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By: Russell Hsiao

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With less than nine months left before Taiwan's national elections are held [on January 13, 2024](#), Beijing is rolling out a suite of economic measures to ostensibly influence Taiwanese voters. Immediately following the overt military pressure demonstrated by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) exercises encircling Taiwan after President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) met US Speaker Kevin McCarthy in California during a transit through the United States ([see Eric Chan's article in this issue](#)), the Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China (PRC) [issued a public notice](#) on April 12 that Beijing was initiating a trade barrier investigation into Taiwan's alleged restrictive trade measures against China. Specifically, the investigation will involve [2,455 products](#), mainly including agricultural, mineral, and chemical products, as well as textiles. Lying in plain sight is the political motivation of the decision, the investigation is slated to conclude on or before October 12, while also explicitly indicating that it could be extended to January 12, 2024—a day before people in Taiwan head to the polls—“[under special circumstances](#)” (特殊情況下).

Beijing's announcement of its alleged trade barrier investigation should not be viewed in isolation from the other economic measures targeting Taiwan that China has ramped up in greater scale and intensity since the start of President Tsai's second term. In an interview with *Vox*, Chiao Chun (焦鈞), the author of *Fruits and Politics—A Recollection of Cross-strait Agricultural Interaction Over the Past Decade* (水果政治學：兩岸農業交流十年回顧與展望), astutely [observed](#): “The motivations behind China's ban are politics and elections. China's ambition for Taiwan has always been unification [...] It's a comprehensive top-down strategy, wrapping around Taiwan's agriculture, farmers, and agricultural products like a net.”

During Tsai's first term (2016-2020)—as the Trump Administration launched a trade war with China—Beijing emphasized doling out economic enticements to lure more businesses and people from Taiwan. This strategy was exemplified by the two tranches of [preferential economic measures](#) that Beijing imposed in 2018-2019. During Tsai's second term, Beijing has decidedly changed this approach and is now leaning heavily on coercive economic tools through a combination of targeted bans of select goods, expand-

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ed import restrictions of a range of products beyond just agricultural and aquatic goods, arbitrary regulatory enforcements targeting select companies for their political activities, and the sanctioning of individuals and organizations.

Incremental Coercion in Tsai's Second Term

In the first wave of this new campaign, China targeted the farmers—a traditional constituency of the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民主進步黨) that is mainly situated in the southern parts of the island. Beijing accomplished this by banning the import of major Taiwanese agricultural products: [pine-apples](#) in February 2021, [sugar apples and wax apples](#) in September 2021, and finally [grouper fish](#) in June 2022. Although Chinese government officials cited harmful pests, chemicals, or other irregularities as justifications, [Beijing was using these bans primarily as a tool of economic coercion](#). It is no surprise that many of Taiwan's top 10 agricultural exports to China in 2020—namely pineapple, sugar apple, grouper, other fresh and frozen fish (i.e., largehead hairtail, fourfinger threadfin), skipjack tuna, squid, other frozen fish, and java apple—have all been [banned by Chinese authorities](#).



Image: Taiwan's representative to the United States, Hsiao Bi-khim (蕭美琴), promotes Taiwanese pineapples following the ban from China. (Image source: [Hsiao Bi-khim's Twitter](#))

In addition to import bans, Beijing began issuing stern warnings to Taiwanese businesses operating in the PRC to mind their political contributions within Taiwan. In November 2021, Chinese textile and cement subsidiaries of Taiwan's Far Eastern Group (遠東集團)—a major donor to the two major political parties within Taiwan—were arbitrarily fined [more than USD \\$13.87 million](#) for a series of supposed regulatory violations, including breaches of environmental protection rules.

Then, in a clear escalatory move—after then-Speaker of the

House Nancy Pelosi visited the island in August 2022—China [suspended](#) natural sand exports, while also [blocking](#) imports of citrus fruits, chilled white scallops, frozen mackerel, as well as confectionery products, including suspending imports from 35 Taiwanese exporters of biscuits and pastries. In total, the PRC's General Administration of Customs (GAC, 海關總署) suspended imports of [more than 2,000 of about 3,200 food products](#) from Taiwan.

In comments made to the *Financial Times* following the announcement of these broad bans, Chiu Chui-cheng (邱垂正), deputy chair of Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council (MAC, 大陸委員會), [stated](#):

"In the past, China hit single products from the primary sector such as specific fruit or fish—that way, they kept the overall macroeconomic impact on Taiwan limited but could target regions where the Democratic Progressive Party is strong [...] But now they are broadening this immensely as they are targeting processed foods, that gives them enormous extortion powers. This is probably only the beginning. We are certain that they will further step up their economic coercion measures."

Implications for Taiwan's National Elections

The most recent investigative action taken by the PRC follows the long-established pattern of employing a mix of economic enticements and punishments to influence Taiwan's politics and elections. However, the effects of the recently announced measure by the PRC Ministry of Commerce may be more subtle and potentially more effective than its previous tactics. The investigation, depending on how it is implemented, would make Chinese economic leverage a semi-permanent fixture in Taiwanese politics—at least right until the January elections. This would represent a notable departure from the one-off effects that targeted bans or sanctions have had in the past.

The investigation will essentially hang as the backdrop for the national elections and could possibly make the viability of the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA, 海峽兩岸經濟合作架構協議) into a national election issue. Beijing could use the ongoing review to justify and indirectly threaten the cancellation of the agreement, which was struck in 2010 between the KMT government under Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) and the PRC. This could have significant economic ramifications for Taiwan, as the ECFA [cut tariffs on 539 Taiwanese exports to China and 267 Chinese products entering Taiwan](#)—“[mainly in the fields of petrochemicals, machinery, textiles, and transport, and tariff-free preferential terms for agricultural and fisheries](#)

[products, including fruit, cut flowers, and fisheries goods.](#)” Still, despite these seemingly high numbers, Taiwan’s Ministry of Economic Affairs (MOEA, 經濟部) forecasted that a termination of the agreement would affect less than [five percent](#) of trade exchanges with China.

Since 2016, when the DPP took back power from the KMT, Beijing has hinted that it could rescind ECFA as a means to punish the ruling administration. These concerns reached fever pitch in 2022 during the Pelosi controversy, when China significantly escalated its rhetoric regarding the future of the agreement. Accordingly, right as Speaker Pelosi visited Taiwan—and while the PLA was conducting unprecedented exercises around Taiwan—the KMT’s Vice Chairman Andrew Hsia (夏立言) [flew to Beijing](#) to obtain reassurances that China would not scrap the ECFA.

Leveraging Taiwan Businesses in the PRC

In addition to political parties, another clear target of Beijing’s action is Taiwanese businessmen. China has long used Taiwanese business interests in the PRC to interfere in Taiwan’s political process. The Association of Taiwan Investment Enterprises on the Mainland (ATIEM, 全國台灣同胞投資企業聯誼會) is the most prominent vehicle for Chinese influence.

Founded in 2007, ATIEM is a business association—[managed under the auspices of the Taiwan Affairs Office \(TAO 國務院台灣事務辦公室\)](#)—consisting of around 300 Taiwanese-funded enterprises and their members in China. The organization acts as a lobbying group for Taiwanese businesses both in China and in Taiwan. According to a [2012 investigative report by Reuters](#), ATIEM previously tried unsuccessfully to lobby the Taiwan government to overturn a rule that bars citizens of Taiwan from taking positions in state or party bodies in China, such as the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC, 中國人民政治協商會議).

Taiwanese businessmen in China [interviewed](#) by the Singapore-based *Lianhe ZaoBao* (聯合早報) stated their belief that if Beijing really wanted to take action on cross-strait economic and trade, the CCP could simply terminate the ECFA. Instead, Beijing’s announcement of the trade investigation was intended to [send a strong warning to Taiwan](#) that “if it continues to seek independence and allow external forces to interfere, it must be prepared to face a large-scale trade punishment.” Wu Jiaying (吳家瑩), executive vice president of ATIEM and chairman of Jiahao Group (Xiamen) Co. Ltd., [said](#) that all those engaged in cross-strait economic and trade exchanges were worried when they heard about the investigation. While he stated that Beijing’s trade investigation may be more symbolic than substan-

tive, it nevertheless carries with it a strong sense of foreboding.

It is worth noting that voter turnout in Taiwan’s general election is generally relatively high, which could have an impact on the election results. [According to the Directorate General of Budget, Accounting and Statistics \(DGBAS, 行政院主計總處\)](#), 163,000 Taiwanese worked in China in 2021—representing a decrease of 76,000 people (19.2 percent) from 2019 and 261,000 persons (61.6 percent) from 2011. A quarter of a million Taiwanese residents in China reportedly voted in the country’s [2012 presidential election](#), and an estimated 100,000 Taiwanese businessmen voted [in 2016](#). Despite these decreased numbers, Taiwanese citizens located in China continue to represent a significant political constituency both in terms of their votes and campaign contributions. With polls predicting an increasingly tight race in January 2024, every vote will count.

Conclusion

Chinese economic statecraft includes not just enticements, but also punishments. Beijing’s recent measures reflect a hardening of its coercive economic approach through a combination of targeted bans of select goods, broadened import restrictions, arbitrary regulatory enforcements, and sanctions of individuals and organizations. Although recent measures do not appear to represent a major departure from Beijing’s longstanding strategy, these measures do represent a doubling down of Xi Jinping’s (習近平) campaign to pressure Taiwan and its voters. While there are currently significant proposals under consideration in the US Congress to mitigate the effects of Chinese economic coercion, the question remains whether the relief will arrive in time to have any meaningful effects. [1]

The main point: Beijing’s recent announcement that it is initiating a trade barrier investigation on Taiwan’s alleged trade restrictive measures against China represents continued efforts by Beijing to influence Taiwan—specifically Taiwanese voters and Taiwanese businesses—through economic coercion.

[1] There are at least two notable legislative efforts that have been introduced that address two prongs of these efforts. While the [Stand with Taiwan Act](#) focusses on deterrence by economic punishment, the [Countering Economic Coercion Act](#) addresses deterrence by denial of the effects of PRC economic coercion. According to [a recent study published by CSIS](#), “Deterrence by denial—focused on resilience and relief for targeted countries—is more likely to mitigate, and over time deter, China’s problematic behavior by decreasing its likelihood of success, frustrating Beijing’s intent.”

Operationalizing Symbolic Encirclement: a Comparison of PLA Exercises Following Recent High-Profile Visits

By: Eric Chan

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On August 10, 2022, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Eastern Theater Command issued the [following statement](#) after the conclusion of large military exercises simulating elements of a Taiwan blockade: "Theater forces will keep an eye on the changes in the situation in the Taiwan Strait, continue to carry out training and preparation for combat, organize regular combat readiness patrols in the direction of the Taiwan Strait, and resolutely defend national sovereignty and territorial integrity."

Accordingly, the PLA has begun a process of methodically utilizing military responses to political events to practice operational methods at scale. This was clear with the [recently concluded](#) 2023 "Joint Sword" (聯合利劍) exercise following Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen's (蔡英文) transits through the United States to visit Belize and Guatemala.

In this article, I will look at the Joint Sword exercise, and compare it to the August 2022 PLA military exercise. In both cases, they were presented by the PRC as a direct "[rapid response](#)" to US-Taiwan high-profile visits, heavy on military symbolism. However, the scale and progression of these exercises indicate a long-term plan of action and milestones for the PLA to improve operational capability, rather than as a military demonstration alone. In this way, the PLA is working to ensure that its conduct of gray zone warfare is complementary to, rather than distracting from, efforts to improve its ability to conduct an all-out invasion.

Joint Sword 2023

The recent exercise was executed from April 8-10, with the [PRC-stated goal](#) to "simultaneously organize combat patrols encircling Taiwan and closing in on the island so as to impose/increase island-wide military intimidation."

This was conducted in part via two primary methods. The first was a demonstration of mass aerial strike packages to show ca-

pability to "[seize control of sea, air, and information under the support of the joint combat system](#)."

On April 8, the PLA sent [71 aircraft into the Strait, with 45 crossing the median line](#); on 9 April, [70 aircraft, with 35 crossing the median line](#); on April 10, [91 aircraft, with 54 crossing the median line](#). These numbers were not accidental: the previous record for aerial incursions was 71 aircraft, with 43 crossing the median line on December 26, 2022. Similarly, the number of median line crossings were also meant to decisively shift the "symbolic" area of operations for the PLA Air Force (PLAAF). As recently as fall of 2021, [the sortie record](#) for the PLAAF into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ)—not across the median line—was 56. In line with [previous assessments](#), the PLA also continued expanding the types of aircraft involved in these incursion operations, most notably the use of the KJ-200 airborne early warning and control aircraft as well as the [J-15 fighter aircraft](#).

The use of the J-15 is notable, both as a venue for real operational practice as well as military symbolism. Over the three days, [80 J-15s were launched](#) from the PLA Navy (PLAN) aircraft carrier *Shandong* (山東艦) in the southeast area of Taiwan's ADIZ. This has several implications.

It points to the second method of PLA intimidation, carrier flight operations in the traditional "safe haven" for Taiwan's air force and navy. The presence of the carrier in that region, with the ensuing flight operations, forms the basis of PLA propaganda that these exercises constitute an [encirclement](#) of Taiwan. While the number of vessels in the exercise would not be sufficient to constitute anything close to an actual encirclement, the practice does indicate a somewhat higher level of joint or at least combined arms operations on part of the PLA, with the ability to conduct concurrent air incursions on both sides of Taiwan, naval incursions, as well as [limited naval live-fire drills](#) close to Pingtan Island (平潭島).

However, in the "crawl, walk, run" continuum of military training, this exercise was clearly closer to a crawl, aimed more at practicing the coordinated movement of platforms rather than execution of a touted "[shore-sea-air joint strike system](#)" ("岸海空一體聯合打擊體系"). Previously announced larger scale naval/land live-fire drills close to Pingtan on the 10th [failed to materialize](#). Meanwhile, the positioning of the *Shandong* in an exceptionally vulnerable operational area during carrier flight operations was a political statement rather than an actual anticipated wartime usage. If there was even the smallest possibility of US/Japanese intervention in an invasion, it would be extremely unlikely the PLA would risk placing a carrier group far

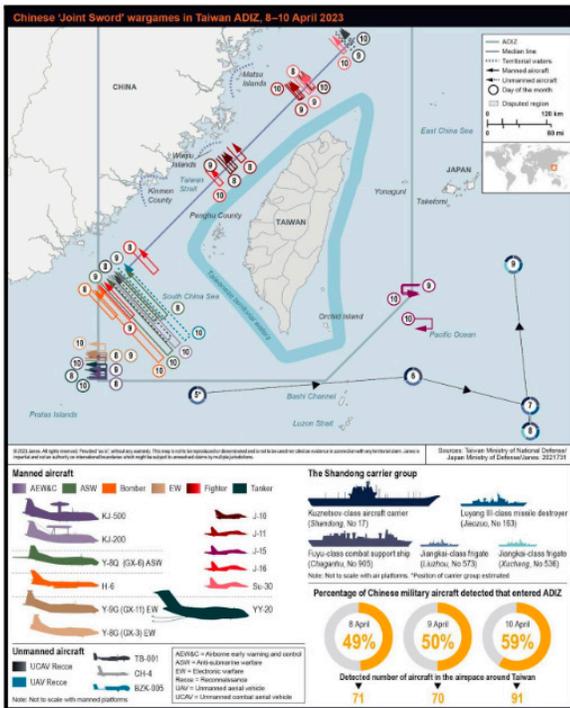


Image: Use of air and naval assets in Joint Sword 2023. These assets were used in a symbolic way, including the use of the PLA Navy aircraft carrier/CV-17 Shandong in a highly vulnerable area. However, it still provides the PLA with experience in conducting a diverse, large-scale movement. (Image source: [Jones](#), utilizing data from Taiwan’s Ministry of National Defense and Japan’s Ministry of Defense)

away from supporting assets, vulnerable to US/Japanese submarines. Moreover, the PLA’s gain relative to the risk is poor; 80 launches over three days would not provide the scale of attack needed to rob Taiwan of its eastern mountain safe havens, nor does it compare well with US carrier launches, which can [sustain 160 launches a day, surging to 270 launches at a time of need](#).

Similarly, the aerial incursions, while large in scale, likely would not reflect actual combat usage. The concentration of incursions in the southwest were likely an effort to militarily intimidate the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民主進步黨) political stronghold in southern Taiwan. In an invasion scenario, most of the initial strikes would likely be conducted by either the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF) or by the PLAAF under an existing air defense umbrella, concentrating on destruction of command and control nodes in the north. Thus, most of the actual training value to these type of massed incursions goes to the command and control elements as well as the mission planners, rather than pilots seeking to simulate complex air-to-air or air-to-ground operations necessary for the stated goal of practicing “[joint shock and deterrence, island closure, and control](#)” (“[聯合](#)

震懾, 孤島封控”).

Comparison with the Post-Pelosi Exercise

Some media outlets have seized on Joint Sword as a “[substantive and ‘war-like’ escalation on those conducted last August](#),” citing the increased realism and comprehensiveness of platforms. However, upon closer look, it is probably more accurate to state that the PLA tested *different* platforms, while reducing both the length, scale, and scope of live-fire demonstrations in Joint Sword. The post-Pelosi exercise was primarily a demonstration of PLA Rocket Force capabilities, with ballistic missiles launched into the [southern, northern, and eastern waters surrounding Taiwan \(and into Japan’s exclusive economic zone\)](#). There were secondary exercises featuring cyberattacks and disinformation, as well as naval/aerial incursions that sought to normalize increased PLA assets in Taiwan’s ADIZ.



Image: Comparison of announced live-fire locations between the August 2022 post-Pelosi exercise and Joint Sword 2023. (Image source: [@CIGeography, Louis Martin-Vezian](#))

In both cases, combat realism was not high—if the realism is measured against the capabilities required for an all-out invasion. However, exercises like these indicate long-term planning to improve joint coordination and ability to integrate multiple complex movements, with the ability for CCP/PLA leadership to pick modular options based on desired effect.

For instance, the ballistic missiles fired by the PLARF in the post-Pelosi exercise badly shocked the region, essentially giving Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio the political space to [modernize Japanese missile defense and standoff strike](#). In light of this self-defeating show of aggression, the PLA chose

new, different options to practice and intimidate, such as the use of the *Shandong*. The immense number of new platforms the PLA has acquired over the last decade means that there is a large number of capabilities that remain relatively untested and uncoordinated. Exercises like these not only assist planners in improving integration of platforms, but also allow policymakers to better gauge regional responses for further gray zone warfare usage.

Conclusion

Both Joint Sword, as well as the post-Pelosi exercise, demonstrate the PLA's interest in melding their day-to-day gray zone warfare operations with the different (and greater) operational training requirements for a cross-Strait invasion.

Previous examples of PLA responses to political events, such as the 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait missile tests, were solely designed to *deter*. Increasingly, responses to political events are becoming a convenient excuse for the PLA to practice the higher requirements needed to *compel*. While these exercises are not yet realistic, there is a real threat that future iterations of these exercises will eventually become indistinguishable from preparations for an actual invasion.

The main point: The recent PLA exercise “Joint Sword” was a heavily symbolic event that does not constitute an encirclement of Taiwan. Much like the previous PLA “response” to the House Speaker visit in 2022, the exercises were planned significantly in advance. While symbolic in nature, these exercises also afford the PLA an opportunity to practice operational methods, massing, and utilization of multiple platforms as a step towards the complex, multi-faceted operations that would be needed to truly encircle, blockade, or invade Taiwan.

An Assessment of the Narratives Surrounding the Tsai-McCarthy Meeting

By: Brian Hioe

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With both encounters being preceded by a pattern of leaks that affected the public perceptions of these meetings, it is perhaps predictable that the narratives surrounding the much-anticipated April 2023 meeting between Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) and US Speaker Kevin McCarthy have followed a

similar course to then-Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022.

The latter's visit took place after [leaks to the *Financial Times*](#). In a similar vein, Speaker McCarthy made his wish to visit Taiwan [known early on](#)—expressing support for Pelosi's visit to Taiwan—stating that he hoped to visit Taiwan if he became Speaker of the House. Yet, after the prospect of a McCarthy visit to Taiwan floated, there was again a pattern of leaks to the media that plagued Pelosi's visit. Most notably, [a report by *PunchBow/News*](#) in January 2023 stated that the Pentagon was preparing for a McCarthy visit to Taiwan.

In part as [a consequence of these leaks](#) that preceded these two meetings, domestic and international discourse about the potential outcomes became highly charged in nature. In particular, the Pelosi visit was depicted by many commentators as unnecessarily provocative of China, with many op-eds penned to this effect in major media outlets such as [the *New York Times*](#) and other outlets. Pelosi, for her part, responded through an op-ed released in [the *Washington Post*](#) to explain the reasoning behind her visit. The op-ed served to push back against international media discourse, which had become hyperbolic about the potential outcomes of the visit and prevailingly supported the view that the visit accomplished little but would lead to a strong response from China. Considering that if Pelosi's visit had only been announced after the fact, there would not have been as much prolonged discussion of it, the leaks were certainly part of what led to the media firestorm on the visit—however this also set the pattern for the McCarthy-Tsai meeting afterward.

US-Skeptic Narratives in Taiwan's Domestic Discourse

Despite initially planning to meet in Taipei, McCarthy was eventually persuaded to meet with Tsai in his home state of California—during a stopover by Tsai on the way to visit Central American allies of Taiwan—after the Taiwanese government [shared intelligence](#) with McCarthy about a potential Chinese response. McCarthy has stated that [he does not rule out a future visit](#) to Taiwan down the line, but the relocation of the meeting between him and Tsai to California was a clear attempt by Tsai's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民主進步黨) to dial back tensions. Certainly, the Tsai Administration does not want to give China pretext to rehearse a blockade or invasion in a way that increases overall regional tensions, nor does it want to be seen as willing to endanger global security for the sake of strengthening ties with the United States.

That McCarthy demurred from visiting Taiwan to instead meet with Tsai in California is interesting, as it is redolent of the nar-

ratives surrounding the Pelosi visit. In August 2022, Taiwanese media reported that the Tsai Administration had tried to turn down the visit but was overruled by Pelosi. [Such claims](#) came from pan-Blue outlets owned by the Want Want Group (旺旺集團有限公司), such as the *China Times* (中國時報). This fact is notable because, as [the Financial Times](#) reported in 2019, Want Want and its subsidiaries have been known to directly accept editorial input from China's Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO, 國務院台灣事務辦公室)—an accusation reinforced by [Apple Daily's](#) reports that Want Want accepted funds from China.

Although the veracity of such claims about the Pelosi visit are unknown, this was an early instance of the US-skeptic discourse (疑美論) increasingly pushed by the pan-Blue camp. In recent months, pan-Blue commentators have cast doubt on everything from sales of US [Volcano landmines](#) to Taiwan, [munitions stockpiles for US forces](#) in Taiwan in the event of a Taiwan contingency, or [semiconductor cooperation](#) between the United States and Taiwan.

Regardless of sharp rhetoric directed against China on other occasions, McCarthy's apparent willingness to listen to input from the Tsai Administration may be reassuring in relation to US politicians not placing Taiwan in the line of fire in pursuit of domestic politicking. Likewise, while McCarthy could have politicized his visit along partisan lines and attacked Democrats as weak on China, [McCarthy opted to frame the meeting as bipartisan in nature](#), seeing as his delegation included members of both parties.

Chinese Responses to the Tsai-McCarthy Meeting

Following the Tsai-McCarthy meeting, China has reacted much as it did before, by conducting another set of [military drills](#). Assessments vary as to whether these drills are a step up from the post-Pelosi drills or not. While they took place further from Taiwan compared to the post-Pelosi drills, they also set new records in terms of [air incursions](#) by Chinese warplanes. Certainly, the three-day duration of the drills was shorter than the post-Pelosi live-fire exercises, and there was not as much international coverage of the exercises compared to those of August 2022. This was probably because this was no longer an unprecedented event and because of the shorter timeframe. Additionally, the drills took place over Easter weekend. Since then, China has announced that it intends to set up a [no-fly zone 85 nautical miles north of Taiwan](#) from April 16-18.

In the wake of these exercises, it seems that a clear script has now been written regarding how China will react to meetings between Taiwanese presidents and US House Speakers. It remains

to be seen whether more of these meetings will take place in the future if China continues to respond in this way—with the DPP in particular needing to avoid the public perception that it is willing to risk Taiwan's security by conducting meetings with US elected politicians. Even as there have increasingly been calls for routinizing meetings between US and Taiwanese officials in recent years—despite the fact that Tsai [did not actually meet](#) with any Biden Administration officials during her trip—meetings between US and Taiwanese elected politicians are clearly of a different sensitivity.

Divides in Public Opinion Could Become More Divided

[Polling at the time of Pelosi's visit](#) indicated that the Taiwanese public viewed the Pelosi visit as reassuring about the strength of US-Taiwan ties and public opinion polls [following the visit](#) indicate divided views. A [Global View Magazine poll](#) from September 2022 showed that 55.5 percent of respondents thought that the Pelosi visit did not help Taiwan's international position, while 42.8 percent thought it did. Additionally, 59.3 percent of businesses thought the visit had benefits, while 38.2 percent did not. Yet, the prominence of US-skeptic discourse is increasingly highlighted in commentary ahead of the 2024 elections and has only grown since the Pelosi visit.

While public response to the Tsai-McCarthy meeting has been more positive, it could still change. Polling by the pan-Green-leaning Taiwan Public Opinion Foundation [in April](#) suggests support for the Tsai-McCarthy meeting, with around 61 percent approving of the meeting and 11.7 percent disapproving of it. Yet, views of the meeting could potentially shift, as observed in polling conducted by the [Brookings Institute](#) about views of the Pelosi visit in September 2022 and January 2023 showing that views about the visit may have increasingly divided along partisan lines. As the elections near, it is likely that US-skeptic discourse will continue to grow in prominence, with pan-Blue politicians framing the DPP as a party of warmongers intent on provoking China through strengthening ties with the United States.

In this sense, what will play a key role in Taiwanese political discourse before the 2024 elections will be the *ex post facto* framing of the Tsai-McCarthy meeting. The KMT will likely frame China's military drills as causally linked to the meeting in an effort to depict the DPP as a party of warmongers while continuing to lean into US-skeptic discourse. Conversely, it is likely to frame itself as the party of peace—the latest version of the KMT's traditional claim that it is the only party in Taiwan able to maintain stable cross-Strait relations. The KMT may also draw on [com-](#)

ments by French President Emmanuel Macron or other western politicians raising questions regarding the advisability of aligning with the United States.

As such, it is still unclear how the echoes of the Tsai-McCarthy meeting will play out in election campaigning for both major political camps. Much like the Pelosi visit, the Tsai-McCarthy meeting has effectively cemented precedents—both in the manner in which China responds, and the narratives that domestic and international commentators push. However, the aftermath of the Pelosi visit did not play a major role in the 2022 local elections, whose [outcome](#) was determined more by voting on the basis of local political issues rather than cross-Strait ones. This may not necessarily be the case with the Tsai-McCarthy meeting, seeing as cross-Strait issues loom larger in presidential and legislative elections. This remains to be seen.

The main point: The Tsai-McCarthy meeting continued many of the important dynamics of the Pelosi visit. Most significantly, it will be leveraged in domestic political discourse by the pan-Blue camp to further advance US-skeptic discourse that began around the time of the Pelosi visit.

Japan and Taiwan: A Relationship Filled With Promise, But Not Without Limits

By: Eleanor Shiori Hughes

Eleanor Shiori Hughes is a nonresident fellow at EconVue, a Chicago-based think tank that offers research on independent economic developments and geopolitical trends.

Amid major geopolitical and economic uncertainty steadily growing in the Indo-Pacific—including China rising as a strategic challenge—Japan can no longer ignore the realities of the region. Increasingly, Tokyo is acknowledging the reality that Japanese security interests hinge on the preservation of the status quo in the Taiwan Strait. In line with the region's evolving and multifaceted security dynamics, Tokyo has fewer qualms about expressing its anxieties over Beijing's disruptions of the regional power balance, which has largely been maintained by the US presence in Asia for much of the post-war era. In seeking to address China's assertion of its national power and other security challenges, Japan is writing new rules of engagement on how it can forge deeper ties with like-minded partners, including Taiwan.

Japan and Taiwan: A Forward-Leaning Trajectory

While Tokyo [switched](#) diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China in September 1972, Japan and Taiwan are capitalizing on the momentum of their unofficial ties by increasing exchanges on a bilateral level. However, this was not always the case. Until a few years ago, Tokyo gravitated towards eschewing public condemnation of China's coercive activities in the Taiwan Strait due to concerns that Japan could inadvertently place itself at the receiving end of Beijing's retaliatory measures. But this way of thinking began to change in 2021, when Japanese decision-makers became more acutely aware of China's destabilizing behavior in the Taiwan Strait and the risks it poses to Japanese security interests. This is why the [joint statement](#) produced from the US-Japan leadership summit in April 2021 underlined "the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues" as an alliance priority for the first time since 1969. While Taiwan was only mentioned once in this statement, its appearance speaks volumes about Japan's willingness to step outside of its comfort zone by openly conveying its heightened concerns about Taiwan.

Since then, Japan has made other indications that Japanese national security interests are tethered to Taiwan's future. For one, the 2021 Japanese defense white paper explicitly [made clear](#) for the first time that peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait is linked to Japanese national security. In July 2021, then-Deputy Prime Minister Aso Taro took it a step further by [arguing](#) that the United States and Japan need to come to Taiwan's defense in the event that China orchestrates an unprovoked military contingency. (To be clear, Japan is similar to the United States in that it maintains an ambiguous stance on its involvement in a hypothetical invasion of Taiwan, as well as the island's political status). Yet perhaps the most notable development was in December 2021, when the late Abe Shinzo, who had already stepped down as prime minister, spoke for an event hosted by the Taiwan-based Institute for National Policy Research (INPR, 國策研究院) and made the short yet sobering [pronouncement](#) that a "Taiwan emergency is a Japanese emergency." His remarks rattled Beijing, and it elicited a [negative response](#) from Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin (汪文斌), who asserted that China "strongly opposes and deplores this." China was also quite hasty in [summoning](#) Japanese Ambassador to China Hideo Tarumi, and conveyed that Abe's comment infringed on the 1972 joint communique by which the two countries initially established diplomatic relations.

With Japanese officials repeatedly emphasizing their alarm over intensifying regional challenges, Japanese foreign policy thinking has begun to tilt more toward expanding its ties to Taiwan.

For the first time last year, a Japanese Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) taskforce [published](#) a review of Japan's strategic approach to Taiwan. The review covered issues relating to security, economics, and people-to-people exchanges. The partnership continued to grow in 2022, when Tokyo and Taipei were able to overcome a major obstacle in their relationship when Taiwan [lifted](#) an import ban on Japanese food from Fukushima Prefecture. Given Japan's outsized role in regional economic integration in the Indo-Pacific, relaxing this ban provided Taiwan with more bandwidth to cooperate with Japan on economic engagement. Meanwhile, Japan continues to state its endorsement of Taiwan joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). Former Prime Minister Abe, an ardent supporter of advancing Japan-Taiwan ties, also virtually [met](#) with Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) in March 2022, during which he commended her for relaxing the restrictions on food imports and reaffirmed his hope that Taiwan can finalize its accession into CPTPP as soon as possible.

When [Abe was assassinated](#) a few months later, Taiwanese Vice President William Lai (賴清德) [broke](#) with conventional norms by attending Abe's funeral, becoming the highest-ranking Taiwanese official to pay a visit to Japan since 1972. An official from the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs quickly clarified their awareness of Lai's trip to Tokyo, maintaining that he came to Japan "in a private visit to pay respects as Abe's friend." In light of Abe's death, Tsai, who had a great affinity for Abe, [proclaimed](#) that he was "Taiwan's most loyal best friend."

Despite Abe's sudden death, Japan continued to augment its bilateral engagements with Taiwan by increasing legislative exchanges (which include parliamentary delegations traveling to the island) and convening intra-party talks between Japan's LDP and Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民進黨). Not long after China's highly provocative military operations in the wake of US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, Furuya Keiji, a Japanese LDP lawmaker who chairs the Japan-ROC Diet Members' Consultative Council, led a Diet delegation to Taiwan. Kihara Minoru, another LDP lawmaker who accompanied Furuya to Taiwan, [confirmed](#) that Taiwan gave the Diet members the green light to commence dialogue on facilitating evacuations of Japanese citizens should a military contingency occur. Furuya subsequently [embarked](#) to Taiwan in October to participate in the festivities for Taiwan's *de facto* National Day on October 10.

In December 2022, Hagiuda Koichi, the chair of the LDP Policy Research Council, [became](#) the highest-ranking member from the ruling party to visit Taiwan since 2003. According to the

[press release](#) issued by President Tsai's office, Hagiuda is considered "a good friend of Taiwan." The release also stated that the two democracies pledged to coordinate more closely on security and other causes. And just last month, LDP lawmakers Iwao Horii and Konosuke Kokuba traveled to Taipei to meet their Taiwanese counterparts and [convened](#) their first two-plus-two intra-party talks in-person. (Japan and Taiwan [launched](#) their inaugural security dialogues virtually in August 2021.) Based on press reports, the purpose of this dialogue was less about generating substantive deliverables and more about emphasizing alignment and committing to schedule another discussion in Tokyo.

Looking Ahead

All in all, trendlines suggest Japan will not taper its engagement efforts with Taiwan in the near future. If anything, Tokyo and Taipei are likely to work toward consolidating future bilateral engagements, especially as China continues to exert its influence in coercive ways. Importantly, Japanese parliamentary exchanges transcend party lines, as evidenced by a Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan lawmaker Aoyama Yamata [leading](#) a delegation on a four-day visit to Taiwan in January.

That being said, Japan-Taiwan relations are not without constraints. Besides the obvious lack of formal diplomatic relations, Japan continues to grapple with where to draw the line between cooperating with and condemning China. Despite China's deteriorating political image in the West, the country is of great strategic importance to Japan, as the two are economically interdependent.

More recently, the [detainment](#) of a Japanese national working for Astellas Pharma Inc. in China last month has deeply vexed Japanese leadership, and Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa [paid a visit](#) to Beijing earlier this month to meet newly-appointed Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang (秦剛) and Premier Li Keqiang (李克強). To Tokyo's dismay, the Japanese diplomats could not convince the Chinese government to immediately release the detained citizen. However, according to media reports, Hayashi [suggested](#) that Chinese General Secretary Xi Jinping (習近平) and Prime Minister Kishida schedule a phone call, presumably with the hopes that Kishida can persuade the Chinese leader to relent. Japan is deeply invested in keeping high-level lines of communication open with China, which is also why the two countries recently [operationalized](#) a defense hotline with an eye toward averting a crisis. Japanese media also [reported](#) that lawmakers from the Komeito party, the junior partner of the LDP, are planning a trip to China in May. If this visit pans

out, it will be the first time a Japanese parliamentary delegation visits the People's Republic of China since the outbreak of COVID-19.

While Tokyo remains committed to paving a pathway toward fostering a constructive and enduring relationship with Beijing across the spectrum, there are not any immediate indications that this foreign policy objective will stymie Japan's endeavor to bolster ties with Taiwan. And with China's escalating military activities in the Taiwan Strait and Japan's geographical propinquity to both China and Taiwan, the multifaceted, triangular dynamic between Japan, Taiwan, and China deserves more attention.

The main point: Japan's long-term aspiration is to enhance its partnership with Taiwan in an unofficial capacity, while also working to dial down tensions with China. For now, it is safe to say that Japan's foreign policy approach *vis-à-vis* China will not fundamentally constrain Tokyo's ability to strengthen cooperation and advance shared interests with Taipei.

Macron Distances Europe from Taiwan, Yet Faces Broad Pushback

By: Marshall Reid

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On April 5, French President [Emmanuel Macron](#) arrived in Beijing, commencing one of the more controversial diplomatic visits in recent memory. Ostensibly driven by a desire to simultaneously obtain Chinese support for a negotiated settlement to the Russia-Ukraine War and maintain France's lucrative economic ties with the People's Republic of China (PRC), Macron struck a relatively conciliatory tone in his discussions with Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping (习近平). While Macron's willingness to engage with Xi on his home turf was certainly notable in its own right—especially given Europe's mounting uneasiness about Chinese influence—it was the French president's comments during and after the visit that triggered alarm bells in both Washington and Taipei.

In addition to its aforementioned political and economic dimensions, the trip also provided Macron with a highly visible platform to advocate for European "[strategic autonomy](#)." Wary of what he views as undue US influence in European affairs, Macron has long pushed for Europe—and more specifically, the European Union (EU)—to chart its own path in the international

system, allowing it to function as a third superpower (alongside the United States and China). While such an impulse is understandable, the French president has repeatedly demonstrated support for [contrarian](#) geopolitical stances as a means of asserting his country's "autonomy." This tendency was on full display in the wake of the China visit, when Macron [declared](#) that the EU should avoid following the United States into a conflict over Taiwan, arguing that the bloc should steer clear of "crises that are not ours." For both the United States and Taiwan, these comments should undoubtedly be concerning, especially as they were made as China was undertaking large-scale [military exercises](#) around Taiwan. However, subsequent European pushback against Macron's rhetoric should inspire confidence that the French leader does not speak for the whole continent.



Image: Chinese President Xi Jinping and French President Emmanuel Macron meeting in Guangzhou on April 7. (Image source: [Reuters](#))

Macron's China Gamble

For Macron, the April visit to the PRC served a variety of purposes. According to an [official release](#) issued by the President's Office, the primary objective of the trip was to "involve China in shared responsibility for peace and stability," particularly as it pertains to the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine. Given Xi's well-publicized [friendship](#) with Russian President Vladimir Putin and the PRC's strong trade links with the isolated Russian economy, Macron evidently hoped to convince the Chinese leader to pressure Putin into a negotiated end to the war. However, as many [commentators](#) have noted, he faced an uphill battle on this front. With the war in Ukraine tying down a large proportion of Western military assets, Xi has little impetus to bring an end to the conflict. Indeed, Macron failed to secure any substantive commitments from Beijing, with Xi refusing to even speak with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

Beyond these arguably naïve geopolitical objectives, Macron's visit also had significant—and more substantive—economic implications. Rather than treating the trip as a solo diplomatic mission, the president arrived in Beijing flanked by a [large contingent](#) of French business representatives. Even as Macron failed in his pursuit of meaningful progress on Ukraine, his delegation succeeded in negotiating several [trade deals](#) with their Chinese counterparts, including agreements on “transport, energy, agriculture, culture and science.” While these deals were framed as [positive developments](#) by some, many others were not so sanguine. As some have [contended](#), the signing of such agreements—and indeed, the very presence of the business representatives on the trip—demonstrates Macron's willingness to place economic interests over broader European security concerns.

For Macron, the visit represented something of a gamble. Domestically, the president has been facing widespread popular discontent in the wake of a [controversial decision](#) to raise the national retirement age. Amid protests that have paralyzed the economy, the president's [approval rating](#) hit record lows in March, with just 23 percent of French citizens expressing approval of his performance. Accordingly, the visit has been [framed by some](#) as an attempt at a [reset for Macron](#), ideally allowing him to draw attention away from his domestic troubles while simultaneously distinguishing himself as a leading figure in European foreign policy. On the first count, the visit was arguably a failure, as protests have [continued to](#) rage across France. On the second, however, the picture is considerably more complex.

For much of his tenure in office, Macron has sought to position himself as a [leader of the European Union](#), a *primus inter pares* serving as the public face for the increasingly powerful grouping. As part of this effort, he has long pushed for “[strategic autonomy](#),” arguing that the EU should act more proactively and independently in pursuit of its own interests. This rhetoric has only [grown more forceful](#) following former German Chancellor Angela Merkel's retirement in 2021. As president of one of Europe's most powerful and wealthy countries, Macron is perhaps justified in seeking a leadership role within a more autonomous EU. However, his skepticism of the United States and readiness to embrace Beijing could have severe consequences, both for the transatlantic relationship and for the EU's unity on Taiwan and China policy.

Strategic Autonomy, the United States, and Taiwan

During his first [major policy speech](#) as president in 2017, Ma-

cron provided the outlines of what would soon become a key element of his foreign policy agenda: European strategic autonomy. Concerned about European overreliance on the United States—particularly in terms of defense—he has pushed for European states to forge a new path. At least initially, this rhetoric focused on improving European [production capacity](#) and reducing [dependencies](#) on foreign goods, including energy. However, as Macron's recent comments have made clear, he has become considerably more aggressive in his thinking.

Speaking with [Politico](#) in the midst of his China visit, Macron revealed a far more skeptical view on the relationship between the European Union and the United States. Specifically, he stated that “[t]he paradox would be that, overcome with panic, we believe we are just America's followers.” When asked about a potential conflict in the Taiwan Strait, Macron doubled down, [arguing](#) that:

“The question Europeans need to answer [...] is it in our interest to accelerate [a crisis] on Taiwan? No. The worse thing would be to think that we Europeans must become followers on this topic and take our cue from the US agenda and a Chinese overreaction.”

Building on this sentiment, Macron also questioned the value of [European involvement in the Taiwan Strait](#), arguing that if “Europeans cannot resolve the crisis in Ukraine; how can we credibly say on Taiwan, ‘watch out, if you do something wrong, we will be there?’”

While these statements were relatively strong in their own right, they were evidently less bold than others made during the interview. According to a disclaimer at the bottom of the published interview, [Politico](#) clarified that Macron's office had insisted on reviewing the content of the article. Notably, the disclaimer included a statement that “parts of the interview in which the president spoke even more frankly about Taiwan and Europe's strategic autonomy were cut out.”

In the days following his visit to China, Macron continued to defend and elaborate on his comments. During a [press conference](#) in the Netherlands on April 12, he stated that “Being an ally [of the United States] does not mean being a vassal [...] doesn't mean that we don't have the right to think for ourselves.” While Macron [clarified](#) that France continues to support the status quo in the Taiwan Strait, his comments have nevertheless proven highly controversial in Europe, the United States, and Taiwan.

Taken together, Macron's statements represent a notable departure from standard EU rhetoric, particularly as it pertains to

Taiwan. While EU states have long held Taipei at arm's length, many have increasingly worked to [expand their ties](#) with the island democracy in recent years. This shift in behavior has been accompanied by a corresponding warming in rhetoric. Since 2020, the EU has substantially expanded its [language on Taiwan](#), releasing multiple high-level documents and statements praising Taiwan for its democracy, commitment to human rights, and strong economic performance. Simultaneously, the EU has also hardened its [rhetoric on China](#), expressing concern about Beijing's aggressive actions in the Taiwan Strait and stressing the importance of maintaining the status quo. With these shifts in mind, Macron's comments are all the more striking.

While Macron's statements were ostensibly intended to strengthen Europe's hand in negotiations with the United States and China, they have the potential to carry out the opposite effect. As the continent's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine has made clear, presenting a [unified front](#) is a crucial means of countering authoritarian aggression. By challenging the EU's position on the United States and Taiwan, Macron could potentially play directly into the PRC's hands, [dividing the EU](#) at a time when unity is more necessary than ever. However, as the European pushback to his comments has demonstrated, EU unity is not so easily undermined. For both Washington and Taipei, this should be an encouraging development.

European Responses to Macron's Comments

In the wake of Macron's comments, many [commentators opined](#) that the French leader had potentially undermined the EU's fragile unity. This response was ironic, as Macron had intended for the trip to highlight Europe's [unified approach to China](#), even including European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen—a strong [proponent of EU solidarity](#)—in his delegation. By questioning the continent's relations with the United States and engaging warmly with Xi, the French president directly challenged the approaches of many EU states, forcing them to make uncomfortable diplomatic choices. Fortunately for Taiwan and the United States, Macron does not seem to have received the response he expected.

Rather than supporting Macron's more skeptical views on the US role in Europe, many EU officials pushed back. Across the continent, [political figures](#) and [analysts](#) criticized the president, describing his comments as “a disaster” and “a political coup [for Xi Jinping].” This reaction was particularly pronounced in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), where a swath of leaders have firmly rejected Macron's proposals. For instance, Polish Prime Minister [Mateusz Morawiecki](#) argued that “[i]nstead of building

strategic autonomy from the United States, I propose a strategic partnership with the United States.” This sentiment was echoed elsewhere in the region, where an [anonymous diplomat](#) stated that “[i]t is not the first time that Macron has expressed views that are his own and do not represent the EU's position.” While this response from CEE states was certainly notable for its intensity, it should perhaps not be surprising, as the region has made news in recent years for its unprecedented [embrace of Taiwan](#).

Taken as a whole, Macron's controversial trip to China may prove to be far less damaging as many of its critics initially feared. While his rhetoric was undoubtedly divisive and poorly timed, the response to his comments suggest that Europe is more unified than it might appear. For both Taiwan and the United States, the episode could potentially serve as a source of encouragement, though not without reservations. As Macron has made clear, European support for the United States and Taiwan is far from unanimous. As the two continue to seek greater transatlantic unity in approaching China, they would be wise to keep this in mind.

The main point: French President Emmanuel Macron's comments during and after his controversial visit to China have sparked debate across Europe, contributing to concerns that he could undermine transatlantic ties and erode EU unity. However, the intense European backlash to the remarks suggest that the EU is unlikely to alter its approach to the United States and Taiwan in the near future, though France's strategy remains unclear.
