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SPECIAL ISSUE: TAIWAN UNDER SIEGE

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Editor’s Note: Special Issue on Taiwan Under Siege

The last year has been a difficult one for Taiwan. The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) intensification of diplomatic, economic, military and political pressure on Taiwan, along with disinformation, espionage and influence operations conducted through United Front work and other means, have heightened the sense of threat in the Taiwanese defense and security community. Nevertheless, the general population has not evinced the same level of threat perception, with many ordinary Taiwanese discounting the possibility of a PRC invasion. Regardless, the last several years, and particularly the months since U.S. Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit and the subsequent People’s Liberation Army (PLA) live-fire exercises

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around Taiwan last August, have undoubtedly seen an increase in outright military pressure by the PRC on Taiwan. The PRC's efforts to militarily intimidate Taiwan have only continued as Xi Jinping's third term as Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary and Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) gets underway. In early April, the PRC carried out naval and aerial patrols of the Taiwan Straits and three days of "Joint Sword" (联合利剑) exercises, ostensibly in retaliation for President Tsai Ing-wen's transit visits through the U.S. en route to Central America, where she met with U.S. House Speaker Kevin McCarthy at the Ronald Reagan Library in Southern California. This special issue of *China Brief* provides context and breaks down different elements of Taiwan's increasingly challenging strategic predicament following the early April PLA exercises.



(Image: Taiwanese Special Forces soldiers participate in a Tactical Mission Training, source: ROC MND Twitter)

I authored the first article in the special issue, "Taiwan's Dwindling Diplomatic Allies," which examines Tsai's early spring visit to Central America, during which she transited the U.S., in the context of China's effort to reduce Taiwan's international space by poaching Taiwan's remaining diplomatic allies.

In "Can Beijing Seize the "Opportunity of the Century"? Willy Wo-Lap Lam provides context for understanding Xi Jinping's perspective that China has a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reshape the world order in its favor, which has ominous implications for Taiwan.

In "Recent Exercises Around Taiwan Suggest a Shift in PLA Operational Doctrine," David D. Chen examines how discussion of recent Joint Sword exercises in official PLA sources emphasizes not only blockading Taiwan and neutralizing its defenses, but also preventing interdiction by foreign forces.

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Ying Yu Lin assesses how military means fit into Beijing's broader strategic tool kit for pressuring Taiwan into moving toward unification in "Sword out of Sheath?: Assessing the Strategic Implications of the PLA's April Exercises Around Taiwan."

Finally, in "China's Emerging Approach to Taiwan: Blockade and Disinformation," Chihwei Yu examines how two longstanding tactics the CCP has used throughout its history are being applied to Taiwan.

John S. Van Oudenaren is Editor-in-Chief of China Brief. For any comments, queries or submissions, please reach out to him at: cbeditor@jamestown.org.

Taiwan's Dwindling Diplomatic Allies

John S. Van Oudenaren



(Image: President Tsai Ing-wen and Guatemalan President Giammattei at the opening ceremony for a month-long Guatemalan coffee culture celebration in Taiwan on April 26, source: Office of the President, Taiwan)

Amidst the drama surrounding Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen's early April stopover in Southern California, where she met with House Speaker Kevin McCarthy and the subsequent People's Liberation Army (PLA) maneuvers around Taiwan that followed, it can be easy to forget why the Taiwanese President was transiting the U.S. in the first place. Tsai was returning home after a trip to Taiwan's two remaining diplomatic allies in Central America, Guatemala and Belize, which was organized around the theme of "Meeting Democratic Partners, Fostering Shared Prosperity" (民主夥伴共榮之旅) ([Office of the President, Republic of China \[ROC\] \[Taiwan\]](#), March 29). Days prior to Tsai's arrival in the Western Hemisphere, Honduras, which had maintained official relations with the Republic of China (ROC) for 82 years, established formal ties with the People's Republic of China (PRC) ([PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs \[FMPRC\]](#), March 26). The move occurred despite U.S. efforts to dissuade Honduras. On March 18, the Biden administration dispatched senior envoy and special adviser for the Americas, former Senator Chris Dodd, who is also well-regarded in Taipei, to Honduras in a last-minute effort to encourage the Xiomara Castro government to change course in derecognizing Taiwan ([Taipei Times](#) March 18).

Under the government of Xiomara Castro, who took office early last year, Honduras has sought to pit Taipei and Beijing against each other in a bidding war for diplomatic recognition. While China has offered inducements, Taiwan has both rejected and called out the Castro government's efforts to condition the

continuation of the official relationship on major increases in financial assistance. Foreign Minister Eduardo Enrique Reina initially denied Taipei's claims that Honduras had asked Taiwan for \$2.5 billion but eventually acknowledged to the media that the Castro government had sought to obtain \$2 billion in aid ([ROC Ministry of Foreign Affairs \[Taiwan MOFA\]](#), March 23). However, he also claimed his country "never received a substantive response from the Taiwanese side" ([TVBS](#), March 24). In a notice regarding these revelations and regretting the pending shift in recognition, the Taiwanese Foreign Ministry warned Honduras not to fall prey to China's "debt trap diplomacy" ([Taiwan MOFA](#), March 23).

Upon announcing the termination of relations with Honduras, Tsai cautioned Taiwan's other diplomatic allies against following the same course, stressing that "we will not engage in a meaningless contest of 'dollar diplomacy' with China." She also criticized the PRC's efforts to employ "any and all means to suppress Taiwan's international participation" ([Office of the President, Taiwan](#), March 26). Earlier this week, the Tsai government averted another diplomatic setback with the election of Santiago Pena of the ruling conservative Colorado Party to the presidency in Paraguay. Pena's opponent, Efraim Alegre, who led a broad center-left coalition, campaigned on switching recognition from the ROC to the PRC in order to facilitate Paraguay's access to China's large agricultural import market ([Nikkei Asia](#), April 18). In a response to a congratulatory tweet from President Tsai, Pena stated that "we are going to continue strengthening our historic ties of brotherhood and cooperation between our countries" ([Taiwan News](#), May 2). However, the Tsai administration is hardly free from the challenge of maintaining the ROC's dwindling network of official relationships. Guatemala, which is Taiwan's largest diplomatic ally, will go to the polls to elect a new president in late June. President Alejandro Eduardo Giammattei Falla, who has been a staunch supporter of maintaining close ties with the ROC, is constitutionally barred from seeking a second term. According to long-time China-Latin America analyst R. Evan Ellis the prospect of "a victory by either a center-left-oriented candidate more open to working with the PRC such as Sandra Torres, or a right-oriented candidate such as Zury Rios, whose Presidency might deepen policy conflict with the Biden Administration, could present a small but not insignificant risk of Guatemalan diplomatic recognition of the PRC" ([CEEP](#), March 7).

Understanding the Importance of Diplomatic Allies to Taiwan

Outside observers are sometimes perplexed by Taiwan's attachment to its dwindling coterie of diplomatic allies, which, with the exceptions of the Vatican in Europe and Eswatini in Africa, comprises small states in Latin America, the Caribbean and the Pacific: Belize, Guatemala, Haiti, the Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, Paraguay, St. Kittis and Nevis, Saint Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines and Tuvalu ([Taiwan MOFA](#)). For Taiwan, these official relationships have both normative and practical significance. As a distinct Taiwanese national identity has taken hold over the past few decades, many Taiwanese believe that their country, an advanced economy, cultural powerhouse and self-governing democracy with all the attributes of statehood except for de jure independence, can and should play a constructive role in the global community. However, the kind of recognition among the community of nations that Taiwan desires is largely lacking, both because it has not declared de jure independence from China and because Beijing has made observance of the "one-China Principle" (一个中国原则) a precondition for conducting official diplomatic relations with other states ([FMPRC](#), August 2, 2022).

Today, Taiwan's relationships with its closest partners, such as the U.S. and Japan, are relegated to semi-official and unofficial channels, with Taiwanese leaders largely cut off from engagements that are routine for their foreign counterparts. State-to-state relations with diplomatic allies allow Taiwan to exercise this sovereign right. In the context of Taiwan's constrained international space, interactions between the Taiwanese president and other heads of state are particularly significant. During Tsai's visit to Guatemala, President Giammattei spoke to these sentiments, stating that "Taiwan is a sovereign and independent country," which for Guatemala "is the only real China. Guatemala supports Taiwan's participation in international organizations such as the WHO and relevant United Nations systems" ([Liberty Times Net](#), April 2). In response to China's criticism of the recent April 24-27 return visit by President Giammattei to Taiwan, an ROC Ministry of Foreign Affairs statement stressed that "when Taiwan engages in interactions and exchanges with diplomatic allies, it exercises a basic right of a sovereign nation and fosters unity among democracies" ([MOFA](#), April 25).

Beijing's Poaching of Taiwan's Diplomatic Allies: Inevitable or Avoidable?

The decision by Honduras to recognize the PRC is the latest in a string of defections by Taiwan's longstanding diplomatic allies. As soon as Tsai was elected in early 2016, Beijing broke the "diplomatic truce" that had been observed with the more pro-China KMT administration of President Ma Ying-Jeou, who led Taiwan from 2008 to 2016, with Gambia switching recognition to the PRC early that year ([PRC Foreign Ministry \[FMPRC\]](#), March 17, 2016).

Unsurprisingly, the deep-blue Ma Ying-Jeou Foundation blamed the Tsai administration for losing Honduras as a diplomatic ally, citing the breakdown of cross-Strait dialogue as the cause and calling on ordinary Taiwanese people to "repair the broken net" of ties with China ([Focus Taiwan](#), March 26). Other, more pro-status quo, "light blue" members of the KMT opposition acknowledged the serious challenges posed by Beijing's diplomatic pressure campaign while also questioning the Tsai administration's diplomatic aptitude. For example, KMT legislator (and former chairperson) Johnny Chiang (江啟臣) lamented that "the Tsai government has been in power for nearly seven years and has broken off diplomatic relations with nine countries." Chiang acknowledged, however, that with the U.S.-China confrontation and fraught cross-Strait relations, the nation faces a very difficult international situation as China has increased its efforts to contain and isolate Taiwan, while also seeking to enmesh the ROC in a costly and unwinnable "diplomatic arms race." However, he contended that in order to meet these challenges, Taiwan must "adapt a more flexible and pragmatic approach to international diplomacy" ([CTWANT](#), March 26).

While the breakdown of the Ma-era diplomatic truce is one element driving Taiwan's recent losses of long-time diplomatic allies, other factors are also at play. The first is the reality that regardless of which party is at the helm in Taipei, Beijing ultimately seeks to reduce the number of Taiwan's diplomatic allies to zero. For the PRC, this would lend powerful impetus to its efforts to negate the ROC's legitimacy as a state and deny Taiwan's claim to be distinct from China. While sustaining official relationships provide both a semblance of international space and legitimacy for Taiwan, for the PRC, whittling down the ROC's few remaining allies serves the opposite purpose. In doing so, Beijing seeks to promote the "One China Principle" as a universally recognized international norm. Hence, the PRC holds up all diplomatic defections from Taiwan to China, as evidence of the universality of the One China Principle. In the joint press conference to announce the

establishment of official relations between the PRC and Honduras, PRC Foreign Minister Qin Gang cited the two nations' newly signed joint communiqué in which “Honduras recognizes there is but one China in the world, the Government of the PRC is the sole legal Government representing the whole of China, and Taiwan is an inalienable part of China’s territory.” Qin then emphasized that “the one-China principle is a prevailing consensus of the international community and a basic norm in international relations” ([FMPRC](#), March 26).

Another factor that has added pressure to Taiwan’s ability to sustain longstanding official diplomatic relationships is the impact of Chinese foreign policy becoming much more ambitious under Xi, who abandoned the Deng-Jiang-Hu foreign policy approach of “hide and bide” in favor of “striving for achievements” early in his tenure ([Tsinghua University School of Social Sciences](#), November 25, 2013). As the PRC has undertaken a more assertive and increasingly global foreign policy under Xi, China has emerged as a player in regions where it had until recently largely been a non-factor. The most seismic shift has occurred in Central America, with Panama switching relations from the ROC to the PRC in 2017, El Salvador and the Dominican Republic in 2018, Nicaragua in 2021 and Honduras this year ([Global Times](#), March 20; [Americas Quarterly](#), July 1, 2021). This highlights a third factor driving Taiwan’s recent defections of the diplomatic partners. As most of Taiwan’s remaining diplomatic allies are concentrated in the Americas and the Pacific, regions where the U.S. and its allies have historically been predominant, Beijing has been incentivized to induce these countries to switch recognition in order to boost its influence and prestige at Washington’s expense.

Conclusion

If the PRC ever succeed in reducing Taiwan’s diplomatic allies to zero, Beijing would gain a powerful propaganda weapon to cast unification as inevitable, both to the Taiwanese populace and to the global community. In the event of an invasion by the PRC; such a situation would further complicate efforts by the U.S. and Taiwan’s other international partners to rally support for a country, with which they themselves lack official relations. As a result, for Taiwan, the importance of retaining its remaining thirteen official relationships far outstrips any economic or material interests these ties might yield. Finally, while the diplomatic contest between the PRC and the ROC may seem tangential to Taiwan’s future, the focus and resources that both Beijing and Taipei have devoted to wooing states in Latin America and the Pacific that are on the fence suggests otherwise.

John S. Van Oudenaren is Editor-in-Chief of China Brief. For any comments, queries, or submissions, please reach out to him at: cbeditor@jamestown.org.

Can Beijing Seize the “Opportunity of the Century”?

Willy Wo-Lap Lam



(Image: PRC President Xi Jinping and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin in the Kremlin on March 21, source: Xinhua)

As President Xi Jinping said farewell to his host and Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin at the end of his visit to Moscow last month, a few Western media outlets caught the Chinese strongman’s parting words to his good friend on the doorstep of the Kremlin: “Let’s join hands in seizing [the opportunity provided by] changes that only appear once in a century” ([Radio Free Asia](#), April 1; [VOA Chinese](#), March 24).

Xi has sought to take full advantage of these “big changes that only come once in a century” (百年未有之大变局), or the “best opportunity in 100 years,” as a primary foreign policy goal since attaining “party core” status at the 19th Party Congress in 2017. More than five years ago, he indicated that the Chinese leadership was “facing the biggest changes [on the global scene] not seen in the past century.” The President and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary explained that since the dawn of the 21st century, “a large number of countries with newly developed markets ... are growing at an expedited pace.” Moreover, Xi added that “the multi-polarization of the world is developing rapidly, and the global distribution of power has become more balanced by the day,” and that “the currents and major trends of the world cannot be negated” ([Netease](#), January 14, 2022; [Sohu.com](#), January 19, 2018). This viewpoint was buttressed by Xi’s revival of one of his

favorite Chairman Mao quotations: “The East is rising and the West is declining” ([People’s Daily](#), November 24, 2022; [Radio Free Asia](#), September 23, 2022).

Xi urged party cadres and comrades to “develop a strategic outlook and establish a global point of view.” He stressed that “while being conscious of the historical opportunity, we must assiduously fix our direction in accordance with once-in-a-century opportunities.” The supreme leader, who heads the CCP’s China’s policy-setting Central Foreign Affairs Commission as well as the Central Military Commission, also indicated that “never have the world’s [developing] countries’ been so united [in the quest] for equal economic opportunities and for a say in global rule-setting” ([Qstheory.cn](#), August 27, 2021; [Gov.cn](#), December 28, 2017). This touches on a related theme in Xi’s style of international diplomacy, which is working to forge a “universe with a common destiny,” particularly with countries barred by the U.S.-led Western coalition from playing a significant role in global affairs ([Xinhua](#), September 3, 2018).

Now that Xi has consolidated near-absolute power coming out of the 20th Party Congress last October and is effectively “leader for life,” he has lost no time in seeking to bring about a “new world order” that would displace that ushered in by the U.S. and its Western allies following World War II. Since last autumn, the supreme leader has been left, right and center on the world stage. The objective is to battle the so-called anti-China containment policy pursued by Washington, most NATO and EU countries, as well as U.S. allies in Asia, including Japan, South Korea and Australia. Hence, the Xi leadership has resorted to a two-pronged strategy. The first element of this approach, is seeking to drive a wedge between the U.S. and its allies, particularly individual EU countries whose questioning of American leadership would undermine the “anti-China” alliance. The second effort is to claim leadership of the new world order by forming China-centric blocs and alliances by offering generous help to developing nations in Asia, Central Asia and Africa.

Driving a Wedge Between the U.S. and its Allies

Xi’s tactics to divide the EU and the U.S. seem to have attained a level of beneficial results among individual European countries. During his visit to Beijing in the company of 40 top French business executives, French president Emmanuel Macron cautioned fellow European countries against becoming a “vassal” of the U.S. by embracing American standards at the expense of Europe’s own “strategic autonomy” ([China Daily](#), April 13). On the issue of the Taiwan Strait and other flashpoints in Asia, Macron reportedly said that Europe “should not be caught up in a disordering of the world and crises that are not ours.” He added that Paris did not favor “a bloc versus bloc logic” ([VOA Chinese](#), April 13; [Deutsche Welle Chinese](#), April 12).

While business moguls from several powerful export-oriented countries, including France and Germany, are focused on revitalizing economic ties with the PRC, other senior European officials have warned against the efforts by China and Russia to dismantle the Western order. German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbach adopted a much harsher attitude toward China. In contrast to Macron, Baerbach told Xi during her visit to Beijing last month that a war with Taiwan would affect the whole world. “The shock wave of such a world economic crisis would also hit China and Germany as special trading nations,” Baerbach said. As a result, she stressed that “we are therefore watching the increasing tensions in the Taiwan Strait with great concern” ([VOA Chinese](#), April 20; [Political.eu](#), April 14). In his visit to Japan and South Korea early this year, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg pledged solidarity with the two American allies and indicated that NATO would come

to their aid in the event of irresponsible efforts by other countries to change Asia's status quo ([NATO](#), January 30). NATO's involvement in Asian affairs is a direct challenge to Xi's warnings about the formation of a so-called Asian NATO.

Longstanding efforts by Beijing to use trade and economic inducements to divide the EU from the U.S. are not working very well because most European countries, particularly those that share borders with the USSR and Ukraine, are against the indirect yet clear-cut support that Beijing is offering Moscow in its invasion of Ukraine. Top leaders such as EU President Ursula von der Leyen have repeatedly warned President Xi over deteriorating human rights conditions within China, as well as Beijing's support for Russia's Ukraine campaign. She indicated after visiting the PRC in April that Europe must adopt a "unified strategy" toward the Asian giant. "China has now turned the page on the era of 'reform and opening' and is moving into a new era of security and control," von der Leyen told EU lawmakers ([Deutsche Welle Chinese](#), April 14; [Ec-Europa.eu](#), March 30). Despite the so-called "smile diplomacy" that Xi has lavished on French and German businesspeople, the much-delayed EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment and related trading protocols remain in limbo. Several Central and Eastern European countries have also indicated that they might pull out of infrastructure schemes formulated with Beijing under the Belt and Road Initiative ([Deutsche Welle](#), January 3). [1]

Beijing's efforts to persuade its neighbors—not only American allies such as Japan and South Korea but also the relatively neutral members of ASEAN—to choose China over the U.S. have arguably proven even less successful. The recent reconciliation between South Korea and Japan over World War II-related grievances was due to Seoul's need to work closely with both the U.S. and Japan in order to deal with North Korea and China. The U.S. has made headway in boosting defense relations with Australia, Vietnam and the Philippines. Vietnam has taken its own initiative in forming defense pacts with countries including India, Japan and Australia to counter China. Manila has offered more bases to the U.S. military to be used in the event of a war ([The Diplomat](#), April 19; [Deutsche Welle](#), April 3; [Kyodo News](#), March 27).

China-centric Bloc Building

The Xi Jinping leadership has spearheaded the formation of large, cross-continental trade and security blocs that testify to the PRC's growing global clout. The biggest push on the economic front is the establishment of one of the largest trading blocs in the world, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which incorporates the ten ASEAN members as well as China, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand. The RCEP is also perceived as a counterweight to the Western-dominated Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), which is a free trade pact among Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, Peru, New Zealand, Singapore, the U.K. and Vietnam. Although the U.S. has not yet joined the CPTPP, it was the pioneer of the prototype of the CPTPP, the Transpacific Pact ([IMF](#), November 23, 2021).

Xi has also leveraged the PRC's close ties with Russia and several Central and South Asian countries in order to expand the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to include Pakistan, India and Iran, in addition to China, Russia and the four Central Asian member states. Several non-democratic countries, including Afghanistan, possess "observer status." Moreover, Belarus, Sri Lanka, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Armenia, Cambodia and Nepal have become "dialogue partners" of the SCO ([Rfi](#), March 19;

[Sectso.org](#), January 10). This potential “axis of autocratic states,” however, has internal problems such as the hidden rivalry between China and Russia, and the animosity between members such as Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, as well as India and Pakistan. Yet another trans-continental network, at least partially initiated by China and Russia is the BRICS bloc. Apart from Brazil, India and South Africa, Beijing and Moscow also want to recruit new members including Algeria, Argentina, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt and Afghanistan. BRICS has so far opposed sanctions levied by the UN on Iran, North Korea and Myanmar; while also maintaining an ambiguous or even permissive attitude toward Russia’s war with Ukraine, as well as Chinese support for Moscow ([China Brief](#), March 17; [South China Ministry Post](#), February 8).

Despite the longstanding reliance of Saudi Arabia and other leading Arab states on strong defense ties with the U.S., the push by Beijing to forge a Sino-centric bloc appears to have fared particularly well in the Middle East. After Xi’s visit to Riyadh last December, around \$30 billion worth of business deals were signed in the course of the consolidation of the PRC’s “comprehensive strategic partnership” with the Kingdom. Xi regards Saudi Arabia as an “important force in the multilateral world” ([Xinhua](#), April 18; [Rfi](#), December 14, 2022). China also brokered a historic rapprochement between Riyadh and Tehran. The representatives of China, Saudi Arabia and Iran met in Beijing in March to proclaim a breakthrough agreement to restore official relations ([FMPRC](#), March 10). Chinese diplomats also seemed heavily involved in the recent détente between Syria and Saudi Arabia. The PRC has also recently sought to play the role of mediator between Qatar and Bahrain and between Turkey and Egypt ([Asia Times](#), April 20; [Australian Institute of International Affairs](#), April 14).

Yet another diplomatic move by Beijing that has much to do with attacking the global leadership position of the U.S. is challenging “dollar diplomacy.” The Xi administration scored a minor victory when, late last year, the Chinese apparently got permission to settle a part of their purchase of oil from Saudi Arabia in renminbi. Beijing is now eyeing Latin America in the U.S.’s own hemisphere. Diplomatic sources quoted by the Hong Kong newspaper *Ming Pao* said the CCP leadership is trying to reach some kind of trade and currency deal with the Mercosur Group, which comprises Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay. This was discussed during Brazilian President Luis Lula da Silva’s mid-April visit to China, during which 14 bilateral agreements on economic cooperation were signed. Lula also expressed his support for the PRC’s stances on Ukraine and Taiwan ([People’s Daily](#), April 15; [Japan Times](#), April 15). Further development regarding a free trade agreement and a protocol on the use of the renminbi as a trading currency between China and the Mercosur Group was discussed during the five-day visit to China by Uruguayan Foreign Minister Francisco Bonasso beginning April 16. Bonasso and his Chinese counterpart Qin Gang celebrated their “mature and stable” strategic partnership, which, they said, would be raised to a new level ([Ming Pao](#), April 20; [CGTN.com](#), April 18; [PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), April 14).

Conclusion: Will Xi’s “Once in a Century” Gambit Succeed?

At a time when China itself is running short of hard currency such as the U.S. dollar, it is doubtful that the Xi administration can sustain its campaign to woo the developing world through generous loans. By the end of 2021, the use of the renminbi in global trade in goods and services had shot up to 2.7 percent. Yet the proportion of world commerce transacted in U.S. dollars still remains close to 90 percent ([BIS.org](#), December 5, 2022; [Gov.cn](#), September 9, 2022). Given several negative factors, including rigid PRC control over foreign

currency movements, Beijing still has a long way to go in its apparent effort to promote renminbi internationalization in order to bolster its role as a global finance role-setter.

A number of severe problems imperil Xi's no-holds-barred efforts to compete with the U.S. and its allies. The first issue is financial, specifically, a lack of cash. Chinese investment in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a key means to win the hearts and minds of developing countries, has dropped dramatically in the past five years. According to the Council on Foreign Relations, China has already spent some \$1 trillion on the BRI. [1] If all the plans and pledges made by Beijing regarding the BRI were to be realized, the CCP administration may have to spend a total of \$8 trillion. At least in theory, China has lent out \$500 billion to countries ranging from Sri Lanka and Pakistan to Venezuela and Greece. Yet China itself is saddled with \$2.7 trillion of foreign debt. The relatively poor state of the PRC economy would seem to militate against the Xi leadership's long-standing strategy of using financial dispensations to gain the favor of developing countries and to form "anti-Western" blocs among them.

Xi's perhaps excessively optimistic projection about the rise of China and the decline of the Western order can be compared to the much more realistic and perspicacious observation of Li Hongzhang (1823-1901), one of the Qing Dynasty's brightest and most modern-minded officials. Li said in 1883 that China was facing "changes that had not occurred in a few thousand years." The master minister-diplomat was referring to the fact that while the Middle Kingdom had dominated the civilized world for more than a thousand years, the precipitous collapse of Chinese moral, economic and military leadership in the face of challenges from one colonizer after another had not happened in thousands of years. While the reasoning underpinning Xi's great leap outward is "the East is rising and the West is declining," Li's advice to the Qing court and intellectuals was to undertake genuine, Westernized reform such as the establishment of modern universities and military forces. By contrast, the Xi leadership has rolled back market reforms and reembraced the centralized dictatorship typical of dynastic China.

Despite the lifting of the three-year zero-COVID policy and its lockdowns, the Chinese economy is perceived as failing to take the bold steps needed to revive Deng Xiaoping's open-door policy. After all, the "wolf warrior" diplomacy essential to China reclaiming its Middle Kingdom status, which has been lost for more than a century, requires superior standards of technology and defense as well as dishing out economic benefits to developing nations. The fact that Chinese administrations of all levels are overleveraged and the government cannot even pay its civil servants or provide basic medical welfare for the elderly runs counter to paramount leader Xi's determination to exploit "the opportunity of the century."

Dr. Willy Wo-Lap Lam is a Senior Fellow at The Jamestown Foundation and a regular contributor to China Brief. He is an Adjunct Professor in the History Department and Master's Program in Global Political Economy at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. He is the author of six books on China, including Chinese Politics in the Era of Xi Jinping (2015). His latest book, The Fight for China's Future, was released by Routledge Publishing in 2020.

Notes

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[1] Lily McElwee, "[The Rise and Demise of the EU-China Investment Agreement: Takeaways for the Future of German Debate on China](#)," Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 20, 2023.

[2] James McBride, Noah Berman, and Andrew Chatzky, "[China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative](#)," CFR Backgrounder, Last updated February 2, 2023.

“Joint Sword” Exercises Around Taiwan Suggest a Shift in PLA Operational Doctrine

David D. Chen



(Image: PLA Navy personnel onboard the frigate Xuzhou of the Eastern Theater Command during the “Joint Sword” exercises on April 9, source: Huanqiu)

Introduction

Early assessments of the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) April exercises in the waters and airspace around Taiwan have focused on the diplomatic and political ramifications of yet another episode of saber-rattling by Beijing, but the People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA) own after-action assessments suggest growing self-confidence in their joint capabilities and the validation of a shift in operational doctrine that has been years in the making. Doctrine [1], or guidance on military thought, is currently provided in the “Chinese PLA Joint Operations Outline” (中国人民解放军联合作战纲要), which remains closely held, but doctrinal concepts and methods of operations are freely discussed by PLA academics and commentators, helping to illuminate the underlying precepts ([PRC Ministry of National Defense \[MND\]](#), January 5, 2022). As Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), Xi Jinping has also provided authoritative guidance in the form of “Military Strategic Guidelines” (军事战略方针) that emphasizes three major points: “innovation” (创新性), “agility of integrated offense and defense” (攻防结合的灵活性) and “active seizure of [battlefield] initiative” (争取主动的积极性). [2] Xi has continued to emphasize these themes into his third term under various political

slogans, including “completion of army building, the objective of one hundred years of struggle” (实现建军一百年奋斗目标), a reference to the approaching centenary of the Red Army’s founding in 1927 ([PLA Daily](#), November 5, 2022). The April exercises can be seen as one more step on the way to 2027.

The “Joint Sword” (联合利剑) exercise began on April 8 and ended on April 10, along with other separate and continuing operations surrounding Taiwan. Over three short days, Joint Sword effectively demonstrated new doctrinal concepts of speed, agility and dynamic control, which align with both Xi’s overarching guidelines and years of vigorous internal debate within PLA academic circles. Joint Sword was a demonstration exercise for both a worldwide audience and validation to the CMC and Xi that the PLA can perform up to expectations.

Achieving Decision Dominance

The PRC has sought to achieve “leapfrog development” (跨越发展) in military affairs from both a technological and a theoretical perspective. Harnessing civilian and commercial enterprises, China has focused on emerging disruptive technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI), directed energy, hypersonic vehicles and quantum-enabled communications, as a means to surpass its potential adversaries ([Strategy Bridge](#), September 6, 2017). The PRC envisions that these technologies will enable the PLA to leapfrog over the “network-centric warfare” model pioneered and perfected by the United States and move toward a next-generation model of warfare. The PLA dubs its general model of modern operations “体系作战” or “system-of-systems operations,” which encompasses PLA institutional reforms in training, equipment and operations. Within that overarching model are key concepts-of-operations that the PLA is increasingly eager to demonstrate in the field.

Joint Sword was an opportunity to do that. In various state media appearances Senior Colonel Zhao Xiaozhuo (赵小卓), deputy director of the China-U.S. Defense Relations Research Center of the Academy of Military Science (AMS), provided in-depth commentary on the intentions behind Joint Sword. He described the opening of the exercise on April 8 as having two phases: **1)** “rapid deployment of forces,” and **2)** “joint seizure of [multi-domain] control (联合夺权),” including air control, sea control, and information control, in order to gain an “extremely advantageous position at the outset” ([CCTV Military Report](#), April 10). In order to prepare for achieving control in the information domain, the exercises also included simulated attacks on Taiwan’s connections to the outside world, with the objective of severing both material and information linkages. Zhao explained that one of the major points of the exercise was not only to cut off Taiwan’s resource imports in order to debilitate its armed forces, but also to break its information links to the international community: “Foreign forces want to send in not only weapons and equipment, but also intelligence and information. This link must also be broken so that they cannot get in.” The support Ukraine has received from NATO countries in battlefield intelligence has underscored the importance of providing similar support for the Republic of China (ROC) armed forces in the case of any invasion scenario. Six weeks prior to Joint Sword, two Chinese maritime vessels severed the undersea fiber optic cables connecting Matsu Island to Taiwan, disrupting civil communications and raising the prospect that China has been operationalizing the concept of an information

blockade as a prelude to war ([Focus Taiwan](#), February 16). These concepts-of-operations illustrate that the PLA considers controlling the flow of information a critical “high ground” advantage in modern warfare.

Chinese military experts see the information space as analogous to the air domain of previous decades, namely as an enabling factor for deciding the disposition of the overall battlespace. According to the deputy director of the Scientific and Technological Commission at the Aviation Industry Corporation of China (AVIC): “Speed and agility are no longer most important. The key to winning air operations, electromagnetic operations, or cyber operations is ‘information agility,’ the priority and mobility of information” ([People’s Daily Online](#), July 4, 2017). Under this concept, the ability to collect, distribute, and exploit information faster than one’s opponent provides a decisive advantage in operational tempo, allowing one to control battlespace developments. The relationship between information and decision advantage is made explicitly clear within the PRC defense establishment. According to the deputy chief designer at the China Airborne Missile Academy of AVIC, the future of warfare could hinge on the evolution of US Air Force Colonel John Boyd’s OODA loop (Observe, Orient, Decide, Act) concept, with China’s technological investments leading to an AI-enabled “OODA 3.0”: “China can overtake others, because we are all at the same starting line” ([People’s Daily Online](#), July 4, 2017). Controlling the electromagnetic and information space in Joint Sword was a priority. The emphasis in Joint Sword on information control indicates that the PLA may be working toward the ability to “get inside” adversaries’ OODA loops, in order to effectuate decisions faster than opponents can react.



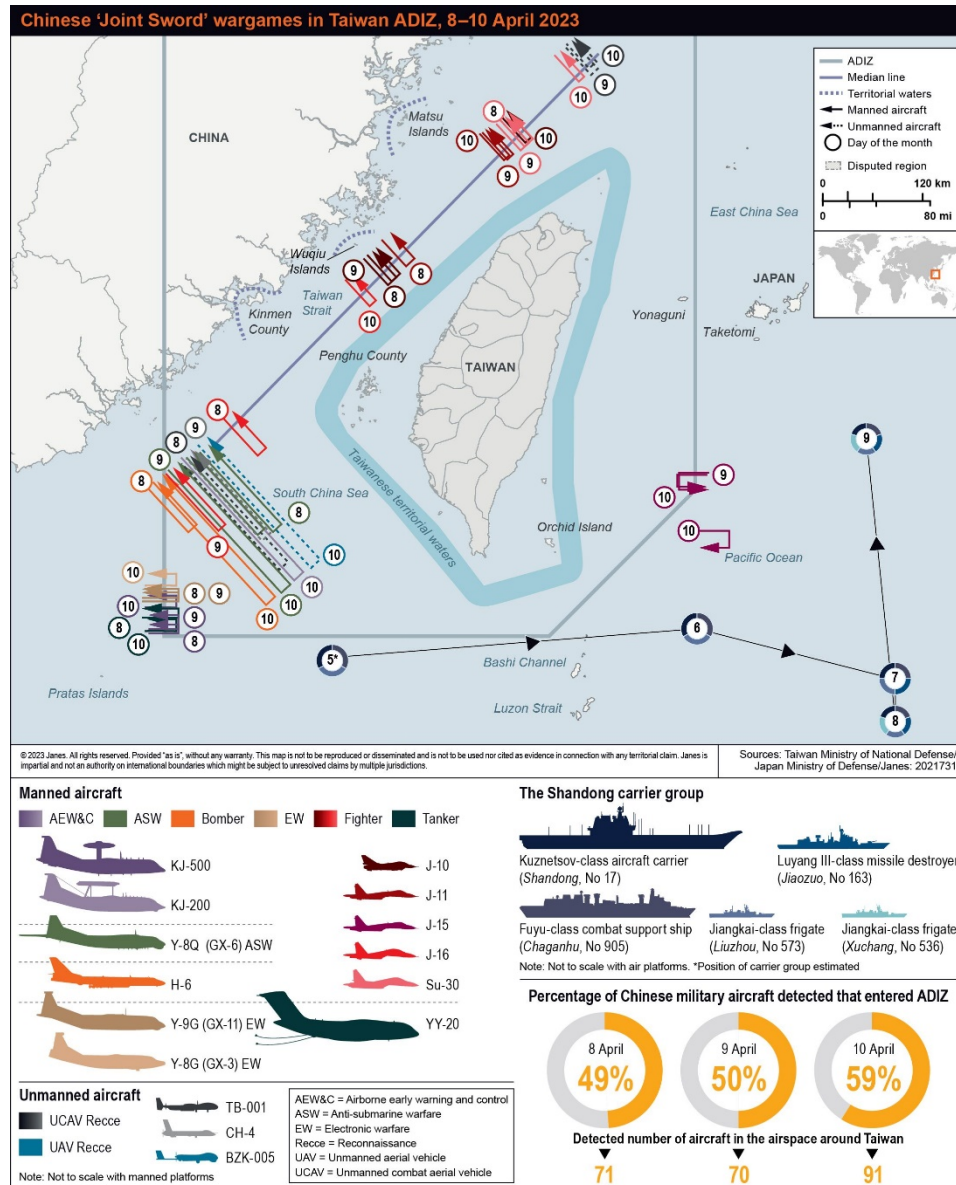
(Image: Screen capture of Sr. Col. Zhao Xiaozhuo explaining elements of Joint Sword, **source:** CCTV Military Report)

Executing “Lightning Strikes”

Over the past several years, PLA military theorists have increasingly focused on the importance of gaining the advantage in terms of speed and initiative. The influential book, *Light Warfare: The New Trend in the Global Revolution in Military Affairs* (光战争：世界军事革命新趋势, PLA Press 2015) thoroughly explored this line of thinking and stimulated a flurry of debate within the PLA academic community. The authors explained that “every second counts in warfare, but the fastest modern missiles only travel at 20 to 30 times the speed of sound, yet the speed of light is 30,000 km per second. As photonic weapons emerge, so will a genuine ‘one-second kill’ [capability], bringing about the true meaning of detect-and-destroy” ([PLA Daily](#), November 21, 2015). *Light Warfare* describes the fusion of intelligence and advanced weapons systems into an integrated whole, capable of autonomous decision-making in order to gain a decisive advantage over a more conventional military. In essence, *Light Warfare* outlined a path toward a detection-destruction convergence, enabled by information agility and hyper-velocity weapons.

Senior Colonel Zhao characterized the second day of the Joint Sword exercises as a demonstration of “joint lightning strikes, striking precisely against critical targets” (联合闪击, 精打击要), explaining that “once you have drawn the sword, you must hone in on targets precisely” ([CCTV Military Report](#), April 10). He described such critical targets as Taiwanese military and political targets (军政目标), certain critical operational nodes of the Taiwanese military’s system-of-systems (作战体系中的一些重要节点) and fast-moving targets (快速移动的目标), such as planes or ships, saying that the PLA would achieve “full-scope tracking” (全程跟踪) in order to execute precision strikes at will. Operationally, this phase as described conforms to the doctrinal concepts in *Light Warfare*, in which full-scope control of the information space allows for rapid precision strikes against key nodes and platforms in the adversary’s system-of-systems architecture.

Recent media disclosures about PRC supersonic and hypersonic vehicles raise the prospect that the PLA may be operationalizing some of these emerging technology capabilities. According to media analysis of leaked classified documents, the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency assessed that a prototype supersonic drone program has at least “two WZ-8 rocket-propelled reconnaissance drones” based at an Eastern Theater Command air base, since at least August 2022 ([Straits Times](#), April 19). Such a reconnaissance capability could be used to fill a critical gap in the PLA’s anti-access and area denial strategy, especially if space-based capabilities were degraded or denied. Reliable and responsive targeting data would be a critical enabler for fully leveraging the PLA’s arsenal of anti-ship ballistic and cruise missiles. In addition, U.S. Air Force Secretary Frank Kendall revealed in 2021 that China had developed a hypersonic vehicle that performed an operational flight test reminiscent of the Soviet-era Fractional Orbital Bombardment System (FOBS), designed to circumvent terrestrial ballistic missile radars ([Breaking Defense](#), September 29, 2021). While outside experts were skeptical about the utility of a FOBS-like system today, further details emerged that the element that most surprised US Government analysts was that a PRC hypersonic glide vehicle, a maneuverable spacecraft capable of carrying a nuclear warhead was monitored test-firing a separate missile mid-flight while in the atmosphere above the South China Sea. [3] While no further indications that this program has been operationalized have emerged in the public record, the suggested concept-of-operations aligns well with PLA doctrinal discourse. A hypersonic vehicle capable of launching a sub-munition, possibly a kill vehicle, while potentially supplying it with fresh, localized targeting data would fit the prescriptions of *Light Warfare*. Such a platform could represent a convergence of sensor and weapon, a ‘detect-destroy’ singularity moment for achieving a resilient and independent kill chain.



(Image: Joint Sword phases of activity, source: Janes)

Extending Operations into the Pacific

Joint Sword also demonstrated growing confidence in naval aviation operations. The ROC Ministry of National Defense (MND) reported for the first time that J-15 carrier-based fighters had entered the country's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) from the southeast (ROC MND, April 10). Japan's Ministry of Defense identified these planes as originating from the PLA Navy's (PLAN) second in-service carrier, the *Shandong* (Japan Ministry of Defense, April 6). In addition, in late December 2022, the PLAN carrier *Liaoning* was observed operating east of the First Island Chain and close to Guam (Global Times, December 29, 2022). Therefore, the *Shandong's* presence in the southeast quadrant of Taiwan's ADIZ was not necessarily unprecedented naval activity, but the combination of a PLAN carrier strike group, complete with three surface escorts, a replenishment ship and submarine support operating in proximity to and possibly having "mirrored movements" of the *USS Nimitz* and its group was noteworthy. [4] PLAN carrier groups operating further out into the Pacific is consistent with the operational concept of "anti-access/area denial" (A2/AD), but it also demonstrates an

understanding of overcoming “network-centric warfare” by holding key platforms at risk. As described by one PLA think tank researcher, “In a situation where a US air base or aircraft carrier might be attacked, US military air strike platforms must consider using airfields or aircraft carriers farther from the battlefield...so that every link in the kill chain can be ‘strained’, and maybe even ‘broken’” ([National Defense Reference](#), December 27, 2016). In contrast to “network centric warfare”:

Scholars in China have proposed the concept of “energy-centric warfare” (能量中心战), believing that the chain of information and the chain of energy are both essential in an operational system-of-systems. ... “Energy-centric warfare” focuses on increasing the speed of the “attack” segment, specific methods include: reducing the time between detection and destruction of targets through development of near-space hypersonic weapons (近空间高超声速武器), electromagnetic orbital cannons (电磁轨道炮), directed energy weapons (定向能武器), and other new concept weapons ([National Defense Reference](#), December 27, 2016).

While PLAN vessels and aircraft have previously operated to the east of Taiwan, the character and tempo of operations during Joint Sword may have been qualitatively different. As Senior Colonel Zhao described the course of the exercise, “after surrounding the island of Taiwan, military forces then proceeded to extend into the Pacific, mainly to prevent foreign forces from intervening. On one hand, [we] blockade the island; on the other [we] prevent foreign forces from intervening, ultimately achieving the [mission] objectives perfectly” ([CCTV Military Report](#), April 10). In the context of PLA doctrinal development, with which Zhao would be familiar as an AMS scholar, he has articulated a theory of victory in a Taiwan campaign that once only existed on paper. The PLA can take advantage of its natural proximity to mainland bastion areas to project power and push out the envelope of space and time. Joint Sword has demonstrated at least part of what those novel concepts would look like in the actual battlespace.

Theory and Practice

The PLA is not yet ready to take Taiwan in an amphibious assault. Joint Sword should be seen as a validation exercise, akin to the annual examination exercises that PLA units must undergo to certify their readiness, but on a larger scale. Following the failure of the initial Russian invasion of Ukraine, CMC leaders must have also had doubts about the PLA’s potential performance and genuine capabilities ([China Brief](#), April 8, 2022). Joint Sword can be seen as an answer to those questions. Still, while the PLA may be increasingly confident in its capabilities, it has not yet tested them in action against a genuine adversary and simply demonstrating new operational theory is not evidence of the ability to execute that theory in a real-world scenario.

Theater-wide considerations may also weigh on Xi Jinping’s ultimate “go-no-go” calculus. A freedom-of-navigation operation conducted by the USS *Milius* in late-March underscored to the PRC that horizontal escalation in a regional crisis could complicate the PLA’s operational planning ([Ministry of Defense](#), March 24). Joint Sword and the other provocative actions undertaken by the PLA in recent months, should be seen as part of an ongoing evolution toward a more capable force. Defense officials in the Indo-Pacific region must be willing to challenge the status quo of modern military thinking, given that the PLA has embraced new concepts-of-operations tailored to overcoming an information-reliant adversary. Prudent preparations and thorough

understanding of the PLA's evolving military theory will remain key to maintaining peace and stability in and around the Taiwan Strait.

David D. Chen is an independent analyst located in Denver, CO. His areas of focus include PLA doctrine and training, space and cyber warfare, and emerging disruptive technologies.

Notes

[1] "Doctrine", as a Western military term, does not have a direct corollary in the PLA lexicon, but can be captured by other terms of practice. See David M Finkelstein, "[The PLA's New Joint Doctrine: The Capstone of the New Era Operations Regulations System](#)," CNA, September 2021.

[2] See China Military Science (中国军事科学), No. 1, 2017

[3] Demetri Sevastopulo, "[Chinese hypersonic weapon fired a missile over South China Sea](#)," *Financial Times*, November 21, 2021.

[4] See for example, Kathryn Hille, "[China's war games in Taiwan hone military strengths but reveal restraint](#)," *Financial Times*, April 12, 2023.

Sword out of Sheath?: Assessing the Strategic Implications of the PLA's April Exercises Around Taiwan

Ying Yu Lin



(Image: PLA Navy warships from the Eastern Theater Command participate in drills, source: STNN)

Introduction

Thus far in 2023, People's Republic of China (PRC) President Xi Jinping has consolidated his power base after securing his third term as General Secretary at the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) last October. Despite the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic dealt a heavy blow to China's economy, Beijing has still shown signs of actively preparing for war, as seen in its defense budget allocation and the implementation of the new Reservists Law ([PRC Ministry of National Defense \[PRC MND\]](#), March 6).

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) undertaking of another round of large-scale military exercises around Taiwan in early April following President Tsai Ing-wen's transit visit to the U.S. provides further evidence of the PRC's intent towards Taiwan. Another key takeaway from the turnover at the 20th Party Congress was the new line-up of the Central Military Commission (CMC). What caught the attention of outside observers was that three members of the seven-person CMC, chaired by Xi, are from the ground force component of the PLA. They include Zhang Youxia, who got his second term as vice chairman; He Weidong, who serves as the other vice chairman of the CMC; and Liu Zhenli, the new Chief of the General Staff ([Gov.cn](#), March 10). Expectations

for the new CMC include accomplishing the challenging task of effectively integrating PLA services and branches in order to facilitate joint deployment of air and naval forces and enable effective command and control in joint operations. The goal is for the PLA to acquire not only the capability to be able to conduct joint operations to take big islands like Taiwan, but also to be able to execute an anti-access and area denial campaign against potential intervention by foreign forces.

Combat Readiness Patrols and the “Joint Sword” Exercise

Shortly after President Tsai concluded her transit through America by meeting U.S. House Speaker Kevin McCarthy in California, China announced a series of maritime law enforcement and military activities near and around Taiwan: a “Joint Maritime Patrol and Inspection in Central and Northern Parts of the Taiwan Strait” from April 5 to 7 and a “Combat Readiness Patrol and “Joint Sword” exercises from April 8 to 10 ([Huanqiu](#), April 5; [Xinhuanet](#), April 8). In addition to intimidating Taiwan by carrying out military maneuvers freighted with warning messages, the PRC also took advantage of the media coverage to maximize its propaganda effects ([PLA Daily](#), April 9). However, whether the patrols and Joint Sword exercises achieved Beijing’s desired aims remains in question. Moreover, a comparison of the April 2023 and the August 2022 exercises is not particularly justifiable due to several factors. The two rounds of drills are distinct from each other in terms of their objectives, purposes and simulated scenarios.

The August exercises were meant to remonstrate U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan, a move that made much sense politically when deepening interaction between Taiwan and the U.S. threatened to become a destabilizing factor to Xi’s bid to win his third term as CCP General Secretary and CMC Chairman at the upcoming 20th Party Congress in the fall. Large-scale military exercises were thus launched around Taiwan not only to demonstrate the strength of the post-reform PLA but also to highlight the purported achievements of Xi’s Taiwan policy. They could also serve as a prelude to Xi’s third term in office, ushering in a new chapter U.S.- China competition. These motives might have driven the August 2022 exercises around Taiwan ([China Brief](#), October 4, 2022).

The April 2023 exercises, however, did not involve the firing of Dongfeng-series ballistic missiles near Taiwan. The PLA Rocket Force played a part in the “Joint Sword” exercise but did not fire a single missile in the process. The most likely explanation for this relative restraint is the fallout from the PLA launching a total of five Dongfeng-series missiles into the waters of Japan’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the exercises around Taiwan last August, a move that caused Tokyo to protest and express serious concerns about the situation in the Taiwan Straits ([Kyodo News](#), August 5, 2022). In response, Japan sought greater cooperation with the U.S. in order to defend its southwestern islands. In a rare image available in the public domain, a Japan Self-Defense Maritime Force ship is seen near a Taiwan warship and a Chinese one, with the three ships within visual range of each other ([UDN](#), August 14, 2022).

Given that it is harder to predict ballistic missiles’ impact points and that their firing is more likely to trigger a strong reaction from the international community, naval surface ships and air force planes were used as more flexible and precision options for the PLA in its maneuvers against Taiwan early last month. Meanwhile, the exercises last August were focused on simulating a maritime blockade of Taiwan and on intimidating the Taiwanese population. This year’s exercises, however, simulated other scenarios, including launching strikes

on multiple targets in Taiwan from air and naval platforms and finding out in the process to what extent the PLA has integrated its command, control and communication systems and coordinated campaign activities across different platforms.

Diplomatic Considerations and Military Lessons

In an attempt to avoid provoking international concern, the PRC primarily deployed its air and naval forces in the recent April exercises around Taiwan, which achieved the goal of intimidating Taiwan without arousing a strong international reaction. The end result was to minimize the ripple effect of the now much-quoted words of the late Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, who said that “if Taiwan has a problem, then Japan also has a problem” ([Nikkei Asia](#), August 21, 2022). Although the exercises were meant to be a response to the meeting between President Tsai and U.S. House Speaker McCarthy, Beijing did not start the second phase of the drills, or the more important part, until Tsai returned to Taiwan. The timing was based on a political judgment that was oriented toward preventing Taiwan from having a chance to cooperate with the U.S., to the disadvantage of Beijing. Meanwhile, the timing of the PLA exercises also factored in diplomatic considerations. Beijing had to wait for visiting French President Emmanuel Macron and President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen to depart so as to launch a large-scale military exercise targeted at Taiwan ([China Brief](#), April 25). This indicates that China still wants to keep an armed conflict in the Taiwan Strait as a matter between the two sides of the strait so as to deny intervention from other countries. In other words, China’s anti-access and area denial campaign will be executed not only through military means but also through diplomacy and grand strategy.

In order to practice its available military means, the PLA, which is still developing the capacity to deploy forces beyond the first island chain, nevertheless, still took advantage of the April exercises around Taiwan to simulate maneuvers of naval ships crossing the first island chain. The maneuvers involved naval ships tasked with different missions sailing to their respective tactical positions, where they coordinated with fighter jets, early warning aircraft, bombers, electronic warfare aircraft and unmanned aerial vehicles to simulate launching joint strikes on Taiwan and gain control of the airspace over Taiwan. Although the PLA did not fire any ballistic missiles during the exercises, it concentrated instead on testing composing services’ and branches’ communication and joint operations capabilities in a joint campaign against big islands like Taiwan in hopes of reaching goals such as “joint seizure of power,” “precision strikes” and “blockade of the island” ([Xinhua](#), April 10). Notably, the PLA has started deploying several warships in the Western Pacific Ocean on a regular basis, a practice that has been ongoing for some time. As a result, if war breaks out in the Taiwan Strait, China will have an immediate naval presence east of Taiwan. These ever-present ships can launch strikes on Taiwan’s eastern coast in coordination with attacks on the western parts of the island. Such coordination depends on a common operational picture that effectively integrates platforms across services. China’s BeiDou-3 navigation satellite system became operational at the end of 2018 ([Xinhua](#), July 29, 2018). This development has likely contributed considerably to the PLA’s integration of joint operations systems, the achievements of which are observable in the recent drills.

Conclusion

After military exercises concluded on April 10, the PRC announced the implementation of a no fly zone north of Taiwan for 27 minutes on April 16 for what it said were safety concerns over an aerospace activity ([Focus Taiwan](#), April 13). The duration of the No-Fly Zone has been changed several times amid concerns from all sectors. Analysis on the part of Taiwan shows that the prohibition of flights in the area announced may have been due to the PRC's launch of a satellite from Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center in Gansu Province, the trajectory of which was projected to pass over the no fly zone ([Taipei Times](#), April 14). This generated fears that some rocket debris might, per warnings from the PRC, fall into the waters north of Taiwan. Although the satellite launch did constitute direct military intimidation against Taiwan, its occurrence right after the military exercises and the accompanying announcement of a no-fly zone were enough for the outside world to associate it with the drills.

Put another way, China has means other than military instruments to intimidate Taiwan, if Beijing is intent on doing so one way or another. It can opt for non-military means, such as leveraging media coverage to launch a propaganda campaign that is supportive of military action. In doing so, China can engage Taiwan with a combination of real and fake moves. In 2020, for instance, a UNI Air flight chartered by the Taiwanese military was asked by Hong Kong air traffic controllers to return to Taiwan for what they said were “dangerous activities” as it was on its way to the Pratas Islands in the South China Sea ([RFI](#), October 17, 2020). This kind of non-military means may be used more frequently by China to exert pressure in the future. In short, Taiwan needs to be vigilant in this increasingly difficult security environment.

Dr. Ying Yu Lin is an Assistant Professor at Graduate Institute of International Affairs and Strategic Studies Tamkang University in New Taipei City, Taiwan and a Research Fellow at Association of Strategic Foresight. He received his Ph.D in the Graduate Institute of International Affairs and Strategic Studies, Tamkang University. His research interest includes PLA studies and Cyber security.

China's Emerging Approach to Taiwan: Blockade and Disinformation

Chihwei Yu



(Image: Newspapers at a Family Mart in Taipei, source: Wikimedia)

Introduction

It has been suggested that China intends to unify Taiwan through a military operation within the next five years. However, based on the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) actions during the 1945-1949 civil war, military means may not be the most effective way for the People's Republic of China (PRC) to achieve its longstanding goal of unification with Taiwan. Since its inception in 1921, the CCP has relied on producing and disseminating disinformation to advance its policy objectives. This strategy is also frequently employed by China towards Taiwan, with the aim of undermining the morale of Taiwanese society through the spread of certain kinds of false information, for example, by claiming that the U.S. will eventually betray Taiwan.

In fact, the CCP's military tactics during the civil war share some similarities with its current Taiwan policy, particularly with regard to the so-called "Peiping Mode" (北平模式). This approach seeks to achieve its goals through a combination of deterring the opponent through superior force and employing United Front work, including deploying agents and spreading fake news to persuade opponents.

Can Blockade and Disinformation Succeed?

While more and more analysts and even some foreign officials argue that the probability of China launching an amphibious invasion of Taiwan is increasing, it would be highly irrational for the PRC to move to invade under the current conditions. Considering the risks entailed, it would be impossible for the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to adequately prepare for an invasion without a general notification of personnel. Preparations would take at least six to ten weeks, not only because the PLA would have to concentrate its forces in southeastern China but also because Beijing would need to ensure sufficient munitions and supplies for a long fight. Furthermore, even if China could successfully launch a surprise attack without triggering global alarm, an occupation would provoke the Taiwanese population and hence, tremendously increase the cost to the CCP of governing Taiwan.

Regarding the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong and China's policy towards the protesters, it is unlikely that the same policy would be successful if applied to Taiwan. Moreover, the PRC's 2019-2020 crackdown in Hong Kong was likely more heavy-handed than is widely assumed. For example, rumors have circulated that the PRC arrested college students who were protesting and transported them by train to an unknown location ([Setn](#), November 27, 2019). Regardless, the situation the PRC confronts in Taiwan is markedly dissimilar to that in Hong Kong. In fact, if China were to take over Taiwan through military force, it would be impossible to govern the island peacefully. The population of Taiwan is nearly four times the size of Hong Kong and any aggressive actions would likely provoke a strong response from the Taiwanese people. As a result, a military invasion of Taiwan would be highly costly and unwise for China, both in terms of the significant risk involved in preparing for such an attack as well as the potential impact on China's global reputation and the possibility of international condemnation due to human rights violations.

Lessons of 1949: Peiping Mode and China's Current Taiwan Policy

If the risks and costs of military unification with Taiwan are deemed too high, China may eventually come to adopt a different strategy. Clues from China's civil war between 1945 and 1949 suggest that the CCP may focus on United Front work and applying military pressure to induce Taiwan to surrender, rather than launching a full-scale invasion. The CCP's takeover of the cities of Suiyuan, Tianjin and Peiping (Beijing) provides valuable insights. In the case of Suiyuan, the CCP agreed to maintain the status quo at the request of the KMT forces in the region, while focusing on United Front work to persuade them to surrender. In Tianjin, the CCP launched an attack on the city's downtown area and wiped out all KMT forces, despite themselves suffering significant damage. This campaign had a significant impact on the CCP's march to Peiping. The tactics of Peiping Mode are very similar to China's current policy towards Taiwan, including its military activities and propaganda efforts.

Based on the history of 1948 and 1949, Peiping Mode consists of three main elements: **1)** employing a deterrence strategy through superior force; **2)** implementing a surrounding blockade; and **3)** undertaking United Front work to undermine the adversary from within. Even though the CCP negotiated with Fu Zuoyi (傅作义), the commander of KMT forces in Northern China, from the beginning stage of the Pingjin Campaign (平津战役), it was only when the Tianjin Campaign (天津战役) ended with the CCP's crushing victory that Fu

agreed to make major concessions in the negotiations. The CCP's victory successfully changed Fu's attitude due to its deterrent effects. In terms of the deterrence strategy, while it may be challenging to replicate the ideal effect of the Pingjin Campaign today, China is increasing its pressure on Taiwan with daily PLA Air Force (PLAAF) and PLA Navy (PLAN) probes into the air and waters around Taiwan. These aircraft have frequently entered Taiwan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ) and deny the existence of the median line in the Taiwan Strait with their deliberate flight routes. The increasing number of PLA aircraft and PLAN vessels and their daily closer proximity to Taiwan creates pressure similar to what people in Peiping felt in 1948.

Based on the positioning of vessels and aircraft, the recent large-scale PLA exercises this April and last August appear to be part of a broader plan to blockade Taiwan ([China Brief](#), October 4, 2022). The exercise zones, particularly those surrounding important harbors, suggest that China is focused on restricting Taiwan's maritime access (Xinhuanet, [April 8](#); [August 2, 2022](#)). Additionally, the location of the exercise zone to the southeast of Taiwan may be strategically significant, as the PLA could be planning for how to prevent U.S. forces from entering the Taiwan Straits from the south. The joint naval exercise between China and Russia in December 2022, held offshore Zhejiang Province, may also play a role in China's plan to deny intervention by U.S. forces stationed on the Korean Peninsula ([China Military Online](#), December 21, 2022). All of these factors indicate that China is taking steps to increase its military presence in the region and to exert greater control over Taiwan, which could have significant implications for regional stability and international relations.



(Image: PLA military exercise zones after the visit by U.S. Speaker Nancy Pelosi in August of 2022 ([China Times](#), August 3, 2022))

Finally, the CCP's United Front work may cause severe damage to Taiwan ([China Brief](#), October 19, 2022). CCP historians admit that the deliberate spread of disinformation is a key element of United Front work. Firstly, recent news stating that U.S. President Joe Biden said, "Wait until you see our plan for the destruction of Taiwan" is a typical example of disinformation ([China Times](#), February 21). This "news" has had a significant impact on Taiwanese society. Despite the dubious nature of these claims, Taiwanese may have become more suspicious of the U.S. due to the spread of this kind of misinformation. The effects of such fake news persist and more disinformation continues to spread on social media. For instance, an article in a U.S. military academic journal entitled "Broken Nest: Detering China from Invading Taiwan" is being discussed on some

local forums, with its arguments twisted to suggest that the U.S. will take over semiconductor giant TSMC and leave Taiwan to be destroyed ([Disp BBS](#), April 9, 2022). [1] This type of fake news is prevalent in Taiwan's media, including newspapers and TV programs. All in all, the spread of fake news related to the U.S. and national security may create confusion and mistrust among the Taiwanese people, which could ultimately weaken Taiwan's ability to resist potential aggression from China.

Furthermore, the spread of fake news in Taiwan serves a more specific purpose beyond triggering suspicion towards the U.S. According to the Peiping Mode, superior force and deterrence alone cannot work without first crushing the opponent's morale. The majority of people in Taiwan believe that Taiwan cannot protect itself without U.S. military aid due to the significant cross-strait imbalance in military strength. Therefore, making concessions to avoid war appears more reasonable for some in Taiwan, for example, by increasing economic interdependence with China ([The Storm Media](#), February 17). This consensus provides China with an opportunity to crush Taiwan's morale, leading to increased numbers of people willing to accept the "one-China principle" and become more pro-China, employing its propaganda via those media outlets with investments in the Chinese market and injecting specific fake news stories, as well. Ultimately, given the growing number of pro-China individuals, China can more easily replicate the Peiping Mode in Taiwan over time.

Conclusion

China still considers the military option as a means to unify Taiwan. However, we should keep in mind that an attack on Taiwan would incur an unbearable cost and does not accord with China's ultimate policy goals. Given these factors and the conditions in the Taiwan Straits and U.S.-China relations, Peiping Mode provides a more reasonable approach for China to achieve its goals vis-à-vis Taiwan. However, given the history of Peiping between 1948 and 1949, the CCP is unlikely to give up on the military option as a potential solution. Instead, China will invest more resources in military preparation and activities to maximize the deterrent effect and amplify the influence of fake news.

Even if we leave China's Taiwan policy aside, the probability of war or conflict erupting from an accident in the Taiwan Strait remains high due to the lack of communication channels and mutual trust between Taipei and Beijing, as well as the ongoing confrontation between the U.S. and China. While the daily presence of PLA aircraft and vessels in the Taiwan Strait is integral to the military pressure element of China's approach, Taiwan must respond accordingly, both in terms of defense and rhetoric. Beijing tends to interpret Taiwan's responses negatively, and its activities towards Taiwan will likely escalate, making incidents more frequent and heightening the risk of conflict in the Taiwan Strait. The U.S. must demonstrate solid and unwavering support for Taiwan; otherwise, China will become more aggressive. Given the increasing confrontation between the U.S. and China and the declining level of mutual trust between the two countries, accidents are more likely to occur in the Taiwan Strait.

Dr. Chihwei Yu is an associate professor at the Department of Public Security, Central Police University, Taiwan, ROC, and an adjunct research fellow at the Institute for National Policy Research (INPR). He earned his Ph.D. Degree from National Taiwan University. He focuses his research on international organization, China's foreign policy, and the regional security in East Asia.

Notes

[1] See Jared M. McKinney & Peter Harris, "[Broken Nest: Deterring China from Invading Taiwan](#)," *Parameters* 51, no. 4 (2021): 23-36