not just troubling; it is a strategic failure of the CCP's long-running campaign of suasion and cultural influence.

Taiwan's democratic system further compounds Beijing's dilemma. Even if a more Beijing-friendly party, such as the Nationalists, were to win power, it could not enact policies that contradict public sentiment. This reality poses an existential threat to China's hopes for peaceful reunification. Given this trajectory, CCP leaders are likely concluding that the longer they wait, the more entrenched Taiwanese identity becomes—and the greater the urgency to force the island's "return to the fold" before the opportunity slips away.

Indicator 4: Chinese demographic decline means China will have less fighting age persons, long-term

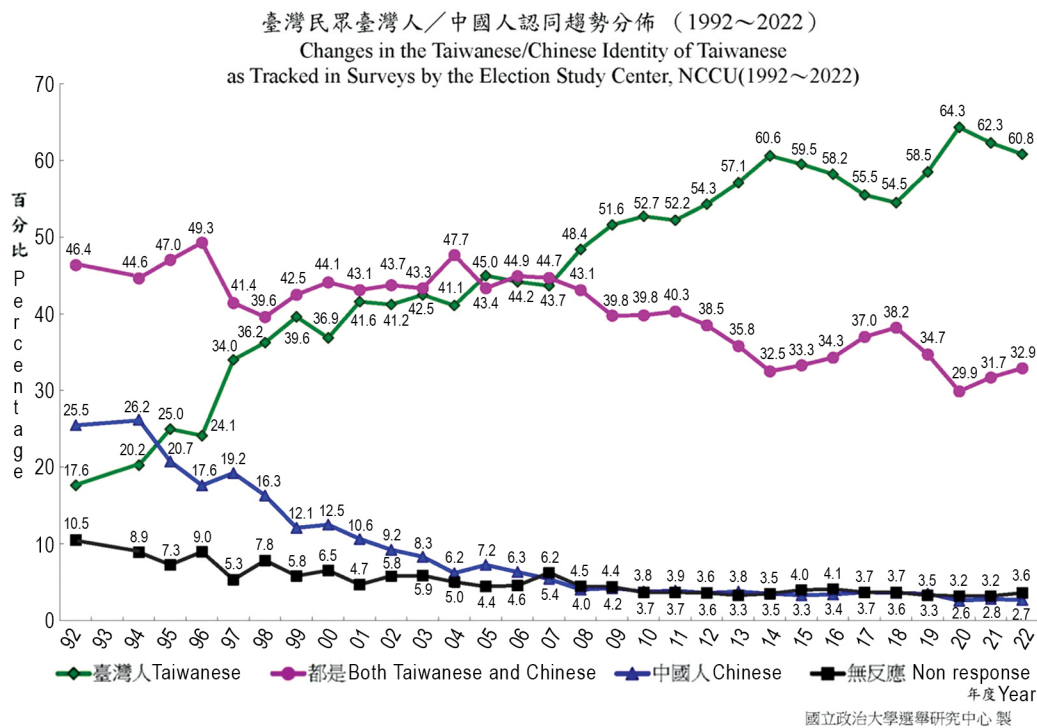
Another key indicator on Xi's dashboard is demographics—specifically, how China's population decline could shape its foreign policy choices. Mark Haas, a leading scholar on demographics in international relations, argues: "Because of high life expectancies and extraordinarily low fertility levels, China is aging faster and to a deeper extent than any other great power, and possibly any country, in history. . . . Aging significantly reduces states' capacity to aggress."⁸

If China postpones resolving the Taiwan issue by another decade or more, its shrinking workforce and aging population could begin to constrain its military options. While this factor may not weigh heavily in the next few years, a longer delay—seven, ten, or twenty years—would leave China with fewer military-age

⁸ Mark Haas, *The Geriatric Peace: Population Aging and the Decline of War* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

men to sustain a prolonged conflict. The economic and social costs of war would become even more severe, particularly given the lingering effects of the one-child policy, which created a surplus of young men. Now that China has moved beyond that policy, its longstanding gender imbalance may gradually correct itself, further altering the composition of its fighting force.

Table 2. Changes in the Taiwanese/Chinese identity of Taiwanese.



Xi has undoubtedly considered these realities. Here again, acting sooner holds strategic advantages—especially if war risks escalating into a prolonged or regional conflict. Given the likely involvement of the United States, Japan, and possibly others—much as the Ukraine war drew in external players—waiting too long could mean waging war with a weaker hand.

Indicator 5: Importance of Taiwan's semi-conductor industry

Taiwan is home to the world's most critical semiconductor industry, one dominated by a single company: Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC). As *The Economist* noted, "Taiwan produces over 60% of the world's semiconductors

and over 90% of the most advanced ones. Most are manufactured by a single company, Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Corporation (TSMC).”⁹

This dominance provides Xi Jinping with a powerful incentive to seize Taiwan, securing both its semiconductor industry and the economic, military, and strategic advantages it confers. To mitigate this risk, TSMC has begun diversifying its production. It has opened an advanced fabrication plant, or “fab,” in Arizona, with additional fabs in development there that will produce cutting-edge 2nm and 3nm chips. New fabs are also planned for Germany and Japan.

For now, TSMC’s Taiwan operations remain irreplaceable. However, within two or three years, its overseas facilities will be advanced enough to significantly reduce the impact of any disruption at its home base. This suggests that TSMC’s strategic value in Taiwan is at its peak—an important factor in assessing future developments.

Indicator 6: Growing importance of semi-conductor industry to China (vs. China’s increasing isolation)

As a manufacturing and export powerhouse, China relies heavily on semiconductors to sustain its economic momentum. Two critical points emerge from this dependency.

First, China’s mercantilist economic practices have increasingly tarnished its reputation, casting a shadow over both its state-owned and private enterprises. These practices—favoring domestic firms, manipulating markets, and disregarding intellectual property rights—have fueled global distrust.

Second, the United States, the European Union, and other allies have imposed escalating sanctions and export controls on China, particularly targeting advanced and dual-use technologies. As a result, Chinese companies face mounting difficulties securing the semiconductors needed to support both domestic production and global exports. Many firms now appear on the US Department of Commerce’s Bureau of Industry and Security “Entity List,” which subjects them to strict licensing requirements for the export, reexport, or in-country transfer of specified items.¹⁰ Companies like Huawei, once technological powerhouses, now struggle to obtain cutting-edge components, machinery, and chips deemed crucial for military or other security-sensitive applications. Consequently, Chinese manufacturers find themselves cut off from the most advanced semiconductors and the tools necessary to produce them.

⁹ “Taiwan’s Dominance of the Chip Industry Makes it More Important,” *The Economist*, 6 March 2023, <https://www.economist.com/>.

¹⁰ Bureau of Industry and Security, “Entities List,” US Department of Commerce, n.d., <https://www.bis.gov/>.

This semiconductor bottleneck has profound implications for China. One potential solution—however perilous—would be an invasion and seizure of Taiwan, placing the headquarters of the world's most strategically vital chipmaker, TSMC, directly into Beijing's hands. Whether Taiwan would allow TSMC to be captured intact, or whether the company's executives and engineers would cooperate with a Chinese occupation, remains uncertain.¹¹ Nonetheless, controlling TSMC's physical infrastructure could offer Beijing significant leverage—not least by denying the United States, Japan, and their allies access to its production capacity.

Should China succeed in securing TSMC intact and compelling its key personnel to comply, Beijing would gain what it currently lacks: unfettered access to cutting-edge semiconductors and the technology needed to manufacture them. This would provide a vital lifeline for Chinese industry and its export sector.

Timing, however, is crucial. TSMC's headquarters in Taiwan holds maximum strategic value at this moment. Within two to three years, the company's overseas fabrication plants—in Arizona, Germany, and Japan—will be sufficiently advanced to mitigate the impact of any disruption at its home base. The longer Xi waits, the less critical TSMC's Taiwan operations become. Simultaneously, prolonged exposure to the Entity List's restrictions will continue to erode China's manufacturing capacity, exports, and broader economic stability.

For Xi, this poses an existential dilemma. His regime's security hinges, in no small part, on economic strength. A floundering economy represents perhaps the gravest threat to his hold on power. Thus, the semiconductor struggle—and TSMC's unique position within it—looms large in Xi's strategic calculus. If the conquest of Taiwan remains a temptation, TSMC represents the crown jewel of that ambition—a prize whose value may never again be as high as it is today.

Indicator 7: Growing US commitment to Taiwan

For years, the United States has upheld a policy of “strategic ambiguity” toward Taiwan—a delicate balancing act aimed at deterring both Taiwanese independence and Chinese aggression. In essence, Washington signals to Taipei, “Don't count us in,” while warning Beijing, “Don't count us out.” This approach, also known as “double deterrence,” seeks to maintain the status quo, threading a line between the commitments outlined in the Shanghai Communiqué of 1972 and the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) of 1979.

¹¹ Jared M. McKinney and Peter Harris, “Broken Nest: Deterring China from Invading Taiwan,” *Parameters* 51, no. 4 (17 November 2021).

The Shanghai Communiqué acknowledges China's position that there is only one China and that Taiwan is part of it, while the TRA obligates the United States to provide Taiwan with the defensive equipment necessary to deter Chinese aggression. Notably, the TRA stops short of establishing a formal defense alliance with Taiwan.

However, on May 23, 2022, during a press conference in Tokyo, President Joe Biden broke with precedent. When asked if the United States would defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese invasion, he responded unequivocally: "Yes... That's the commitment we made."¹² Despite attempts by the Department of Defense to walk back his remarks, Biden reiterated this position on three subsequent occasions. This marked a significant departure from the traditional posture of strategic ambiguity.

Donald Trump's 2025 return to the White House introduces uncertainty regarding US policy on Taiwan. While Trump appears to have reverted to a stance more aligned with strategic ambiguity, the broader trajectory suggests a deepening US–Taiwan relationship. Despite Trump's own hedging, his foreign policy and defense team remain staunchly hawkish on China—a position that typically translates into stronger support for Taiwan.

Recent trends reinforce this shift. US arms sales to Taiwan and military-to-military cooperation have steadily increased, a pattern unlikely to reverse under Trump's leadership. For Beijing, the outlook appears increasingly grim. Over the next four years, the US–Taiwan bond seems poised to grow stronger, not weaker—further complicating China's strategic calculus.

Indicator 8: US commitment to the ROC has yet to include exercises and/or build-up of interoperability

Unlike its relationships with South Korea and Japan, the United States does not have a formal alliance with Taiwan, nor does it conduct official joint military exercises with the island. While the United States once maintained a mutual defense treaty with Taiwan, this arrangement ended in 1979 when Washington recognized the People's Republic of China as the sole legitimate representative of the Chinese people, simultaneously downgrading its diplomatic ties with Taipei.

According to the Council on Foreign Relations, "Taiwan was . . . a significant recipient of U.S. economic and military aid during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, up until the United States normalized relations with China in 1979 and abrogated its mutual defense treaty with Taiwan. However, in late 2022, Congress passed

¹² Quoted in Ben Gittleman and Adam Carlson, "Biden says, again, that US would defend Taiwan from Chinese invasion," *ABC News*, 19 September 2022, <https://abcnews.go.com/>.

historic legislation enabling Taiwan to receive U.S. military aid once again—up to several billion dollars a year in loans and grants.”¹³

The TRA has long permitted the United States to provide Taiwan with defensive equipment and engage in limited military-to-military cooperation, largely confined to training tied to the use of that hardware. Yet, the TRA stops short of formalizing direct military support. Two key points, however, must be clear to Xi and China's leadership, as highlighted in Tables 3 and 4 below.

First, Republican administrations have historically been more inclined to approve arms sales to Taiwan than their Democratic counterparts. During Donald Trump's first term, US military sales to Taiwan—measured in dollars—surged to levels unseen in 30 years, surpassed only by the George H.W. Bush administration, as shown in Table 3. With Trump in the White House for another four years, it is highly likely that this trend will continue, further complicating Beijing's calculus should it contemplate an invasion of Taiwan.

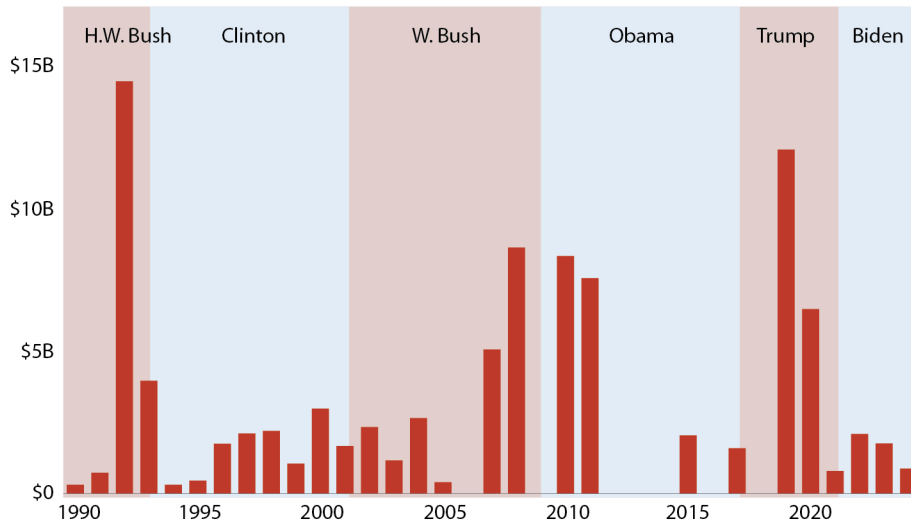
Second, the United States has now resumed providing formal military aid to Taiwan—distinct from arms sales—marking a significant shift in its support for the island. This added layer of assistance enhances Taiwan's defense posture and increases the strategic costs for China, reinforcing the growing military partnership between Washington and Taipei.

¹³ Jonathan Masters and Will Merrow, “US Military Support for Taiwan in Five Charts,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, 25 September 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/>.

Table 3. Arms sales to Taiwan under recent US administrations. (Source: Jonathan Masters and Will Merrow, “US Military Support for Taiwan in Five Charts,” Council on Foreign Relations, 25 September 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/>.)

Arms Sales to Taiwan Have Been Significant Under All Recent Administrations

U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, constant 2022 dollars

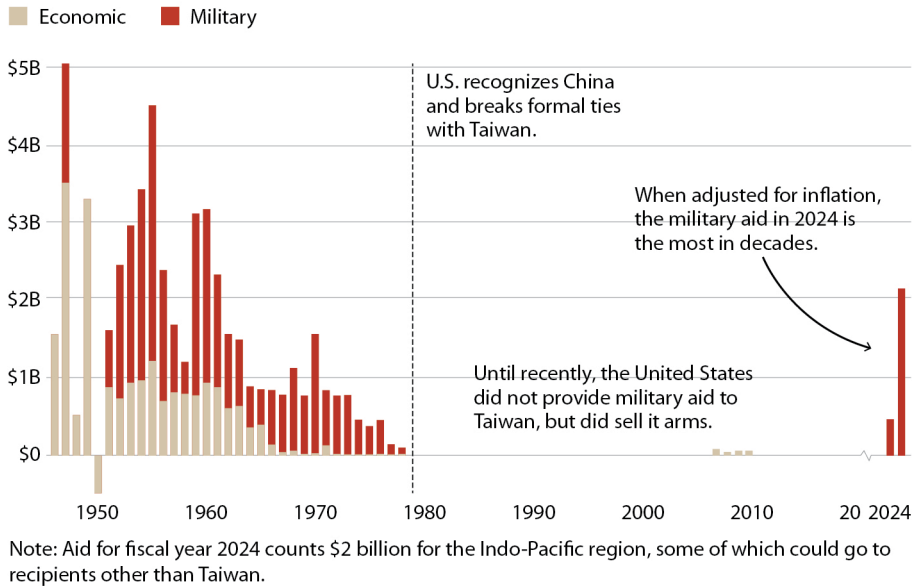


As Table 4 below indicates, US military aid to Taiwan since 2022 was the most in decades, since the 1960s. It is not yet clear what policy the Trump Administration will take toward Taiwan, but it does not seem likely that it would provide less hardware and aid than did the Biden Administration. For Xi, waiting longer seems likely to result in further US military aid and US sales of military equipment to Taiwan, which would only make conquest of Taiwan more difficult.

Table 4. Recent US aid to Taiwan. (Source: Kelly A. Grieco and Hunter Slingbaum, “No Runways, No Sorties: Chinese Missiles Threaten US Airpower Plans,” *Defense News*, 17 December 2024, <https://www.defensenews.com/>.)

Recent U.S. Aid to Taiwan Is Historically Significant

U.S. aid to Taiwan by fiscal year, constant 2022 dollars



Indicator 9: China has the current advantage regarding ship-killer/hypersonic weapons

The United States faces a mounting missile dilemma in the Indo-Pacific. US ships and air bases are acutely vulnerable to Chinese missile strikes—so much so that the US Navy may find itself unable to support Taiwan in the event of an attack, while air bases in Japan and Guam could face significant operational disruptions if targeted by China.¹⁴

Beijing's missile arsenal poses a clear and present danger. Its antiship missiles—such as the YJ-8, YJ-12, DF-21, and DF-26—are designed to push US forces further from the region. The DF-26, with a range of 2,500 miles, puts US military facilities in Guam squarely within striking distance. Even more alarming is China's DF-17, a road-mobile, solid-fueled ballistic missile armed with a hypersonic glide vehicle

¹⁴ Kelly A. Grieco and Hunter Slingbaum, “No Runways, No Sorties: Chinese Missiles Threaten US Airpower Plans,” *Defense News*, 17 December 2024, <https://www.defensenews.com/>.

capable of flying at speeds between Mach 5 and Mach 10. With a range of 1,100 to 1,500 miles, the DF-17 is believed to be adaptable for antiship missions.¹⁵

While the United States can intercept YJ-8, YJ-12, DF-21, and DF-26 missiles in limited numbers and under ideal conditions, massed salvos would likely overwhelm US defenses. More troubling is that the United States currently has no reliable means to counter the DF-17's combination of speed and maneuverability.

For now, China holds the upper hand at sea due to its advanced antiship missile capabilities. However, this advantage may prove fleeting. As the United States intensifies efforts to develop countermeasures, Xi may see his window of opportunity narrowing—another factor that could push Beijing toward acting sooner rather than later.

Indicator 10: US seeks to field hypersonic weapons / defenses against hypersonics; not yet operational

Compounding the United States' missile dilemma in the Indo-Pacific is the hypersonic missile gap.¹⁶ Since President Ronald Reagan's "Star Wars" initiative, the United States has prioritized building a national missile defense system—a project that took far longer than Reagan ever envisioned but ultimately produced a multilayered defense network. Yet, while the United States concentrated on missile defense, China and Russia pressed forward with the development of hypersonic platforms, designed to outpace and outmaneuver American interceptors. Both nations have now achieved the deployment of operational hypersonic missile systems.

By contrast, the United States has only recently begun to catch up. While it has successfully tested a hypersonic glide vehicle missile, it has yet to field hypersonic weapons in active service.¹⁷ Deploying such weapons would bolster deterrence against China, but perhaps even more critical to the US security posture in the Indo-Pacific is the ability to neutralize an adversary's hypersonic missiles. At present, the United States lacks a reliable means to do so.

Though a Patriot missile system in Ukraine recently shot down a Russian Kinzhal hypersonic missile¹⁸—and the US Navy's new Aegis SBT is marketed as capable of intercepting hypersonic threats—there is no conclusive evidence that the United

¹⁵ Missile Defense Project, "DF-17," *Missile Threat*, 23 April 2024, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/>.

¹⁶ Gregory J. Moore, "Hypersonic Tonic: A US New Year's Resolution on Hypersonic Offense and Defense," *National Interest*, 31 December 2022, <https://nationalinterest.org/>.

¹⁷ "Army and Navy Successfully Test Conventional Hypersonic Missile" (press release, US Department of Defense, 12 December 2024), <https://www.defense.gov/>.

¹⁸ "Pentagon Press Secretary Air Force Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder Holds a Press Briefing" (briefing, US Defense Department, 9 May 2023), <https://www.defense.gov/>.

States has a dependable method for countering these advanced weapons. Once again, the PLA holds a distinct advantage. However, this edge may erode with time. The longer Beijing waits, the more likely the United States will deploy effective countermeasures against systems like the DF-17 and develop its own hypersonic arsenal—tilting the balance back in Washington's favor.

Indicator 11: State of relations with US (when poor, lower cost to go; when good, higher cost to go)

The state of China's relationship with the United States—its peer competitor and Taiwan's potential protector—may also serve as a critical indicator on Xi's strategic dashboard. Strong China-US relations, marked by robust trade and diplomatic engagement, raise the cost of any military move against Taiwan, as Beijing would risk considerable damage to its ties with Washington. Conversely, if relations with the United States are poor—or worse, visibly deteriorating—China has less to lose by launching an attack on Taiwan.

This dynamic echoes the principles of the Liberal school of international relations theory, particularly the concept of economic interdependence: nations deeply interconnected through trade and investment are generally less inclined to resort to conflict. However, the current reality is that China-US relations are far from stable and show few signs of improvement—especially with President Trump returning to the White House. Counterintuitive though it may seem, worsening ties between Beijing and Washington could lower the diplomatic cost of aggression, making it easier—not harder—for China to move against Taiwan.

Indicator 12: Xi's view of US intentions toward China (if “hostile,” US more likely to support Taiwan)

Closely tied to the state of China-US relations is Xi's perception of American intentions toward China. If Xi believes the United States harbors hostile intentions, he is likely to assume that Washington seeks to use Taiwan as a strategic lever against Beijing—either by supporting Taiwanese independence or by actively defending the island in the event of an attack.

Xi's views on this matter were laid bare in a significant speech delivered at the March 2023 National People's Congress to high-level Party cadres. He stated, “Western countries led by the U.S. have implemented comprehensive containment, encirclement and suppression against us, bringing unprecedented severe

challenges to our country's development."¹⁹ His use of the term *containment* is laden with historical significance, invoking Cold War-era US policies aimed at curbing Soviet expansion.

Xi's rhetoric in this and other recent speeches reflects an increasingly hawkish stance toward the United States. The implication is clear: he likely views Washington as having moved beyond the diplomatic restraint of the Shanghai Communiqué era and as actively working to thwart Beijing's ambitions—especially regarding Taiwan. From this perspective, reclaiming Taiwan sooner rather than later might seem strategically advantageous, lest the United States further fortify its support for the island or, worse, embolden Taipei to pursue formal independence.

Indicator 13: Taiwan election in 2024 with DPP win (Taiwan is likely to drift further from the PRC)

Before Taiwan's January 2024 election, the political forecast was clear: A victory for the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and Lai Ching-te would push Taiwan further from China. A win for the Kuomintang (KMT) under Hou You-yi would likely have maintained the status quo while fostering closer ties with Beijing. A triumph for the Taiwan People's Party (TPP) under Ko Wen-je would have signaled an effort to improve relations with China, as Ko advocated strengthening Taiwan's defenses while pursuing diplomatic engagement. Beijing, for its part, made no secret of its preference for Ko or Hou over Lai.

Lai and the DPP prevailed in January 2024, and Lai assumed the presidency in May. This outcome did not bode well for cross-strait relations. Within three days of Lai's 20 May inauguration, China launched large-scale military exercises encircling the island, a stark demonstration of its displeasure. Had either of the other candidates won, Beijing might have held out hope for halting—or at least slowing—Taiwan's drift toward away from Beijing. The DPP's victory extinguished that hope, eliminating a potential brake on Chinese military action. From Beijing's perspective, as long as the DPP remains in power, Cross-Strait tensions will not ease. If anything, they are likely to escalate in the coming years.

Other Factors Pointing to a More Near-Term “Go”

Having examined the 13 indicators on Xi's metaphorical Taiwan dashboard, it is worth noting four additional factors that point to a near-term “go” for a potential invasion. These are not indicators in the same sense—fluctuating between “more”

¹⁹ Agence France-Presse, “Xi Condemns U.S.-led ‘Suppression,’” *Le Monde*, 7 March 2023), <https://www.lemonde.fr/>.

or “less” likelihood—but rather constants, enduring conditions that reinforce the inevitability of Beijing’s perseverance in achieving its objective. The first two are subtle yet longstanding elements of communist rule under Mao and Xi, while the latter two are more recent but equally persistent under Xi’s leadership. Table 5 presents these factors, each of which is explored in detail below.

Table 5. Additional factors suggesting a near-term “go” for a Taiwan invasion

Factor	Description
A “Sacred Commitment” to Taiwan	A constant, unwavering, and existential commitment to reclaiming Taiwan.
Authoritarian Decision-Making Risks	The structural flaws of an authoritarian political and military leadership increase the likelihood of hubris and overconfidence.
Xi’s Political Incentive	Regaining Taiwan would bolster Xi Jinping’s claim to leadership beyond 2027.
PLA Readiness for 2027	Xi has explicitly stated that the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) should be prepared to take Taiwan by 2027.

What explains China’s fixation on Taiwan? As I have argued elsewhere, Beijing’s “sacred commitment” to Taiwan—a constant, unwavering, even existential imperative—holds the key. “Sacred commitments” explain far more about China’s obsession with Taiwan than conventional notions of balance of power or strategic significance.”²⁰

These commitments are not rooted in pragmatic realpolitik but in an article of faith. They encompass a fusion of emotional, nationalistic, historical, and quasi-spiritual beliefs deeply ingrained in the Chinese psyche. For China’s leaders, territorial integrity is sacrosanct, and modern China’s founders pledged themselves to the reunification of the motherland—Taiwan included. The identity of China, as defined by its leaders, demands Taiwan’s return. The so-called “century of humiliation” cannot be rectified, in the eyes of most on the mainland, until Taiwan is brought back under Beijing’s control.²¹ There is no room for negotiation. No Chinese leader can abandon the goal of reunification without inviting political suicide.

Beyond ideology, authoritarian decision-making compounds the risk. Xi, like many autocrats, operates in an environment where subordinates fear delivering inconvenient truths. His repeated purges—including the removal of Defense Minister Li Shangfu in 2023—have reinforced this tendency.²² Josef Stalin’s Soviet Union and the Kim dynasty in North Korea suffered from the same affliction: leaders shielded from

²⁰ Gregory J. Moore, “The Power of ‘Sacred Commitments’: Chinese Interests in Taiwan,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12, no. 2 (April 2016): 214–35, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

²¹ Zheng Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

²² William Matthews, “As China’s purge of top military officials continues, will Xi’s high-stakes gamble pay off?,” *Chatham House*, 3 December 2024, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/>.

reality, surrounded by officials who tell them what they want to hear. As Stephen Biddle has documented, authoritarian rulers receive less reliable intelligence than their counterparts in open societies. Without contrary perspectives, they are prone to hubris and strategic miscalculation.²³

This raises a critical question: While many Western analysts insist that China is not yet ready to invade Taiwan, what does Xi himself believe? More importantly, what is he being told? Given the systemic distortions in China's political structure, it is highly likely that Xi is not receiving an honest assessment of the PLA's actual readiness. If his military and intelligence officials, either out of fear or ideological zeal, present an overly optimistic picture, Xi may act on dangerously flawed assumptions—bringing a crisis sooner than expected.

Xi also has a personal stake in Taiwan's fate. Regaining the island would cement his political legacy and strengthen his claim to power in 2027 and beyond. The loss of Taiwan would be a national humiliation for any Chinese leader, but for Xi, it carries added weight. He has already shattered Deng Xiaoping's precedents limiting CCP general secretaries to two terms—he is now in his third—and discouraging rule beyond the age of 70—he is 72. Many within the Party resent his disregard for these norms, and his purges and anticorruption campaigns have created powerful enemies. The next Party Congress in 2027 will determine whether he secures a fourth term, extending his rule until at least 2032. A successful takeover of Taiwan would silence critics and solidify his grip on power.

Adding to the urgency is Xi's reported directive that the PLA be ready to take Taiwan by 2027. While Beijing has not publicly confirmed this, CIA Director William Burns has stated that US intelligence is certain Xi issued the order. As one report summarized, "Burns said that the United States knew 'as a matter of intelligence' that Xi had ordered his military to be ready to conduct an invasion of self-governed Taiwan by 2027."²⁴ Most China analysts take this seriously. It does not guarantee an invasion, but it signals a clear timeline—one that aligns with the 2027 Party Congress, where Xi's leadership will be assessed. If Xi views Taiwan's fate as tied to his own, the risk of action rises dramatically (see point 3 above).

Conclusions

There is no crystal ball available to us, nor has Nostradamus weighed in. But this study presents compelling evidence that a near-term Chinese invasion of

²³ Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

²⁴ Michael Martina and David Brunnstrom, "CIA Chief warns against underestimating Xi's ambitions toward Taiwan," *Reuters*, 2 February 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

Taiwan—within one to three years—must be considered not just possible but plausible. It also suggests that such an invasion is more likely than not before Xi presents his credentials to Party leadership in October 2027, or even weeks earlier at the Beidaihe leadership conference that precedes it. This conclusion rests on a stark reality: 11 of 13 indicators on what this study identifies as Xi's "Taiwan dashboard" point to a "sooner is better" scenario if Beijing intends to use force.

Military preparedness is one of the few indicators that favors delay. The PLA would undoubtedly benefit from more time. But several mitigating factors suggest this alone may not override the broader strategic calculus. First, authoritarian decision-making—one of the key factors identified in Table 5—creates a critical blind spot. Xi's purges of top military officials mean that those best positioned to "speak truth to power" may already be gone. History offers precedent: Peng Dehuai's downfall under Mao is a cautionary tale of what happens when a Chinese leader is confronted with uncomfortable truths. In such an environment, it is entirely possible that Xi is not receiving an honest assessment of PLA readiness. He may believe the military is more prepared than it is, or he may have convinced himself that decisive action outweighs lingering uncertainties.

Second, this study presents strong evidence that the advantages of striking sooner rather than later are significant. China faces closing windows of opportunity—both in its relative military balance with the United States and in Taiwan's own defense preparations. The longer Beijing waits, the harder an invasion becomes. These pressures may ultimately outweigh any lingering doubts about the risks of acting too soon.

These conclusions are sobering for those who value Taiwan's democracy, its role in global commerce and technology, and the stability of the Indo-Pacific. A Chinese invasion of Taiwan would be catastrophic, with far-reaching consequences. But while we may all hope for a peaceful world, responsible policy must be based on reality, not wishful thinking. Ignoring hard truths does not make them disappear; it only increases the likelihood of being caught unprepared. A clearer understanding of China's interests in Taiwan and Xi's potential calculus is not just an intellectual exercise—it is an imperative. 🌟

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The Art of Protracted War

A Taiwanese Insurgency the Maoist Way and the US Department of Defense's Role

CPT ANDREW FAULHABER, US ARMY

Abstract

Scholars have extensively analyzed Taiwan's asymmetric defense strategies against a potential Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) invasion. However, most studies focus either on pre-invasion deterrence or a post-invasion insurgency culminating in a US-led counteroffensive. This article applies Mao Zedong's theory of protracted war to a hypothetical Taiwanese insurgency, examining how Taiwan could repel the PLA using the same strategy China employed to expel imperial Japan during World War II. By waging a war of attrition with US and allied support, Taiwan could force Chinese leadership to reconsider occupation or risk forfeiting its long-term strategic objectives and domestic stability. This study explores low-intensity conflict as a means of advancing US strategic interests while avoiding the high costs of a conventional war with China.

The United States and China are locked in a struggle for global hegemony, and a decisive battle over Taiwan could shape the outcome. Taiwan represents two competing futures: one that upholds the rules-based international order and the principle of self-determination, and another that accelerates the spread of autocratic values and the erosion of global freedoms. The stakes for US strategic and ideological interests have not been this high since the Cold War.

For the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Taiwan remains the final obstacle—not only as a strategic position for projecting power into the Western Pacific and undermining US alliances but also as a threat to the CCP's grip on power. If Taiwan remains independent, it signals the persistence of democratic ideals in China's sphere of influence.¹ Consequently, the CCP has made Taiwan's reunification a priority, whether through coercion or force. Failure would delegitimize the regime, derail its long-term strategic goals, and could even threaten its survival.²

Given these risks, the CCP would commit fully to Taiwan's conquest. According to People's Liberation Army (PLA) doctrine, a *Joint Island Attack Campaign* would

¹ Ian Easton, *The Chinese Invasion Threat: Taiwan's Defense and American Strategy in Asia* (Manchester, UK: Eastbridge Books, 2017), 217–18.

² Jacob Maywald et al., "Logistics Interdiction for Taiwan Unification Campaigns," *War on the Rocks*, 21 August 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/>.

involve deploying up to a million troops to gain complete control of the island.³ Given the PLA's numerical advantage over Taiwan's forces and the complexities of US intervention against a nuclear-armed peer, China might achieve initial success.⁴ The PLA could also consider nuclear brinkmanship—either by detonating a device preemptively to deter US intervention or by escalating against US forces and allies during a counteroffensive.⁵ A conflict of this scale would likely trigger a global economic depression, given the deep interdependence of the world's two largest economies.

Despite these risks, the United States should support Taiwan in waging asymmetric warfare under the threshold of armed conflict to undermine a PLA occupation. Avoiding full-scale war would preserve global economic stability and prevent nuclear escalation. Whether Taiwan resists through an asymmetric or conventional strategy, the objective remains the same, but the latter would impose significantly greater costs on US national interests. Therefore, pre-invasion preparations should focus on strengthening antiaccess/area-denial (A2/AD) measures to deter China.⁶ If deterrence fails, however, Taiwan must adopt an alternative strategy to counter a PLA occupation.

Mao Zedong's *On Protracted War* provides a framework for weaker forces to wage a war of attrition against superior occupiers. He advocated leveraging a defender's strengths against an invader's weaknesses, a strategy he successfully employed against Japan in World War II. Taiwan, with US support, can adapt Mao's strategy to inflict severe costs on the PLA, forcing the CCP to reconsider its occupation or risk everything it has worked toward for decades. Taiwan's post-invasion strategy should incorporate Mao's key principles of protracted war: drawing the enemy into unfavorable terrain, trading space for time, exploiting the environment, mobilizing domestic and international support, and executing a three-phase insurgency.⁷ If Taiwan applies these principles effectively over a prolonged conflict, it can undermine the PLA's occupation and secure its sovereignty.

³ Easton, *The Chinese Invasion Threat*, 14, 153.

⁴ Philip C. Saunders and Joel Wuthnow, "Crossing the Strait: PLA Modernization and Taiwan," in *Crossing the Strait: China's Military Prepares for War with Taiwan*, ed. Joel Wuthnow et al. (Washington: National Defense University Press, 2023), 6.

⁵ Easton, *The Chinese Invasion Threat*, 59.

⁶ Andrew Erickson and Gabriel Collins, "Eight New Points on the Porcupine: More Ukrainian Lessons for Taiwan," *War on the Rocks*, 18 April 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/>.

⁷ Mao Tse-Tung, *On Protracted War*, trans. by the People's Publishing House (Peking, China: Foreign Languages Press, 1967), 15, 34–40, 85, 105.

Draw the Enemy in Deep and Trade Space for Time

Mao's first two principles form the foundation of any protracted insurgency: drawing the enemy deep into one's territory and temporarily ceding space to buy time for long-term success.⁸ By forcing an invader to extend its logistics lines, a defender can exploit home-field advantages and selectively engage the enemy at critical points. China used this strategy against imperial Japan, drawing Japanese forces deep into its vast interior, where asymmetric tactics slowly bled the invaders.

Though Taiwan lacks China's geographic depth, the 100-mile expanse of ocean between the two presents a formidable obstacle.⁹ This natural barrier complicates not only an initial PLA invasion but also the long-term sustainment of an occupation. The Taiwan Strait's unpredictable weather and rough seas further restrict amphibious operations, realistically limiting invasion windows to just two months out of the year.¹⁰ Taiwan can turn these challenges to its advantage. Amphibious invasions rank among the most complex military operations, and sustaining an occupation in a distant, hostile territory is even more daunting. By compelling the PLA to commit ground forces far from home, Taiwan can create the conditions for its long-term failure.

Time amplifies the challenges of warfare, especially during an occupation. War favors the defender when drawn out, as protracted conflicts strain the aggressor's domestic politics and economy. Sun Tzu warned in *The Art of War* that "there is no instance of a country having been benefited from prolonged warfare."¹¹ For Taiwan, a drawn-out war presents existential risks, but China faces a different dilemma: a prolonged campaign undermines its national interests and risks internal unrest. Taiwan must exploit this, stretching the conflict out until China concludes that occupation is unattainable and not worth the cost.

While China conducts some counterinsurgency training in preparation for a Taiwan invasion, its focus remains largely on counterterrorism tactics—targeting Taiwanese leadership and key enablers during stability operations.¹² PLA writings suggest China draws inspiration from US battles in Baghdad and Fallujah, viewing them as models for quick, decisive victories against insurgents.¹³ Yet history offers

⁸ Mao, *On Protracted War*, 84, 85.

⁹ David Sacks, "Why China Would Struggle to Invade Taiwan," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 10 January 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/>.

¹⁰ Easton, *The Chinese Invasion Threat*, 150.

¹¹ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Lionel Giles (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2002), 45.

¹² Sale Lilly, "Killing Rats in a Porcelain Shop: PLA Urban Warfare in a Taiwan Campaign," in *Crossing the Strait: China's Military Prepares for War with Taiwan*, ed. Joel Wuthnow et al. (Washington: National Defense University Press, 2023), 140.

¹³ Lilly, "Killing Rats in a Porcelain Shop," 140, 146.

little support for this optimism. Russia's faltering campaign in Ukraine is a stark reminder of the rarity of swift triumphs. Since 1500, Western powers have found that wars are far more likely to spiral into protracted struggles than to end in rapid conquests.¹⁴ Taiwan must harness this reality and force China to confront the futility and staggering costs of occupation.

Mao recognized the strategic value of time. He argued that territorial losses in the short term do not determine victory, as long as they serve a greater objective. In anticipation of a possible US invasion of mainland China after the defeat of Japan and the Nationalists, he declared, "if Beijing is lost, it is not critical" and that they would "go to caves in the mountains between Beijing and Taiyuan and struggle with the enemy there."¹⁵ Taiwan should adopt a similar mind-set, viewing temporary territorial losses as a means of sustaining an insurgency to accomplish its goals over the long run.

Taiwan's military should first attempt to repel a PLA invasion with asymmetric tactics, employing antiship and antiair missile defenses, sea mines, littoral obstacles, and cyber and electronic warfare to disrupt PLA command and control. However, if the PLA secures a beachhead or airstrip, Taiwan must be prepared to transition to Mao's protracted insurgency model. Preserving combat forces and key equipment will ensure Taiwan retains the strength to wage a sustained resistance. This strategy will also enable Taiwan to eventually shift to the final phase of Mao's protracted war theory, which will be discussed later.

Utilize the Environment to Its Fullest

Mao argued that once a stronger enemy is drawn into favorable terrain, the weaker force must fully exploit environmental advantages. While Taiwan has a small military, its geography offers an optimal battlefield for resistance. The island's 770-mile coastline is largely inaccessible, three-quarters of its landmass is mountainous, and its dense urban centers further complicate movement.¹⁶ These factors will severely restrict PLA maneuverability. A Taiwanese insurgency should capitalize on this by engaging PLA forces in the mountains, urban areas, littoral zones, and the broader information environment.

¹⁴ Williamson Murray, "The Strategy of Decisive War versus the Strategy of Attrition," in *The New Makers of Modern Strategy: From the Ancient World to the Digital Age*, ed. Hal Brands (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023), 495, 497.

¹⁵ M. Taylor Fravel, *Active Defense: China's Military Strategy since 1949* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 125.

¹⁶ Easton, *The Chinese Invasion Threat*, 129.

At the onset of hostilities, once Taiwan shifts to a Maoist insurgency model, its military should retreat into the mountains and embed within urban centers. Sun Tzu advised, if an enemy is “superior in strength, evade him” and “attack him where he is unprepared.”¹⁷ Taiwanese forces must prioritize preserving combat power through strategic withdrawals, and strike PLA units unexpectedly to prolong the conflict and disrupt stabilization efforts. Taiwan’s eastern mountain range will significantly hinder conventional PLA operations, making rapid pacification nearly impossible. The US learned this lesson in Afghanistan, where the Taliban leveraged mountainous terrain to sustain a two-decade insurgency against the world’s most powerful military. Taliban fighters used an extensive tunnel network to store equipment and evade capture—an approach Taiwan can emulate. The island already possesses an extensive underground system, built by imperial Japan during World War II to resist a US counter-invasion.¹⁸ Taiwan should expand and utilize these defenses in a prolonged conflict.

Although Mao’s strategy for protracted war against imperial Japan centered on rural resistance, Taiwan must not overlook its urban areas as critical battlegrounds. Urban warfare should be a core element of Taiwan’s defense. Most of the island’s 23 million people live in cities along the western coast, which will complicate PLA efforts to establish control.¹⁹ Urban warfare is inherently difficult, but when insurgents have both active and passive civilian support, occupation becomes even more perilous. Based on historical counterinsurgency precedents, China would likely need at least 600,000 troops just to pacify and secure Taiwan’s urban centers.²⁰ The US experience in Iraq underscores the challenge of occupying hostile cities, where insurgents can seamlessly blend into the civilian population, cache weapons, and strike at will. Although Taiwan lacks Iraq’s sectarian divisions, PLA forces will still face the standard array of urban insurgent tactics: ambushes, hit-and-run attacks, improvised explosive devices (IED), sniper fire, and indirect bombardments.

One potential complication for an urban insurgency is Taiwan’s extensive surveillance infrastructure. The island has an estimated 155,000 CCTV cameras, which PLA counterinsurgents could repurpose to track and identify resistance fighters.²¹

¹⁷ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, 42, 43.

¹⁸ Tyler Cottenie, “Forgotten Formosan Fortifications,” *Taipei Times*, 15 September 2023, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/>.

¹⁹ Sacks, “Why China Would Struggle to Invade Taiwan.”

²⁰ Benjamin Jensen, “Not so Fast: Insights from a 1944 War Plan Help Explain Why Invading Taiwan is a Costly Gamble,” *War on the Rocks*, 8 September 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/>.

²¹ Reed Bauer, “Taiwan’s Vast Surveillance Infrastructure: An Achilles’ Heel if China Invades,” *Modern War Institute at West Point*, 8 August 2023, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/>.

To mitigate this risk, Taiwan should develop a pre-invasion plan to disable or destroy key surveillance systems, ensuring insurgents retain freedom of movement.

From the mountains and urban centers, Taiwanese forces can also strike along the littoral zone, where the PLA Navy and its logistical supply chains will be concentrated. Sustaining a massive invasion force will require constant resupply by sea, making Chinese shipping a critical vulnerability. Disrupting these operations will slow the PLA's ability to counter an insurgency, forcing it to divert resources to secure supply routes. The Houthi militants in Yemen have demonstrated how a weaker force can disrupt the shipping and military operations of stronger powers using relatively simple means, such as attack drones and small boats.²² Taiwan, however, should rely primarily on autonomous systems to conduct these attacks, as operating in the littoral zone will pose a high risk of detection. Ukraine has already shown the effectiveness of aerial and surface drones in targeting Russian naval assets.²³ Additionally, the US Navy is developing antiship swarm drones that could severely degrade PLA naval operations before and after an invasion.²⁴ Covertly deploying naval mines along key military shipping routes would further impede PLA logistics. By prioritizing unmanned and asymmetric methods, Taiwan can avoid direct naval confrontation while dealing devastating blows to Chinese supply lines—provided the PLA cannot locate or decrypt the systems controlling these attacks.

Beyond the physical battlefield, the information domain offers another crucial front. Taiwan must use it to shape global perceptions, rally domestic and international support, and undermine the CCP's credibility. Given China's record of repression in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, the PLA is unlikely to conduct a counterinsurgency campaign based on David Galula's model of "protecting the people."²⁵ Taiwan should focus on exposing PLA war crimes and disseminating this information globally to erode international legitimacy for the invasion.²⁶ Ukraine has successfully leveraged public outrage over Russian atrocities to sustain foreign military and economic assistance. Without the support of the United States and its allies, Ukraine would have

²² Sidharth Kaushal and Gary Somerville, "Win the Urban War in Taiwan," *Proceedings*, February 2023, <https://www.usni.org/>.

²³ Gordon B. Davis Jr. and Lorenz Meier, "The Challenges Posed by 21st-Century Warfare and Autonomous Systems," *Center for European Policy Analysis*, 25 October 2023, <https://cepa.org/>.

²⁴ Sam Lagrone and Aaron-Matthew Lariosa, "Pentagon Puts Out Call for Swarming Attack Drones That Could Blunt a Taiwan Invasion," *USNI News*, 30 January 2024, <https://news.usni.org/>.

²⁵ Carter Malkasian, "Strategies of Counterinsurgency and Counter-Terrorism after 9/11," in *The New Makers of Modern Strategy: From the Ancient World to the Digital Age*, ed. Hal Brands (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023), 920.

²⁶ Chris Bassler and Aidan L.P. Greer, "Resist to Deter: Why Taiwan Needs to Focus on Irregular Warfare," *Modern War Institute at West Point*, 19 December 2022, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/>.

struggled to maintain its war effort.²⁷ Taiwan must plan, train, and develop the infrastructure needed to wage an effective information campaign, ensuring it dominates the court of global public opinion.

While Taiwan's primary objective in a protracted conflict should be to engender a withdrawal of PLA forces from Taiwan, the Taiwanese can amplify this effort by generating chaos internally in China. Taiwan should seek to disrupt China's domestic stability to the point where the CCP is forced to reconsider whether Taiwan is worth the risk of internal upheaval. Mao himself advocated for targeting an enemy's home front, arguing that China should encourage the "rise of the revolutionary movement of the people in Japan" to weaken its ability to fight abroad.²⁸ For an authoritarian regime like the CCP, maintaining domestic order is paramount. If Taiwan can undermine public support for the invasion and exacerbate internal pressures, it could force the CCP into a strategic retreat—not because it was defeated militarily, but because it risked losing control at home.²⁹

Taiwan's information campaign against the CCP may yield mixed results, given the regime's historical resilience in the face of domestic upheaval. As an entrenched authoritarian government, the CCP has maintained power for over 70 years by tightly controlling public discourse through state-owned media and internet censorship.³⁰ It has also demonstrated a willingness to use force to suppress dissent, as seen during the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, when 300,000 soldiers were deployed to crush demonstrations.³¹ Despite these challenges, Taiwan still has avenues to influence China's information environment.

In the event of a PLA invasion of Taiwan, the CCP will likely pre-position People's Armed Police (PAP) units—tasked with maintaining domestic stability—in key regions most prone to unrest. Each Chinese province has its own PAP unit, roughly the size of a light infantry division, reinforced by the CCP's vast militia, estimated at eight million reservists.³² This formidable force, combined with aggressive policing tactics, will likely deter large-scale protests. However, Taiwan does not need mass uprisings to sow discord. If it can ignite small, persistent pockets of domestic resistance, the psychological impact on CCP leadership

²⁷ David Petraeus and Andrew Roberts, *Conflict: The Evolution of Warfare from 1945 to Ukraine* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2023), 394.

²⁸ Mao, *On Protracted War*, 10, 107.

²⁹ Margaret M. Pearson, Meg Rithmire, and Kellee S. Tsai, "China's Party-State Capitalism and International Backlash: From Interdependence to Insecurity," *International Security* 47, no. 2 (2022), 143.

³⁰ Chang-Dae David Hyun, "Contentious Politics in China: Authoritarian Resilience," *Gettysburg Social Sciences Review* 3, no. 1 (2019): 41, 44, 45, 52.

³¹ Hyun, "Contentious Politics in China," 41, 52.

³² Easton, *The Chinese Invasion Threat*, 159, 160.

could be profound. The constant specter of internal instability may erode confidence within the regime's inner circle, forcing Beijing to look inward even as it wages war abroad.

As seen in Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, hacktivism is likely to emerge as a key tool for undermining authoritarian control.³³ Taiwanese cyber actors, alongside sympathetic hacktivist groups, can disrupt Chinese state narratives and spread counter-messaging to challenge the CCP's legitimacy. Taiwan could also pursue more direct efforts, covertly infiltrating mainland China to foment dissent among oppressed minority groups, such as the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, who already resist Chinese rule.³⁴ While the CCP's control mechanisms may limit the immediate impact of these efforts, they will nonetheless force Beijing to divert attention and resources toward domestic stability, complicating its ability to sustain a prolonged war.

No invading power is immune to the political strain of a protracted war, and China will be no exception. Taiwan should exploit every opportunity to expose fractures in the CCP's rule, forcing China's leadership to weigh the cost of continued aggression against the risk of internal instability.

Gain the People's Support

Taiwan's ability to sustain an insurgency will rest heavily on both active and passive civilian support. Mao recognized this as a cornerstone of protracted warfare, famously declaring that "the richest source of power to wage war lies in the masses of the people."³⁵ A Maoist-inspired insurgency strategy for Taiwan will hinge on the nation's political will to sustain prolonged resistance against the PLA. Such a strategy would come at a steep cost—high casualties, economic devastation, and deep societal divisions between those committed to fighting and those advocating for an end to the war.³⁶ Unlike populations with a long history of insurgency, such as the Afghans, who have resisted foreign occupation for multi-millennia, Taiwan has not engaged in full-scale warfare for decades. The resilience of its people will be severely tested in the face of invasion.

The willingness of the Taiwanese people to fight will hinge on several key factors, which can be examined through the lens of Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs*. According to this theory, individuals are motivated in the following sequence: physiological

³³ Kyle Fendorf, "What Can Taiwan Learn From Ukraine's Cyber Army?," *National Interest* (blog), 23 October 2022, <https://nationalinterest.org/>.

³⁴ Easton, *The Chinese Invasion Threat*, 173–74.

³⁵ Mao, *On Protracted War*, 105.

³⁶ Yingtai Lung, "In Taiwan, Friends Are Starting to Turn Against Each Other," *New York Times*, 18 April 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/>.

needs, safety, love and belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization.³⁷ At the most basic level, survival depends on essentials—potable water, nutritious food, and breathable air. Without these, higher-order needs like freedom and sovereignty become irrelevant.³⁸

This framework applies not just to individuals but to societies. Before a nation can fight for abstract ideals like liberty and sovereignty, it must first secure the life-sustaining necessities of its people. In the event of a PLA invasion, Taiwan's most fundamental needs would come under direct threat. The island reportedly has only six months' worth of food reserves—excluding rice—due to its heavy reliance on food imports and limited arable land for large-scale farming.³⁹ Given the PLA's likely repression during hostilities, it is reasonable to expect that Chinese forces may restrict access to food and water to break the will of the Taiwanese people.

This harsh reality would force individuals to make a brutal choice: fight for their freedom or ensure the survival of their families. On a societal level, such deprivation could create a rift—dividing those willing to capitulate in the hope of stability from those resolved to resist.

Nevertheless, there is evidence to suggest that advanced societies with more to lose may respond to threats with “massive, society-changing violence.”⁴⁰ Ukraine provides a striking example. Despite decades of relative peace, Russia's invasions—first in 2014 and then in 2022—transformed Ukraine from a modernizing nation into a wartime society. The assault on its sovereignty spurred widespread resistance, uniting civilians and soldiers alike in defense of their homeland.

Taiwan may face a similar reckoning. The battle for its future will not rest solely on military strategy but on the resilience of its people—where the struggle for survival meets the unyielding pursuit of freedom.

Sustaining support for an insurgency—both actively and passively—will be critical. Despite concerns over political will, recent polling suggests that nearly three-quarters of Taiwanese favor either maintaining the status quo or full independence from China.⁴¹ Furthermore, surveys indicate that between 30 to 70

³⁷ Abraham H. Maslow, “A Theory of Human Motivation,” *Psychological Review* 50, no. 4 (1943): 370, 372, 376, 380–82, <https://psycnet.apa.org/>.

³⁸ John P. Baker, “Maslow, Needs, and War” (Strategy Research Project, US Army War College, 2012), 3, <https://apps.dtic.mil/>.

³⁹ Gustavo F. Ferreira and Jamie A. Critelli, “Taiwan's Food Resiliency—or Not—in a Conflict with China,” *Parameters* 53, no. 2 (Summer 2023), 39, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/>.

⁴⁰ Baker, “Maslow, Needs, and War,” 22.

⁴¹ Bassler and Greer, “Resist to Deter.”

percent of the population would be willing to “actively resist an invasion.”⁴² These figures suggest that, in the event of a PLA occupation, a significant portion of the population would rather fight than surrender their sovereignty.

Taiwan’s military should capitalize on passive civilian resistance, drawing from historical examples such as underground networks in occupied Europe during World War II. Civilians can assist by stockpiling weapons and supplies, gathering intelligence, and misleading PLA forces. Ukraine’s recent experience provides a modern precedent—Ukrainian civilians have played a crucial role in targeting Russian forces by relaying troop movements through social media platforms like Telegram, enabling Ukrainian forces to launch precise strikes.⁴³ Even if the PLA restricts internet access, Taiwanese civilians can still function as forward observers, relaying critical information through alternative communication channels.

Beyond civilian participation, active support for an insurgency would extend into Taiwan’s military and reserve forces. While Taiwan maintains a standing force of roughly 200,000 active-duty personnel, it also possesses nearly 2.5 million regular reservists and an additional 1 million nontraditional civil defense reservists.⁴⁴ This force structure enables Taiwan to engage in both conventional and asymmetric warfare. For comparison, during the height of the US surge in Afghanistan (2008–2011), a coalition force of nearly 400,000—including 100,000 US troops, 260,000 Afghan security personnel, and 50,000 NATO forces—failed to eliminate a Taliban insurgency with an estimated 200,000 supporters, of which 20,000 to 60,000 were its active fighters.⁴⁵ If Taiwan can effectively train and mobilize its 3.7 million active and reserve personnel for insurgent operations or direct support roles, it can ensure that the PLA remains entangled in a costly, indefinite conflict.

Gain International Support

Mao emphasized that securing international support is a fundamental requirement for sustaining an insurgency, as external backing provides the necessary logistical resources, weaponry, and training to resist a superior enemy.⁴⁶ Taiwan’s ability to wage a prolonged insurgency will depend on the support of the United States and its allies,

⁴² David J. Lorenzo, “Why Do Many Taiwanese Resist Unification with the People’s Republic of China? An Overview of Explanations,” *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 7, no. 3 (May–June 2024): 41, 46, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

⁴³ Petraeus and Roberts, *Conflict: The Evolution of Warfare*, 364.

⁴⁴ Easton, *The Chinese Invasion Threat*, 53.

⁴⁵ Petraeus and Roberts, *Conflict: The Evolution of Warfare*, 260–61; and Jonathan Schroden, “Afghanistan’s Security Forces Versus the Taliban: A Net Assessment,” *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, January 2021, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/>.

⁴⁶ Mao, *On Protracted War*, 10, 107.

particularly in providing material aid, intelligence, and tactical assistance. Ukraine's experience offers a compelling precedent—following Russia's 2022 invasion, Ukraine successfully mobilized a coalition of more than 50 allied nations to sustain its war effort.⁴⁷ This international backing has enabled Ukraine to continue its asymmetric fight against a military once regarded as one of the world's most formidable. Taiwan must similarly cultivate and expand its international support network to ensure the long-term viability of its resistance.

However, securing and maintaining this level of international backing will require navigating complex geopolitical realities. The United States, for instance, may face mounting pressure to scale back foreign aid to Taiwan if the war drags on—especially if it begins to strain the US economy, disrupt domestic stability, or collide with zero-sum political battles at home. The American response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine highlights this challenge. Despite Ukraine's military successes, public support in the United States has shown signs of erosion. A recent poll from 2023 to 2024 found that roughly 41 percent of US adults believed the country was spending too much on the war in Ukraine, fueling calls from some politicians to reduce aid.⁴⁸

This shift in sentiment illustrates a hard truth: even when an ally achieves battlefield gains, sustained foreign support is not guaranteed. Yet the same poll revealed that most Americans—across party lines—would back assistance to an ally under attack if that nation were part of NATO.⁴⁹ While the United States does not have a formal defense treaty with Taiwan, it remains a strategically significant partner and, in the eyes of many Americans, a country worth defending.

Despite there being some doubts about the United States assisting Taiwan during a protracted conflict, other countries may also have similar doubts about sustaining aid to Taiwan. China's status as one of the world's largest economies and a key trading partner makes many countries hesitant to take a firm stance against Beijing. To persuade these nations to actively support Taiwan rather than remain neutral, Taiwan must frame the consequences of a PLA invasion in terms of their core national interests rather than relying solely on broad appeals to defending democracy. For example, estimates suggest that a Chinese invasion could cost the global economy approximately USD 10 trillion, due to supply chain disruptions, interruptions in international shipping, and a near-total halt in semiconductor production—an event

⁴⁷ "U.S. Security Cooperation with Ukraine" (fact sheet, US Department of State, 21 October 2024), <https://www.state.gov/>.

⁴⁸ Stephen Groves and Linley Sanders, "US Adults Fracture along Party Lines in Support for Ukraine Military Funding, AP-NORC Poll Finds," *AP News*, 29 February 2024, <https://apnews.com/>.

⁴⁹ Groves and Sanders, "US Adults Fracture along Party Lines."

that would trigger widespread economic instability and mass unemployment.⁵⁰ Taiwan must clearly articulate how these economic consequences will directly impact individual nations and their domestic political stability, making the case that supporting Taiwan is not merely a moral imperative but a matter of self-interest.

In some scenarios, there may not be a choice for countries to withhold assistance without putting at risk the cohesion of collective defense agreements, thus reducing their own security. If China attacks the United States, for instance, Washington could seek to invoke NATO's Article 5 for the defense of itself and Taiwan. Yet ambiguity remains. Would an attack on Hawaii or Guam, rather than the continental United States, trigger NATO's commitment?⁵¹ Would a nonkinetic cyberattack prompt NATO to action?⁵² As the United States builds and maintains a coalition, China will actively seek to counter these efforts, using diplomatic and economic pressure to dissuade nations from backing Taiwan.

Should Taiwan fail to secure willing international backers, the United States may need to raise the stakes to ensure its survival. A more assertive strategy, leveraging economic and diplomatic tools, may become necessary. Washington could condition foreign aid on recipient nations' material support for Taiwan or, more aggressively, impose tariffs and trade embargoes on those that refuse. However, such trade restrictions would likely exacerbate an already fragile US economy, particularly given the broader global recession a Taiwan conflict would precipitate.

If the US pursues an aggressive approach towards obtaining international support for Taiwan, this would carry with it long-term risks for American interests. Yet failing to contest China's influence in this parallel war for global backing could prove even costlier. In the end, Washington may have little choice but to escalate its efforts—both to sustain the coalition and to endure the war itself.

In the event the United States and allies can provide long-term assistance to the Taiwanese, the US Department of Defense will be central to Taiwan's ability to sustain a long-term insurgency and counter an occupying PLA force. While direct US military engagement with the PLA would risk large-scale conflict, Washington can still achieve its strategic objectives through indirect means. The RAND Corporation's research for the US Army Special Operations Command outlines a framework for "strategic disruption," in which US special operations forces (SOF)

⁵⁰ Jude Blanchette, Ryan Hass, and Lily McElwee, "Building International Support for Taiwan," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 13 February 2024, <https://www.csis.org/>.

⁵¹ "Cyber Defense" (fact sheet, NATO, 30 July 2024), <https://www.nato.int/>.

⁵² John Hemmings, and David Santoro, "NATO Needs to Plug the 'Hawaii Gap' in the US Indo-Pacific Deterrence Strategy," *Pacific Forum*, 9 July, 2024, <https://pacforum.org/>.

work to “delay, degrade, or deny an adversary’s ability to achieve core interests.”⁵³ This approach offers a model for supporting Taiwan without crossing the threshold into conventional war. Under this strategy, the United States would provide advanced weaponry and ammunition, train insurgent forces, conduct unconventional warfare operations, engage in covert resupply and smuggling efforts, share critical intelligence, and establish secure communication networks for resistance forces. By leveraging these tools, the United States can sustain Taiwan’s war effort indefinitely while avoiding direct military confrontation with China, ensuring a prolonged and costly occupation for the PLA.

Between 2014 and 2024, the United States provided Ukraine with more than USD 70 billion in military aid, including training, logistical support, and a vast arsenal of weaponry: over 400 million rounds of small arms ammunition, 4 million artillery shells, 10,000 Javelin antiarmor systems, 3,000 Stinger anti-aircraft missiles, unmanned aerial systems, and coastal defense antiship missiles.⁵⁴ While this may seem like a substantial investment, it has yielded significant strategic returns for the United States. By proliferating asymmetric weapons, Washington has enabled Ukraine to blunt Russian military advances at the tactical level. Strategically, this support has physically contained a major near-peer adversary, degraded Russia’s military and economic power, undermined its global standing, and strengthened NATO. This model of proxy warfare should be applied to Taiwan.

Training will be another critical pillar of US support for a Taiwanese insurgency. Over the past two decades, nearly all US combat experience has revolved around understanding, countering, and dismantling insurgent and terrorist networks. While the results of these conflicts have been mixed—ranging from the rapid collapse of Afghanistan’s government after a 20-year war to the successful dismantling of ISIS’s territorial control—counterinsurgency has become a core competency of the US military. This expertise should be incorporated into a broader strategy with Taiwan. The alternative—a prolonged, large-scale conventional war against China—would be far more costly and would not exploit US asymmetric advantages.

The United States has long conducted foreign internal defense training for partner nations, and a similar approach should be applied to Taiwan. Just as the British have trained over 10,000 Ukrainian fighters in the United Kingdom, the United States should train Taiwanese insurgent forces once hostilities have commenced.⁵⁵ Throughout the conflict, US forces could train Taiwanese civilians and

⁵³ Eric Robinson et al., *Strategic Disruption by Special Operations Forces* (Santa Monica: RAND, 5 December 2023), v, <https://www.rand.org/>.

⁵⁴ “U.S. Security Cooperation with Ukraine.”

⁵⁵ Petraeus and Roberts, *Conflict: The Evolution of Warfare*, 395.

military personnel outside of Taiwan, as well as foreign fighters willing to assist in the resistance. Covert transportation of these trained personnel back into Taiwan would bolster the insurgency. Ukraine, for instance, saw an influx of 20,000 foreign fighters joining its battle against Russia.⁵⁶ A similar level of commitment from the United States, its allies, and individual volunteers could ensure that Taiwan's resistance remains well-trained, well-equipped, and sustained over the long term.

Beyond Taiwan, US SOF can play a critical role in disrupting Chinese logistics and economic interests that sustain the PLA's war effort through conducting unconventional warfare operations. Chinese shipping routes and port infrastructure outside the First Island Chain will be particularly vulnerable to unconventional warfare.⁵⁷ Should an international consensus at the United Nations lead to a global trading embargo on China, seizing commercial vessels could become a viable mission for US SOF. However, such actions risk prompting reciprocal measures against US and allied shipping, increasing the likelihood of broader escalation. Even so, sustained unconventional warfare by the United States and its allies would impose significant long-term costs on the CCP and its strategic objectives.

The most critical area of support the United States can provide to sustain a protracted Taiwanese insurgency is covert resupply. During hostilities, Taiwan will be cut off from the outside world, meaning that food, supplies, weapons, and ammunition will not be overtly resupplied. The good news, however, is that Taiwan's coastline runs over 770 miles long, so the PLA Navy will likely be unable to cover that much coastline to prevent insurgent resupply.⁵⁸ The US Navy's submarine force along with US SOF should use both autonomous and manned submarines to ferry across supplies, weapons, and newly trained fighters into Taiwan.

Though difficult, such operations have historical precedent. During World War I, Imperial Germany successfully employed merchant submarines like the *Deutschland* to bypass the British blockade and sustain its economy.⁵⁹ More recently, transnational drug cartels have used submersibles to smuggle narcotics into the United States undetected, demonstrating the viability of stealth-based smuggling networks.⁶⁰ By leveraging similar techniques, the United States and its allies could sustain Taiwanese resistance forces over the long term, ensuring that the PLA remains engaged in a costly and protracted conflict.

⁵⁶ Petraeus and Roberts, *Conflict: The Evolution of Warfare*, 385.

⁵⁷ Seth Cropsey, "Naval Special Warfare Will Have to Fight Differently," *Proceedings*, February 2024, <https://www.usni.org/>.

⁵⁸ Easton, *The Chinese Invasion Threat*, 129.

⁵⁹ Francis Duncan, "Deutschland—Merchant Submarine," *Proceedings*, April 1965, <https://www.usni.org/>.

⁶⁰ Patrick Griffin, "Contested Logistics: Adapting Cartel Submarines to Support Taiwan," *Proceedings*, January 2024, <https://www.usni.org/>.

Unmanned aerial systems could also play a critical role in resupply operations. The US Marine Corps is actively developing drone-based logistics to sustain forces in the field. Short-range tests—transporting minimal payloads up to 7.5 miles—have already been proven successful. Efforts now focus on scaling this capability to move hundreds of pounds of weapons and supplies over greater distances, potentially up to 2,500 nautical miles.⁶¹

Even if medium-range drone resupply—around 100 nautical miles—becomes viable before a PLA invasion and occupation of Taiwan, significant obstacles still remain. Given Taiwan's distance from US and allied territory, drones will likely need to launch from naval vessels positioned relatively close to the island. That proximity presents its own risks. The PLA's advanced air defense systems, including the HQ-9 and Russian-produced S-400, create a protective bubble extending hundreds of miles, posing a formidable challenge to drone operations.⁶² To penetrate these defenses, stealth technology must be integrated into any aerial resupply platform operating near the Taiwan Strait.

Yet technological innovation and operational creativity could allow the US military to sustain Taiwan's defenders. Advances in air and sea domains—combined with a concerted effort to outpace Chinese countermeasures—could make drone resupply a viable element of US strategy.

Effective intelligence-sharing between the United States, its allies, and Taiwanese insurgents will also be critical for sustaining resistance efforts. However, the primary challenge in wartime will be how to discreetly deliver intelligence to Taiwanese forces without detection. Taiwanese insurgents will likely operate in a severely degraded communications environment—at best, one heavily monitored by the PLA. To circumvent these constraints, they must adopt alternative communication methods beyond conventional digital networks. Ukraine's success with *Starlink* has prompted experts to call for Taiwan to develop its own domestic satellite communications network, particularly given its reliance on just 15 underwater cables for global connectivity.⁶³ While this would provide an initial advantage, Taiwan must also account for the growing threat of antisatellite technology, which could render such systems vulnerable.

⁶¹ Stew Magnuson, "Marines Expanding Drone Resupply Missions," *National Defense Magazine*, 13 May 2024, <https://www.nationaldefensemagazine.org/>.

⁶² Jacob Mezey, "Russian and Chinese Strategic Missile Defense: Doctrine, Capabilities, and Development," *Issue Brief*, 10 September 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/>; and "China's Anti-Access Area Denial," *Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance*, 24 August 2018, <https://missiledefenseadvocacy.org/>.

⁶³ Jason Hsu and Richard Y.K. Chen, "Keeping Taiwan Connected," *The Strategist*, 14 September 2023, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/>.

To mitigate these risks, insurgents should employ a mix of secure, low-tech, and unconventional communication methods. Transmitting encrypted, fragmented messages across predesignated radio frequencies, combined with cryptic coded language, could help evade PLA surveillance.⁶⁴ Additionally, traditional courier-based messaging—using trusted individuals to physically relay intelligence during covert resupply operations—could prove highly effective. This method for instance, though slower, enabled Osama bin Laden to remain undetected for nearly a decade, demonstrating its viability in a high-risk environment.

Regardless of the specific approach, Taiwan's insurgency can and must maintain secure lines of communication despite PLA efforts to disrupt them. By leveraging a combination of emerging technology and proven clandestine methods, Taiwanese resistance forces can ensure the continued flow of critical information, sustaining their fight against Chinese occupation.

Three Stages of Protracted War

Mao asserts that insurgencies progress through three distinct phases when confronting a superior adversary: strategic defensive, strategic stalemate, and strategic counteroffensive.⁶⁵ However, movement through these stages is not linear; insurgents may shift between them based on current battlefield conditions, force disposition, resource availability, and broader strategic outlook.

The strategic defensive phase begins at the onset of conflict, during which insurgents trade space for time, preserving their forces while executing limited attacks. As the enemy weakens, insurgents transition into the strategic stalemate phase, consolidating territorial gains and preparing for a larger counteroffensive. The final stage, the strategic counteroffensive, occurs once the enemy is sufficiently degraded and nearing withdrawal. At this point, insurgents shift from guerrilla warfare to conventional-style operations, massing forces and maneuvering to force the enemy's retreat. While guerrilla tactics dominate the early stages, Maoist doctrine emphasizes mobile and positional warfare as key elements of conventional engagements in the latter phase.⁶⁶

Taiwan may use this three-stage framework as a broad strategic guide, but it should not be viewed as a rigid blueprint for victory. Mao's model, rooted in Clausewitzian theory, assumes that insurgents must ultimately achieve a decisive

⁶⁴ Barnett S. Koven and Chris Mason, "Back to the Future: Getting Special Forces Ready for Great-Power Competition," *War on the Rocks*, 4 May 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/>.

⁶⁵ Mao, *On Protracted War*, 34, 36.

⁶⁶ Mao, *On Protracted War*, 86; and Favel, *Active Defense*, 41.

conventional military victory.⁶⁷ However, for a Taiwanese insurgency, an outright battlefield defeat of the PLA may not be necessary. The final months of the US war in Afghanistan offer a compelling counter-narrative: while the Taliban intensified attacks, it was not military pressure alone that forced the US withdrawal, but rather a collapse of domestic political will. If Taiwanese insurgents can sustain high levels of attrition against PLA forces over a protracted period, the CCP may face a similar dilemma.

As the Taliban famously remarked, “The Americans may have the watches, but we have the time.”⁶⁸ The same political reality could ultimately apply to China. If a Taiwanese insurgency can impose sustained costs and outlast the PLA’s resolve, Beijing may find its will to fight eroding long before achieving its strategic objectives.

Mao’s three stages of protracted warfare may not be easily discernible once hostilities begin. The battlespace will be shaped as much by the information domain as by physical combat. Basic battlefield realities—force numbers, troop dispositions, territorial control—will likely be obscured, manipulated, or outright fabricated. The PLA views information warfare as the foundation of modern conflict, essential for achieving decisional advantage.⁶⁹ To that end, Beijing will aggressively disseminate a mix of truth, falsehoods, and exaggerations—both to the Taiwanese people and to the world—to shape perceptions of its success. The goal: to manufacture uncertainty about ground realities and obscure the insurgency’s true progress.

Artificial intelligence (AI) will further complicate this information environment, accelerating shifts between stages of conflict and injecting volatility into battlefield transitions. If neither side effectively degrades its adversary’s AI systems, both the PLA and the Taiwanese—assisted by the United States—will leverage AI to influence the pace of war. The Pentagon’s new *Combined Joint All-Domain Command and Control* system (CJADC2) could give US and allied forces a decisive edge by integrating vast streams of battlefield data into a coherent picture of PLA movements.⁷⁰ If Washington can securely transmit this intelligence to Taiwanese insurgents in real time, it will enhance their ability to target high-value PLA assets and disrupt

⁶⁷ Toshi Yoshihara, “Sun Zi and the Search for a Timeless Logic of Strategy,” in *The New Makers of Modern Strategy: From the Ancient World to the Digital Age*, ed. Hal Brands (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023), 88.

⁶⁸ Shahid Afsar, Chris Samples, and Thomas Wood, “The Taliban: An Organizational Analysis,” *Military Review* 88, no. 3 (May–June 2008), 64, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/>.

⁶⁹ B.A. Friedman, “Finding the Right Model: The Joint Force, the People’s Liberation Army, and Information Warfare,” *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 6, no. 3 (March–April 2023): 1, 6, 9, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

⁷⁰ Cheng-Hung Hsu, “The Military Use of AI: Challenges and Opportunities for Taiwan,” *Royal United Services Institute* (2024), 8, 9, <https://static.rusi.org/>.

critical support nodes. This could hasten Taiwan's shift from stage two (strategic stalemate) to stage three (strategic counteroffensive) once insurgents are postured for coordinated strikes.

Stage one (strategic defensive), however, will be defined by chaos. Taiwanese forces will fight for survival against the PLA's initial onslaught while struggling to establish secure internal and external communications, command cohesion, and a steady flow of material and intelligence support from the United States and its allies. This phase could take months, but its success will determine the insurgency's viability. Patience will be essential—Taiwanese forces must build a resilient foundation before moving to the next phase. Without it, long-term success will be impossible.

Strategic Risk

As with any strategy, a thorough assessment of risk is essential. For policymakers, the challenge lies in weighing these risks against the expected outcomes of their strategic options. If Taiwan and the United States pursue a Maoist-inspired insurgency strategy, they assume a moderate level of risk by relying on low-intensity conflict as a means of defending Taiwan.

One significant risk is the decision to withhold conventional US forces from engaging the PLA directly, since they could plausibly play a decisive role in protecting Taiwan and shortening the duration of conflict. However, by avoiding full-scale combat, the United States mitigates the risk of global economic destabilization and removes any plausible justification for nuclear escalation. A full-scale US–PLA war would be fraught with uncertainty, as both sides would likely experience degraded command and control capabilities, making battlefield assessments and strategic decision-making more difficult. More critically, such a war would mark the first direct conflict between two nuclear-armed states, introducing the possibility that China might resort to the use of a low-yield or strategic nuclear weapon—either as a deterrent against US intervention or to stave off a decisive military defeat.⁷¹

While an insurgency-based strategy lowers the probability of nuclear conflict, it does not eliminate it. China may take cues from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, where Putin's threats of limited nuclear use successfully deterred direct Western intervention and initially restricted the flow of advanced weaponry to Kyiv.⁷² Xi could adopt a

⁷¹ Gregory Weaver, "The Role of Nuclear Weapons in a Taiwan Crisis," *Issue Brief*, 22 November 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/>.

⁷² Weaver, "The Role of Nuclear Weapons."

similar posture, using nuclear brinkmanship to intimidate the United States and its allies into limiting their support for Taiwan.

That said, Beijing is less likely to employ nuclear weapons in a low-intensity conflict. The greater uncertainty lies in how China would react if forced into retreat. Though unlikely, a scorched-earth scenario remains possible. In a final act of destruction, the PLA could sabotage Taiwan's nuclear power plants or, in an extreme case, detonate a nuclear weapon to ensure that no one claims victory.⁷³ This risk exists whether the United States and Taiwan pursues conventional war or a protracted insurgency strategy.

Beyond the nuclear threat, China could retaliate against the United States through conventional military means for its support of Taiwan. To date, no modern war has resulted in a direct attack on the US homeland with advanced weaponry, largely due to the protective buffer of two vast oceans. However, China's rapid military and technological advancements have eroded this geographic advantage. The United States now faces an array of potential disruptions—both to military operations and civilian life—if war breaks out. Beijing has developed intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of striking the US mainland, and advancements in hypersonic missile technology suggest an attack could occur within minutes.⁷⁴

Beyond kinetic strikes, China has already demonstrated its intent to target critical infrastructure through cyber warfare. The recent probing of vital networks in Guam underscores Beijing's preparation for offensive cyber operations against both military and civilian systems.⁷⁵ The era of US immunity from the consequences of great-power war has ended. However, a limited-footprint approach to supporting Taiwan could mitigate the likelihood of significant attacks against the US homeland.

Even if China refrains from striking US soil, American military assets in the Pacific would remain at risk, even under an insurgency-based strategy. The PLA could attempt to interdict supply lines by targeting bases and logistics hubs critical to Taiwan's sustainment effort. However, historical precedent suggests China would tread carefully. During the Vietnam War, both the Soviet Union and China openly armed and supplied North Vietnamese forces without provoking direct US retaliation.⁷⁶ If Washington and its allies calibrate their support

⁷³ Lung, "In Taiwan, Friends Are Starting to Turn Against Each Other."

⁷⁴ Elizabeth Economy, "Xi Jinping and the Strategy of China's Restoration," in *The New Makers of Modern Strategy: From the Ancient World to the Digital Age*, ed. Hal Brands (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023), 988.

⁷⁵ James Andrew Lewis, "Cyberattack on Civilian Critical Infrastructures in a Taiwan Scenario," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 11 August 2023, <https://www.csis.org/>.

⁷⁶ Barnett S. Koven and Chris Mason, "Back to the Future: Getting Special Forces Ready for Great-Power Competition," *War on the Rocks*, 4 May 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/>.

below the threshold of armed conflict, China will have little justification for escalating beyond limited strikes.

Yet an insurgency-based strategy still carries risks beyond military retaliation. China will likely target US interests worldwide, recognizing Washington's undeniable role in the conflict even if it remains below the threshold of war. Economic retaliation is one of Beijing's most potent tools. China could impose trade restrictions, weaponize its debt holdings, or pursue broader economic coercion. However, fears of financial warfare are often overstated. Despite holding USD 850 billion in US debt as of 2023, Beijing has little leverage—its 2015 sell-off of USD 180 billion in US securities had negligible effects on the American economy.⁷⁷ Likewise, Chinese tariffs, import bans, or consumer boycotts would harm China as much as they would the United States, particularly when compounded by the inevitable Western sanctions that would follow an invasion of Taiwan.⁷⁸ Much like Russia after its invasion of Ukraine, China would find itself increasingly isolated—facing economic headwinds that could undermine its long-term strategic ambitions.

Finally, China could seek to undermine US domestic stability as a form of retaliation. Beijing may attempt to interfere in US elections or further sow distrust in the government—tactics it has already pursued. Evidence suggests China engaged in such efforts ahead of the 2024 US elections, though the long-term impact remains uncertain.⁷⁹ While these operations have undoubtedly affected American society, an invasion of Taiwan would not necessarily grant Beijing greater success in this arena than it has already achieved.

At first glance, Mao's model of insurgency may seem unappealing to Taiwan, given the immense difficulties of waging a protracted war under occupation. Yet, it remains the most viable path to denying the PLA a permanent foothold and ensuring Taiwan's survival as a free and autonomous entity. If Taiwan and the United States can effectively exploit Chinese vulnerabilities while leveraging their own asymmetric strengths, they can impose significant costs on Beijing—potentially forcing the CCP to reconsider its commitment to a prolonged conflict. This shift in strategic calculus may not happen immediately, but over time, the burden of war could compel the CCP to ask itself whether Taiwan is worth the price of losing everything it has worked for over the past several decades. Insurgency, by its nature,

⁷⁷ Center for Strategic and International Studies, "Is it a Risk for America that China Holds So Much U.S. Debt?," *ChinaPower*, 4 March 2024, <https://chinapower.csis.org/>.

⁷⁸ Logan Wright et al., "How China Could Respond to US Sanctions in a Taiwan Crisis," *Atlantic Council*, 1 April 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/>.

⁷⁹ James M. Lindsay, "Election 2024: China's Efforts to Interfere in the U.S. Presidential Election," *Council on Foreign Relations* (blog), 5 April 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/>.

is an art rather than a science—but if executed effectively, it could ultimately prove decisive in Taiwan's favor.

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The views expressed in this paper reflect the personal views of the author alone, and do not express the policy or opinions of the US Army or Department of Defense.

The Challenges Taiwan Faces in Cognitive Warfare and Its Impact on US–Taiwan Relations

COMMANDER JEREMY (YEN-MING) CHEN, ROC NAVY

Abstract

Taiwan remains a flashpoint for conflict in the Indo-Pacific, where the People's Republic of China (PRC) actively employs cognitive warfare to reshape Taiwanese perceptions. Targeting media content, public opinion, and national identity, the PRC seeks to prepare the way for annexation—an approach reminiscent of Russian actions preceding the 2014 seizure of Crimea. Will Taiwan follow Crimea's path? This article examines election opinion polls in Taiwan to illustrate the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) methods from 2020 to 2023 and their impact on US–Taiwan relations. The study finds that counter-cognitive warfare has recently evolved into what this author terms “rhetorical labeling tactics,” with actors on both sides of the Taiwan Strait crafting and promoting narratives to influence public political views.

Cognitive warfare (認知作戰)—a component of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) strategy of “unrestricted warfare” (超限戰)—targets human perception, attitudes, and decision-making through information manipulation, propaganda, and psychological operations to achieve strategic objectives. Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense (MND) describes cognitive warfare as an effort “to sway the subject's will and change its mindset. . . . Psychologically, the PRC is trying to cause mental disarray and confusion, in order to weaken fighting will and determination to defending ourselves.”¹

¹ In 2021, Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense (MND) defined *cognitive warfare* as follows: “Cognitive warfare is used to sway the subject's will and change its mindset... cognitive warfare is originated from the [disciplines] of intelligence warfare, psychological warfare, and public opinion warfare. . . . [I]t can make use of highly efficient modern computing systems, the internet, and social media, to twist the subject's social ideologies, mentality, and the sense of law-and-order through cyber infiltrations and manipulation of mentality and public opinions. The PRC is exploiting the tactics of cognitive warfare, mixing with ‘Three Warfares’ . . . in an attempt to create postures to its own favor. . . . Psychologically, the PRC is trying to cause mental disarray and confusion, in order to weaken our fighting will, determination to defending [sic] ourselves, and seize the dominance of public opinions.” See: ROC Ministry of Defense, *ROC National Defense Report 2021* (中華民國110年國防報告書), November 2021, 46, <https://www.mnd.gov.tw/>; and Louise T. Higgins and Mo Zheng, “An Introduction to Chinese Psychology—Its Historical Roots Until the Present Day,” *Journal of Psychology* 136, no. 2 (March 2002): 225–39, <https://doi.org/>.

Traditionally, military forces have served as the first line of national defense, protecting states from external threats. However, rapid technological advancements now allow adversaries to bypass conventional defenses by manipulating media and other information channels to shape public opinion. In Taiwan's case, the CCP integrates media and commercial activities to spread propaganda, including narratives promoting "America Skepticism" (疑美論) to weaken US–Taiwan relations.²

At times, accusations of cognitive warfare serve a strategic purpose by reinforcing negative perceptions of a nation, thereby justifying specific policies or actions against it.³ Observing recent statements and actions by Taiwan's leaders, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)—the governing party that holds Taiwan's current presidential administration—wields resistance to CCP cognitive warfare as a strategic weapon.⁴ Rather than merely countering misinformation, the DPP has adopted proactive tactics—developing cross-platform content strategies, leveraging algorithmic influence, and encouraging institutional and grassroots participation. This shift transforms ideological defense into a competitive initiative. While largely beneficial, these measures require careful management to prevent unintended consequences.

The Evolution of Cognitive Warfare Strategies

Cognitive warfare aims to shape how individuals evaluate issues or events, often without the person's own awareness. This strategic operation relies on propaganda and narrative control,⁵ operating at the intersection of cyberwarfare, information warfare, and psychological operations⁶ to influence cognitive and decision-making processes.⁷ The CCP propaganda machine consistently adheres to the "mouthpiece theory" (喉舌理論) inherited from the Soviet Communist

² Kuan-Chen Lee, "Measuring Public Preferences for Strategic Choices in an Era of Great Power Competition: Taiwan as a Case Study," *Issues and Studies* 60, no. 2 (June 2024): 1–26, <https://doi.org/>; and John Dotson, *Chinese Information Operations against Taiwan: The 'Abandoned Chess Piece' and 'America Skepticism Theory'* (Washington: Global Taiwan Institute, August 2023), <https://globaltaiwan.org/>.

³ Robert Bebbler, *Cognitive Competition, Conflict, and War: An Ontological Approach* (Washington: Hudson Institute, 2023). <https://s3.amazonaws.com/>.

⁴ Max Tsung-Chi Yu and Karl Ho, "COVID and Cognitive Warfare in Taiwan," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 58, no. 2 (March 2023): 249–73, <https://doi.org/>.

⁵ Yu and Ho, "COVID and Cognitive Warfare in Taiwan," 255–60.

⁶ Marco Marsili, "Guerre à la Carte: Cyber, Information, Cognitive Warfare and the Metaverse," *Applied Cybersecurity & Internet Governance* 2, no. 1 (2023): 1–11, <https://doi.org/>.

⁷ Rodrigo Pace and Emilio Coelho, "Information as a Weapon of Mass Disruption: From Information Disorder to Cognitive Warfare," *Revista da Escola de Guerra Naval* 28, no. 2 (2022): 707–22, <https://doi.org/>.

propaganda system.⁸ Since Mao Zedong's era, the CCP has mandated that all media and propaganda channels serve as the Party's mouthpiece, reinforcing its policies and safeguarding its interests.⁹ As Mao wrote in *How China Can Win*, "Even if one cannot immediately defeat a more powerful enemy, by rallying the masses to one's side and persisting, it's possible to gradually turn the tide against unfavorable odds."¹⁰

By 2011, Mainland Chinese scholars Zeng Huafeng (石海明) and Shi Haiming (曾華鋒) had recognized the potential of cognitive warfare and expanded its conceptual framework. Their work examined its application, from shaping public opinion in peacetime to influencing decision-making in wartime—consolidating internal support, undermining enemy resolve, and winning over neutral parties.¹¹ By 2014, Chinese Communist scholars introduced the concept of "brain supremacy," marking a shift from information warfare to intelligence warfare. This evolution emphasized securing an advantage in cognitive speed and processing, often termed "intelligence supremacy." Ultimately, cognitive warfare aims to influence or alter the target audience's behavior.¹² (See fig. 1, below)

⁸ *Mao Zedong Thought* is the product of the integration of Marxism-Leninism with the practical realities of China's revolution and development. Weimin Ji and Haowei Jia, "The Contemporary Inheritance and Value Implications of Mao Zedong's Journalism Thought (毛澤東新聞思想的新時代傳承及其價值意蘊)," *Journalism & Communication Research*, no. 12 (2023), http://gjs.cass.cn/kydt/kydt_kycg/202401/t20240131_5731555.shtml.

⁹ Sha Yexin, "Mao Zedong's Four Major Propaganda Theoretical Systems," *Open Magazine* (Hong Kong), September 2003, 89–91.

¹⁰ Mao Tse-tung, "On Protracted War," in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, vol. II (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1967), 113–94.

¹¹ Huafeng Zeng and Haiming Shi, *Brain Supremacy: War and National Security Strategy in the Global Media Era* (Beijing: People's Liberation Army Literature and Art Publishing House, 2014), 2–10.

¹² Huafeng Zeng, ed., *Brain Supremacy: Rules of War and National Security Strategy in the Global Media Era* (Beijing: People's Liberation Army Publishing House, 2014).

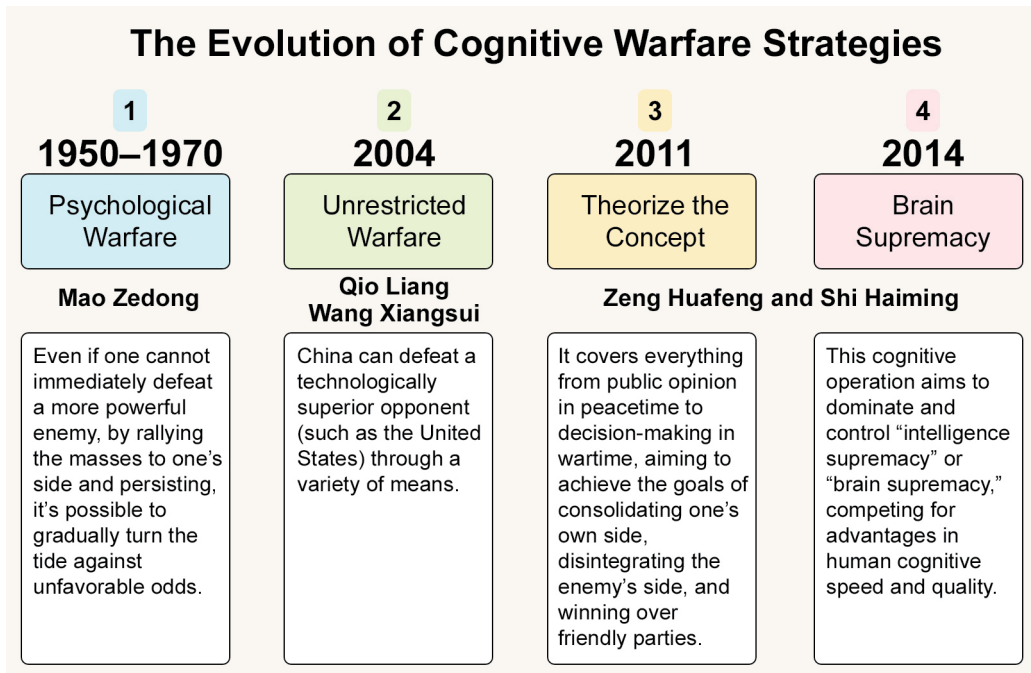


Figure 1. The evolution of CCP cognitive warfare strategies. (Source: created by the author.)

Influence Efforts Directed at Foreign Media

Grounded in these theoretical insights, the CCP continues to implement and refine these strategies, adapting them to advancements in modern technology. Both domestic and international social media platforms serve as critical tools for crafting and disseminating narratives that promote CCP influence. These platforms also enable the generation and spread of divisive content, deepening social fractures. To co-opt and infiltrate foreign media, the CCP employs three primary strategic approaches.¹³

The first, known as “building a boat to go to sea” (造船出海), relies on direct control. The CCP establishes its own professional international news organizations and cultivates media talent, ensuring control over television channels, radio stations, and newspapers through majority ownership. This approach allows the Party to shape the narrative from within.¹⁴

¹³ Qinglian He, *Red Infiltration: The Truth About China's Global Media Expansion* (Taipei: Gusa Publishing, 2019).

¹⁴ Yun Chen, “CCP Intimidating Taiwanese People and Remotely Controlling Media? DPP: KMT and TPP Shouldn't Become Accomplices in Suppressing Taiwan,” *Liberty Times*, 26 June 2024, <https://video.ltn.com.tw/>.

A second approach leverages economic influence to pressure independent media with business ties to China. By exploiting financial dependencies, the CCP encourages self-censorship, compelling media outlets to avoid reporting unfavorable news.¹⁵

The third, referred to as “borrowing a boat to go to sea” (借船出海), involves using existing foreign platforms to disseminate CCP-approved narratives. This strategy relies on public figures or established Western media outlets to frame China’s messaging in a manner that resonates with international audiences.¹⁶ By enlisting local pundits and social media influencers with loyal followings, the CCP ensures that its narratives reach target audiences in a credible and effective manner.¹⁷

China’s Cognitive Warfare Strategy against Taiwan: Techniques and Implications

China’s propaganda tactics employ a multifaceted strategy to shape perceptions and influence decision-making, carrying significant implications for businesses and media organizations. This approach integrates information control, propaganda dissemination, and narrative shaping. Military actions, such as regular air force incursions into Taiwan’s airspace, further reinforce these efforts and amplify their impact.¹⁸

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leverages business ties to China to pressure independent media into removing content unfavorable to the Party. This economic influence often leads Taiwanese media organizations to self-censor sensitive topics, including the Tiananmen Massacre (or “6-4 Incident,” 六四事件), the Falun Gong (法輪功) religious group, and the Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama (達賴喇嘛), in order to maintain access to the Chinese market. Over time, this self-censorship establishes editorial norms that dictate “what can be said” and “what cannot be said” in news reporting.¹⁹

A striking example of these tactics in action is the case of the Want Want Group, a Taiwanese business conglomerate. Originally a food manufacturer, the group expanded into media by purchasing the *China Times* in 2008 and merging with China Television (CTV) and Chung T’ien Television (CtiTV) in 2009—a move that aligns with the CCP’s “building a boat” strategy. The influence of this strategy

¹⁵ “Perverse Advantage.” *The Economist*, April 2013. <http://www.economist.com/>.

¹⁶ Hong Cai, “Research on the ‘Borrowing a Boat to Go to Sea’ Strategy in External Communication,” *News Frontline*, no. 1 (2020), <http://paper.people.com.cn/>.

¹⁷ “Understanding the Controversy of Taiwanese Social Media Influencers and China’s ‘Cognitive Warfare,’” *BBC Chinese*, 20 June 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/>.

¹⁸ Jean Langlois-Berthelot and Didier Bazalgette, “Chinese Army Cognitive Warfare: Challenges for Next Generation of Operations,” *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2023, <https://doi.org/>.

¹⁹ Sue Curry Jansen, *Censorship: The Knot That Binds Power and Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

became evident during Hong Kong's anti-extradition bill protests, when Want Want's media outlets labeled protesters as "rioters," while other, less CCP-aligned outlets described police brutality as the actions of "mad cops."²⁰ This case illustrates how the economic incentives of the Chinese market increasingly shape the behavior of Taiwanese conglomerates seeking to balance cross-strait interests with their media operations.

Through investments in media companies, China has significantly expanded its ability to manipulate information and deploy official media to promote narratives aligned with CCP objectives. This strategy has shaped public discourse on several key issues.²¹

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese state media and affiliated accounts actively promoted claims on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, alleging that the virus originated in the United States.²² These campaigns heavily relied on both the "borrowing boats" and "building boats to go to sea" strategies to amplify their reach and influence global perceptions.²³

A similar approach emerged during the 2019–2020 Hong Kong protests. Twitter identified and dismantled a network of accounts linked to mainland China that had deliberately spread disinformation to discredit protesters and inflame political discord. By infiltrating global social media platforms, China sought to shape international opinion and weaken support for the pro-democracy movement.²⁴

Skepticism toward the United States also surfaced as a prominent theme in Taiwan, particularly in the lead-up to the 2024 election. In 2021, narratives critical of US policies gained traction, including claims that American demands—such as requiring Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) to build factories abroad—would harm Taiwan's economy.²⁵ Additional allegations suggested that US pork imports containing ractopamine posed significant health risks. Although the

²⁰ Xi Wang, "If You Only Read the Headlines of China Times and United Daily News, You'll Think Hong Kong's Anti-Extradition Protests Are Just Hong Kongers Rioting and Becoming Terrorists," *Watchout*, 5 September 2019, <https://watchout.tw/>.

²¹ Binguan Xiong, "Tell China's Story Well?" *International Journal of Interactive Communication Systems and Technologies* 5, no. 1 (2015): 26–40, <https://doi.org/>.

²² Vanessa Molter and Graham Webster, "Coronavirus Conspiracy Claims: What's Behind a Chinese Diplomat's COVID-19 Memes," *Stanford Internet Observatory*, 2020, <https://cyber.fsi.stanford.edu/>.

²³ Zhejiang City Radio and Television News, "From 'Borrowing Boats to Go to Sea' to 'Building Boats to Go to Sea': The 'Qingtian Model' Excels in Integrated Pandemic Prevention and Control Promotion | Qingtian Media Group Wins National Radio and Television Media Integration...," *The Paper*, 26 March 2020, <https://m.thepaper.cn/>.

²⁴ Twitter Safety, "Information Operations Directed at Hong Kong," *Twitter Blog*, 2019, <https://blog.x.com/>.

²⁵ Ben Blanchard, "TSMC Shares Soar After Bullish Outlook," *Reuters*, 19 January 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) ultimately secured victory in the January 2024 election, analysts note that Taiwan’s opposition parties have increasingly steered public discourse toward skepticism of the United States.²⁶

The Impact on Taiwan, the United States, and the US–Taiwan Relationship

The CCP’s cognitive warfare against Taiwan influences multiple aspects of society, including military force structure, US–Taiwan relations, public understanding of cognitive warfare, political trends, and presidential election outcomes. Analyzing internet trends and key events over time reveals how these narratives have shaped discourse.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, as Taiwan prepared to receive its first batch of Moderna vaccines, a widely circulated narrative suggested that Taiwan had exchanged military purchases and semiconductor chips for vaccines. However, Taiwan’s early success in pandemic prevention made this claim difficult to sustain.

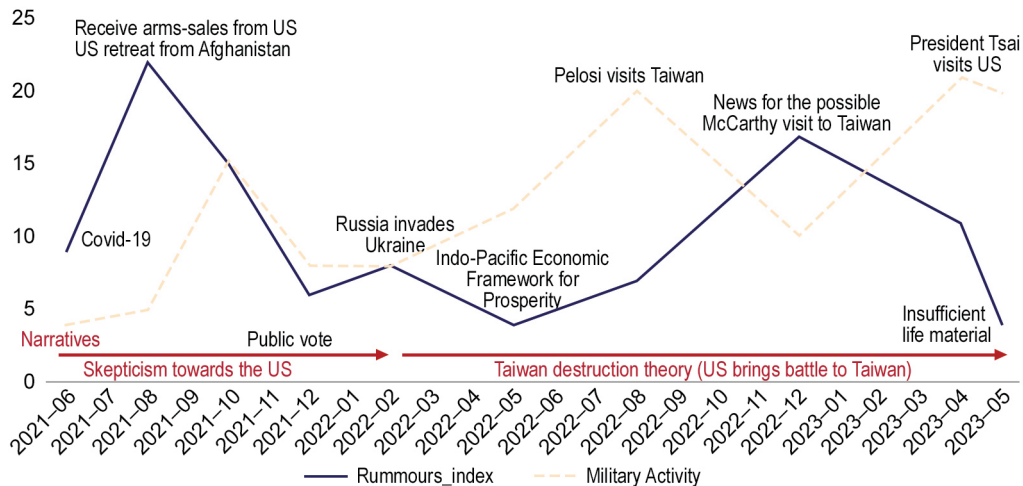


Figure 2. Analyzing the impact of three issues: The U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Russian Invasion of Ukraine, and Taiwan Presidential Meetings with U.S. Political Leaders. (Source Yu, Chih-Hao. “Anti-US Skepticism and Their Origins.” Taiwan Information Environment Research Center (IORG), November 8, 2023. <https://iorg.tw/a/us-skepticism-238#h2-8>. Modified by author.)

In February 2022, Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine sparked anxiety in Taiwan. Almost immediately, online narratives blamed the war on alleged US and

²⁶ Syaru Shirley Lin, Caroline Fried, and Siwei Huang, “What Taiwan’s 2024 Election Means for China, the US, and the Future of Taiwan,” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 79 (March 2024).

NATO “provocations,” reinforcing the idea that the United States was the primary source of global instability, war, and destruction.²⁷

In May 2021, after US President Joe Biden announced the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, the so-called “Taiwan destruction narrative” emerged. This narrative asserted that Taiwan’s participation in the framework was part of a broader US strategy to turn Taiwan into a battlefield.²⁸

In August 2022, Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan coincided with large-scale Chinese military exercises around the island. Online discourse claimed that Taiwan itself had provoked the crisis and was responsible for its own growing entanglement in potential conflict.²⁹

By late October 2022, news of TSMC’s upcoming ceremony for transferring equipment to its Arizona factory fueled claims that the United States was “hollowing out” Taiwan. Narratives accused the United States of exploiting Taiwan’s resources and talent while preparing to abandon the island altogether. In 2023, similar claims resurfaced in response to reports that Speaker Kevin McCarthy might visit Taiwan, reinforcing fears of Taiwan’s so-called “Ukrainization” and portraying the United States as an instigator of war.³⁰

Between 2022 and 2023, then-President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) met separately with Speakers Pelosi and McCarthy. Following these visits, Chinese military activities around the Taiwan Strait intensified, coinciding with a surge in narratives such as the “source of chaos (混亂的根源)” (framing the United States as the root of global conflicts), the “false friend (錯誤的盟友)” (alleging that the United States profits from Taiwan while no real support), and the “abandonment Taiwan narrative (放棄台灣論)” (claiming that the United States views Taiwan as a pawn and will ultimately desert it). The phenomenon of Weibo and Chinese official media leading in popularity is also evidence that these narratives were first disseminated from China (see fig. 3).³¹

²⁷ Chih-Hao Yu, “Anti-US Skepticism and Their Origins,” Taiwan Information Environment Research Center (IORG), 8 November 2023, <https://iorg.tw/>; Wang Chun, “The Kuomintang’s ‘Skepticism Toward the US’ Continues: How Can They Equate ‘KMT-CCP Collusion’ with ‘US-China Communication’?,” *News Lens*, 3 September 2024, <https://www.thenewslens.com/>.

²⁸ Yu, “Anti-US Skepticism and Their Origins.”

²⁹ Yu, “Anti-US Skepticism and Their Origins.”

³⁰ “Report: U.S. House Speaker McCarthy’s Visit to Taiwan—Tsai Cheng-yuan Reveals U.S. Intentions: Provoking Mainland China to Launch a Taiwan Strait War,” *ETtoday*, 24 January 2023, <https://www.ettoday.net/>.

³¹ Taiwan Information Environment Research Center [IORG], “2023 Overall Research Findings,” IORG, 19 January 2024, <https://iorg.tw/>.

Regarding President Tsai Ing-wen's Second Meetings with U.S. House Speakers in 2022 and 2023 The Propagation Heat on Various Platforms 10 Days Before and After Each Meeting and During Military Exercises

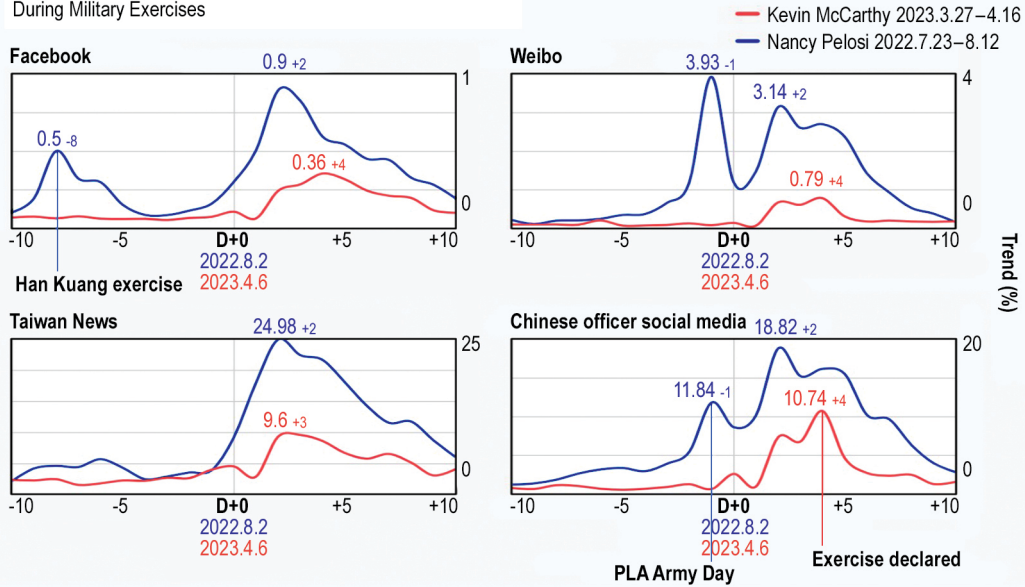


Figure 3. The Internet Presence, When Tsai Ing-wen's Meetings with US House Speakers in 2022 and 2023. (Source Taiwan Information Environment Research Center [IORG], "8 Suspicious Narratives and Dissemination Behaviors Related to PRC Military Exercises After the Tsai-McCarthy Meeting," IORG Weekly Report no. 41, May 23, 2023, <https://iorg.tw/da/41#h2-5>.)

The Impact on the US–Taiwan Relationship

Taiwan's relationship with the United States has long been central to public discourse, shaping the island's democratic trajectory and its role within global democratic alliances. However, the spread of "America Skepticism" threatens this relationship by fostering negative perceptions of Taiwan's democratic governance and international partnerships. Manipulative narratives—often misleading or deliberately distorted—erode the quality of public discourse and weaken trust in democracy. The CCP remains the primary external force behind these efforts.³²

Despite these challenges, growing public satisfaction with governance since 2020 and the 2019 Hong Kong anti-extradition bill protests, which exposed the authoritarian nature of the Chinese regime, have strengthened Taiwan's national

³² Dotson, *Chinese Information Operations against Taiwan*.

identity.³³ This shift has helped counteract the influence of anti-U.S. rhetoric. However, even as US–Taiwan relations continue to deepen, skepticism toward the United States remains present in Taiwan’s information environment. This persistent narrative underscores the urgent need for enhanced media literacy among Taiwanese citizens to navigate an increasingly complex and contested information landscape.

Taiwan’s Methods of Resistance against Cognitive Warfare

Taiwan has adopted a multifaceted approach to counter the People’s Republic of China’s cognitive warfare, with both civil society and government initiatives playing key roles. In the digital age, anyone can publish or share content, leading to the widespread circulation of false, misleading, or deliberately fabricated information. In response, grassroots efforts such as the Kuma Academy (黑熊學院, “Black Bear Academy”) have emerged to promote social media literacy. Additionally, “internet armies” are often active on various social media platforms, identifying disinformation and propaganda as “Chinese operations.”³⁴

To combat the spread of false information, Taiwan has developed a robust network of online fact-checking platforms, including Cofacts.³⁵ By analyzing headlines and content, Cofacts employs artificial intelligence to assess the credibility of information. Platforms such as Snopes, FactCheck.org, and Cofacts provide users with accessible tools to verify news reports and detect falsified images, videos, or accounts. A study by Stanford University found that individuals who use fact-checking tools are significantly less likely to share false information.³⁶ For the general public, mastering these resources and recognizing deepfake technology are essential skills in defending against misinformation.

To counter disinformation and cognitive warfare from the mainland, Taiwan’s government has tasked the National Communications Commission (NCC) and the Financial Supervisory Commission (FSC) with overseeing media mergers and acquisitions—particularly cases involving mainland Chinese entities seeking control of Taiwanese companies. The NCC employs a consensus-based system to evaluate complex cases, but its cautious approach and limited authority have drawn criticism. The premier has notably remarked that “nobody can control it, and it

³³ Yu-chen Lai, “NCCU Survey: Percentage of People Identifying as Chinese Hits New Low; Those Identifying as Taiwanese Exceed 60% for Nearly 4 Years,” *Central News Agency*, 23 February 2024, <https://www.cna.com.tw/>.

³⁴ Hong Zhong and Jianmin Wang, “The Influence of Taiwan’s ‘Internet Army’ on Social Public Opinion and Its Implications for Mainland China,” *China Review*, no. 291 (March 2022): 95–99.

³⁵ Cofacts Team, “About Cofacts,” *Cofacts*, 2024, <https://cofacts.tw/>.

³⁶ Jennifer Allen et al., “Evaluating the Fake News Problem at the Scale of the Information Ecosystem,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118, no. 15 (2021): e2104235118, <https://doi.org/>.

controls nothing,” highlighting concerns over the NCC’s inability to curb PRC influence in Taiwanese media or effectively combat disinformation.

The NCC faces a persistent dilemma: expanding its regulatory authority risks accusations of overreach, while excessive restraint leaves it ineffective. Striking a balance between regulatory power and functional oversight remains the central challenge, as Taiwan seeks to defend its information environment without compromising democratic principles.³⁷

Taiwan’s Ministry of Justice’s Cognitive Warfare Research Center stands as a crucial pillar in the defense against CCP information warfare. Operating with precision and vigilance, the center is tasked with countering the spread of disinformation and safeguarding the integrity of Taiwan’s democratic processes. By deploying advanced techniques to identify and neutralize false narratives, the center plays a vital role in maintaining an informed populace and ensuring that the public discourse remains free from malign foreign influence. In this digital age, where information can be as potent a weapon as any, the center’s efforts are indispensable in the ongoing struggle to preserve truth and democracy.

Domestic Political Controversies in Taiwan Surrounding Cognitive Warfare

The discourse on cognitive warfare requires a nuanced analysis of the tension between national security and democratic principles of free expression. Some scholars contend that claims of PRC-led cognitive warfare are overstated or driven by geopolitical interests, noting that information warfare and public opinion shaping are common tools in international competition. In some instances, governments may also use accusations of cognitive warfare to reinforce negative perceptions of a rival state, thereby legitimizing specific policies or actions taken against it.³⁸

This strategic communication landscape reveals that both the CCP and Taiwan’s governing DPP actively construct narratives to shape political perceptions. The challenge lies not in suppressing competing viewpoints but in fostering a political environment that encourages rigorous debate while upholding the democratic principle of open dialogue. Some critics argue that the DPP, when confronted with unfavorable narratives that threaten its political standing or policy agenda, reflexively labels dissenting messages as “cognitive warfare.” According to these critics, this approach aims to discredit the sources of negative information while avoiding

³⁷ Jia Huang, “Opinion Submission: Solutions to the NCC Dilemma,” *Storm*, 15 May 2024, <https://www.storm.mg/>.

³⁸ Bebbler, *Cognitive Competition, Conflict, and War*.

deeper self-examination or substantive policy adjustments. Rather than addressing the root causes of public dissatisfaction, they contend, the DPP risks dismissing legitimate concerns under the pretext of countering foreign influence.³⁹

In response, the DPP maintains that its efforts to counter cognitive warfare are essential to safeguarding Taiwan's sovereignty and democratic institutions. Officials argue that distinguishing between genuine domestic criticism and PRC-driven influence campaigns is crucial in an era of hybrid threats. The party also emphasizes its commitment to press freedom, pointing to Taiwan's vibrant and competitive media landscape as evidence that opposition voices remain robust. While navigating the complexities of information warfare, the DPP asserts that its actions seek to reinforce public resilience against external manipulation rather than stifle legitimate debate. Nonetheless, as the discourse on cognitive warfare evolves, ensuring that counter-disinformation measures do not inadvertently suppress dissent remains a critical concern in Taiwan's democratic governance.

Balancing Democratic Values and National Defense in the Ideological Battlefield

This analysis underscores that media functions as a battleground for ideological conflict, where narratives compete to shape public perception. Defending democracy in this space requires a strategic response, balancing the need to counter harmful disinformation with the fundamental commitment to free expression. Discussions on restricting certain speech must be evaluated through the lens of national interest, recognizing that legitimacy in any information struggle depends on safeguarding collective well-being. While democracy thrives on inclusivity, the unchecked spread of harmful ideologies can erode its foundations. Accusations of restricting free speech often come from those who feel their perspectives are under threat, highlighting the complexities of maintaining open discourse. Inaction in this contest risks ceding ground in the battle for public opinion.

Disinformation and conspiracy theories operate as weapons, embedding themselves in public consciousness when left unchallenged. Their spread is fueled by fear, uncertainty, and distrust in institutions. Effective countermeasures rely on transparency, factual accuracy, and reasoned dialogue—rather than outright suppression—enabling skeptical audiences to distinguish truth from falsehood over time. Just as military forces are trained to employ strategic force, cultivating a well-informed and engaged citizenry through open discussion fortifies democratic resilience. Encouraging

³⁹ Ching Chang, "Cognitive Warfare Label: The Green Camp's Ah Q Spirit Victory Method," *United Daily News*, 21 September 2024, <https://udn.com/>.

critical thinking and national unity in the face of cognitive warfare strengthens society's ability to defend its core values without resorting to censorship.

Conclusion

China's cognitive warfare against Taiwan is a multifaceted and adaptive strategy that extends across international, regional, and commercial spheres. By leveraging Taiwan's economic dependence, Beijing seeks to shape media narratives through strategic incentives such as market access, advertising revenue, and capital investments. These pressures affect both pro-unification and pro-independence outlets alike, contributing to an information landscape increasingly vulnerable to manipulation. This reality underscores the urgent need for stronger media literacy in Taiwan, equipping citizens with the tools to critically assess the information they consume.

At the corporate level, Taiwanese media owners with financial interests in China often engage in self-censorship on politically sensitive topics, aligning their editorial policies with Beijing's broader communication strategies. In tandem, the CCP actively fosters skepticism toward the United States, attempting to weaken Taiwan's confidence in its most crucial international partner. However, these efforts have faced growing resistance, particularly since the 2019 Hong Kong protests, which heightened public awareness of China's coercive tactics and reinforced Taiwan's commitment to democratic resilience.

Both the CCP and the DPP actively shape narratives to influence public opinion, reflecting the broader contest over Taiwan's political future. As Taiwan navigates this evolving battlefield, the challenge lies in safeguarding democratic values while maintaining space for open debate. Strengthening critical thinking and media literacy will remain essential in countering cognitive warfare. Looking ahead, Taiwan must refine its defensive strategies by reinforcing regulatory oversight of media ownership, expanding public education on disinformation, and deepening international cooperation on information security. Continued research is vital to understanding the long-term impact of cognitive warfare on democratic societies and to developing countermeasures that preserve the free flow of information while resisting malign influence. 🌟

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Is a Coming War in the Taiwan Strait a Myth?

A Review Essay

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Taiyi Sun and Dennis Lu-Chung Weng, *The Myth of War in the Taiwan Strait: Elite Perspectives from Beijing, Taipei, and Washington amid the Yizhou Dilemma*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2024). ISBN: 978-1666965001. 212 pp.

Sulmaan Wasif Khan, *The Struggle for Taiwan: A History of America, China, and the Island Caught Between*. New York: Basic Books, 2024. ISBN: 978-1541605046. 336 pp.

The *Myth of War in the Taiwan Strait* offers a unique rethinking of China–Taiwan–US relations. Drawing on their backgrounds—one from the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the other from Taiwan—the authors seek to establish a baseline consensus. Their ability to present both perspectives, and to reason maturely about them, is admirable. They challenge readers to avoid a simplistic adoption of the so-called “Thucydides Trap,”¹ arguing instead that China’s own history provides an alternative model, which they term the “Yizhou Dilemma.” Unlike the typical narrative of the bipolar Greek world divided between a rising Athens and an established Sparta, the authors contend that the triangular relations of the Three Kingdoms period of Chinese history (220–280 CE) offer a more fitting analogy to the situation today. (In fact, fifth-century Greece also had three major powers, but Persia’s role is often overlooked in simplified accounts—a point that can be set aside for now.)²

Sun and Weng center their analysis on the Yizhou Dilemma. The states of Yizhou and Shu, both claiming rightful succession through the Han Dynasty, cooperated and competed as the fortunes of the warring states shifted. To the east, Wei and Wu waged war, exerting pressure on Yizhou and Shu. Seeking an advantage in the

¹ The Thucydides Trap, named after the ancient Greek historian Thucydides, encapsulates the perilous dynamic that occurs when a rising power threatens to displace an existing dominant power. Thucydides observed this during the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta, positing that the rise of Athens instilled fear in Sparta, making conflict inevitable. In modern parlance, this term is often invoked to describe the brewing tensions between the United States and China, with the underlying query: Will history repeat itself?

² Richard Little, “The Greek City-States in the Fifth Century BCE: Persia and the Balance of Power,” in *The Balance of Power in World History*, ed. Stuart J. Kaufman, Richard Little, and William C. Wohlforth (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2007), 47–70, <https://doi.org/>.

broader struggle for hegemony, Shu expanded into Yizhou and blockaded it. In response, Yizhou's ruler opened the city gates and allowed Shu to absorb his state, ostensibly to spare his people the cost of a losing battle. Sun and Weng argue that this conquest led to overextension, ultimately enabling Wei to defeat both Wu and Shu, paving the way for the rise of the Jin dynasty (10–13).

The authors draw a modern parallel, likening the United States to Wei, the dominant power; China to Shu, a divided state striving for consolidation; and Taiwan to Yizhou, the weakest actor yet one whose choices could shape the system's trajectory. The dilemma, they explain, lies in the risk that a rising power's expansion may result in overextension and stall its ascent. Conversely, failing to consolidate territory may leave it too weak to challenge the leading power (14). As they conclude, "the path to hegemony is constricted when the rising power faces the challenge of navigating its relationship with the valuable weaker actor as a prelude to reaching hegemonic status" (15).

While the book covers more ground, its central argument—the Yizhou Dilemma—merits closer examination. Sun and Weng argue that in a system with three powers, the rising power will avoid conflict with a weaker third party because the costs of a distracting conflict would be prohibitively high given the pressures exerted on the rising power by the hegemon. However, they also contend that not expanding into the third party carries equally high costs, as it constrains the rising power's ability to ascend (17). This is the dilemma. They conclude, "Beijing will stay weak if it stays put, but [it will be] weakened if it uses its military to attack by force" (17). Given the risks associated with expansion, they argue that "the specter of war in the Taiwan Strait is largely exaggerated" (161).

Yet the most puzzling aspect of this argument lies in the historical precedent. Shu did, in fact, pursue expansion. Although Yizhou did not resist with full force, it could have; and while Shu's conquest succeeded, it ultimately failed to secure dominance. This raises a key question: Is the lesson of the Yizhou Dilemma meant to be descriptive or prescriptive? Sun and Weng advise rising powers to exercise caution in expanding into third-party states, yet their primary case study describes a rising power doing precisely that. Their argument ultimately hinges on the notion that prescriptive reasoning should override descriptive precedent. But if that were the case, conquests would not be as prevalent in world history as they are. The prospect of war in the Taiwan Strait may not be as exaggerated or mythical as the authors suggest.

A second claim requiring scrutiny is the assertion that "Beijing will stay weak" unless it unifies with Taiwan. But why must this be true? Is Beijing weak today, and what role does Taiwan play in China's ability to increase its national strength? This argument attempts to replace a material rationale with an ideological one. The

mainland government seeks unification for the same reasons it did in the seventeenth century: to neutralize the legitimacy threat posed by a rival regime in exile and to mitigate the strategic risk of a foreign presence in Taiwan.³ Yet both risks have already been managed or significantly reduced. Taiwan no longer seeks to reclaim rule over the mainland, and global recognition of the “One China” has largely prevented foreign states from directly intervening in Taiwan’s affairs, as the United States did between 1950 and 1979.

A truly peaceful unification would provide Beijing with geographical, economic, technological, ideological, and prestige benefits. However, the claim that PRC cannot be a strong and influential state without unification is unfounded. This mistaken inference stems from Sun and Weng’s overly direct analogy between China’s ancient warring states and the modern geopolitical landscape. As Yuri Pines has demonstrated, Legalist rulers in China’s past viewed population size and agricultural output as the primary sources of state power.⁴ More territory meant greater access to both, creating a continuous incentive for expansion.⁵ Today, however, the correlation between population size, agricultural land, and state power has largely disappeared. If it had not, China and India would already be the world’s most powerful states.

Instead, state power today depends on science, technology, trade, and innovation—factors closely tied to a nation’s education system, market economy, and stable relations with neighbors. The Chinese people, in fact, seem to understand this intuitively. China is not weak, nor will it be destined for weakness without unification with Taiwan. It is crucial to state this plainly, lest a new and unfounded justification for imperial expansion enter public discourse. A more fitting conclusion than Sun and Weng’s is the line from the Chinese satire *Please Don’t Call Me Human*, “Our nation’s doing just fine, thank you, and getting better.”⁶

Although Sun and Weng’s central argument is flawed, their survey evidence remains valuable. They conducted elite surveys in the PRC, Taiwan, and the United States, with approximately 130 participants completing the questionnaires. Their

³ Emma Jinhua Teng, *Taiwan’s Imagined Geography: Chinese Colonial Travel Writing and Pictures, 1683–1895*, Harvard East Asian Monographs 230 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005); and Alan Wachman, *Why Taiwan? Geostrategic Rationales for China’s Territorial Integrity*, Studies in Asian Security (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

⁴ Yuri Pines, “Legalism in Chinese Philosophy,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2018, <https://plato.stanford.edu/>.

⁵ Yang Shang, *The Book of Lord Shang: Apologetics of State Power in Early China*, trans. Yuri Pines, abridged edition, Translations from the Asian Classics (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

⁶ Quoted in William A. Callahan, “National Insecurities: Humiliation, Salvation, and Chinese Nationalism,” *Alternatives* 29, no. 2 (2004), 214.

most notable finding was that elites in Taiwan and China view war in the Taiwan Strait as “somewhat unlikely,” while elites in the United States consider it “somewhat likely” (58). Moreover, elites in all three regions generally do not believe the United States would intervene militarily. Only 10 percent of PRC respondents, 14 percent of US respondents, and 20.8 percent of Taiwanese respondents predicted such intervention (59). Among Taiwanese elites, only those affiliated with the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) believe the United States would send troops, whereas nearly all Kuomintang (KMT) elites reject that possibility (69).

Assessing the validity of elite surveys remains challenging. The growing skepticism regarding US military intervention is increasingly shared by Taiwan’s public, particularly as expectations have been shaken by the war in Ukraine.⁷ However, a recent CSIS elite survey found that 96 percent of US experts are “completely or moderately confident” that the United States would intervene militarily in the event of an invasion, while 72 percent of Taiwanese experts concurred.⁸ A 2022 CSIS survey further reported that 100 percent of American experts believe China expects US military intervention in a Taiwan conflict.⁹ Yet, if all American experts believe China anticipates such intervention, while only 10 percent of Chinese experts actually do, this suggests a deep-seated mutual misperception.

A separate survey indicates that concerns over US intervention have a modest effect on Chinese public support for forcible unification with Taiwan.¹⁰ If China’s decision-making elite do not expect US military involvement, then such a threat offers little deterrence. More robust evidence on Chinese perspectives is essential to clarifying this issue.

Until such evidence emerges, Sun and Weng’s findings remain the most compelling. Their data suggest that US elites are out of touch with their Chinese counterparts, particularly in the post-COVID-19 and post-Ukraine invasion environment. Furthermore, President Joe Biden’s efforts to shift US policy toward “strategic clarity” appear to have failed. This failure may stem from the perception that an unequivocal US commitment to Taiwan’s defense outweighs America’s actual stakes in the conflict. It may also reflect the absence of traditional credibility mechanisms, such

⁷ T.Y. Wang and Su-feng Cheng, “Strategic Clarity and Taiwanese Citizens’ Confidence in the US Security Commitment,” *Asian Survey* 64, no. 1 (February 1, 2024): 54–78, <https://doi.org/>.

⁸ Bonny Lin et al., “Surveying the Experts: U.S. and Taiwan Views on China’s Approach to Taiwan in 2024 and Beyond,” *ChinaPower Project* (blog), 22 January 2024, 17, <https://chinapower.csis.org/>.

⁹ China Power, “Surveying the Experts: China’s Approach to Taiwan,” 12 September 2022, 14, <https://chinapower.csis.org/>.

¹⁰ Adam Y. Liu and Xiaojun Li, “Assessing Public Support for (Non-)Peaceful Unification with Taiwan: Evidence from a Nationwide Survey in China,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, 14 May 2023, 11, <https://doi.org/>.

as forward troop deployments or a mutual defense treaty, in the Taiwan case.¹¹ Regardless, the presidential transition from Biden to Trump could have produced the same outcome.

History suggests that misunderstanding and misperception have long shaped US–China–Taiwan relations. Sulmaan Wasif Khan’s *The Struggle for Taiwan* traces this pattern in a chronological history from 1943 to the present. He compellingly describes how the US government has “shifted between two gears—strategic drift and sudden energetic action—while constantly revisiting its options” (52). For Taiwan, this dynamic began in 1950, when the United States unexpectedly intervened in the Korean Peninsula and simultaneously deployed naval forces in the Taiwan Strait to prevent the war’s expansion. The following year, the United States excluded “China” from the San Francisco Peace Conference, leaving Taiwan’s sovereignty unresolved. Although Japan renounced its claim to the island, the question of whether sovereignty belonged to the Republic of China (ROC), the People’s Republic of China (PRC), or neither remained unanswered (65).

Even after the Korean War armistice, US reconnaissance data enabled Chiang Kai-shek’s blockade of China’s southern coast, a violation of freedom of navigation that Secretary of State John Foster Dulles dismissed as merely “a little illegal” (76–77). Amid rumors of an impending US–ROC defense treaty, Mao ordered the shelling of Kinmen and Matsu to signal that such an agreement would be a mistake (82). The United States, however, interpreted the shelling differently and formalized the treaty to deter further aggression. Eisenhower, previously ambivalent on the issue, then signaled he might use nuclear weapons to defend the offshore islands. The crisis deescalated at the 1955 Bandung Conference, though a similar confrontation emerged in 1958.

Khan uses these episodes to illustrate his broader argument: US leaders repeatedly escalated peripheral disputes into near-existential confrontations. Richard Nixon, by contrast, avoided becoming “imprisoned” by his National Security Council (105), which allowed him to pursue rapprochement with the PRC. This effort required setting the United States on a path toward severing official ties with the Republic of China and ending its defense commitment to Taiwan. Khan argues that had Nixon fully abandoned Taiwan in 1972—rather than leaving the process to unfold under future administrations—Taiwan’s “story would have ended there” (115). This conclusion is too abrupt. The PRC lacked the air and sea superiority needed for a successful

¹¹ Peter Harris and Jared M McKinney, “Strategic Clarity or Calamity?: Competing Logics of Deterrence in the Taiwan Strait,” *International Affairs* 100, no. 3 (7 May 2024): 1171–87, <https://doi.org/>.

amphibious invasion,¹² and at any rate, was consumed by the internal chaos of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Since the Korean War, multiple factors have informed the PRC’s capability and willingness to launch an invasion, and in the aggregate these variables have led the PRC to defer any such effort to the future.¹³

As Khan’s narrative moves into more recent events—China’s economic reforms after Mao’s death, the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis (1995–96), and the policies of the Trump and Biden administrations—it becomes more descriptive. The Struggle for Taiwan traces Taiwan’s political evolution from Lee Teng-hui’s 1995 assertion that “mutual respect will gradually lead to the peaceful reunification of China” to the increasingly polarized politics of the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). This division was symbolized in March 2023, when Ma Ying-jeou visited China while Tsai Ing-wen traveled to the United States (236).¹⁴

In recent years, Khan argues, the US–China–Taiwan triangle has reached the “edge of chaos,” with all sides becoming desensitized to escalating risks (237). As peaceful unification grows increasingly implausible due to Beijing’s “brutish nationalism” (250) and deteriorating US–China relations, the possibility of conflict stands at its highest point in three generations.

If a conflict were to occur and the PRC conquered Taiwan, Khan argues that regional powers would counterbalance China militarily and geopolitically, even as Beijing endured the long-term costs of estrangement from the West (255). Many American analysts, however, disagree, contending that regional states would be more likely to bandwagon with China, triggering a domino-like collapse of the US alliance system in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁵ As with differing American and Chinese expectations of US military intervention, this debate should not rely on abstract speculation but instead serve as a basis for further scholarly research. The responses of India,¹⁶ Japan,¹⁷

¹² Shang-su Wu, *The Defense Capabilities of Small States: Singapore and Taiwan’s Responses to Strategic Desperation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

¹³ Jared M McKinney and Peter Harris, *Deterrence Gap: Avoiding War in the Taiwan Strait* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: US Army War College Press, 2024), chap. 1.

¹⁴ For a fuller telling: John F. Copper, *Taiwan’s Presidents: Profiles of the Majestic Six* (New York: Routledge, 2025).

¹⁵ Matt Pottinger, ed., *The Boiling Moat: Urgent Steps to Defend Taiwan*, Hoover Institution Press Publication, no. 738 (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, Stanford University, 2024); for a stark contrast compare Patrick Porter, “The United States Should Not Defend Taiwan,” *National Review*, 20 December 2021, <https://www.nationalreview.com/>; and Elbridge A. Colby, “The United States Should Defend Taiwan,” *National Review*, 2 December 2021, <https://www.nationalreview.com/>.

¹⁶ Jabin T. Jacob, “A Potential Conflict over Taiwan: A View from India,” *Washington Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (July 3, 2022): 147–62, <https://doi.org/>.

¹⁷ Mike Mochizuki, “Tokyo’s Taiwan Conundrum: What Can Japan Do to Prevent War?,” *Washington Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (3 July 2022): 81–107, <https://doi.org/>.

South Korea,¹⁸ Australia,¹⁹ and others—and, more importantly, China's expectations of their responses—will critically shape any assessment of the costs and benefits of an invasion.

Chinese scholar Jiang Shigong asserts that reunification with Taiwan would elevate China to “political leadership in East Asia” and prompt Japan to “leave Europe and rejoin Asia.”²⁰ But is this claim accurate, or is it yet another case of strategic misperception? Perhaps Jiang should reflect on the Yuzhou dilemma and consider the potential costs of expansion.

Khan concludes his book with a critique of the increasingly casual discussions in Washington, DC, about a potential Taiwan conflict, including speculation on a possible US first use of nuclear weapons.²¹ In this rhetoric, echoes of President Dwight Eisenhower's statements during the Taiwan Strait crises of the 1950s are evident. Yet two key differences exist: the PRC is now a nuclear power and no longer relies on Russia for extended deterrence, and Taiwan is no longer a formal treaty ally, as it was in the mid-1950s. As a result, such threats are both less credible and more reckless.

In sum, this review essay identifies two key tasks for scholars and policy makers across the region:

1. Conducting new research to better understand PRC elite expectations regarding the likely consequences of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan.
2. Shaping and influencing perceptions of those consequences in ways that strengthen deterrence.

The first task requires analysts to approach the issue with genuine curiosity, extending their focus beyond the US–China–Taiwan triangle. The second demands regional consensus-building, careful consideration of credible US and coalition responses short of open warfare, and a clear articulation of why maintaining the status quo is preferable to recklessly rolling the iron dice of war. Such efforts may ultimately contribute to war in the Taiwan Strait being more firmly established as mythical. ★

¹⁸ Oriana Skylar Mastro and Sungmin Cho, “How South Korea Can Contribute to the Defense of Taiwan,” *Washington Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (3 July 2022): 109–29, <https://doi.org/>.

¹⁹ Brendan Taylor, “Taiwan: What Could, Should and Will Australia Do?,” *Washington Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (3 July 2022): 131–46, <https://doi.org/>.

²⁰ Shigong Jiang, “台海变天? 北大教授: 还有一场决定性的暗战要拿下 [The Rise of a Great Power and the Revival of Civilization: The Taiwan Issue and the ‘Enduring War of Civilization’],” trans. David Ownby, *Beijing Cultural Review*, 6 August 2022, <https://www.readingthechinadream.com/>.

²¹ Matthew Kroenig, “Deliberate Nuclear Use in a War over Taiwan: Scenarios and Considerations for the United States,” *Atlantic Council*, November 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/>.

Is a Coming War in the Taiwan Strait a Myth?

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Less Politics, More Military

The Outlook for China's 2025 Military Incursions into Taiwan's Airspace and Waters

K. TRISTAN TANG

Abstract

China's military incursions into Taiwan's airspace and waters in early 2025 mark a shift from politically triggered responses to a sustained military presence. Despite the absence of major political flashpoints, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has intensified its air and naval operations, setting record highs in median-line crossings and warship activity. Joint combat readiness patrols have expanded in both frequency and scope, incorporating long-range missions and drone flights encircling Taiwan. Even during the traditionally subdued Lunar New Year period, Beijing escalated maneuvers, dispelling the notion that cross-Strait tensions are solely driven by political catalysts. This sustained military presence reflects an evolving doctrine that prioritizes operational dominance and training over diplomatic signaling. Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense data reveal a deliberate pattern of increased activity, underscoring Beijing's goal of enhancing the PLA's warfighting capability. Analysts and policymakers must recalibrate their assessments, focusing not on political rhetoric but on the PLA's expanding operational footprint and long-term ambitions.

China's military provocations against Taiwan have followed a familiar pattern, triggered by political developments in Taipei. In response to President Lai Ching-te's (賴清德) inauguration speech in May and National Day speech in October, Beijing conducted two rounds of Joint Sword-2024 military exercises around Taiwan. Military maneuvers timed to coincide with politically sensitive events have become routine. Yet, if Taipei avoids actions that Beijing deems provocative, will cross-Strait military tensions ease?

As of early 2025, no major political incidents have disrupted cross-Strait relations, and Beijing has adopted a seemingly softer stance. On 17 January, China announced the resumption of travel for residents of Fujian and Shanghai to Taiwan, a move that could signal a push for greater cross-Strait economic and social engagement.¹ Yet, this apparent thaw has not translated into a de-escalation of military activity.

¹ "The mainland will resume Fujian and Shanghai residents will visit Taiwan in the near future," *Xinhua Network*, 17 January 2025, <http://www.news.cn/>.

In January 2025, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) carried out the most aggressive incursions into Taiwan's airspace and waters since 2021, according to data from Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense (MND). Routine military aircraft and warship operations intensified, accompanied by joint combat readiness patrols and maneuvers, even during the Lunar New Year period. This trend suggests that analysts should not focus solely on Beijing's reactions to political events but also recognize the growing strategic importance of routine PLA military operations in Taiwan's vicinity.

Overall Trends

PLA air and naval activity around Taiwan has surged, with military aircraft and warships operating at unprecedented levels. In January 2025, the number of PLA aircraft crossing the Taiwan Strait median line reached an all-time high, far surpassing previous years. Taiwan's MND recorded 73 sorties in January 2021, 141 in 2022, 126 in 2023, 72 in 2024, and a staggering 248 in 2025—1.75 times greater than the previous peak in January 2022.

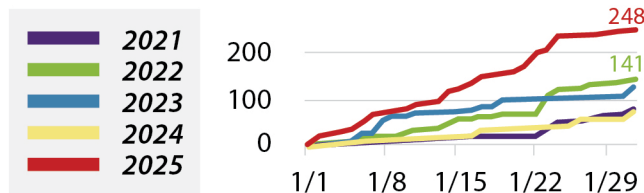


Figure 1. Comparison of PLA aircraft sorties crossing the median line in January since 2021. (Source: Author's compilation from Taiwan's MND data.)

Beijing also expanded its reach beyond the median line. PLA aircraft crossed the Bashi Channel into the Western Pacific more frequently than ever before, a marked shift toward longer-range operations. In previous Januarys, such crossings were rare—none in 2021 or 2024, just one in 2022 and 2023—but in January 2025, the number jumped to four. Flight path overlays released by Taiwan's MND further confirm intensified PLA activity in Taiwan's eastern airspace.

Naval operations followed the same trajectory. The number of PLA warships in Taiwan's surrounding waters climbed sharply: 112 in January 2023, 142 in 2024, and 200 in 2025—1.7 times the 2023 total and 1.4 times that of 2024. This rise reflects a sustained increase in daily PLA naval presence rather than a temporary surge concentrated on specific dates.

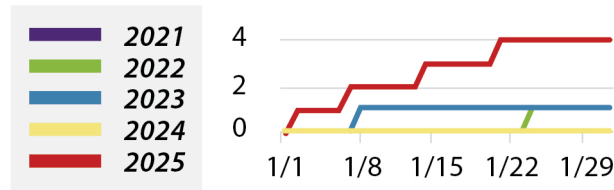


Figure 2. Comparison of PLA aircraft sorties crossed the Bashi Channel in January since 2021. (Source: Author's compilation from Taiwan's MND data.)

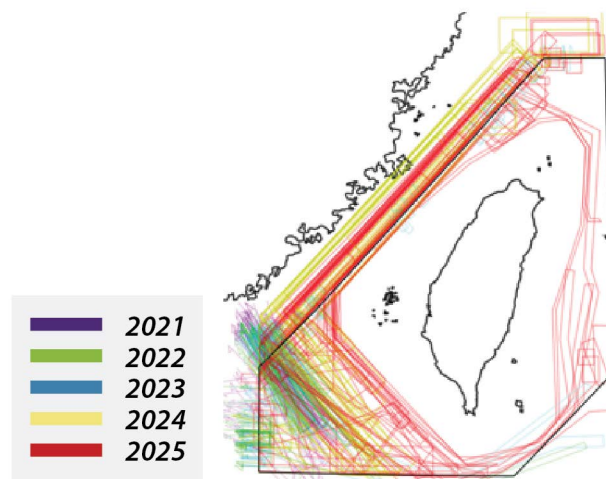


Figure 3. Map overlay of PLA aircraft flight paths around Taiwan in January since 2021. (Source: Author's compilation from Taiwan's MND data.)

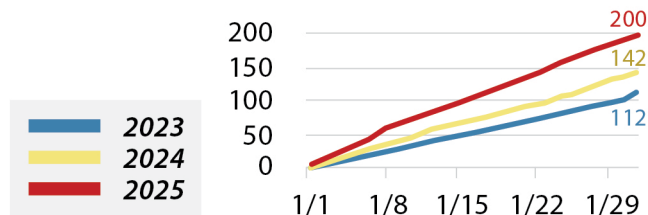


Figure 4. Comparison of PLA warships operating in the waters surrounding Taiwan in January since 2021. (Source: Author's compilation from Taiwan's MND data.)

Taken together, these trends point to a fundamental shift. PLA incursions are no longer defined by episodic spikes but by a steady, intensifying presence.

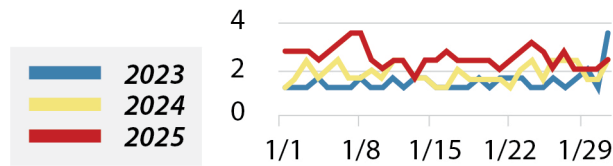


Figure 5. Daily number of PLA warships operating surrounding Taiwan in January since 2021. (Source: Author's compilation from Taiwan's MND data.)

Special Circumstances

The PLA's incursions against Taiwan have intensified, as evidenced by the scale and frequency of joint combat readiness patrols, particularly during the Lunar New Year period. These patrols, which surpass routine PLA activities in both scope and threat level, serve as a critical measure of China's operational preparedness.

Joint combat readiness patrols are more significant and pose a higher threat to Taiwan, as compared to routine PLA activities. According to *PLA Daily*, these patrols assess the integrated operational capabilities of multiple military branches.² The involvement of both the PLA Air Force and Navy signifies a heightened level of operational coordination, increasing the potential for exercises to transition into real-world engagements.

In 2025, the PLA has escalated its patrol operations beyond 2024 levels in both frequency and geographical extent. In January 2025, it conducted four joint patrols, up from three the previous year. Notably, one patrol took place each week leading up to the Lunar New Year—a period during which the PLA typically scales down operations. This pattern underscores a broader shift: rather than adhering to past seasonal norms, Beijing is intensifying its military presence around Taiwan, making heightened activity the new standard.

The geographic scope of PLA patrols in January 2025 marked a significant escalation. All four joint combat readiness patrols that month involved long-range missions, with military aircraft crossing the Bashi Channel—an operational pattern absent from the three patrols conducted in January 2024. More alarming, two of the 2025 patrols (on 14 January and 22 January) included drone flights encircling Taiwan, a development not observed the previous year.

² Han Lin, Wei Bing, and Liu Jianwei, "A review of the implementation of the 'Outline of Joint Operations of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (Trial)' for one year," *Liberation Army Daily*, 5 January 2022, <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/qwfb/4902340.html>.

While long-range missions and drone operations have occurred before, they are typically rare at the start of the PLA's annual training cycle, when activity tends to be moderate in scale and intensity. Riskier maneuvers—such as extended-range missions and aircraft encircling Taiwan—are generally uncommon in January. Their repeated occurrence in early 2025 signals a deliberate intensification of joint combat readiness patrols.

The PLA's heightened activity during the Lunar New Year period further underscores this shift. Historically, military incursions around Taiwan decline during the holiday, either due to routine reductions in training or as a reflection of Beijing's "both sides of the Taiwan Strait are Chinese" narrative. In 2025, however, this pattern was decisively broken, with Lunar New Year operations exceeding those of previous years—a clear indication that seasonal pauses are no longer a constraint on China's expanding military posture.

At first glance, the 2025 Lunar New Year appeared to follow the usual pattern. The holiday began on 27 January, marked by a decline in PLA military aircraft flights around Taiwan compared to the heightened activity earlier in the month.

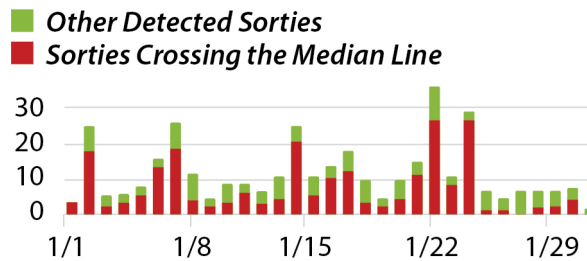


Figure 6. Daily PLA aircraft sorties around Taiwan in January 2025. (Source: Author's compilation from Taiwan's MND data.)

However, a closer analysis of PLA incursions during previous Lunar New Year periods reveals a stark escalation. In 2025, the number of sorties crossing the Taiwan Strait median line surged to 31—the highest ever recorded and a sharp increase from the 22 sorties observed in 2024. This trend signals a departure from past practices, suggesting that even traditional lulls in military activity are no longer a given in Beijing's evolving strategic calculus.

Table 1. Comparison of PLA aircraft sorties crossing the median line during each Lunar New Year since 2021. (Source: Author's compilation from Taiwan's MND data.)

Year	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Little New Year's Eve		4	1	3	
New Year's Eve		5		2	3
Day 1 of the Lunar New Year				1	3
Day 2 of the Lunar New Year	2				5
Day 3 of the Lunar New Year				1	
Day 4 of the Lunar New Year	1	1	1	1	6
Day 5 of the Lunar New Year	1	2	2	14	14
Total Aircraft Sorties	4	12	4	22	31

Although both 2024 and 2025 saw joint combat readiness patrols on the fifth day of the Lunar New Year—each involving 14 sorties crossing the Taiwan Strait median line—the nature of these operations shifted significantly. Flight path overlays released by Taiwan's MND indicate that in 2025, PLA aircraft operated much closer to Taiwan's airspace than in the previous year. This shift was especially pronounced in the north, where flight paths edged uncomfortably close to Taipei, underscoring an increasingly aggressive posture aimed at tightening military pressure on the island.

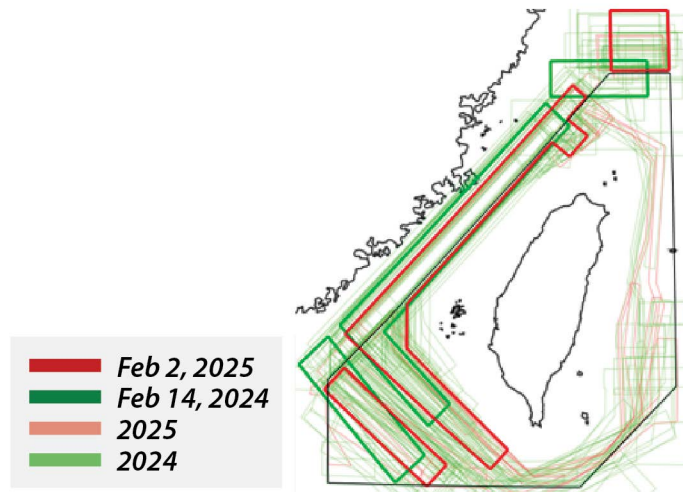


Figure 7. Map overlay of PLA aircraft flight paths around taiwan during joint combat readiness patrols. (Source: Author's compilation from Taiwan's MND data.)

Implications

The extent of the PLA's incursions into Taiwan's airspace and waters surged in January 2025, despite Taiwan's President Lai Ching-te and other key leaders avoiding actions China might deem provocative. This suggests that, irrespective of political developments or cross-Strait relations, Beijing is steadily intensifying its military training and exercises around Taiwan.

January is typically a lull in cross-Strait political activity. Even with the Lunar New Year, Chinese military maneuvers should, in theory, be restrained. Moreover, in his two major speeches that month—on 1 January and 27 January—Lai steered clear of language associated with Taiwanese independence and largely avoided the subject of cross-Strait relations. Taiwan, in short, maintained a low profile. The spike in PLA activity, therefore, cannot be attributed to political triggers.

The explanation is straightforward: the PLA is systematically escalating the scale and tempo of its operations. This trend was already apparent in 2024, when incursions became more frequent and sustained rather than tied to specific political flashpoints. The pattern suggests that Beijing's military presence is driven less by diplomatic grievances and more by military strategy. Analysts should focus on these military dynamics rather than Beijing's shifting political justifications.

Conclusion

The sharp increase in PLA incursions into Taiwan's airspace and waters in January 2025 signals a fundamental shift in Beijing's military policy. Rather than reacting to specific political events or perceived provocations from Taipei, the PLA is now conducting operations around Taiwan continuously, regardless of annual training schedules or traditional holidays. The unprecedented scale and consistency of these operations—especially during the traditionally subdued Lunar New Year period—demonstrate that Beijing has shifted its training from the airspace over mainland China to the surrounding airspace around Taiwan. Beijing has intensified the PLA's training regardless of the potential political impact or excessive military pressure on Taiwan, with the goal of enhancing the PLA's combat capability and capacity and even allowing pilots to accumulate real-world experience and pressure in confronting Taiwan's Air Force. This shift renders outdated the conventional assumption that cross-Strait tensions ebb and flow solely in response to political developments.

This evolution in PLA operations carries significant implications for Taiwan, broader Indo-Pacific security, and the United States and its allies. For Taiwan, the normalization of heightened military activity necessitates a recalibration of its military readiness. Taipei must prepare for an environment where frequent incursions, joint combat readiness patrols, and long-range operations are not anomalies but constants, indicating that both the psychological and operational strain on Taiwan's armed forces will only intensify. Given that Taiwan's air force is unlikely to significantly increase its number of aircraft—as China has done—it is imperative that Taiwan enhances the readiness of its air force personnel and the maintenance. Particularly concerning are the recurring aircraft accidents in recent years, which stem from human error or logistical maintenance issues; the intensification of PLA military incursions into Taiwan could further exacerbate these risks. In an environment of limited air assets, efficiently sustaining air defense and maintaining the capability to intercept PLA aircraft incursions has become more critical than ever for Taiwan.

For the broader region, China's expanding military presence around Taiwan challenges the status quo and increases the risk of miscalculation. The PLA has shifted away from its previous patterns of seasonal lulls, indicating an increase in both the intensity and duration of its military readiness and training activities. Military actions are now driven by training or exercises rather than being limited to specific political events or reasons. As a result, Taiwan is currently facing a persistent pattern of military intrusions, which could also extend to neighboring countries such as South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam. This also complicates the interpretation

of China's strategic intentions, as the PLA's ongoing incursions into the airspace of various nations—whether during significant political events or peacetime—raise the question of whether these actions reflect China's foreign policy stance or are merely part of the PLA's independently planned military training.

Finally, for the United States and its allies, the evolving nature of PLA operations requires a reassessment of deterrence strategies. A response framework focused primarily on reacting to discrete political crises—such as Taiwan's elections or high-level US–Taiwan engagements—by deploying three to four US Carrier Strike Groups and Amphibious Ready Groups may no longer be adequate. Instead, a more sustained presence of US and allied major military assets in the region will be essential. For example, operations by French Charles de Gaulle, British HMS *Prince of Wales*, and Italian Navy *Cavour* carrier groups alongside US forces in the Western Pacific would provide a stronger deterrent posture to China. This is not only for Taiwan but also a response to the PLA's increased military aggression toward neighboring countries.

In sum, the data from early 2025 suggest that China's military approach to Taiwan is no longer driven by immediate political events but by purely military considerations for training or exercises. This shift in military focus not only affects Taiwan but also has significant implications for the entire regional security environment. Recognizing this shift is crucial for crafting effective responses, ensuring stability, and preserving deterrence in the face of Beijing's expanding operational ambitions. 🌐

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Airpower Has a Mass of Its Own

Predicting an Air Order-of-Battle for a Taiwan Conflict

MAJ NICHOLAS STOCKDALE, USAF

Abstract

This article examines the strategic and operational challenges of defending Taiwan against China's growing airpower threat. It analyzes the People's Liberation Army's capability to suppress US and allied air operations through massed missile strikes and superior force projection. The discussion focuses on how the United States and its allies can achieve air superiority through technological advancements, resilient basing, and force-multiplying platforms such as collaborative combat aircraft. Additionally, the article explores the role of aerial denial—disrupting Chinese invasion forces through interdiction and sustained air pressure—as well as Taiwan's asymmetric defense strategy to prolong resistance. By assessing historical precedents, emerging technologies, and allied contributions, this study outlines a viable framework for countering the most formidable air threat US forces have faced since World War II. The article ultimately argues that Taiwan's survival will depend not only on American airpower but also on the strength and cohesion of its allies.

The sheer mass of firepower the People's Liberation Army (PLA) can unleash on air bases and carriers in the western Pacific renders Agile Combat Employment impractical within the First and Second Island Chains. To defend Taiwan, the United States and its allies must find a way to project airpower through the PLA's expanding ring of fire. A formation comprising just 10 percent of China's H-6 bomber force could launch “more than a hundred missiles against a U.S. aircraft carrier strike group or air base,” while PLA strike aircraft alone could sustain a barrage of 1,400 missiles per day throughout an extended air campaign. This relentless bombardment would “keep U.S. and allied air bases in the western Pacific suppressed.”¹ Worse, China's rapid production of these capabilities ensures an increasingly dire strategic landscape. The United States and its allies must develop the ways and means to defeat this threat. Two core missions shape the fight for air dominance: *air superiority* and *global strike*.

¹ Robert Haddick, *Fire on the Water: China, America, and the Future of the Pacific* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2022), 97.

Air Superiority

Airpower theorists as disparate as John Warden and Robert Pape agree on one fundamental truth: air superiority is the prerequisite for any air campaign. The first step in countering the PLA's growing air threat is ensuring its bombs never reach US and allied targets. Pape asserts, "aircraft cannot systematically place bombs on any target set if air operations encounter strong opposition," emphasizing that air superiority is a "necessary step."² Warden concurs, calling air superiority the "key to strategic operations." While he acknowledged the difficulty of securing it, he believed not having it was "one of the surest ways to fail."³

Air superiority within the Second Island Chain is no longer assured. A RAND study assessing a Taiwan conflict found that China reached rough parity with the United States by 2017.⁴ Last year, the PLA's air superiority inventory matched US numbers and is now poised to surpass it. Reports indicate that production of the J-20—China's fifth-generation air dominance platform—has already eclipsed the F-22, with at least 150 units in service and estimates reaching as high as 220.⁵ The United States fields just 178 F-22s, and even if all were deployed to the Indo-Pacific, China is producing 40 to 50 new J-20s annually.⁶

The US response is the Next Generation Air Dominance (NGAD) family of systems, already in development and slated for initial delivery by 2030.⁷ Designed to replace the F-22, NGAD will not be produced on a one-for-one basis. Even with former Air Force Secretary Frank Kendall's "notional" inventory of 200 NGADs, the United States will remain outnumbered.⁸ But quality can offset quantity. Superior capability has long been the defining edge of American airpower—and in the coming contest for air superiority, it must be again.

² Robert A. Pape, "The Limits of Precision-Guided Air Power," *Security Studies* 7, no. 2 (1997), 97, <https://doi.org/>.

³ John A. Warden III, "Success in Modern War: A Response to Robert Pape's *Bombing to Win*," *Security Studies* 7, no. 2 (1997), 190, <https://doi.org/>.

⁴ Eric Heginbotham et al., *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996–2017* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2015), 330.

⁵ Ken Moriyasu, "China's Stealth Fighter Inventory Set to Eclipse America's F-22s," *Nikkei Asia*, 15 February 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/>; and John A. Tirpak, "Pentagon: China Working on Upgrades to Top Stealth Fighter, Manned-Unmanned Teaming," *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, 24 October 2023, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/>.

⁶ Craig Hoyle, *2025 World Air Forces* (London: Flight Global, 2024), 33, <https://www.flightglobal.com/>; and Tirpak, "Pentagon: China Working on Upgrades."

⁷ John A. Tirpak, "The Future Force," *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, 31 March 2023, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/>.

⁸ Tirpak, "The Future Force."

Table 1. US combat aircraft unrefueled ranges and distances, selected Pacific locations. (Sources: Northrup-Grumman, The Boeing Company, U.S. Air Force, and Hill Aerospace Museum.)

Airframe	Range	First Island Chain		Second Island Chain		Third Island Chain
B-1	6,500 mi ⁹	Okinawa	966 mi	Central Japan	2,373 mi	Alaska
B-2	6,904 mi ¹⁰	Taiwan	1,711 mi	Guam	3,945 mi	Hawaii
B-21	Unspecified*	Philippines	946 mi	Palau	3,938 mi	Tonga
B-52	8,800 mi ¹¹	Malaysia	699 mi	Indonesia	4,763 mi	New Zealand
F-22	1,850 mi ¹²		Note: Distances between islands are approximate.			
F-35	1,350 mi ¹³					
NGAD	TBD		* Sources give a range anywhere from 7,000 to 11,000 mi.			

Getting fighters into contested airspace poses another obstacle to securing air superiority in the First and Second Island Chains. While the goal is to establish air superiority before the PLA cripples the ability of the United States and its allies to generate sorties from bases like Guam and Okinawa, such an outcome cannot be assumed. One variant of the NGAD will “have sufficient range to operate in the Pacific with far less tanker support than today’s fighters,” but even so, the distance between the Third and Second Island Chains remains well beyond the reach of any current fighter.¹⁴

Yet range is a function of logistics. Tankers can extend fighter operations far beyond their unrefueled maximum range. Framing the challenge as a range problem constrains potential solutions. The real issue is tanker vulnerability. Defense strategist Chris Dougherty notes that red teams in wargames have repeatedly exploited aerial refueling dependencies to devastating effect against American forces.¹⁵ He highlights China’s deliberate targeting of “destroying aerial refueling tankers” and calls for a “larger and more diverse fleet of connectors” to reduce risk.¹⁶

⁹ Hill Aerospace Museum, “Boeing B-1B Lancer Specs.” Accessed December 6, 2023. <https://www.aerospacemuseum.org/>.

¹⁰ Northrup-Grumman, “B-2 Technical Details.” Accessed December 6, 2023. <https://www.northropgrumman.com/what-we-do/air/b-2-stealth-bomber/b-2-technical-details>

¹¹ The Boeing Company, “B-52 Technical Specifications,” 2025, <https://www.boeing.com/>.

¹² “F-22 Raptor Fact Sheet” (fact sheet, US Air Force, August 2022), <https://www.af.mil/>.

¹³ “F-35A Lightning II” (fact sheet, US Air Force, April 2014), <https://www.af.mil/>.

¹⁴ Tirpak, “The Future Force.”

¹⁵ Chris Dougherty, *Buying Time: Logistics for a New American Way of War* (Washington: Center for New American Security, 2023), 9.

¹⁶ Dougherty, *Buying Time*, 8–10.

The future US tanker force aims to address this vulnerability. The Next-Generation Aerial-Refueling System (NGAS), a stealth family of systems slated for service by 2040, will integrate with a Tactical Data Link connecting F-22s, F-35s, B-21s, and NGAD aircraft. This network will allow stealth platforms to share battlespace awareness while keeping the NGAS concealed from adversaries but easily located by friendly forces for refueling. Meanwhile, the Air Force is pursuing a “bridge tanker” to fill the gap between the KC-46 and the NGAS, ensuring sustained refueling capability in an increasingly contested environment.¹⁷

A viable option is the MQ-25, an aerial refueling drone already on order by the US Navy. In 2021, an MQ-25 successfully refueled an F-35, demonstrating its operational potential. While it lacks the stealth characteristics of the NGAS, it has a significantly lower radar cross-section than any other tanker in the US arsenal. It has also launched from an aircraft carrier—proving its flexibility and making its location far less predictable. By providing quick in-theater support and potentially reducing fuel requirements by a factor of five, it strengthens US airpower resilience. Dougherty notes that a single tanker at 1,000 nautical miles from base can deliver the same effect as five tankers at 3,000 nautical miles.¹⁸ With the KC-46, NGAS, and MQ-25, the US tanker fleet will be far more survivable against PLA attacks, allowing the entire fighter force to operate unburdened by unrefueled range limits.

No Indo-Pacific air campaign is possible without allies and partners—and no ally is more critical in a Taiwan scenario than Japan. The Japan Air Self-Defense Force (JASDF) already fields 38 F-35s and plans to acquire over 100 more, along with a small fleet of KC-46 tankers to support operations.¹⁹ Just as significant is Japan’s development of the Mitsubishi F-X, a sixth-generation stealth fighter expected to enter service by 2035.²⁰

Japan’s greatest contribution to air superiority in a Taiwan conflict, however, will not come from any single platform but from its role in enabling airpower to reach the fight. US basing in Japan, South Korea, and other regional allies like the Philippines—or even Thailand—is essential for success. Former Defense Minister and current Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru has been a steadfast advocate for stronger regional security cooperation amid rising threats from China, Russia, and North Korea. He has pushed to elevate AUKUS—which links the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia—along with its “Pillar II” partners (Japan,

¹⁷ Tirpak, “The Future Force.”

¹⁸ Dougherty, *Buying Time*, 12.

¹⁹ Hoyle, *2025 World Air Forces*, 22.

²⁰ Mike Yeo, “Japan Unveils Timeline for Indigenous Fighter Jet Program,” *Defense News*, 9 July 2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/>.

South Korea, Canada, and New Zealand) into a NATO-like defense framework. His vision includes deeper Japanese integration into the US–Japan alliance, mirroring the US–UK relationship. This would mean an expanded role in US bases in Japan, such as Kadena Air Base in Okinawa, and even forward-deploying Japanese forces to air bases in US territories like Guam.

Global Strike

Once air superiority is secured, the global strike mission shifts to *aerial denial*—a strategy of coercion through sheer destruction. Aerial denial means breaking enemy forces so decisively that friendly ground troops can seize contested territory with minimal losses. Nowhere is this more relevant than in a Taiwan conflict. Counterintuitively, strategic bombing is the least effective tool for aerial denial. Instead, sustained theater air pressure, combined with ground force operations, proves the most potent coercion strategy.²¹

Operation Desert Storm offers a compelling case study. Airpower shattered Iraq's two pillars of ground resistance: front-line morale and mobile reserves. Iraqi forces remained under constant threat from “hundreds of theater-based aircraft.”²² While B-52s played a critical role, the bomber force alone could not generate the suffocating air pressure needed. The multiplying effect came from F-15s, F-16s, F/A-18s, and A-10s, which relentlessly struck secondary targets and paralyzed Iraqi logistics. Fear, as much as firepower, left front-line units exposed, unable to resupply food, water, medicine, or clothing.²³

By 2030, the US Air Force will begin fielding collaborative combat aircraft (CCA)—unmanned, autonomous escorts for crewed planes, with a planned ratio of up to five CCAs per fighter or bomber. These drones will provide “affordable mass,” delivering the same multiplying effect that manned fighters did in Desert Storm but at a fraction of the cost. Former Secretary Kendall floated an inventory of 1,000 CCAs, a force multiplier that could reshape the balance in an Indo-Pacific fight.²⁴

As with air superiority, Japan's growing fleet will contribute to the aerial denial mission. But Taiwan's security depends on its own defense initiatives as well. Taiwan's fourth-generation aircraft—F-16s, Mirage 2000s, and its Indigenous Defense Fighter—offer little to the global strike mission. Instead, Taiwan must focus on

²¹ Pape, “The Limits of Precision-Guided Air Power,” 97–101.

²² Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War*, (Ithica, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), 246, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt1287f6v>.

²³ Pape, *Bombing to Win*, 248.

²⁴ Tirpak, “The Future Force.”

asymmetric defense, maximizing resistance against invasion until the United States, Japan, and other allies can respond.

Lessons from Afghanistan, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Ukraine underscore the effectiveness of cheap, lethal weapons against expensive, technologically advanced systems. Former Chief of the General Staff Lee Hsi-ming (2017–2019) has championed an asymmetric strategy of “using the small to control the large” in a whole-of-society defense. This so-called “porcupine strategy” prioritizes small, mobile, distributed, and lethal weapons capable of countering the People’s Republic of China’s numerical and material superiority.²⁵ Taiwan, unlike Ukraine, has no land borders and limited strategic depth, making mobility and concealment paramount. A survivable defense does not turn time into Taiwan’s greatest asset—time already is its greatest asset. The point is to buy as much of it as possible. Investments in portable missiles, mines, mobile radars, and artillery batteries make Taiwan a harder target and extend the window for allied forces to respond, mitigating the immense logistical challenge of deploying them to the theater.

Conclusion

Defending Taiwan requires an air campaign that can withstand and counter the full weight of PLA bombardment across the First and Second Island Chains. Success hinges on achieving air superiority—not merely by matching China’s growing numbers but by outpacing them through technological superiority, operational ingenuity, and resilient force projection. The United States and its allies must secure access to the fight, leveraging stealth, range, and survivable aerial refueling networks to ensure fighters and bombers remain in the battlespace.

Air superiority, however, is only the first step. Once secured, it enables a strategy of aerial denial—crippling Chinese forces through a fusion of strategic bombing, interdiction, and mass-multiplying platforms like CCAs. Yet airpower alone cannot hold the line. A ground strategy of asymmetric, whole-of-society defense is essential to denying Beijing a quick victory. Taiwan’s ability to prolong resistance through mobile, distributed, and lethal defenses—while US and allied forces build combat power—may ultimately decide the conflict’s outcome.

This is the most formidable air threat US forces have faced since World War II. Winning requires more than American resolve; it demands a coalition willing to act decisively. The survival of Taiwan does not rest on the United States alone—but on how much the United States can depend on its allies. ★

²⁵ Tommy Jamison, “Taiwan’s Theory of the Fight,” *War on the Rocks*, 21 February 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/>.

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