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## KMT Vice Chairman's PRC Tour Highlights Party's Difficult Balancing Act

By: Russell Hsiao

Russell Hsiao is the executive director of the Global Taiwan Institute (GTI) and editor-in-chief of the Global Taiwan Brief.

In August, [Andrew Hsia](#) (夏立言), the vice chairman of Taiwan's largest opposition party, the Kuomintang (KMT, 國民黨), made a controversial tour of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Over a period of 17 days from August 10 to 27 (10 days were reportedly spent in quarantine in Xiamen), the second-highest ranking KMT leader traveled to the Chinese cities of Xiamen, Fujian, Guangzhou, Dongguan, Shenzhen, Kunshan, and Shanghai for what was billed as a "[Care and Listening Tour](#)" (關懷聆聽之旅). Such a visit by a senior KMT leader to the PRC would normally not garner a great deal of local news coverage, as former KMT heavyweights frequently visit China. Yet, this visit in particular raised eyebrows and generated [international attention](#). This is perhaps unsurprising given the extraordinarily tense circumstances surrounding the timing of the trip, which came at a particularly sensitive time in cross-Strait relations: at the time that the trip's itinerary was leaked, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) was still [conducting military exercises](#) in close proximity to Taiwan, raising tensions in the Taiwan Strait to arguably the highest peak in 25 years.

While fielding questions from reporters at Taoyuan International Airport as he was about to leave for Xiamen on August 10, Hsia tried to [downplay his visit's political repercussions](#) in response to charges by the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民進黨)—and even from some within his own party—that the visit could be seen as an act of appeasement to Beijing. The opposition leader explained how the small-delegation visit had in fact been planned since June, but due to the COVID-19 situation the itinerary had not been finalized until recently. The delegation's [itinerary](#) was leaked to media only a day before Hsia's departure. The KMT's [five-member delegation](#) included Lin Chu-chia (林祖嘉) and Teng Tai-hsien (鄧岱賢), the director and deputy director, respectively, of the KMT's China affairs office; Kao Su-po (高思博), executive director of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Foundation (二十一世紀基金會), and KMT Editor Lin Tzu-hsuan (林子玄). Hsia [framed the visit](#) primarily as an effort to engage Taiwan compatriots in China, but left open the possibility that he could also meet with Chinese officials. On the official side, the KMT vice chairman ended up [meeting](#) with the PRC's Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits

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**Editor-in-Chief**  
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Global Taiwan Institute  
1836 Jefferson Place NW,  
Washington DC 20036  
[contact@globaltaiwan.org](mailto:contact@globaltaiwan.org)

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(ARATS, 海協會) Chairman Zhang Zhijun (張志軍) and Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO, 國台辦) Deputy Director Chen Yuanfeng (陳元豐), as well as a number of Taiwanese business groups, professors, and students in China.

### ***How the KMT Framed Deliverables and Optics***

Criticized by both the ruling party and—perhaps more remarkably—even from some within his [own camp](#), Hsia defended his visit in a post-trip media debrief by stating that he made a point of using the meetings with Chinese officials to convey the serious concerns of the Taiwanese people over Beijing’s recent military exercises in areas surrounding Taiwan. Hsia [claimed](#) that he told his Chinese interlocutors that the PLA’s disproportionate military exercises were unhelpful for the peaceful development of cross-Strait relations, and that the vast majority of people in Taiwan were concerned by the military exercises.

The vice chairman also emphasized the need for the two sides to maintain a channel for cross-Strait communication. It is indeed notable that there has not been a meeting between senior government officials since the DPP came into power, as Beijing unilaterally [suspended official dialogues](#) between Taipei and Beijing in June 2016. Hsia portrayed his trip as an effort on the part of the KMT to care for compatriots in China, while simultaneously presenting the KMT to voters as a responsible alternative to the DPP, and as the only party that the CCP is willing to talk to amid a steady rise in cross-Strait tensions since 2016.

According to Hsia, Taiwan compatriots in the PRC are particularly concerned by the limited contact between Taiwan and China in recent years, and specifically underscored their anxieties about the very limited number of cross-Strait flights as well as recent PRC economic measures aimed at punishing Taiwan businesses, farmers, and fishermen. The KMT’s [press release](#) on August 28 specifically noted how there is only one cross-Strait flight per week from Shanghai, while there are no flights from the Pearl River Delta area where 300,000 persons from Taiwan reportedly live. The Taiwan business community in the PRC—a traditional constituency of financial and political support for the KMT—also [called for restoration](#) of the “mini-three links” (小三通), which were suspended in February 2020 due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Discussion also reportedly covered speculation that Beijing could terminate the “early harvest” list, which covers 500 products that have been designed to receive early tariff reductions under the cross-Strait Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA, 海峽兩岸經濟合作架構協議). The agreement came into effect in 2010 and officially expired in 2020, although neither side has formally terminated the agree-

ment. In response, the Chinese side reportedly [conveyed hopes](#) that ECFA-related cooperation would not be affected by cross-Strait tensions.

### ***A Different KMT than the mid-2000s?***

It should be noted that Hsia is not the first senior party official to visit China. In fact, leaders from the KMT have frequently visited China since the mid-2000s. Although high-level contact between party officials had been essentially nonexistent over the four decades after 1949, the political ice began to slowly thaw in the early 1990s. In a highly controversial trip in 2005, then-KMT Chairman Lien Chan (連戰)—now honorary party chairman—defied the then-ruling DPP administration of Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁, 2000-2008) and made a high-profile [visit to China](#), where he met with then-CCP General Secretary Hu Jintao (胡錦濤). This marked the first such visit to the PRC by the top party official from the KMT in the history of cross-Strait relations.

It is instructive that in the 2022 meeting between Hsia and the TAO’s Chen, the two parties again agreed that the two sides should strengthen exchanges and communication, as cross-Strait relations have become more complicated and strained. At the same time, however, Chen defended the Chinese government’s military exercises, [stating](#): “The countermeasures we have taken are legitimate and just. We hope that the majority of Taiwan compatriots will uphold national justice, jointly oppose Taiwan independence provocations and foreign interference, and jointly maintain peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait as well as their own security and well-being.”

During a previous period of mounting cross-Strait tensions in the early- to mid-2000s under the prior DPP administration, the KMT and the CCP—once archenemies—established party-to-party talks that allowed the two parties to bypass official channels, and which undermined the effectiveness of Taiwan’s central government in negotiating with Beijing. The first [KMT-CCP Forum](#) (國共論壇) began in 2006. These talks became institutionalized through government channels when the KMT returned to power in 2008, and additional people-to-people channels were established to facilitate more avenues for exchange and cooperation between the two sides.

### ***Generational Rifts and Internal Party Dynamics***

While political support for former Chairman Lien Chan’s visit in 2005 was split along partisan lines, the reaction to the visit by Hsia has been markedly different. This reflects a different party at a very different period in cross-Strait relations. Several factors also suggest that the visit may have more to do with maintain-

ing internal party cohesion among the various factions in the lead-up to Taiwan's local elections in November. For one, this visit occurred several months after KMT Chairman Eric Chu (朱立倫) made his long-awaited maiden visit as chairman to the United States in June. The visit by the vice chairman to the PRC should perhaps serve to emphasize Chu's [foreign policy approach](#) of “stay close to America, on friendly terms with Japan, and on good terms with the mainland” (親美友日和陸).

While the KMT's stated reasons for the vice chairman's untimely visit seems legitimate—though tone-deaf—there are other reasons to believe that the underlying motivations were geared towards managing internal party dynamics. In recent years, the internal pressure from the party's [pro-unification wing](#) has grown increasingly pronounced. This dynamic was exemplified more recently by the [criticisms](#) of Chu's US visit that emerged from the pro-unification faction. These political fissures were once again on full display during the Hsia visit. With only a few months before the local elections in November, the trip came at a particularly sensitive time politically. Before, during, and after the visit, differences of opinion emerged between generations of candidates running for office, many of whom saw the senior KMT leader's delegation to China at an inappropriate time as a potential [political liability](#). The concerns were so pronounced that several younger candidates running for office even issued a [public letter](#) to dissuade Hsia from going to China. The internal clamor was so notable that the KMT chairman and several other former party leaders had to quell such concerns by coming out to [publicly support](#) Hsia's visit—thereby underscoring the party chairman's difficult balancing act.

Since Chu's trip to the US in June, pressure has continued to build from the unification wing of the party for the chairman to demonstrate the credibility of his commitment to maintaining “good terms with the mainland” (和陸). This difficult balancing act has also exacerbated the ideological fissure within the party, which was on further display in terms of the generational rifts in the overall pro-US or pro-China orientation of the party. Chu may also be attempting to present a contrast to former party Chairwoman Hung Shiu-chu (洪秀柱), who is a frequent visitor to the PRC and meets publicly with senior Chinese leaders.

It is notable that during the [KMT National Congress](#) held on August 28 (a day after Hsia's return from his PRC tour), only former President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九), former Chairman Wu Den-yih (吳敦義), and former Chairman Johnny Chiang (江啟臣) attended the important conclave meant to demonstrate party unity and rally national grassroots support for the party's candidates for the local elections. By contrast, former Chairman Lien Chan, Chair

## 停止出訪・聆聽民意

中共日前對台灣進行軍事演習，造成亞太地區動盪不安，身為捍衛中華民國主權的政黨，首要之務應對內凝聚共識、對外共同禦敵。

據聞本黨夏立言副主席欲率團關心在中國大陸地區求學、工作等台灣同胞生活需求，然而在兩岸劍拔弩張之際，更應利用科技便利以視訊方式即時反應處理，如此事半功倍並能解決燃眉之急，故並無需要此番特別赴往大陸地區進行探視，並以下列三項理由說明：

一、正當性：  
台灣面對此次中共軍演，再次以「台海危機」來稱呼凶險情境。然台灣人民並未因此民心動盪，也未有民意要求兩岸協商討論，在無民意基礎下至對岸無論理由為何，均容易被有心人士操弄，而失去正當性。

二、合理性：  
中共軍演持續進行不停，在可能侵犯中華民國領土之際，依舊進行帶團赴陸僅為關心在陸國人，並無合理說法讓人民支持本黨作為。

三、重要性：  
國民黨在面臨八二三砲戰、中美斷交、石油危機等，都成功凝聚台灣人民一同禦敵當下最重要的是應發揮領航精神，著眼在對內完善共識對外為中華民國發聲與尋求協助，凌過此次難關。

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*Image: A public letter issued by younger KMT members urging Andrew Hsia to cancel his trip to the PRC. (Image source: [Newtalk](#))*

-man Wu Bo-hsiung (吳伯雄), Chairwoman Hung Shiu-chu (洪秀柱), and Legislative Speaker Wang Jyn-ping (王金平) were no shows.

### ***How Will the Vice Chairman's Visit Affect November's Local Elections?***

Another important but under-examined dimension of the trip is its potential effect on the November local elections. Notably, this is the [first official visit](#) by a current senior KMT leader to China since Eric Chu became the chairman of the ailing party in October 2021. While the visit appears intended, at least in part, to put the new chairman's stamp on the party's approach to foreign policy, it is also driven by practical party interests.

Despite the poor optics of the visit in light of the belligerent actions taken by Beijing in response to US Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in early August, these dynamics reflect a very different KMT from the days of the mid-2000s when Lien Chan led his delegation to China. The controversy over the KMT vice chairman's China tour underscores the difficulty of KMT Chairman Chu's balancing act as he tries to “stay close to America, on friendly terms with Japan, and on good terms with the mainland.”

This challenging domestic political context was on display at the party's [National Congress](#) this year. During the event, the KMT chairman made a clear point to trumpet the mainstream credentials of the party's candidates for local offices as an effort to draw in more youths and centrist voters, who are increasingly wary of China, to support the party. At the same time, however, he had to defend Hsia's PRC tour in order to satisfy the pro-unification wing of his party as well as the Taiwan compatriot and business community in the PRC, which are traditional constituencies and provide both financial and political support for the KMT, despite the criticisms from within his own party for appearing to lean too close to China.

While cross-Strait relations do not tend to factor high in the considerations of voters in Taiwan during local elections, Beijing's actions and Hsia's tour are making it an electoral issue this November. Ironically, this is perhaps another one of the factors for Hsia's apparent haste in making his China trip—waiting any longer would only serve to make it even harder to disentangle the policy from the politics. It is worth noting that hardline actions taken by Beijing in the past have had the counter-productive effect of antagonizing voters and driving support away from the PRC's preferred outcome, however, it is not clear how these current circumstances will affect political behaviors in Taiwan and whether the KMT vice chairman's visit could have a mitigating or aggravating effect. Time will soon tell.

**The main point:** The August visit to China by KMT Vice Chairman Andrew Hsia, ostensibly made to hear out the concerns of Taiwanese residing in the PRC, was awkwardly timed in the immediate wake of threatening military exercises conducted around Taiwan by Chinese forces. The trip by Hsia and other senior KMT officials reflects the party's difficulty in maintaining a balancing act between its pro-unification and more mainstream wings in the lead-up to local elections in November.

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## Past Patterns and Present Provocations: China's Electoral Interference in Taiwan's Local Elections

By: Edward Brass

*Edward J. Barss is the author of Chinese Election Interference in Taiwan and a China investigative research associate at Strategy Risks. The views in this article are the author's own and are not intended to represent those of his affiliate organizations.*

On October 4, 2007, the director of the Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO, 國務院台灣事務辦公室) warned Taiwan that "[those who play with fire will get burnt](#)" over the issue of holding a referendum on whether Taiwan should join the United Nations under its own name. Now, almost fifteen years later, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping (習近平) has issued the [same threat](#) to President Biden over Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's recent visit to Taiwan. The CCP's predilection for threatening foreign politicians for "interfering" in Taiwan affairs goes hand-in-hand with CCP claims of exclusive control over Taiwan's domestic politics. Much of Taiwan's strength on the world stage is derived from its robust democracy, but China's demarches and manipulations over the years have significantly harmed Taiwan's electoral processes. As a new round of local elections set to be held on November 26 draws near, a critical examination of the CCP's past attempts to subvert Taiwan's local elections becomes more relevant for determining Beijing's strategy.

### **Past Patterns: 2009-2018**

#### *The 2009-2010 Local Elections*

During the 2009 and 2010 local elections, following the Kuomintang (KMT, 國民黨)'s victory in the 2008 national elections, relations between China and Taiwan were relatively friendly. Even so, the CCP made several moves to interfere in the island's domestic politics. First, China reduced hostile rhetoric approximately one month before the 2009 and 2010 elections. [1] Hostile rhetoric from the CCP can turn an election from a competition of ideas into a referendum on cross-Strait relations, which is why the CCP generally refrains from making public statements on Taiwan two weeks before national elections. As Dr. Kimberly Wynn Wilson's recent study found, Taiwan's political parties react strategically to foreign interventions, and hostile rhetoric from the CCP is frequently utilized to boost Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民進黨) voter turnout. [2] Second, the CCP used economic incentives to build political connections and showcase the benefits of the KMT's conciliatory approach to China. For example, a month before the 2009 elections, several provincial governments, including those of Sichuan, Beijing, Guangzhou, and Jiangsu, sent large trade delegations to Taiwan. [3] Beijing also utilized *Taishang* (臺商, Taiwanese businesspeople working in China) to conduct interference. For instance, before the 2010, 2014, and 2018 local elections, the Association of Taiwan Investment Enterprises on the Mainland (ATIEM, 全國台灣同胞投資企業聯誼會), a TAO-run organization for *Taishang* in China, gave flight discounts to *Taishang* returning to Taiwan for voting. [4] At times, the ATIEM also included specific directives

for voters: in 2010, for example, ATIEM leadership urged *Tai-shang* members to [“exercise their democratic rights” and protect “cross-strait peace.”](#)

Finally, the CCP has targeted specific voting blocks in Taiwan. These actions included increasing the procurement of goods from ethnic minorities, and meetings with religious organizations and *Taishang*. [5] These methods of influence appear benign, but have proven effective at influencing voters. A 2016 paper examining the effects of the CCP’s targeted agricultural purchases on Taiwan’s voters found that purchases of this type often resulted in increased votes for the KMT, reduced voter participation, and an increase in invalidated protest votes in small towns. [6] Meetings with specific leaders and influence groups can also have an impact. For instance, in September 2010, then-Director of the TAO [Wang Yi \(王毅\) met with the Taiwan Mazu Fellowship \(台灣媽祖聯誼會\)](#)—a Taiwanese religious organization—and urged them to unite in order to oppose Taiwanese independence and uphold the “1992 Consensus” (九二共識).



*Image: An October 2014 meeting held in Xiamen for members of ATIEM, a Chinese government-run organization for Taishang (Taiwan businesspeople) in China. The organization has attempted to mobilize Taishang to support the PRC’s preferred candidates in Taiwan elections. (Image source: [ATIEM](#))*

#### *The 2014 Local Elections*

Taiwan’s 2014 municipal elections followed pivotal changes in the cross-strait situation. First, Xi Jinping had fully assumed control of the CCP, doing away with consensus-driven leadership and replacing it with a centralized, top-down decision-making process. Second, the Sunflower Student Movement held major protests against growing CCP influence in Taiwan, galvanizing public support for their cause. Sensing the sea change in political opinion in Taiwan and anticipating DPP gains, the CCP attempted to blunt the expected election results by relying on

intimidation rather than enticements.

The CCP began by making threats that it would take away cross-strait economic gains from Taiwan, framing the choice for voters as one between peaceful development or destabilization. Xi Jinping personally underlined this rhetoric on two occasions. First, he explicitly tied [threats of retaliation to a DPP electoral win](#); and then, days before the election, called for the [elimination of “interference”](#) that led to difficulties in cross-strait relations that year, such as the failure to ratify the Cross-strait Service Trade Agreement. Additionally, the director of the TAO linked the [continuation of the Shanghai-Taipei City Forum \(上海-臺北城市論壇\)](#) with the results of the Taipei mayoral race. The CCP also bolstered support for pro-unification political parties in Taiwan by holding a meeting between Xi Jinping and approximately 20 pro-unification groups in September 2014. [7] The CCP further used its party-to-party contacts to hold meetings with influential political groups. For instance, in October 2014, the ATIEM held the [“Taiwan’s Nine in One Election Taishang Support Meeting” \(台灣九合一選舉台商後援總會座談會\)](#), in which the attendees included prominent KMT politicians such as Chiang Pin-kung (江丙坤), Lee Wo-shih (李沃土), and Chiang Shuo-p’ing (江碩平). Finally, the CCP attempted to legalize the “1992 Consensus” and the “One-China Principle” (一個中國原則) to mitigate the DPP’s ability to maneuver on cross-strait issues and “criminalize” voter support for the DPP. [8]

#### *The 2018 Local Elections*

The 2018 local elections became synonymous with CCP election interference in Taiwan, as China engaged in an extensive political interference campaign following the DPP’s win in the 2016 national elections. Beijing predicated its interference strategy on delegitimizing Taiwan’s national government while simultaneously boosting the KMT and other friendly political groups. [9] To start, the CCP held high-profile meetings with KMT leaders, local politicians, pro-unification groups, and media owners throughout the period before the elections. These meetings included political figures from around the country, including leaders from Hualien, Nantou, and Kinmen. [10] For example, in October 2018, a cross-strait media delegation of over [100 reporters and 50 media organizations](#) went to China for a forum on new media. The CCP also put further pressure on the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民進黨) by increasing the number of military exercises, such as naval drills and fighter jet encirclement patrols, and releasing a statement from the Minister of National Defense stating that the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) would stop at nothing to prevent Taiwan’s “secession.” [11] The CCP blamed its military escalation on the DPP, accusing

them of undermining cross-Strait peace. At the same time, the CCP systematically worked to cut off Taiwan from its diplomatic allies, starting in May with the Dominican Republic and ending in August with El Salvador. [12]

Beijing also launched an extensive campaign to influence voters through the use of economic incentives, disinformation, and local collaborators. Economic incentives designed to influence key voting demographics started in February 2018, when the CCP released the “[Measures to Promote Economic and Cultural Exchanges and Cooperation with Taiwan](#)” (關於促進兩岸經濟文化交流合作的若干措施)—also commonly known as the “31 Measures” (31條措施) policy—in an attempt to financially entice Taiwanese youth and businesses. The CCP also launched a disinformation campaign to shape voter attitudes, including operating content farms on Facebook and spreading false stories about President Tsai. [13] Taiwan’s Investigation Bureau (法務部) confirmed that it launched several [investigations into the CCP illegally funding local election candidates](#) at that time. In one instance, the Chinese Democratic People’s Party (CDPP, 中國民主進步黨), founded by Chang An-le (張安樂) and Zhou Qingjun (周慶峻), ran Zhang Xiuye (張秀葉) as a candidate in the Taipei municipal elections. Zhang was later [sentenced to prison for using CCP funds to buy votes](#).

### **Present Provocations: 2022 Midterms**

Over time, the CCP’s ability to interfere in Taiwan’s elections has grown more sophisticated, while also becoming more aggressive in response to shifts in domestic politics. CCP interference in local elections tends to be more extreme compared to its efforts to subvert national elections, often serving as a testing ground for election interference tactics. However, the passage of [several laws](#) and [amendments](#) designed to limit CCP influence in Taiwan, restrictions on cross-Strait travel due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and [Beijing’s poor image](#), have all limited the CCP’s options for electoral interference. Economic measures, party contacts, and disinformation remain the most viable options for Beijing’s electoral interference activities.

However, several avenues for interference remain. [One potential option](#) includes economically punishing DPP counties while assisting KMT counties. However, while the CCP’s targeted purchases of Taiwan goods may improve voter support for the KMT, the opposite is not necessarily the case—and may only drive up turnout for incumbents in both parties. The CCP already appears to be trying to manipulate Taiwan’s elections through party contacts, such as KMT Vice Chairman Andrew Hsia’s August trip to China. The [KMT’s August delegation trip to China](#) has

drawn criticism due to the CCP’s recent military exercises and accusations that the KMT is relying on funds from China to fuel its election campaigns.

Disinformation also remains an endemic threat to Taiwan’s elections and continues unabated. Recently, Taiwan’s Ministry of National Defense (中華民國國防部) recorded 272 [disinformation attempts from August 1-8](#), launched in conjunction with China’s military exercises in the same period. Nevertheless, effective disinformation of this sort requires coordination with [local political collaborators](#) to avoid [backfiring](#). Moreover, Taiwan’s government has grown more adept at dispelling disinformation. Beijing will continue to meddle in Taiwan’s local elections, but unless there is a significant change in tactics, the CCP is unlikely to see the success it wants.

**The main point:** The CCP’s election interference activities in Taiwan’s local elections have grown more aggressive and sophisticated over time, and serve as focal points for testing election interference tactics. However, due to shifts in domestic politics, the impact of COVID-19, and Beijing’s strategic missteps, the effectiveness and scope of its election interference activities should be limited in the 2022 local elections.

[1] Edward J. Barss, *Chinese Election Interference in Taiwan* (Routledge, 2022), 145, 147.

[2] Kimberly Lynn Wilson, “Strategic Responses to Chinese Election Interference in Taiwan’s Presidential Elections,” *Asian Perspective* 46, (2022): 264, 270-272.

[3] Yearbook on Chinese Communism Editorial Committee (eds.), “探析年來中共部分黨政幹部訪台意涵,” [Analysis of This Year’s CCP Exchanges with Taiwan], in 中共年報2010 (2009.1–2009.12) [*2010 Yearbook on Chinese Communism*] (Taipei: Institute for the Study of Chinese Communist Problems, 2010), 5–49, 5–50.

[4] Barss, 65.

[5] Barss, 145, 148.

[6] Yu Qiang, Geng Shu, Chen Xi, and Li Yang (於強, 耿叔, 陳曦, 和李揚), “惠台政策對台灣農漁業選民的影響研究：利益、認同與投票行為,” [The Impacts of Economic Preferential Policies on Taiwanese Farmers: Interests, Identity, and Voting Behavior], *台灣研究 [Taiwan Studies]*, no. 2, (2016):16-17.

[7] Barss, 75, 155.

[8] Barss, 155.

[9] Barss, 161.

[10] Barss, 162.

[11] Barss, 162-164.

[12] Barss, 162-163.

[13] Barss, 62-63.

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## An Overview of Chinese Military Activity Near Taiwan in Early August 2022, Part 2: Aviation Activity, and Naval and Ground Force Exercises

By: John Dotson

*John Dotson is the deputy director of the Global Taiwan Institute and associate editor of the Global Taiwan Brief.*

### [Download Timeline of Chinese Military Near Taiwan in August 2022](#)

In an approximately seven-day period straddling the first and second weeks of August, People's Republic of China (PRC) military forces conducted a series of military exercises around Taiwan in the wake of US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to the island. As discussed in the [first article of this series](#), the PRC announced a ring of closure areas around Taiwan for military activities, and conducted a series of provocative ballistic missile launches on the afternoon of August 3—including at least four missiles that flew over the northern territory of Taiwan itself. This second article examines the publicly available information about the operations of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) during this same period in other warfare domains: air, naval, and ground.

#### **Aviation Sorties across the Taiwan Strait Centerline**

On August 3, large-scale flights by PRC military aircraft across the Taiwan Strait centerline (台灣海峽中線) began. [Crossings of the Taiwan Strait centerline](#) have historically been rare events, normally used by the PRC to signal its displeasure either with actions by officials of Taiwan's government, or else visits by senior-level US political figures. The last such large-scale incursions had occurred on [September 18-19, 2020](#), in reaction to a visit by US Undersecretary of State Keith Krach. Notably, this period also saw the commencement of regular PLA flights into the southwestern quadrant of Taiwan's declared air defense identi-

fication zone (ADIZ). Per information from Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense (MND, 中華民國國防部), the [surge of sorties across the centerline on August 3](#) was the largest observed up to that point, involving six J-11 fighters and sixteen J-30 fighter aircraft crossing the centerline in the northern strait, as well as an additional five J-16 fighters in the southern strait area.

The [surge of flights on August 5](#) was the largest of the week, involving a total of 47 fighter aircraft and two supporting reconnaissance/patrol aircraft. On both of these dates, the aircraft roughly bracketed the northern and southern channels into the strait. Taiwan's MND issued a [statement on Twitter](#) that the PLA aircraft flying on August 5 had also conducted a "possible simulated attack against [high value assets]"—presumably meaning simulated attacks against ground targets with air-to-surface munitions, although no amplifying details were provided.

Unlike previous such incidents, the sorties across the centerline did not stop after a brief duration. Instead, in the days following August 3, aircraft from the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) and PLA Navy (PLAN) continued near-daily incursions across the centerline (see examples [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)). These flights have not involved deep penetration into the airspace on Taiwan's side of the line, but have instead turned back after short incursions of a few kilometers. (This, despite [PLA propaganda material](#) intended to convey the impression that PLA aircraft have been flying in close proximity to Taiwan and its outlying islands.) The fact that the flights have continued on a regular basis, however, is significant. This change to the cross-Strait status quo parallels the change in norms that occurred in autumn 2019, when PLA aircraft began entering Taiwan's ADIZ on a near-daily basis.

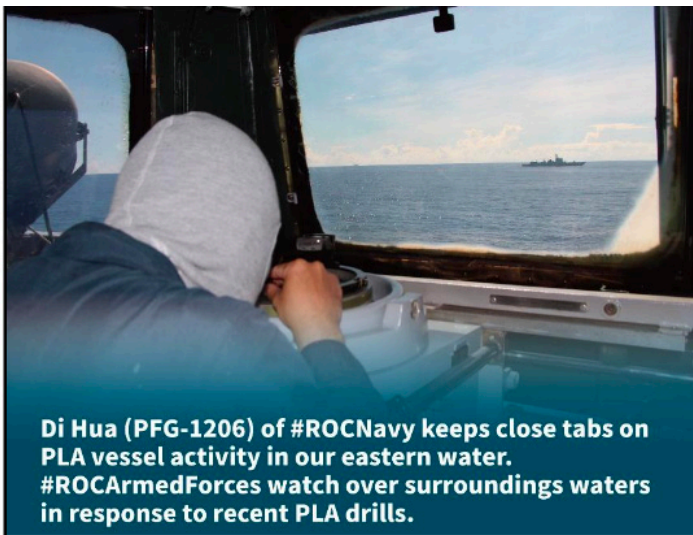
*(For further analysis of PLA air activity during this period, to include a more detailed breakdown of aircraft types and sortie patterns, see "The PLA Air Force Erases the Taiwan Strait Centerline" by Thomas Shattuck, elsewhere in this issue.)*

#### **PLA Naval Exercises and "Joint Blockade" Operations**

On August 4, [PRC state media announced](#) that PLA forces from all branches would conduct exercises in the "northern, southwestern and southeastern waters and airspace off the Taiwan Island," and that the exercises would be "focused on key training sessions including joint blockade, sea target assault, strike on ground targets, and airspace control operation, [and testing] the joint combat capabilities of the troops [...] in the military operations." Beyond this general assertion, PLA media provided sparse details regarding the specific PLAN ships that participated in the "live-fire comprehensive exercises" (實戰化綜合演練), with accounts that were long on propaganda and short

on substantive information. [1] On August 5, [PRC state media indicated](#) that “10 destroyers and frigates from the navy of the [relevant] theater command conducted joint blockade operations in waters off the Taiwan Island,” but did not identify the vessels by name.

Originally scheduled for August 4-7, the exercises were extended nominally for the purpose of additional anti-submarine exercises on August 8-9. In a rare example of specific detail, [PRC state media](#) described the *Luyang II*-class (Type 052C) guided missile destroyer *Changchun* (長春) (DDG-150) as engaging in such operations “in waters southwest of Taiwan,” conducting sonobuoy drops and mock attack/defense drills in conjunction with its embarked Ka-28 helicopter. Overall, however, PRC state sources were noteworthy for the dearth of specific information about either the PLAN vessels deployed, or their activities—a stance that contrasts with the more detailed information made public in relation to [naval exercises in spring 2021](#), or the [Liaoning \(辽宁\) carrier group deployment in May 2022](#). This more restrictive and secretive posture is likely a reflection of the increased sensitivities surrounding the August 2022 “blockade operations” and their intended psychological effects.



*Image: A Taiwan MND publicity photo showing watchstanders aboard the ROC Navy Kang Ding-class frigate Di Hua (迪化) monitoring an unidentified PLAN vessel in waters east of Taiwan, August 6. (Image source: [Taiwan MND](#))*

For its part, Taiwan’s MND has issued statements about the presence of PLAN vessels in the waters around Taiwan, but these reports have been similarly short on details. For example, a [statement on August 5](#) indicated that the PLA had “dispatched 68 aircraft and 13 vessels [...] for the activities around [the] Taiwan Strait, part of which had crossed the median line and jeopardized the status quo of the strait.” On August 6, [Taiwan’s](#)

[MND indicated](#) that a total of 20 PLA aircraft and 14 vessels had continued to “conduct joint sea-air exercises” (進行海空聯合演習) in the waters around Taiwan, but without specifics as to the vessels involved or their areas of operation. By [August 10](#), nominally the end of the major exercise phase, Taiwan’s MND reported that 36 PLA aircraft (“including 17 that crossed the strait centerline”) and 10 ships had engaged in operations in the waters around Taiwan. Although numbers of ships were given, MND’s reports have offered no specifics as to PLAN ship types, hull numbers, or assessed specific operations.

There are some indications that the PLA Navy may have originally intended for naval exercises that were larger in scale, possibly including the involvement of one or both of the PLAN’s operational aircraft carriers. The nationalist outlet *Global Times* (環球時報) [reported on August 2](#) that the carrier *Liaoning* had departed its homeport of Qingdao on July 31, and that the *Shandong* (山東) had departed its homeport of Sanya on Hainan Island on August 1. This reporting explicitly linked the carrier sorties to Pelosi’s expected visit. However, the *Liaoning* reportedly [returned to port by August 3](#), and the *Shandong* took no apparent role in the early August exercises around Taiwan. It is unclear whether the reports of intended PLAN carrier operations were bluster by nationalist press outlets, or whether their participation was cancelled due either to political concerns or maintenance issues.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the exercises was the fact that PRC state media described them as [“Taiwan encirclement” exercises](#), and that the PLA described them as a demonstration of its [“sea-air joint blockade and control capability”](#) (海空聯合封控能力) regarding Taiwan. Alongside the missile launches, the publicized presence of PLAN ships in the waters east of Taiwan was clearly intended to present a narrative of the PLA’s ability to choke off maritime sea lines of communication (SLOC) into and out of Taiwan.

### ***PLA Ground Force Exercises—or the Lack Thereof***

Alongside the provocative missile launches, aviation activity, and naval exercises conducted in early August, it might be reasonably expected to see parallel exercise activity among the PLA ground forces stationed in the Eastern and Southern Theater Districts. The PLA Army (PLAA) 71<sup>st</sup>, 72<sup>nd</sup>, 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Group Armies, stationed at various locations along China’s southeastern coast, maintain [infantry and mechanized units oriented towards amphibious landing capabilities](#). Along with the smaller [PLAN Marine Corps](#), these group armies would be expected to provide the primary ground combat power required for any island seizure or Taiwan invasion operation.



However, in early August there appeared to be little significant PLA exercise activity related to amphibious operations. PLA publicity materials in early August described [72<sup>nd</sup> Group Army small unit training](#) conducted in July; recent [74<sup>th</sup> Group Army infantry training](#) with man-portable air defense missile systems (MANPADs); and [ideological-political classes](#) held by an unnamed PLAN Marine Corps unit. Such routine matters aside, there appeared to be no apparent larger-scale ground force activity to parallel the operations conducted by the air force, rocket force, and navy. This contrasts with PLA Army [amphibious exercises in spring 2021](#), which were actively publicized in PRC press—and arguably, hyped beyond their actual significance—as part of a psychological pressure campaign against Taiwan.

The reasons for the lack of concomitant amphibious exercise activity in August 2022 are unknown. One explanation could be the fact that elements of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Group Army had already conducted a [“joint sea-crossing exercise”](#) in May of this year, and that further training exercises were deemed unnecessary—or else that the required logistical preparations for further exercises might have required a longer timetable than was available in the relatively short-notice timeframe that accompanied the Pelosi visit. The most compelling explanation, however, may be political: that the CCP/PLA leadership did not want to carry out ground force activity that might have been misinterpreted by foreign observers as preparation for an actual invasion. In any event, publicly observable ground force activity did not match that of the other PLA branches in the air and sea domains.



*Image: A still image from a PLA publicity video about amphibious exercises conducted by elements of the 73<sup>rd</sup> PLA Group Army in May 2022. This recent exercise, as well as the desire to avoid signaling preparations for an actual invasion, may explain the lack of observable PLA amphibious ground force exercises in August 2022. (Image source: [PRC Ministry of Defense](#))*

## Conclusions

The PRC military drills conducted around Taiwan in early August should be understood primarily in terms of their intended political and psychological effects. On the one hand, some of the PRC’s military actions were quite provocative, including the missiles fired around, and even over, Taiwan; the repetitive crossing of the Taiwan Strait centerline by aircraft, thereby casting aside a *de facto* demarcation line that had existed since the 1950s; and an active propaganda campaign touting the PLA’s capability to enforce a blockade on Taiwan. On the other hand, there were many indications of calculated restraint: contrary to hyperbolic threats in nationalist PRC outlets, there were no penetrations of Taiwan’s territorial air or sea space (12 nautical miles) by PLA ships or aircraft, and even the centerline crossings penetrated only a limited distance before turning back. Furthermore, although evidence is limited, the much-hyped naval “blockade” exercises appear to have consisted largely of basic warfare proficiency drills.

Beijing’s claims that the military drills were conducted entirely as a response to Pelosi’s visit should also be treated with some skepticism. In fact, the rapid pace of their implementation suggests an effort planned well in advance, with intended domestic political effects connected to the [20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in October](#). Overall, the PRC’s application of military pressure on Taiwan in August seems to embody a “Goldilocks” strategy: one in which the coercive porridge must be neither too cold or too hot, but instead calculated to be “just right.”

Since the early August exercises, there has been widespread discussion as to whether or not a [“new normal”](#) now exists in terms of PRC military activity around Taiwan. While it appears likely that PLA presence and activity in the air and waters around Taiwan will remain at an elevated level relative to the norms of past years—with discarded observance of the *de facto* Taiwan Strait centerline a key change—PLA military activity is likely to recede to a more measured level in the next several weeks, as the CCP leadership focuses on the preparations for the party congress. However, the months and years ahead are likely to see continued and gradual escalation in the military pressure campaign directed against Taiwan.

**The main point:** In response to US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan in early August, the PRC conducted a series of provocative naval and air exercises in the vicinity of the island. Aviation, missile, and naval activity were intended to send a political message regarding the PRC’s ability to mount a blockade of the island, but the lack of parallel ground force activity indi-

cates that there were no plans for an actual invasion or island seizure operation.

[1] For one limited example, see the [official description](#) of underway replenishment (UNREP) and air defense drills conducted by the *Fuyu*-class supply ship *Chaganhu* (查幹湖艦) (Hull 967) and the *Jiangdao*-class corvette *Panzhuhua* (攀枝花艦) (Hull 621), both assigned to the PLA Southern Theater/South Sea Fleet. Even this account, of two relatively minor ships operating in an adjacent/supporting theater for Taiwan operations, places a primary focus on propaganda (the dedication of the crews, etc.) rather than detailing the nature of their operations.

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## Americans Who Are Familiar with Taiwan Tend to Be More Supportive of Taiwan

By: Eric Lee

*Eric Lee is associate director of programs at the Project 2049 Institute*

With Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan at the beginning of August, and subsequent Chinese military activities, Taiwan has been yet again thrust into news headlines across America. At the same time, there have been increasing numbers of public opinion polls conducted in recent years on [US sentiments toward Taiwan](#). Political elites and scholars frequently opine in print and broadcast media about issues pertaining to Taiwan—but what does the American public think about Taiwan, and what do they believe the United States should do in regards to Taiwan policy?

Public opinion polling provides a rough measurement tool to assess what the public thinks on a given issue. On Taiwan, it can provide lawmakers and policymakers with a window to see how policy decisions might be received by their constituents and the general public in the United States. Furthermore, at a time when public opinion polling within Taiwan is scrutinized to gain insights regarding Taiwanese will to fight against Chinese aggression, results from US domestic polling on Taiwan could also impact Taiwanese morale.

Of course, public opinion polls have their limitations. This is especially true in terms of assessing US domestic attitudes toward Taiwan, as the datasets available are sparse and the questions asked are not consistent. There is also an unknown, and difficult to measure, level of respondents' knowledge of the complexities surrounding Taiwan issues. Nonetheless, polling can

establish a rough baseline for how Americans view Taiwan. To inform this analysis, polling data from the last year was used from Morning Consult, Pew Research Center, and the Chicago Council on Global Affairs.

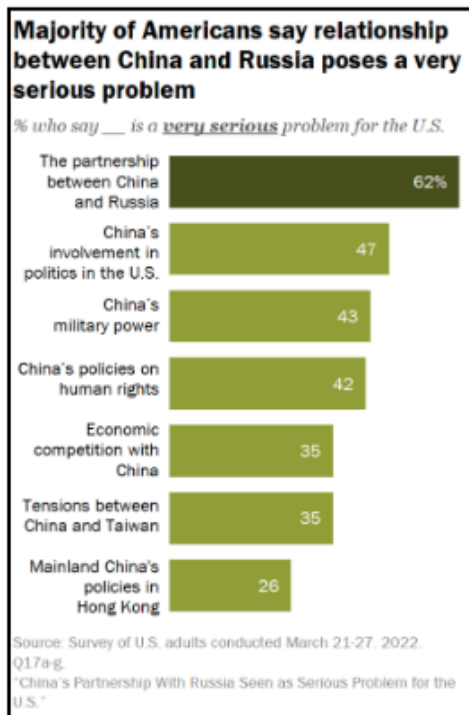
**Americans are generally unfamiliar with Taiwan.** In a [Morning Consult poll](#) conducted this May, while over half of respondents had some familiarity with China-Taiwan relations, only 15 percent were very familiar with the issue. And the younger a person was, the less familiar they tended to be with Taiwan. In a [Morning Consult poll conducted this August](#), only 34 percent were able to correctly identify Taiwan on a map—the same percent of respondents who could correctly identify Ukraine on a map in a [Morning Consult poll released this February](#).

**Americans generally support a more legitimate US-Taiwan relationship.** In August 2021, [the Chicago Council on Global Affairs reported](#) that 69 percent of respondents supported recognizing Taiwan as an independent country, and 53 percent supported a formal alliance between the United States and Taiwan. In a Morning Consult this [May](#), respondents were presented with various hypothetical US policy measures to respond to Chinese aggression against Taiwan. Establishing formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan was the most supported of all options, polling at 64 percent. In Morning Consult's poll this [July](#), 63 percent supported Taiwan independence.

In their poll this [August](#), Morning Consult informed participants that China claims Taiwan as part of the People's Republic of China (PRC), while Taiwan maintains its independent status, despite not formally declaring independence. With this knowledge, around 70 percent of respondents supported both Taiwan's independence from the PRC and Taiwan formally declaring independence from the PRC. Over 80 percent of respondents familiar with Taiwan supported these positions. However, it is not clear whether respondents were aware of China's redlines vis-à-vis Taiwan or other potential triggers for war over the Taiwan Strait.

**Americans generally do not view China-Taiwan tensions as a significant problem for the United States.** In a [March 2022 poll conducted by Pew Research Center](#), researchers asked Americans what they viewed as very serious problems in the US-China relationship. 62 percent of respondents said that the China-Russia relationship was by far the most serious problem. This was 15 percent more than the second-most popular response, which was China's involvement in US politics. Next in descending order of respondent frequency were China's military power, and China's policy on human rights issues; China-Taiwan tensions were

tied for fifth place, alongside China's economic competition with the United States. This reflects a consistent ranking in previous Pew Research Center polls of Taiwan-related concerns as among the lowest in the major problems in the US-China relationship.



(Graphic source: [Pew Research Center](#))

**Americans generally view Taiwan as aligned with the United States—however, they tend to not view the defense of Taiwan as a US responsibility.** From July to August this year, [Morning Consult reported](#) that the percentage of Americans who viewed Taiwan as being geopolitically aligned with the United States increased from 40 percent to 57 percent after Speaker Pelosi's visit. But when asked if the United States has a responsibility to defend Taiwan against China, only 34 percent said yes. This number was down from 37 percent in an earlier poll conducted by [Morning Consult in May](#). When asked the same question on Ukraine, 48 percent of respondents in May agreed that it was a US responsibility to defend Ukraine.

**In response to Chinese aggression toward Taiwan, Americans tend to favor non-military responses.** Across all polls evaluated, economic and diplomatic responses were the most preferred US responses. In [Chicago Council polling this August](#), the most favored US responses to China invading Taiwan were imposing economic and diplomatic sanctions, accepting Taiwan refugees, sending weapons to Taiwan, and using the US Navy to prevent a Chinese blockade of Taiwan. According to Morning Consult polls this [May](#) and [July](#), the most preferred US responses to China invading Taiwan included sanctions, bans on bilateral invest-

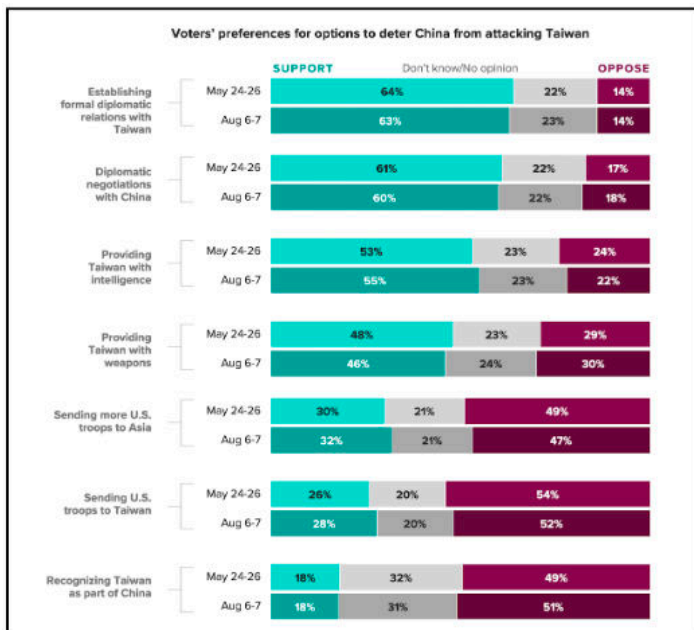
ment, and diplomatic negotiations. The next most preferred US responses were providing Taiwan with military intelligence and weapons.

**Americans are generally not supportive of deploying US troops into the Indo-Pacific theater.** In the [Chicago Council poll](#) this August, sending US troops to Taiwan ranked last among presented US policy options for a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, with a difference of over 20 percent compared to the next least-preferred option. At 40 percent, sending US troops to Taiwan was the only provided option that failed to obtain majority support. In Morning Consult polls this [May](#) and [July](#), this option also ranked at the bottom of US policy options against China, with the exceptions of recognizing Taiwan as part of the PRC and launching cyber and military attacks against China.

**However, the war in Ukraine is changing perceptions on military options.** While there is still hesitancy to send troops to aid Taiwan, opposition sharply declined as the Russian invasion of Ukraine reached new heights. From [May](#) to [July](#) this year in Morning Consult polls, support for sending troops to Asia increased by seven percent, while opposition decreased by 18 percent. While support for sending troops to Taiwan increased by only two percent, opposition decreased by 13 percent. Still, sending US troops to Asia and Taiwan are unpopular options: they poll at 37 percent and 28 percent in total support, respectively. But this is not a unique sentiment toward Taiwan. Rather, Americans tend to be less inclined overall to enter new conflicts, especially those that involve the use of US military force. In a [Morning Consult poll this February](#), prior to the war in Ukraine, 72 percent of respondents were concerned about a potential Russian invasion of Ukraine—yet only 36 percent supported sending US troops to Ukraine and Eastern Europe to prevent a Russian invasion.

After Speaker Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, [Morning Consult polling in August](#) showed a minor increase in support for deploying US troops into the Indo-Pacific theater. In general, support for all given US policy options against Chinese aggression toward Taiwan stayed fairly consistent before and after Pelosi's visit. A majority of respondents in August were aware of Chinese reactions to the visit, with 71 percent aware of Pelosi's visit, 67 percent aware of [Chairman Xi's warning to President Biden](#), 60 percent aware of China's missile launches, and 56 percent of China's fighter jet incursions around Taiwan.

At the same time, [Chicago Council polling](#) has indicated increasing support for sending US troops if China invades Taiwan. From 2020 to 2021 there was an 11 percent increase in support (to 52



(Graphic source: [Morning Consult](#))

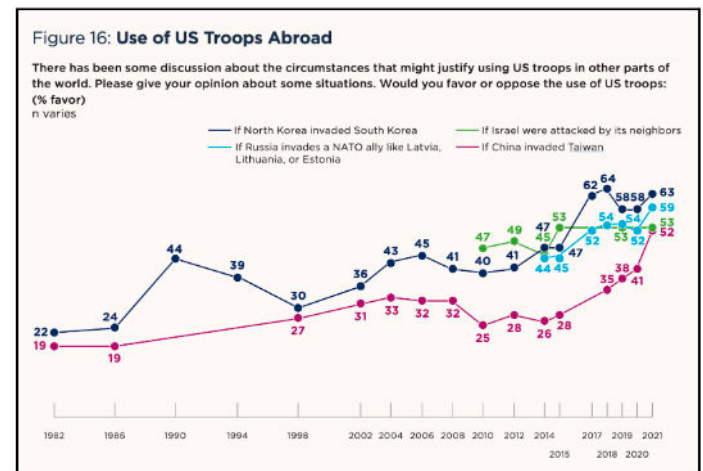
percent overall) for sending US troops to aid Taiwan. 2021 was the first time that the Chicago Council noted majority support for using US troops if China invades Taiwan. But even so, this level of support was still lower than using US troops to defend Israel (53 percent), NATO allies (59 percent), and South Korea (63 percent). Even in 2019, sending US troops to defend Taiwan enjoyed less support than using US troops to fight terrorists in Syria and Iraq (59 percent), to defend Japan over disputed islands (43 percent), or to stop Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons (70 percent). Notably, in [Chicago Council polling this August](#), support for using US troops if China invades Taiwan dropped back down to 40 percent.

Interestingly, [as the Chicago Council noted](#), Americans generally support sending troops to defend Taiwan if China invaded rather than committing to defend Taiwan in advance, somewhat mirroring the US policy of strategic ambiguity.

**Americans who are more familiar with Taiwan tend to be more supportive of Taiwan.** Morning Consult is one of the few institutions that provide detailed datasets on US sentiments toward Taiwan. From their demographic data, one conclusion is abundantly clear: that a higher degree of familiarity with Taiwan issues translates into greater support for Taiwan.

For example, in [Morning Consult's May poll](#), when asked if the US has a responsibility to defend Taiwan against China, 37 percent agreed and 32 percent disagreed. Among respondents who said they were familiar with Taiwan, 51 percent agreed and 32 percent disagreed. While opposition stayed constant, support for defending Taiwan increased by 14 percent. When

asked if the United States should establish diplomatic relations with Taiwan to prevent China from invading, 64 percent were supportive and 13 percent were opposed. Among those familiar with Taiwan, 78 percent were supportive and 13 percent were opposed. Again, opposition stayed constant while support for Taiwan increased. This trend—that greater familiarity with Taiwan correlated with greater support—held true for every question asked on US policy responses to Chinese aggression against Taiwan.



(Graphic source: [Chicago Council on Global Affairs](#))

**Conclusions**

Public opinion polls regarding US attitudes toward Taiwan are worth commending, and such efforts should be continued and expanded. As US policy continues to hone in on the pacing threat from China and the pacing scenario in Taiwan, better data on domestic opinion will become increasingly significant as they can be tracked over time, collected alongside major global events, and compared to sentiments toward other flashpoints. What do Americans think about US policy options against various forms of Chinese coercion? Polling results could encourage, or dissuade, bolder US policy pursuits in response to Chinese aggression across the peace-war continuum, including direct military intervention should the Chinese Communist Party initiate an all-out war against Taiwan.

The polling results also make clear that the more that Americans know about Taiwan, the more they are likely to support actions that would favor Taiwan's autonomy and closer US-Taiwan relations. In other words, Americans that are familiar with Taiwan tend to support a more normal, stable, and constructive relationship between the United States and Taiwan. This trend presents an opportunity to better educate the American public on one of most critical flashpoints in the world, the Taiwan

Strait, as well as where current US policy stands.

Better education should start with clarifying the United States' position on Taiwan, namely the "One-China Policy" (一個中國政策). In contrast to the PRC's "One-China Principle" (一個中國原則), which asserts that Taiwan is a part of China and that the PRC is the sole representative of China, the United States' "One-China Policy" simply acknowledges this claim but does not recognize it as so. The objective reality is that Taiwan, under its current Republic of China constitution, exists as an independent and sovereign state. Washington's current position is that the United States does not take a position on Taiwan's sovereignty—and this should be stated more explicitly. To be clear, this recommendation is separate from the debate surrounding "strategic ambiguity" and "strategic clarity." This type of policy clarity could direct better public awareness on complex issues and hamper confusion around events such as Speaker Pelosi's visit to Taiwan. Policy clarity could also substantively counter Chinese propaganda efforts to paint the American and Chinese positions on Taiwan as being one and the same. This would also benefit the global community, as other nations could more clearly understand the US position—and not view Speaker Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, for example, as an abrogation of the United States' One-China Policy.

**The main point:** Public opinion polling in the United States on attitudes toward Taiwan reveals that Americans are generally unfamiliar with Taiwan, tend to not view the defense of Taiwan as the responsibility of the United States, and favor non-military US responses to Chinese aggression against Taiwan. From the data, it is also abundantly clear that Americans who are more familiar with Taiwan tend to be more supportive of Taiwan.

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## The PLA Air Force Erases the Taiwan Strait Centerline

By: Thomas Shattuck

*Thomas J. Shattuck is the global order program manager at the University of Pennsylvania's Perry World House, and a member of Foreign Policy for America's NextGen Foreign Policy Initiative and the Pacific Forum's Young Leaders Program.*

In response to US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's early August 2022 visit to Taiwan, the People's Republic of China (PRC) carried out an unprecedented military and economic response to punish Taipei. Much analysis has already covered the [live-fire missile tests](#) conducted around (and over) Taiwan, as well as the [joint](#)

[military exercises](#) that accompanied them. (For further discussion of the latter, see "An Overview of Chinese Military Activity Near Taiwan in Early August 2022, Part 2: Aviation Activity, and Naval and Ground Force Exercises" by John Dotson, elsewhere in this issue.) Before these exercises, Beijing often expressed its displeasure about a Taiwan policy issue by sending military aircraft into Taiwan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ). Starting in September 2020, in response to then-Under Secretary of State for Economic Growth, Energy, and the Environment [Keith Krach's visit to Taiwan](#), the People's Liberation Army (PLA) began conducting regular sorties into Taiwan's ADIZ. From September 2020 to July 2022, the focus of these incursions was the southwestern portion of the ADIZ, primarily between southern Taiwan and Taiwan-occupied Pratas/Dongsha Island (東沙島) in the South China Sea. Since Pelosi's visit in early August, Beijing has initiated a new phase in its military pressure campaign against Taipei. This new phase has focused on near-daily Taiwan Strait centerline crossings, with less of an emphasis on the southwestern ADIZ area.

Since September 2020, Chinese military planes have only crossed the centerline of the Taiwan Strait on a few occasions. Both Beijing and Taipei have long tacitly observed and respected the demarcation of the strait, known as the Davis Line, after Air Force General Benjamin O. Davis Jr., who drew the line in 1955 after the signing of the [Sino-American Mutual Defense Treaty in 1954](#). [1] It was drawn to reduce the risk of military confrontation between Beijing and Taipei, and particularly to reign in the Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石) regime from drawing the United States into a war. [From 1955 until 1999](#), no Chinese military aircraft crossed the centerline. While the line has never been an official, internationally recognized feature, both sides acknowledged and observed the norm for nearly 70 years. The centerline has existed longer than the so-called "1992 Consensus" (九二共識), the similarly ambiguous agreement that Beijing insists serves as the foundation for cross-Strait interactions.

As China's military power began to increase *vis-à-vis* that of Taiwan (and even the United States), Beijing began to erode long-established norms, including respect for Taiwan's ADIZ and the Davis Line. In 2020, the PLA conducted at least [380 sorties](#) into the ADIZ, [22 of which](#) crossed the centerline of the Taiwan Strait; followed by [972 sorties](#) in the ADIZ in 2021, none of which crossed the centerline. In the months leading up to August 2022, [625 sorties](#) were conducted, only [one of which](#) crossed the centerline. However, this changed significantly in August, when the PLA conducted [444 sorties](#), [323 of which](#) crossed the centerline. Importantly, since August, Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense

(MND) has also begun to note whenever Chinese naval vessels entered these areas. This new phase of ADIZ activity—with the focus primarily within the Taiwan Strait—sets a dangerous precedent for Chinese military activity in one of the region’s (and the world’s) most important and active waterways.

**What’s Crossed the Taiwan Strait Centerline?**

One of the most important aspects of the centerline crossings is the model of aircraft that are used for these types of incursions, as opposed to the “regular” southwestern ADIZ incursions. Nearly every single sortie crossing the centerline has been made by fighter aircraft: J-10, J-11, J-16, JH-7, and SU-30. Of particular importance is the exponential increase in the use of the SU-30 in August 2022.

Before Pelosi visited Taiwan, the SU-30 flew only 48 sorties into the ADIZ, none of which crossed the centerline. The month with the highest frequency of use was October 2021, [with 20 sorties](#). In August 2022, however, SU-30 fighters flew [176 sorties](#) across the centerline. During that month, the SU-30 has served as [the fighter aircraft of choice for these centerline crossings](#): the J-10 has flown 22 sorties, the J-11 77 sorties, the J-16 36 sorties, and the JH-7 seven sorties. The SU-30 has flown more sorties than all of those aircraft combined, with the focus of its use occurring during the live-fire joint exercises in early August. On August 3, 16 SU-30s crossed the centerline; followed by 12 on August 4; 24 on August 5; and 10 on August 6. On August 18, another 12 made a crossing.

The fact that Beijing almost exclusively reserves the Taiwan Strait for fighter aircraft is not particularly surprising, since their use sends a clear message: the Taiwan Strait crossings and exercises are not meant to be intelligence-gathering missions, but are instead practice for offensive contingencies like a blockade or invasion. The Chinese military will need to achieve air superiority over the Taiwan Strait to launch a successful invasion of Taiwan proper, so sending these fighter aircraft serves as preparation for that goal. If anti-submarine aircraft like the Y-8 ASW variant or electronic warfare aircraft like the Y-8 EW variant were the predominantly used aircraft in the Strait, then Beijing would be sending a less aggressive message. These two other categories of aircraft are the second and third most used in ADIZ incursions, but they are primarily used in the southwestern region. Beijing wants its Taiwan Strait crossings to send as clear a message as possible: the waterway is the shortest distance and most direct route from the People’s Republic to Taiwan.

The true danger lies in the normalization of centerline crossings as Beijing seeks to increase its military pressure on Taiwan in

a post-Pelosi visit environment. If the international community reacts minimally to this new development—as has occurred since September 2020, when Beijing began its regular ADIZ incursions—then centerline crossings will become another new element of the now-diminished cross-Strait status quo. Additionally, these activities could provide Beijing with cover should the day come that an invasion does occur, as a “normal” exercise featuring several squadrons of aircraft crossing the centerline of the Taiwan Strait could quickly transition into something far more aggressive. While this situation is not likely to occur in the near-term, the likely next step in Taiwan Strait centerline crossings will be increasingly deeper penetration closer and closer to Taiwan, potentially escalating to incursions into Taiwan’s actual territorial airspace.

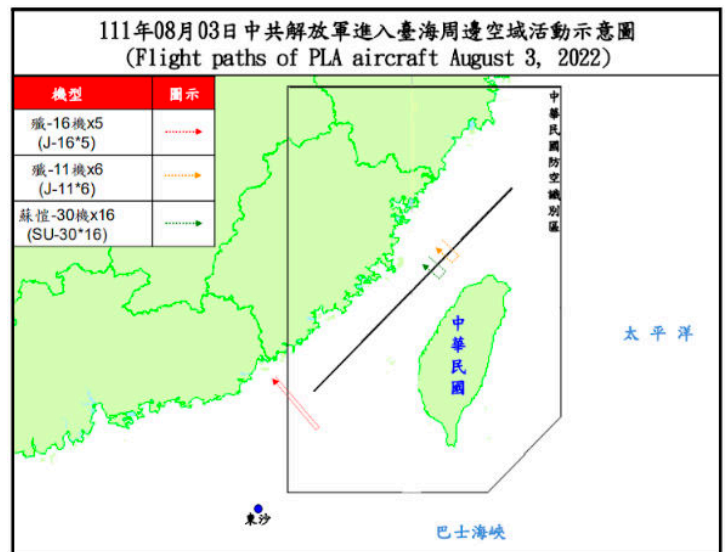
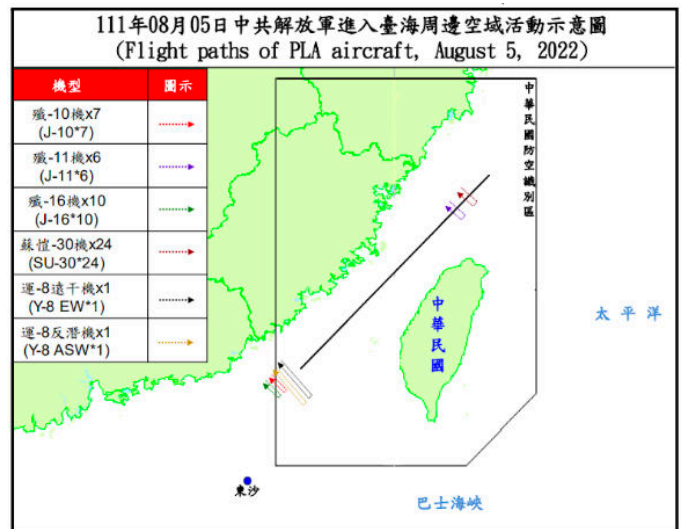


Image: Sorties of PLA aircraft across the Taiwan Strait centerline on August 3 and August 5. (Image source: [Taiwan MND](#) and [Taiwan MND](#))



### *Implications for the Future*

As Taiwan seeks to expand its international space and unofficial ties with other countries, Beijing will continue to react by crossing the centerline of the Taiwan Strait, among other responses. Since Speaker Pelosi refused to back down and made the trip to Taipei despite strong protests by Chinese officials, Beijing has seemed determined to ensure that Taiwan regrets these efforts by foreign dignitaries to signal public support for Taiwan. The more that this red line is crossed by high-profile individuals, the stronger the reaction from Beijing will likely be. The post-Pelosi exercises have demonstrated that China is not afraid of conducting unprecedented exercises around Taiwan and changing the cross-Strait status quo. Before August 2022, near-daily Taiwan Strait crossings seemed like a bridge too far for Beijing, since they had been so rare for so long. After Pelosi's visit, however, Taiwan Strait centerline crossings are now a new facet of the cross-Strait status quo. The unprecedented quickly gets folded into the norm. Ultimately, this is one of the most dangerous elements of Beijing's Taiwan strategy: desensitization to military coercion. Should the world accept this new mode of PLA aviation activity, it would allow Beijing to continue to frame the security responses to US regional policy and Taiwan's international affairs.

Beijing's salami-slicing tactics will continue to slowly squeeze Taiwan across a number of spheres, to include straining the resources of Taiwan's military. In March 2021, Taipei announced that it had [ceased intercepting every single ADIZ incursion](#). Taiwan's military would still track the aircraft with surface-to-air missile systems and issue warnings to leave the area, but it would only intercept Chinese aircraft on an as-needed basis. This decision was driven primarily by economic restraints, as the fuel costs for intercepting each incursion were having a negative effect on the defense budget. By changing the nature of the incursions from the distant southwestern area to the Taiwan Strait, Beijing can attempt to force Taiwan to now revert back to its old policy and intercept every single Taiwan Strait crossing.

Given the significant number of incursions in August 2022 alone, Taiwan's military will not be able to afford to intercept every single aircraft that crosses the centerline. China simply has more aircraft than Taiwan, as well as a huge budgetary advantage. The initial ADIZ incursions did not break the Taiwanese military budget, but the military had to divert funds to the interceptions from other important needs. With this new phase of near-daily Taiwan Strait incursions, Taiwan's military will have to make difficult choices about what to do and when to intercept. Tracking aircraft in the southwestern ADIZ was a wise policy choice given

the constraints of Taiwan's military, but flights across the centerline will be a harder decision given how much closer these aircraft are to Taipei.

Looking to the future, considering that "phase one" of ADIZ incursions lasted for nearly two years, we can expect that "phase two" of Taiwan Strait centerline crossings will last for some time in their current form—before Beijing eventually decides to change the terms of engagement again, and escalates into a potential "phase three." A new phase of ADIZ escalation would likely include flights that go closer to Taiwan's territorial airspace. Instead of breaching the centerline of the Taiwan Strait slightly and then turning around, Chinese military aircraft could potentially continue toward Taiwan and turn around just before hitting that point, which would undoubtedly result in Taiwanese aircraft attempting to intercept them. Beijing will likely wait for another future moment in time when the United States and Taiwan move closer together, or seemingly cross one of the PRC's red lines, before it decides to initiate a new phase in this response toolkit. Such a move would allow Beijing to play the victim and claim that it was forced to increase military pressure on Taiwan. This tactic has historically been the case whenever Beijing decided to further squeeze Taiwan, and it will likely continue that way into the future.

**The main point:** Since US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan in early August 2022, Beijing has sent nearly 300 military aircraft across the centerline of the Taiwan Strait, breaking a nearly 70-year understanding. Following two years of near-daily incursions into Taiwan's southwestern ADIZ, the post-Pelosi focus on Taiwan Strait centerline incursions marks a new phase in Chinese military coercion of Taiwan, a pattern likely to continue indefinitely.

[1] The line runs 26°30' north latitude, 121°23' east longitude to 24°50' north latitude, 119°59' east longitude, to 23°17' north latitude, 117°51' east longitude.