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People vs Platforms: US-Taiwan Security Cooperation in the Near Future

By: Eric Chan

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In the spring of last year, I covered various lessons from the Russia-Ukraine War that Taiwan could benefit from, ranging from [mobilization and logistics](#) to the importance of [airpower and initiative](#). At the time of this writing, Ukraine is now in the process of [carefully husbanding reserves](#), integrating [nearly two thousand Western-provided armored vehicles and tanks](#), and [training troops in combined-arms warfare](#) in preparation for an expected late-spring counter-offensive.

It is the last portion—modern combined-arms training—that has proven to be one of the [most difficult challenges](#). This is due to the immense number of escalating requirements for combined-arms warfare to work effectively: basic soldiering, systems proficiency, inter-service communication, a command-and-control network able to operate between services—and finally, a leadership that understands the capabilities that each service brings, and can coordinate their effects accordingly. However, the payoff for being able to conduct combined-arms warfare is immense. The Russians were not capable of this, and thus their offensives repeatedly [bogged down into sequential operations](#) that could be predicted and countered at each turn. Now, Ukraine is attempting to boil down what would ideally be [several decades’ worth of reform](#) into several months. This is made all the more difficult because [many of Ukraine’s most experienced soldiers from the pre-invasion period have fallen](#). New recruits must not only rapidly pick up soldiering skills without the benefit of battle-experienced mentors, but also learn to operate [completely new platforms via crash course training](#).

In this regard, Taiwan’s military has several key advantages. First and foremost, it has the advantage of time. Over the winter and spring, many of Ukraine’s combat-experienced regular units were pulled away from the frontlines to undergo intensive combined-arms training, both within Ukraine and in Europe. Ukraine’s [territorial defense force brigades](#) (whose members receive anywhere from [three days to three weeks of training](#)) had to cover the gap, taking severe casualties to blunt Russia’s winter offensive and buy

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time. Given the terrible pressure these units faced at home, the combined-arms training time allotted is also short by Western standards: [five weeks](#) to go through “marksmanship, along with medical training, squad, platoon and company training, and a battalion force-on-force exercise.” By way of comparison, Western units often go through a [six month training cycle](#).

Second, Taiwan already has many—and better—platforms than what Ukraine is getting, and has used them for years. Ukraine has been asking for Western fighter aircraft since the beginning of the war, and likely [will not receive any for some time](#). By contrast, Taiwan has used F-16s since 1992, has acquired upgrades that make them more capable than the ones in the US Air Force inventory, and in a few years will have an [additional 66 new F-16Vs](#). The army has trained on [M1A2T Abrams](#) since last year. By already having a high baseline of platform training compared to Ukraine, Taiwan’s armed forces can allot more time to combined arms and joint maneuver.

In this article, I will look at one of the main existing challenges to US-Taiwan security cooperation—a massive backlog in weapons deliveries—and explore the likely contours of US-Taiwan security cooperation in the near future. I then provide several recommendations for both Taiwan and the United States in order to maximize the effectiveness of such security cooperation, [building upon my previous comments](#) on the subject in 2021.

Weapons Starvation, then Glut

US security cooperation with Taiwan previously focused on foreign military sales (FMS) of platforms, with a longstanding debate over [the type of platforms](#) that Taiwan should or should not acquire. However, it was only after the Western scramble to rapidly and massively arm Ukraine that the US national security community began to realize that the US defense industry had serious, long-standing capacity issues, worsened by the effects on the global supply chain from the COVID pandemic. This affects almost every single platform and munition. Accordingly, the US Congress has also begun to take notice of the [infamously large backlog](#) of US FMS to Taiwan.

The US Departments of State and Defense, under [Congressional pressure](#), are now employing a variety of methods to speed up the delivery of weapons. These methods range from [policy/process review](#) to the use of Presidential Drawdown Authority (PDA). However, this will still not mean rapid, sustained deliveries of all of the weapons in the backlog.

Rather, there will likely be a tiered effect: first, PDA items, which include weapons, platforms, and capabilities released from ex-

isting US stock. [PDAs were first authorized under the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961](#) for emergencies (such as disaster relief) and for non-emergency situations given special legislative authority. The criticality of stopping Russian aggression against Ukraine has vastly expanded the US government’s appetite to use PDA: at the time of this writing, there have been [37 Ukraine PDAs since August 2021](#), totaling USD \$21.1 billion. In light of the PRC’s unrelenting gray zone warfare, under the 2023 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), Taiwan was allocated [USD \\$1 billion in PDA funds](#). The first tranche of announced Taiwan PDA is [valued at USD \\$500 million](#)—comparable to a [medium-sized Ukraine PDA](#)—which gives some additional capability while filling out munition stocks.



Image: The National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile System (NASAMS), a distributed, networked short-to-medium range air defense system jointly produced by the US and Norway. Multilateral support for Ukraine has opened up significant new avenues of cooperation within the US alliance network, both in terms of policies such as PDA and weapon system availability. The United States is now slated to [sell NASAMS to Taiwan](#), with delivery expected in 2024. (Image source: [Kongsberg](#))

Using similarly-sized Ukraine PDA examples as conjecture, Taiwan’s PDA would probably represent a first step towards building a robust [war reserve stockpile](#), and may add capabilities that would otherwise be impacted by the lengthened backlog. These assets would be useful both against gray zone warfare and against all-out invasion. Second on the delivery tier will be the items from the backlog that have been prioritized by both US and Taiwan political leadership. Given the heightened US concern regarding an all-out invasion, this tier will likely include capabilities such as the [Harpoon anti-ship missile](#). Finally, the most complex and technologically demanding items—[such as the F-16V](#)—will still enjoy minor speed-ups in delivery due to policy changes and generalized pressure on the defense industry to prioritize Taiwan over other customers.

Operationally, this means that in the immediate future, Taiwan’s

military will receive a relative trickle of new platforms, weapons, and capabilities from PDA and US FMS. Then, in roughly a few years' time, that trickle will transform into a flood. Taiwan will thus have approximately three years to structure and optimize its military training programs to ensure that these weapons can be rapidly and fully integrated, thus greatly increasing deterrence against the PRC.

Training en Masse

Both the United States and Taiwan have realized the importance of training prior to the influx of platforms. Accordingly, both sides have announced a number of new training initiatives as part of the bilateral security cooperation strategy. The United States has sent a [number of advisors to Taiwan](#), building on [existing Army, Marines, and special forces efforts to quietly train](#) elements of Taiwan's military. US special forces personnel are now [specifically training for simulated urban combat in Taiwan](#). Taiwan, for its part, announced in February [plans to send a combined-arms battalion to the United States](#) for training. Furthermore, Taiwan also announced an [extension of the mandatory military service requirement from four months to one year](#), coming into effect in 2024 and applicable to those born after 2005.

These efforts are critical in improving [small-unit tactics](#) as well as critical basic soldiering skillsets such as marksmanship and communication in a disrupted environment. However, it would be a serious mistake if the US training focused too narrowly on the special forces effort to create a "partisan resistance model," and if combined arms training in the United States for Taiwan's military personnel was limited to simply the battalion level.

Instead, both the scope of the training as well as the numbers involved should be magnified.

For the sake of simplicity, existing engagement programs could be expanded. For instance, on the issue of a "partisan resistance model," Taiwanese non-commissioned officers (NCOs) are already [attending exchange programs in the United States](#) during visits to the US Joint Readiness Training Center and the US Army Asymmetric Warfare Group. An expanded effort could involve not just more NCOs in a "train the trainers" program, but also selected, high-performing conscripts who could later spread their knowledge in either the [garrison troop \(守備部隊\)](#), [civil defense \(民防系統\)](#), or [reserve system \(後備系統\)](#). While it is still unlikely that Taiwan will fashion a Ukraine-like [Territorial Defense Force](#), an expanded US training effort here would provide a significant long-term boost to existing private civil defense efforts like the Kuma Academy.

Furthermore, expanded training should not be limited to asymmetric warfare. As Ukraine's intense and difficult endeavor to generate massed conventional combat power for a large-scale counter-attack demonstrates, there is a real necessity for Taiwan's military to also be capable of massing, maneuvering, and executing combined-arms operations at scale. Moreover, Taiwan's military must assume that these operations will be conducted under fire by a far more capable adversary than the fumbling Russian military.

Thus, current battalion-level training in the United States is likely insufficient; instead, both Taiwan and the United States should evaluate the possibility of brigade-level training in the United States, with a similar level of engagement by the Republic of China Air Force (ROCAF) and the Republic of China Navy (ROCN). Again, utilizing existing engagements would be ideal, such as [Taiwan's attendance at US exercises such as Northern Strike](#), hosted by the Michigan National Guard. The size of US training areas and ranges would provide space for more complex exercises and make it more difficult for prying eyes to ascertain tactics, techniques, and procedures learned. Moreover, the multilateral aspects to these exercises would provide Taiwan's military a broad spectrum of examples to learn from, instead of simply taking the US expeditionary force as a sole model for military operations.



Image: A Michigan Air National Guard (ANG) A-10 conducts a public highway landing as part of exercise Northern Strike 22 (June 2022). Northern Strike featured combined-arms training between Michigan ANG, the Army National Guard, and the US Marine Corps Reserve, as well as forces from the UK, Canada, and Latvia. Expanded Taiwan participation in a combined-arms exercise like Northern Strike will not only allow for large-scale combined arms training, but also allow Taiwan to leverage the US alliance network to share operational best practices. (Source: [US Air National Guard](#))

Conclusion

For Taiwan, the increased US focus on training as the new cornerstone of the security cooperation relationship may mean accepting a greater level of short-term risk: if training in the United States is dramatically ramped up, then that would mean some reduction in force on Taiwan itself, at a time when [military manpower is already a concern](#). However, it is critical to take advantage of the period of time when Xi Jinping (習近平) still does not believe the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is capable of both successfully invading Taiwan while defeating counter-intervention forces. With increased risk, though, comes the possibility of higher return. It would mean a military more readily capable of using its new platforms and weapons at full potential, thus providing greater deterrence throughout this decade of maximum danger.

The main point: For the immediate future, US defense production issues will continue to delay delivery of FMS items to Taiwan. US PDA and policy changes will ameliorate this over the next two to three years. By accepting greater risk today and expanding training, Taiwan's military will be in a much stronger position to rapidly integrate new weapons systems and deter the PRC.

China Commences Military Drone Flights Circumnavigating Taiwan

By: John Dotson

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

The year 2022 saw a steady escalation in terms of People's Republic of China (PRC) [military aviation activity directed at Taiwan](#)—particularly in terms of the number of aircraft sorties into Taiwan's declared air defense identification zone (ADIZ), and flights crossing the Taiwan Strait centerline. While such activity had been gradually increasing since 2019, it [spiked dramatically in August 2022](#) following the visit to Taiwan by then-US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi—and has remained at elevated, albeit fluctuating, levels ever since. While Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) flights into the ADIZ and over the centerline have received the lion's share of attention, a less well-noted development—and one potentially more menacing for Taiwan's security interests—is the increasing number of PLA sorties, and naval activity, conducted to the east of Taiwan.

PLA aircraft began to [circumnavigate Taiwan](#) on an episodic basis in 2016-2017, with this mission being performed primarily by PLA Air Force (PLAAF) H-6K bombers. Bomber flights east of Taiwan were also noted in the past year in conjunction with PLA Navy (PLAN) carrier deployments. For example, in mid-December 2022, during a "beyond the island chain training" (跨島鏈訓練) [deployment by the PLAN Liaoning aircraft carrier group](#), two PLAN Air Force (PLANAF) H-6J bombers flew through the Miyako Strait (east-northeast of Taiwan) to a point near Japan's Daito Island. In doing so, it is possible that they used the *Liaoning* escort ships for a mutual targeting exercise, demonstrating an increased willingness to operate in airspace farther out into the Pacific Ocean.

At the end of April, the PLA also initiated flights around Taiwan with unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs)—a step that could significantly increase the number of PLA aviation sorties in Taiwan airspace, as well as further augment the [PLA's air-breathing reconnaissance coverage](#) of the eastern littoral regions of Taiwan. While China-based UAVs have flown over or near Taiwan-administered territory before, the initiation of long-range reconnaissance flights by more capable military UAVs is a new development, and represents yet another provocative step in the PRC's coercive pressure directed against the island.

The PLA Begins UAV Circumnavigation Flights Around Taiwan in Late April

The PLA has been using drone flights to surveil and probe Taiwan's outlying islands in an overt fashion since at least last year. For instance, news media revealed an [August 2022 incident](#) in which Taiwan soldiers on Erdan Island (二膽島) in the Kinmen Island Group threw rocks in an apparent effort to drive away an unidentified low-flying drone, which was presumed to have originated in the PRC. Following a string of similar reports of low-flying UAV surveillance and harassment over the Taiwan-administered islands close to the PRC coast, Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense (MND, 中華民國國防部) altered its rules of engagement and ordered the [shoot down of a presumed PRC drone](#) over Lion Islet (獅嶼, also in the Kinmen Group) on September 1.

Such flights by lower-altitude (and apparently, cheaper and off-the-shelf) UAVs around Taiwan's outlying islands are now being buttressed by sorties made by longer-range, higher-end military UAVs. Most significantly, at the end of April these flights began to circumnavigate Taiwan for the first time, adding a new aircraft type to the bombers that have flown periodic circuits around Taiwan over the past several years. [1] As of the writing

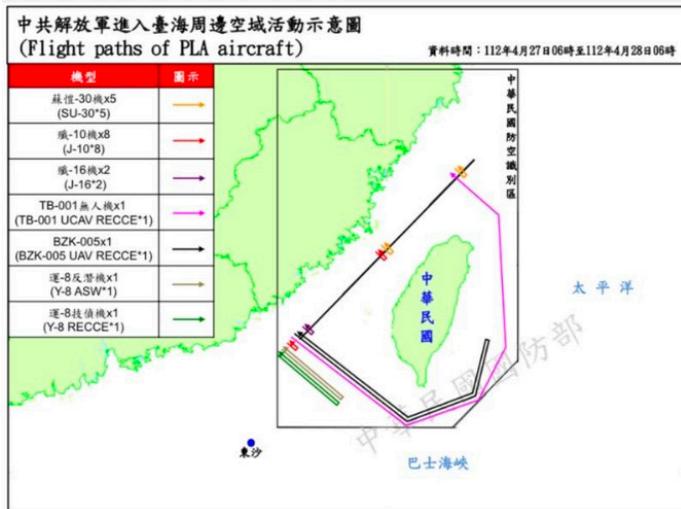


Image: A MND graphic showing the April 28 flight paths of a Chinese TB-001 UAV that circumnavigated Taiwan in a counter-clockwise pattern, and a BZK-005 UAV that flew to the east of Taiwan, as well as the sorties of supporting aircraft. (Image source: Taiwan MND)

of this article, three such flights have occurred: on April 28, May 3, and May 11.

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April 28

On this day, a TB-001 *Tengden* UAV flew the first publicly reported [circumnavigation flight around Taiwan](#)—flying first through the Bashi Channel south of Taiwan, and then circling the island in a counter-clockwise direction around its eastern side. On the same day, a BZK-005 *Chang Ying* drone flew a similar flight path for roughly the first half of its sortie, but doubled back at a point east of Taiwan and returned along its original track (see accompanying graphic).

- The April 28 drone flights were also accompanied by [sorties of other PLA aircraft](#): five Su-30 fighters operating at the north and the center of the Taiwan Strait, with shallow penetration of the centerline; eight J-10 fighters operating at the center of the Strait, crossing the centerline; and two J-16 fighters at the south end of the Strait, also crossing the

centerline. Two Y-8 patrol aircraft (one an anti-submarine patrol variant, the other a reconnaissance variant) also conducted flights in the southwest quadrant of Taiwan’s ADIZ, likely carrying out supporting reconnaissance operations.

May 3

Five days after the first UAV circumnavigation flight, a BZK-005 Chang Ying drone [circumnavigated Taiwan](#) in a [clockwise pattern](#), following a flight path that approached Taiwan from the north, continued through airspace to the east of Taiwan, and passed through the Bashi Channel south of Taiwan on a home-ward track.

- As with the previous flight on April 30, the BZ-005 flight was also accompanied by [supporting sorties of PLA manned aircraft](#): three Su-30 fighters operating at the north end of the Taiwan Strait, with centerline penetration; four J-10 fighters operating at the center of the Strait, crossing the centerline; and two J-16 fighters at the south end of the Strait, also crossing the centerline. A total of three Y-8 patrol aircraft (an anti-submarine variant, a reconnaissance variant, and an electronic warfare variant) also conducted flights in the southwest quadrant of Taiwan’s ADIZ, once again likely conducting supporting reconnaissance operations.

May 11

After a week-long hiatus following the second UAV circumnavigation flight, on May 11 another [series of long-range UAV flights](#)

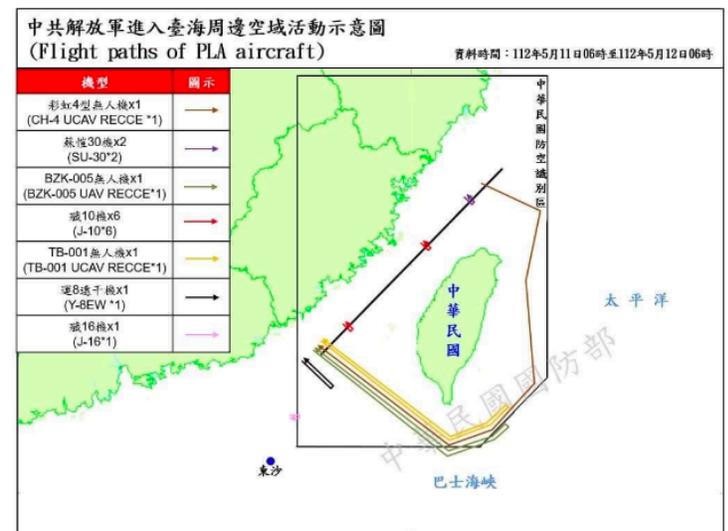


Image: A MND graphic showing the May 11 flight paths of a Chinese CH-4 UAV that circumnavigated Taiwan in a clockwise pattern, and BZK-005 and TB-001 UAVs that flew through the Bashi Channel, as well as the sorties of supporting aircraft. (Image source: Taiwan MND)

[occurred](#). On this date, a CH-4 *Cai Hong* UAV circumnavigated Taiwan in a clockwise path, similar to the route on May 3. Two additional UAV flights also occurred—involving a TB-001 and a BZK-005—running a partial route through the Bashi Channel and back (similar to the BZK-005 route on April 28, although apparently not extending as far around the island’s eastern side).

- In addition to the three UAVs, other PLA supporting aircraft were also active: two Su-30 fighters flew at the north end of the Taiwan Strait, crossing the centerline; a total of six J-10 fighters flew routes in the central and southern areas of the Taiwan Strait, crossing the centerline; and a Y-8 electronic warfare aircraft flew a probable reconnaissance mission in the southwest quadrant of Taiwan’s ADIZ.

PRC Media Commentary on the Circumnavigation Flights

Following a recent pattern in which PRC media outlets have actively publicized military operations around Taiwan for propaganda purposes, the UAV circumnavigation flights have been

extensively touted in PRC sources. For example, the nationalist tabloid [Global Times asserted on May 4](#)—the day after the second flight—that the UAV flights were part of a larger demonstration of the PLA’s “enhanced capabilities [for] safeguarding national sovereignty, security and development interests,” which included ongoing naval exercise activity in the sea spaces adjoining Taiwan. The paper asserted that “the drones could conduct reconnaissance on the eastern side of the island and provide target guidance for fire strikes,” as well as potentially “carry[ing] out decapitation strikes on secessionist leaders should a conflict break out.” The *Global Times* further noted that “the PLA has been holding routine patrols and exercises around the island of Taiwan, including with drones, so such island encirclement drone flights could also become regular [in practice].”

PRC sources seemed particularly interested in stressing the idea that UAVs equipped with air-to-surface missiles could be a weapon for conducting “decapitation” strikes against leadership targets in Taiwan. For example, [one state media posting](#)

Chinese Reconnaissance / Strike UAVs Circumnavigating Taiwan

The [TB-001 *Tengden* \(騰盾\) \(AKA “Scorpion”\)](#) is a twin-engine, twin-tailed drone manufactured by Sichuan Tengden Technology, which possesses a reported range of 3,700 miles, and is capable of both aerial reconnaissance and strike missions with air-to-ground munitions. The [BZK-005 *Chang Ying* \(長鷹, “Long Eagle”\)](#)—a platform produced by Beihang University and the Harbin Industry Aircraft Group, and which is often [compared to the US-made Global Hawk UAV](#) in design and capabilities—conducted the second reported [circumnavigation of Taiwan by a PLA drone](#) on May 3. The [CH-4 *Cai Hong* \(彩虹\) \(“Rainbow”\)](#) is a long-range, air-to-ground strike-capable drone manufactured by the China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation (CASC), which is often [compared in design to the US-designed MQ-9 Reaper](#) drone system. All three platforms demonstrate the advances made by PRC state-affiliated technology research and development institutions in developing more advanced UAV aircraft for military roles—as well as the extensive [reverse-engineering of US drone technology](#) that has played a major role in China’s own design advancements.



Image left: A file photo of a TB-001 drone (undated). Image source: [Sohu.com](#))

Image right: A file photo of a BZK-005 drone from a PLA military parade (undated). (Image source: [CNR.cn](#))

about the circumnavigation flights described missile-capable UAVs as “decapitation weapons” (斬首武器), and mused that such flights could represent the initiation of “decapitation operations” (斬首行動) directed at Taiwan. [Another such article](#) described missile-launching UAVs such as the TB-001 as “decapitation magic weapons” (斬首神器), and predicted that such UAV flights around the island would now become regular components of PLA operations.

Conclusions

The commencement of publicly reported military UAV flights circumnavigating Taiwan is likely intended to provide the PLA with benefits in two areas. The first of these lies in the realm of tactical reconnaissance, wherein regular flights by unmanned, air-breathing platforms could provide the PLA with additional electronic and photo reconnaissance collection on military targets and infrastructure facilities located along the eastern coastal regions of the island. Such collection will be important to PLA planners considering operations as a part of a potential future blockade—as was reportedly practiced during the PLA’s “Joint Sword” (聯合利劍) exercise that followed the meeting between Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) and US Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy in April 2023.

The second area is likely the more important one for PLA and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials: the psychological realm, as part of the PLA’s ongoing political warfare efforts to apply coercive pressure against both the government and population of Taiwan. [China’s “gray zone” operations against Taiwan](#), as well as major military exercises such as those conducted around Taiwan in August 2022 (see [here](#) and [here](#)), are calculated at least as much for political and psychological effect as they are for improving the operational capacity of PLA forces. It is in this respect that the propaganda emphasis on UAV “decapitation operations” should be understood: the CCP propaganda apparatus wishes to promote a narrative of stealthy and ever-present platforms capable of eliminating “separatist” officials at any time.

The introduction of UAV circumnavigation flights around Taiwan does not represent a dramatic step forward in PLA capabilities—except perhaps in the limited terms of greater employment of UAVs for longer-range reconnaissance. It does represent, however, the latest gradual escalatory step in levying greater coercive military pressure against the island. Just like the now near-daily PLA flights into Taiwan’s southwestern ADIZ and the [flights across the Taiwan Strait centerline](#) that have been a normal feature of Taiwan Strait air activity since August 2022, UAV

circumnavigation flights may now be expected to form part of the “new normal” of PLA aviation activity around Taiwan.

The main point: In the last week of April and the first half of May, the PLA flew the first publicly acknowledged circumnavigation flights around Taiwan by unmanned aerial vehicles. Such flights may now be expected to become a regular feature of PLA aviation activity around Taiwan.

[1] Of note, one PRC media source consulted for this article asserted that a Chinese TB-001 flight conducted during the [2022 Han Kuang \(漢光演習\) military exercise](#) represented the first actual UAV circumnavigation flight around Taiwan—but that this flight had not been publicized, due to the fact that “at that time the two sides handled it in a low-key fashion.” [This assertion](#) has not been corroborated in other sources, such as the official daily reports of PLA aviation activity near Taiwan reported by Taiwan’s MND.

Porcupine or Honey Badger?: The “Overall Defense Concept” and Asymmetry in Taiwan’s Defense Strategy

By: Lt. Gen. Wallace ‘Chip’ Gregson (USMC, ret.) and John Dotson

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Considerable discussion has taken place in recent years regarding [Taiwan’s “Overall Defense Concept”](#) (ODC, 整體防禦概念), a series of ideas most closely associated with former Republic of China (ROC) Chief of the General Staff Admiral Lee Hsi-ming (李喜明). During Admiral Lee’s tenure (2017-2019), the ODC was promoted as a new vision for Taiwan’s defense: one that placed an emphasis on defensive warfare in the littoral zone, and which emphasized acquiring a larger number of smaller and dispersible platforms possessing the capability to strike against the superior military resources of China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA). While the ODC appears to have fallen out of official favor within Taiwan’s Ministry of National Defense (MND, 中華民國國防部) ([see discussion here](#)), at least some of the ODC’s focus on “asymmetry” has influenced Taiwan’s current defense

planning.

The emergence of the ODC connected to an earlier concept that had long been promoted by many US-based defense commentators. In 2008, US Naval War College Professor William Murray [first articulated](#) what became known colloquially as the “Porcupine Strategy” for Taiwan’s defense. The central idea was that Taiwan should focus on the defensive capabilities that would make it difficult for an invader to overwhelm and incorporate it. Using the metaphor, Taiwan’s defense planners were advised that their defense posture should be like that of a porcupine, a large rodent that protects itself from predators with a coat of sharp spines or quills.

The concept is clear enough, but the porcupine metaphor is limited by the passive nature of the animal’s defensive behavior: the spines and quills cannot be launched or projected, and porcupines are not animals known for their agility. It is not representative of the posture that the ODC calls for. Furthermore, Taiwan’s armed forces do not seem to be attracted to the porcupine as a symbol. (A quick perusal of Taiwan squadron patches will reveal a range of cobras, dragons, devils, spectral dogs, and others, but no porcupines.) The porcupine’s range is also generally limited to North America, so it is not even a native Asian symbol. Accordingly, it is time to replace this zoological metaphor with one that is more active and aggressive—and one better aligned with the more proactive posture called for in the Overall Defense Concept.



Image: A Taiwan Air Force pilot wearing an unofficial patch that became popular in Spring 2023, which depicts a Formosan black bear punching Winnie the Pooh (symbolic of Chinese leader Xi Jinping [习近平]). While there are many such animal metaphors common among the iconography of Taiwan’s armed forces, the porcupine has not been a popular choice. (Image source: [Taiwan News](#))

The Precision Strike Regime and What It Means for Taiwan’s Defense

Taiwan seeks an active defense, focusing on “denial” of territory instead of “control” of it. Mission kills and attacking the enemy’s operational centers of gravity instead of an attrition fight are in order. [An excellent “draft” paper by Admiral Lee](#) calls for an active defense capability, replete with asymmetric operational concepts and capabilities.

Today’s [precision strike regime](#)—which combines pervasive, ubiquitous surveillance with high speed weapons accurate at distance—must be harnessed to Taiwan’s advantage. Operating within that regime demands that Taiwan’s armed forces assume a widely distributed, operationally resilient posture. Forces must be agile, mobile, and hostile, with precision weapons that engage at distance to strike enemy forces before they can close the gap on Taiwan or any of its numerous outlying islands. The close fight is always possible, but an aggressive, active defense can prevent that or greatly increase the odds in Taiwan’s favor. The porcupine is not known for any of those traits, and a passive defense posture is not attractive or possible.

The Honey Badger: a Better Metaphor for the Defense Taiwan Needs

Fortunately, Asia hosts a carnivorous mammal known for its strength, ferocity, and aggressive attitude when facing down predators. It has a high pain tolerance, seemingly immune to toxic venom and bee stings. It is the [honey badger](#), an animal with an impressive internet and YouTube presence. Younger generations find it very appealing. An [online encyclopedia](#) offers an apt description of this creature’s active defense as follows:

*“Honey badgers are also well known for their tremendous courage and fearlessness. They have been observed fighting, killing, and eating extremely venomous snakes as well as **chasing adult lions from their territory**. Honey badgers are relatively slow compared to other carnivores found in their region, so their **best form of defense is offence**. Their strong jaws, sharp teeth and claws and their ability to rapidly move backwards makes them an extremely formidable foe” (emphasis added).*

The small but fierce honey badger is a far more apt metaphor for the defense posture Taiwan needs, in contrast with the prickly but passive porcupine.

What Does “Asymmetry” Mean for Taiwan?

Taiwan is frequently urged by defense commentators to seek

“asymmetry,” an ill-defined term that has been devalued by being applied to certain weapons. (One of the authors has previously offered some discussion as to what this vague term might mean for Taiwan in a [previous article](#).) Both weapons systems and operational concepts may be symmetric or asymmetric, depending upon context. Of course, some weapons are more readily applicable to asymmetric operational concepts—but we must develop the appropriate concepts and then apply the weapons to them, rather than looking at one or another weapon as some asymmetric panacea that will magically redeem flawed concepts.

“Smart” weapons, especially if they are small and agile, are often described as “asymmetric” in comparison to larger (and likely more expensive) “conventional” weapons. As with any instrument or tool, it comes down to how they are used. “Asymmetry” as applied to operational concepts and tactics can be, and must be, taught to commanders at all levels—to include non-commissioned officers likely to be commanding widely distributed small units under fire.

Asymmetry demands a new look. A nation’s forces are variously suited for space, land, air, sea, or undersea environments. They may exist, sequentially and simultaneously, in one of four modes. These start with *production*, where a nation recruits and trains the force while manufacturing the necessary weapons and equipment. This is also where a nation develops the strategic, operational, and tactical concepts it needs. Next is *logistics*, where fixing, fueling, eating, and sleeping occur. Following that is *operations*, where forces move toward conflict and come into contact with the enemy. The *tactical* state is the one in which where the master arming switch is on, and weapons are fired. This is also where tactical maneuvering and intelligence gathering occur. One can be attacked in any mode of existence, but shooting happens only in the tactical mode.

For example, an airplane versus another airplane in the tactical mode is a symmetric engagement (as is ship versus ship, etc.), in which both sides can shoot. Such confrontations are staples of war movies, and are the costliest form of combat engagements. A first degree of asymmetry occurs when a ship fires at an airplane, an airplane attacks a ship, or a ground unit attacks a ship—all examples of units deployed and operating in the tactical mode, though in differing realms of combat.

Substantially higher degrees of effective asymmetry are available. Asymmetric, non-tactical engagements offer the shooter the greatest advantage because the target is unable to return fire. Such engagements occur when forces in the tactical mode

engage enemy forces in the operations, logistics, or production modes. Reduced to their essence, they can be described as shooting at an enemy unable to shoot back. For a modern example, look no further than the early phase of the Ukraine war, when small, widely distributed Ukrainian ground units in the tactical mode used Javelin missiles to destroy the fuel tankers (logistics mode) sustaining the Russian armored forces. [1]

Conclusions

Lest all of these considerations be written off as needlessly academic matters of military theory, we would argue that Taiwan and its allies face daunting odds. The entire population of Taiwan, and its friends, must be given reason to believe that Taiwan’s people and armed forces can prevail against the numerical odds, “[foiling the PLA’s mission of successfully invading and exerting political control over Taiwan](#).”

Aviation and naval forces have some challenges, but ground forces need immediate action as well. It is imperative to develop the ability of the Taiwan Army and Marine Corps to play a meaningful and decisive role in the defeat of an invasion before it reaches Taiwan’s shore. Modern operational concepts, combined with the right weapons, are needed. Recognizing this, Taiwan Defense Minister Chiu Kuo-cheng (邱國正) is seeking “[range, precision, and mobility](#)” for his forces. Small, widely distributed, operationally resilient, agile, and well-led units equipped with appropriate weapons will meet the minister’s edict and be decisive. Together with support from sea and air forces, they can deny the PLA effective control of the sea. Such a capability would also reverse centuries of battlefield practice, allowing ground forces to inflict a larger share of the killing, while suffering a smaller share of the dying, than ever before. Such a “honey badger strategy” would serve Taiwan well.

The main point: While past arguments for a “porcupine strategy” for Taiwan’s defense were not without merit, the concept is ultimately insufficient. Instead, Taiwan should adopt a “honey badger strategy,” proactively and aggressively transforming its armed forces to enable them to halt a Chinese attack before it can make landfall.

[1] Readers seeking a more fulsome description of this concept can find it in: Lt. Gen. Philip D. Shutler, (USMC, ret.), “Thinking About Warfare,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, November 1987. This award-winning essay became a course taught at the National War College.

Ma Ying-jeou Goes to China to Set the KMT Platform

By: David J. Keegan

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It has been a busy travel year for Taiwan politicians. Much as they do before every presidential election, potential candidates have headed to the United States in recent months, always centering their visits on Washington, DC. During these trips, the candidates meet with US administration officials, members of Congress, and think tanks to convey appreciation for their support for Taiwan's military, diplomatic, and economic security, while providing assurances that they will avoid destabilizing relations with China.

So far, Terry Gou (郭台銘), the founder of Foxconn, [visited Washington in March](#) and [announced](#) on his return to Taiwan that he will seek the Kuomintang (KMT, 中國國民黨) nomination as its presidential candidate. Ko Wen-je (柯文哲), former mayor of Taipei and founder of the Taiwan People's Party (TPP, 台灣民眾黨), [traveled to DC in April](#), where he also signaled his interest in being a presidential candidate. However, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民主進步黨) candidate for president, Taiwan's current Vice President William Lai Ching-te (賴清德), will have difficulty traveling to Washington given the US policy against Taiwan's president and vice president traveling to the United States—though there are already rumors that Lai may follow in President Tsai Ing-wen's (蔡英文) steps by [transiting through the country](#). This might enable him to meet quietly with US officials, perhaps from the State Department and the National Security Council, outside Washington.

The person many pundits anticipate will win the KMT nomination for president, New Taipei City Mayor Hou You-yi (侯友宜), who [won reelection](#) in November 2022, has [traveled to Singapore](#), but has not indicated if he plans to visit the United States. Look for that to change if he does win the nomination.

KMT Elder Ma Ying-jeou Goes to China

The most striking exception to this familiar US-centric travel pattern was undertaken by someone who will not be on the ballot next January: Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九), the former two-term president of the Republic of China (2008-2016) and the dominant elder of the KMT. From March 27 to April 7 Ma [visited China](#), stopping in Nanjing, Changsha, Xiangtan, Wuhan, and Shanghai.

Ma [stated](#) that he wanted to pay his respects at the memorial to the founder of the KMT, Sun Yat-sen (孫逸仙), in Nanjing; visit the hometown of his parents; and [lead a delegation of Taiwan students](#) to interact with students in China. This sounds like an almost meaningless itinerary, the kind we all imagine for ourselves but always put off because we have other things to do. Was Ma's visit to China, just as Taiwan began its presidential election campaign, indeed personal—or did Ma have a strategic objective for this visit? If he did have an objective, what was it, and does it matter?

The Origins and Difficulties of the “1992 Consensus”

To understand Ma's visit, it is important to understand what this political moment looks like for the KMT. The two most recent Taiwan presidential elections have been, it is fair to say, disasters for the KMT. In 2016, the KMT under Chairman Eric Chu Li-luan (朱立倫) selected Hung Hsiu-chu (洪秀柱) as the party's presidential candidate. Notably, Hung [advocated](#) for the ultimate unification of Taiwan and China, a position out of sync with popular opinion. She quickly fell far behind the DPP candidate, Tsai Ing-wen, [causing Chu to push Hung aside](#) and install himself as the KMT presidential candidate. Nevertheless, Chu subsequently lost to Tsai by over 25 percent.

Two years later, after [winning many of the local elections](#) held in November 2018, the KMT appeared to be in a very strong position heading into the 2020 presidential elections. The party nominated Han Kuo-yu (韓國瑜), the newly elected mayor of Kaohsiung. Han's populist style, as well as his victory in a city known as the heartland of the DPP, had made him the darling of the KMT. Like Hung, however, Han quickly adopted what many saw as a [pro-unification position](#), far too close to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) at the same time that Beijing was [crushing dissent in Hong Kong](#). The [outcome](#) was a second successive rout for the KMT.

As Taiwan heads toward the 2024 presidential elections, the KMT once again looks to be on a roll, coming out of strong victories in the 2022 local elections, although opinion polls suggest that [the KMT has lost support](#) since that victory. With current President Tsai Ing-wen of the DPP coming to the end of her second term, KMT supporters are hoping that Taiwanese will decide that it is time for a change and vote for the KMT.

Presidential elections in Taiwan differ from local elections in one crucial respect: they turn on issues of ethnic identity—are we Taiwanese, Chinese, or both?—and national futures—is Taiwan part of China, fated to unify with mainland China, or a separate state? The DPP has a clear answer to both of these questions:



Image: Ma Ying-jeou (front row, center) and members of his travel delegation at the Sun Yat-sen Memorial in Nanjing (March 28). (Image source: [CGTN](#))

we are Taiwanese, not Chinese, and Taiwan is a state separate from China even if its official title is “Republic of China” (ROC). By contrast, the KMT position is less clear. The traditional position of the KMT has been that the people of Taiwan are Chinese and that Taiwan is a part of China. In accordance with this line of thinking, the party has long maintained that Taiwan and China are destined to ultimately unify, with only the timing and modality to be determined. The challenge for the KMT is that most Taiwanese—especially most younger Taiwanese—increasingly see themselves as Taiwanese and oppose any unification with the the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

The traditional KMT position has been encapsulated in what former Secretary-General of the National Security Council [Su Chi](#) (蘇起) called the “1992 Consensus” (九二共識). In 1992, unofficial representatives of Taiwan and China [met in Hong Kong](#) to arrange a meeting the following year in Singapore to reduce barriers hindering business across the Taiwan Strait. The key challenge at that time was to arrive at some formulation to bridge the very different ways in which the two sides understood their relationship. While they agreed that there was one China, they could not agree on which government legitimately ruled China—the People’s Republic of China on the mainland, or the Republic of China on Taiwan. They decided that the two sides would each say that there was one China, but both would define it in a way that signaled their own primacy. This somewhat clumsy compromise enabled the 1993 economic talks to proceed to the benefit of both sides, and it was mostly forgotten in subsequent years. However, the KMT later [resurrected the term](#) in the early 2000s—using it as a cudgel to criticize the first president of Taiwan elected from the DPP, Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁), and his advocacy for a Taiwan identity less tied to China and its authoritarian government.

After the party’s defeat in the 2020 presidential elections, some in the KMT suggested that the [party’s defeat](#) was a result of its close association with the concept of “One-China” encapsulated in the “1992 Consensus.” Johnny Chiang (江啟臣), newly elected as KMT chairman, appointed a [KMT reform committee](#) to consider how to handle the issue. Ultimately, the group concluded that the “1992 Consensus” should be understood as “a historical description of past cross-Strait interaction,” rather than as a basis for future cross-Strait dialogue. [Younger party activists welcomed this effort](#) to discard a policy that had alienated younger voters, but the older generation of KMT leaders accused the reformers of mimicking DPP policy. When this new approach was put to a vote at the [KMT party congress](#) in September 2020, it was defeated, largely at the behest of older party members. Chiang was later defeated in his bid for reelection as party chairman by Eric Chu. Communist Party Chairman [Xi Jinping](#) (習近平) [sent a congratulatory note](#) to Chu, who responded by expressing his hope that the KMT and CCP could cooperate on the basis of the “1992 Consensus” to secure cross-Strait peace and stability.

Hou You-yi Waffles

When Hou You-yi won reelection in New Taipei City, he [campaigned](#) primarily as an effective manager of local issues. However, he made no statements on national or identity issues. As he considers whether to seek the KMT nomination for president, Hou has come under increasing pressure to take a position on cross-Strait issues generally—and the “1992 Consensus” in particular. To lead the KMT back to victory, Hou will need the support of both the “deep blue” KMT diehards and younger independent voters.

Thus far, his general approach appears to be to deemphasize the “Consensus,” instead [arguing](#) that cross-Strait policy should be based on strengthening Taiwan’s democracy and defense capabilities while reducing cross-Strait antagonism. He has also added that he [opposes](#) Taiwan independence, but considers the ROC effectively independent. It appears that Hou is seeking to avoid discarding KMT orthodoxy while simultaneously keeping sufficient distance from endorsing Chinese ethnic identity and cross-Strait unification to avoid antagonizing younger voters.

Ma Travels to China to Bring the “1992 Consensus” Back to Life

As Hou and the KMT ponder how to balance their platforms for the election, Ma has decided to stake out his commitment to “One-China” and the “1992 Consensus” in a dramatic fashion that he hopes will force the party to follow his lead. Notably, his trip to China overlapped with President Tsai’s trip to Central

America, which included two transits of the United States. On the eve of Ma's flight from Taipei to Shanghai, Hsiao Hsu-tsen (蕭旭岑), the executive director of the Ma Ying-jeou Foundation, [contrasted Ma's agenda with Tsai's](#): "Instead of buying more weapons, it would be better to increase exchanges between young people of the two sides of the Taiwan Strait."

Ma began his visit to China by reasserting the KMT's roots on the mainland by paying his respects at the memorial in Nanjing to Sun Yat-sen, the founder of the party and the ROC. [Ma told reporters](#) afterwards that "The people of both sides of the Taiwan Strait belong to the Chinese nation, are children of the Yan and the Yellow Emperors." His appeal to ancient Chinese sage rulers echoed [a theme struck by the 2022 PRC White Paper](#), "The Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era." This theme was [repeated by Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping](#) in his October 16, 2022 report to the Twentieth Communist Party Congress, who stated that "Blood is thicker than water, and people on both sides of the Straits share the bond of kinship." [Ma eulogized Sun](#) as the founder of the Republic of China, the first democratic republic in Asia, and said Sun shaped "what the Chinese race should be today."

Ma then traveled to Changsha in Hunan, where he led a discussion between the 28 students who accompanied him from Taiwan and 32 Hunan University students. [Ma told the gathering](#) that "our country has been divided into two parts. One is the Taiwan area, and the other is the mainland area. Both are part of our Republic of China. Both are China."

Ma then went to Xiangtan to visit the gravesites of his ancestors, saying that he was deeply moved by the chance to return and meet family members. His visit to his ancestral home came shortly before the Chinese "Tomb Sweeping Day" festival (清明節), when families honor their ancestors at their graves. Ma's family gesture may evoke contradictory emotions among Taiwanese. In one sense, he was following a custom widely practiced in Taiwan. In another sense, however, he was saying that his ancestral home is in Hunan, not Taiwan. That is a very different characterization of his ethnic identity than the one he offered when he was inaugurated as President of the ROC in Taipei in 2008. At that time, he [spoke of](#) "We, the people of Taiwan" and of "our homeland-Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen and Mazu," having campaigned as a "new Taiwanese." The idea that a Taiwanese would see their ancestral origins in mainland China is not something that would resonate with a large majority of the island's residents, most of whom see their ancestral origins as being on the island.

Ma's final event was a meeting with Song Tao (宋濤), the director of China's Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO, 國務院台灣事務辦公室). [Song offered](#) "cordial greetings and best wishes from General Secretary Xi Jinping to Mr. Ma Ying-jeou" (thereby reminding everyone that Xi was general secretary, while Ma was only "mister," not a "former president"). Song cast the visit by Ma and the students who accompanied him as a family event, once again presenting Taiwan and China as part of the same Chinese nation, adding "we are a family, we have a common blood, a common culture, a common history, a common vision." Song assured his visitors that peaceful cross-Strait relations could be achieved, provided the "1992 Consensus" was accepted.

On his return to Taiwan the following day, [Ma told those welcoming him](#) that what most inspired him was that "the '1992 Consensus' has been brought back to life." On her own return to Taiwan, [President Tsai countered](#) that Ma's approach reflected the realities of the 1970s and not today. In a reminder of how different and how much more militarized cross-Strait relations have become over the past few decades, [China's People's Liberation Army \(PLA\) Air Force and Navy deployed](#) 70 or more aircraft and nine or more ships to operate near Taiwan on each of the three days after Ma and Tsai returned home.

Symbolism to Set the KMT Platform

Ma Ying-jeou's visit to China was an extended exercise in symbolism. There were no substantive talks and no negotiations. There was no discussion of the meaning of the "1992 Consensus," how much the two sides agreed on, or how much the two sides could tolerate the other's position. Instead, the "1992 Consensus" was treated more as a magic talisman, promising cross-Strait peace. Ma did not even meet with Wang Huning (王滬寧), the member of the Communist Party Politburo Standing Committee (PSC, 中央政治局常委會) charged with Taiwan policy. That kind of policy meeting took place a month earlier, when KMT Vice Chairman Andrew Hsia (夏立言) traveled to China. Instead, Ma used his events and remarks to emphasize that he is Chinese, that the KMT is Chinese, and that all Taiwanese are Chinese ethnically and culturally.

As the most senior leader in a party that values seniority, Ma proclaimed that the KMT is a Chinese party, imagining a China that finds its unity in mythical sage rulers. Ma insisted repeatedly that the "1992 Consensus" is a core element of the KMT's policy and identity. However, Ma's approach poses a long-term risk for his party. The KMT insists that expressing common cause with the Communist Party enables them to secure peace, but it also risks implicating the KMT in the Communist Party's efforts

to coerce Taiwan into accepting unification on Beijing's terms.

More immediately, Ma's approach puts Hou You-yi (or whoever emerges as the KMT presidential candidate) in a quandary: does he champion the "1992 Consensus" to win Ma's support (and with it the support of the KMT's older members who identify with China), or does he move away from Ma's platform in the hopes of winning younger voters who identify as Taiwanese and fear China? Whichever approach the KMT candidate chooses, he risks losing part of the support he needs to win the election.

The main point: While former President Ma Ying-jeou framed his visit to China in primarily personal terms, it was nevertheless highly symbolic. For KMT presidential hopefuls, the trip poses difficult questions about party identity and cross-strait relations, potentially making the 2024 election far more complex.

Danger on the Horizon: Lessons from Tsai Ing-wen's Latest US Transits

By: Michael Mazza

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In late March and early April, Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) [visited New York and California](#) on her way to and from diplomatic visits to Guatemala and Belize. These so-called "transit stops" revealed much about Taipei, Washington, and Beijing. Observers in all three capitals had been holding their breath since Kevin McCarthy secured the speakership of the House of Representatives. McCarthy had previously [indicated](#) that he would like to visit Taiwan. Such a visit would have been in accord with the US "One-China Policy" and with historical precedent, but Beijing worried that a McCarthy visit would deepen what it sees as an American shift away from its "One-China" framework—while Taipei and Washington were concerned about a more intense replay of China's [post-Pelosi-visit antics](#) of last August.

In the end, Tsai and McCarthy met in California, while China's response—both in the leadup to the meeting and in its wake—was, in some ways, more restrained than it had been seven months earlier. Even so, sighs of relief may be premature.

Responsible Stakeholders

There is a tendency among some in Washington to use Taiwan

policy to punish China or to score points against political opponents. For them, Taiwan is a cudgel, too quickly grasped because doing so is an easy way to prove oneself tough on China. This is problematic for Taiwan, whose people are likely to feel the pain regardless of whether they are getting hammered, or getting used as a hammer. But it is also a problem for the United States, as it raises tensions in the Taiwan Strait, in US-China relations, and in US-Taiwan relations without making meaningful policy progress.

One conclusion to draw from the Tsai transits is that, while there are vocal individuals that seek to use Taiwan to poke China in the eye, they are not actually running the show. Josh Rogin [reported](#) that Tsai, after consulting with the Biden Administration, decided against opening to the press the New York reception at which the Hudson Institute awarded her its Global Leadership Award, and the right-leaning think tank complied. Neither Tsai nor Hudson has released a full transcript of her remarks, instead publicizing only brief summaries. Here, Hudson respected Taiwan's assessment of its own interests.

Speaker McCarthy did so as well. On March 8, Kathrin Hille and Demetri Sevastopulo [reported](#) for *Financial Times* that "Tsai Ing-wen has convinced US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy to meet in California rather than Taipei to avoid an aggressive Chinese military response." There were also concerns in Taipei about how a McCarthy visit later in the year could interact with Taiwan's presidential campaign season, which will begin kicking into high gear in the summer. McCarthy deserves plaudits for refraining from insisting on making the trip despite his previously stated intentions, even though Taipei might have found it difficult to say no if he did.

Overall, the transits showed that the Tsai Administration, the Biden Administration, and the speaker's office are capable of



Image: US Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy and Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, California (April 5). (Image source: [Time](#))

exercising pragmatic caution without sacrificing on important principles. Tsai did not shy away from receiving, in person, an award from an influential Washington think tank, nor did she shy away from meeting with Speaker McCarthy, despite Beijing's rhetorical insistence that a meeting with the speaker was unacceptable regardless of location. As a Chinese embassy spokesman [put it](#) in early March: "No matter [if] it is the Taiwan leaders coming to the United States or the US leaders visiting Taiwan, it could lead to another serious collision in the China-US relationship." American and Taiwanese leaders, working together, called that bluff, and rightly so.

Good News, Bad News

As for China's response to the Tsai transits, it is a good news/bad news story. First, the good news: Beijing's [reaction to the Tsai-McCarthy meeting](#) was more muted than its reaction to then-Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan last August. People's Liberation Army (PLA) activities near Taiwan were less intense and less sustained, and did not involve live-fire drills. There were fewer cyberattacks on Taiwan government websites and fewer personal sanctions levied on Taiwanese and American individuals. The economic pressure that China imposed was not designed to have an immediate sting. These differences from last August are positive. There were not serious concerns about escalation as the Chinese response unfolded last month. Perhaps as a result, observers did not rush to label this latest episode a new "Taiwan Strait Crisis," as [some did last August](#).

Even so, some aspects of China's response are deeply troubling. Days before Tsai's departure for her visits to the United States and Latin America, Honduras severed diplomatic ties with Taipei and established formal relations with Beijing, with the Honduran foreign ministry [describing](#) Taiwan as "an inalienable part of Chinese territory." This was the ninth time in Tsai's tenure that China has poached a diplomatic ally from Taiwan, rendering the tactic something of a dull-edged tool. Its continued use is troubling nonetheless.

Taiwan now has just 13 diplomatic allies, down from 22 a decade ago. China seems unconcerned that as that roster continues to shrink, stability in the Taiwan Strait might suffer. But there is a real risk for Beijing here. As I [wrote](#) for East Asia Forum after Solomon Islands and Kiribati severed diplomatic relations in 2019, "If one day Taiwan finds itself with few or no diplomatic allies, the door will be open to a reassessment of Taiwan's existence as the Republic of China (ROC)." Beijing seems unlikely to welcome a conversation in Taiwan about what direction the country should set for itself in a world where the ROC has only

a limited or no recognized legal standing. Yet China continues to push Taiwan in that direction. In doing so, it is tempting fate.

China's response to the Tsai transits also included a PLA component. April 10 saw the highest-ever daily intrusions of Chinese military aircraft into Taiwan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ). The *Shandong*, China's first indigenously produced aircraft carrier and second overall, patrolled to the east of Taiwan for the first time since its commissioning in 2019. The truly concerning activities, however, were quieter, yet potentially far more dangerous.

On the same day Tsai and McCarthy met in California, the Fujian Maritime Safety Administration [announced](#) a three-day patrol and inspection operation in parts of the Taiwan Strait, which it said would include "on-site inspections" of vessels. The Maritime Safety Administration's *Haixun 06* patrol ship led a group of law enforcement vessels during the operation, which crossed the Taiwan Strait median line and which one of Taiwan's own coast guard vessels shadowed. Taiwan's coast guard instructed civilian vessels to refuse inspection and to call upon the coast guard for assistance if necessary. In short, conditions were ripe for an at-sea confrontation, with military assets certainly lurking in the vicinity.

In the event, the *Haixun 06* never tried to board a Taiwanese or any other vessel and the three-day patrol ended without incident. China's [imposition of a no-fly zone](#) north of Taiwan, which was initially announced as a three-day event but then bizarrely reduced to 27 minutes after Taiwan government complaints, likewise ended without incident. The important thing, however, is not the lack of enforcement this time. Rather, it is the demonstration of a tool that China is ready to use in less-than-crisis situations—which could itself very well lead to a crisis. China's decision to pull these tools from its toolbox amounted to a claim to the right to deny Taiwan and other international actors access to waters and skies that are beyond Chinese jurisdiction. It was, in this sense, a major escalation. It is worth noting that American crisis simulations focused on the Taiwan Strait often start with China imposing sea or sky closures; Beijing surely knows this, and may be signaling that it is very comfortable playing with fire.

The bottom line is that, in the face of Taiwanese and American restraint, China displayed a troubling inability to pocket what it could reasonably conceive to be (or spin as) small victories. Even amid a response to the Tsai "transit stops" that Beijing designed to appear less threatening than those of last August, Xi Jinping (习近平) could not help but find new ways to pressure—and, yes, to provoke—Taiwan and its overseas partners. Xi is painting

himself into a corner and courting catastrophe in the process.

The main point: Tsai Ing-wen's US transits showed that the Tsai Administration, the Biden Administration, and the House Speaker's office are capable of exercising pragmatic caution without sacrificing important principles. But in the face of Taiwanese and American restraint, China displayed a preference for escalation.