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## What US Air Force Re-Optimization Means for Taiwan

By: Eric Chan

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In February 2024, the leadership of the US Air Force (USAF) introduced a set of sweeping reforms, under the mantra of “[Re-Optimization for Great Power Competition](#).” These will be some of the biggest changes for the service since its inception, designed so that the USAF can better compete with, deter, and if need be, defeat aggression from the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

There are some 24 areas of reform, covering the service’s organization, manning, readiness, and weapons development. However, in general terms, these reforms can be seen as having two primary goals: *rapid force generation and readiness for a high-end fight*. The re-optimization goes beyond operations. As the [USAF Chief of Staff has stated](#), it can be thought of as an attempt to build the USAF from scratch, given the current strategic environment.

In this article, I will look at some of the major areas of reform, along with the implications and ideas they contain for Taiwan’s defense.

### **Rapid Force Generation**

The USAF has a long tradition of being an expeditionary air force. Once the USAF has completed preparations for intervention, opponents who have sought to directly challenge the United States have [historically been crushed](#) by an overwhelming combination of technology and training. This reached an apogee during the long global war on terror, with adversaries rarely having the ability to target US airpower, let alone the vast support network behind it. Thus, for missions today, the USAF “[crowdsources](#)” various capabilities piecemeal—for instance, fighters, bombers, tankers, even individual personnel—and then combines them in the theater. This is analogous to “just in time” logistics: efficiency is high and costs are lowered, but this approach is not suited for high-intensity combat. Given the environment of the war on terror, where the US enjoyed air dominance, safe bases, easy communications, and time for units to work together to achieve combat readiness, this worked well enough.

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This environment would not exist in a conflict over Taiwan. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has long studied the [Gulf War](#), the [Kosovo War](#), the [Iraq War](#), and now the [Russia-Ukraine War](#) for lessons in blunting the US ability to intervene. The US Secretary of the Air Force has noted that the PRC has [systematically targeted](#) every aspect of American power projection in a Taiwan crisis, seeking to slow or degrade generation, deployment, and finally employment of military power. This is all wrapped into the PLA operational concept of [system destruction warfare](#) (體系破擊戰), which seeks to paralyze the enabling capabilities of an adversary force. Accordingly, the PLA [constantly assesses USAF operational readiness](#) for weaknesses to exploit. US force generation just prior to the start of a conflict would likely be struck by massive [cyber-attacks](#) from the PLA Strategic Support Force (PLASSF, 解放軍戰略支援部隊) to deny communications, spread disinformation, and hack logistics systems. All of this would badly slow down and degrade the ability to generate forces via the crowdsourcing method, as delays in any part of the generation and deployment chain would compound upon one another.

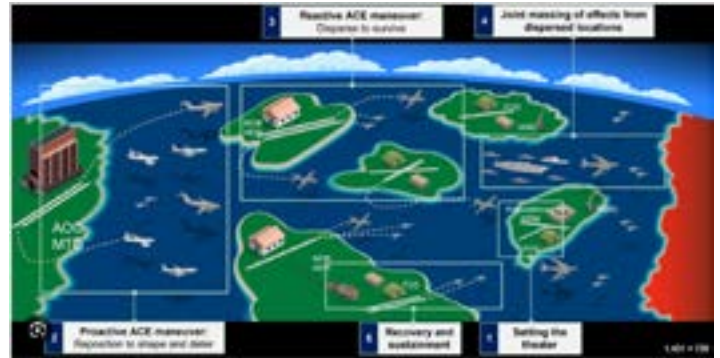
Thus, the USAF has now proposed a new “unit of action” configuration, the [combat wing](#). The combat wings will train extensively with multiple capabilities and be prepared to rapidly deploy, even when communications are badly disrupted. They will have their own native command-and-control, mission, and support elements. By pre-building cohesive units trained to the mission, the effects of a PLA paralysis attack on force generation can be mitigated. While this organization will likely have more expensive upkeep, it provides resiliency and the ability to absorb attrition that the current model does not have.

### **Readiness for a High-End Fight**

Rapid force generation is important, but not sufficient. The now-generated force now needs to be ready to fight against a peer adversary. Revelations that PLA Air Force (PLAAF, 解放軍空軍) pilots were [being trained by Western ex-military pilots](#) at the Test Flying Academy of South Africa (TFASA) is a good indicator that the PLAAF does not have high confidence in either its own training or the quality of its pilots. However, the PLAAF would be fighting close to home, with a dense network of radars, air defense, and bases, while the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF, 解放軍火箭軍) is expected to employ mass salvos against US forward airfields and command-and-control nodes.

The USAF has responded to this by embracing the [Agile Combat Employment](#) (ACE) scheme of operational maneuver, by rapidly moving forces from dispersed base to dispersed base. It is in

essence a military form of the shell game, confusing adversary targeting.



*Image: Visualizing the USAF concept of Agile Combat Employment. The USAF is leaning into maneuver as a form of survivability. To successfully execute complex maneuvers under an environment of constant kinetic and non-kinetic attack, the USAF emphasizes specific training, pre-positioning of assets, and mission command. Taiwan does not have the need to coordinate a massive expeditionary force across thousands of miles; however, Taiwan still does need to ensure its units can execute Taiwan's defense plans under the same communication-denied environment. (Source: [Air University Public Affairs](#))*

As ACE itself introduces new complexities in terms of [training, logistics, and base defense](#), the USAF re-optimization seeks to build a force from the ground up that is trained to these challenges. Training will more heavily focus on [mission command and flexibility](#). Exercises will become [larger and more complex, with a focus on the Pacific](#). This is not limited to the USAF alone. In addition to joint integration, more and more allies are [now included](#) as key operational enablers and a clear sign of strategic [integrated deterrence](#). All of this will lead to a [major Pacific exercise in 2025](#) involving multiple combatant commands—in short, exercising global US military power for a singular purpose, at a scale unseen since the Cold War.

### **Lessons for Taiwan**

While Taiwan should not blindly replicate the expeditionary air force model, there are also useful lessons in considering and adapting some of the assumptions behind the USAF reform.

First, the USAF is assuming that the adversary has achieved a relative level of technical parity. Unlike the Cold War, in which the United States sought to use technological superiority to both [offset](#) Soviet numerical superiority and to [goad the USSR](#) into ruinous military spending, the assumption here is that there is no set of technological solutions that will impose sustained dominance on the adversary. Short-term tech initiatives like “[Repli-](#)

cator” (massed attritable, autonomous systems) are meant to match PRC capabilities, versus achieving overmatch. Even the future fielding of advanced capabilities such as [the Next Generation Air Dominance platform](#), [the B-21 stealth bomber](#), and [collaborative combat aircraft](#) will not allow for “operations as usual.” Taiwan should also not assume that deterrence can be created through a “war-winning” technical solution—acquisitions should not drive strategy. *Training and organization is the primary offset, not technology.*

Second, the USAF assumes defensive countermeasures will not fully mitigate the ability for the adversary to cut off command and control. While the United States has invested in [base hardening](#), [air defense](#), and [electronic warfare](#), the experience of the Russia-Ukraine War has demonstrated that [fixed air defense sites can be overwhelmed](#) by pure numbers, and defense against electronic warfare is [transitory](#). The new unit of action configuration is an acknowledgment that even while defensive countermeasures raise the cost of aggression for an adversary, the USAF cannot guarantee the survival of centralized command and control, and thus needs to build a structure that is not dependent on it.



*Image: ROCAF teams loading an AGM-84L Harpoon anti-ship missile at Chiashan Air Base (佳山基地) during the Han Kuang (漢光演習) exercise (July 26, 2023). Chiashan is well-known for its extensive fortified underground hanger system, and [would also likely be an alternate command and control site](#) in case the Joint Air Operations Center (空軍作戰指揮部) in Taipei’s Toad Mountain (蟾蜍山) was knocked out. However, given the likely scale of kinetic and electronic attack on these fortified bases, Taiwan’s military would be well-advised to treat the availability of centralized command and control as a fortuity instead of an operational necessity. (Source: [ROCAF](#))*

Taiwan has also practiced elements of base hardening, as well

as a tactical version of ACE: [aircraft highway landings](#). Practicing larger-scale dispersal and follow-up sortie generation under simulated kinetic/electronic attack would demonstrate to the adversary that they would face more than pinprick attacks at the end of their firepower strikes. Previous Taiwan national-level exercises [practiced survivability drills for command and control](#); future exercises should practice a worst-case scenario where centralized command and control is badly degraded. Taiwan does not have the issue of coordinating spread-out forces and fighting across thousands of miles, but it does need to ensure a more basic requirement that bases and units will not be paralyzed into inaction like Ukraine’s [Crimean bases in 2014](#).

### Conclusion

The PRC has already begun an expanded campaign of gray zone coercion, with the greater use of [balloons](#) and [China Coast Guard incursions around Kinmen](#). However, this is a mask for a period of [relative PRC weakness](#), which allows for a period of strategic risk-taking. Just as the US military is accepting some short-term *operational* risk through a significant reform, Taiwan should take advantage of this period by economizing on gray zone response, freeing up time and resources for the military and all-of-society defense to undergo a greater level of training, informed by the US experience. This will deepen deterrence over the decade and beyond.

**The main point:** The US Air Force’s re-optimization program emphasizes rapid force generation and readiness for the high-end fight to deter PRC aggression. Taiwan has different defense needs and priorities, but will be subject to many of the same assumptions that drive the USAF reform. Taiwan should analyze the process of USAF re-optimization and adapt accordingly to deter PRC aggression over the long-term.

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## At the 2024 “Two Sessions” in Beijing, China Talks Tough on Taiwan

By: Amrita Jash

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From March 4 to 11, the annual dual meetings of China’s legislature, the National People’s Congress (NPC, 全國人民代表大會), and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC, 中國人民政治協商會議), a nominal political advisory



ry body, were held concurrently in Beijing. Commonly known as the “Two Sessions,” or *Lianghui* (兩會), this national political event provides an official review of the preceding year, as well as setting an agenda—political, economic and military—for the year ahead. While setting an agenda on China’s economic growth and development was the priority, the other aspect that calls for attention is the discussion on Taiwan—a matter of particular note this year, given a marked shift as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) adopted a tougher tone on Taiwan.

### **Language on Taiwan in the 2024 Government Work Report**

Delivering his first [Government Work Report](#) before the NPC since taking office in 2023, Chinese Premier Li Qiang (李强) categorically stated:

*“We [China] will implement our Party’s overall policy for the new era on resolving the Taiwan question, stay committed to the one-China principle and the 1992 Consensus, and resolutely oppose separatist activities aimed at “Taiwan independence” and external interference.*

*We will promote the peaceful development of cross-Strait relations, be firm in advancing the cause of China’s reunification, and uphold the fundamental interests of the Chinese nation. By advancing integrated cross-Strait development, we will improve the wellbeing of Chinese people on both sides so that together, we can realize the glorious cause of national rejuvenation.”*

Compared to previous NPC work reports (see [here](#) and [here](#)), this report marked a noted shift in that the earlier language of “peaceful reunification” was replaced by being “firm in advancing the cause of China’s reunification.” While the “peaceful development of Cross-Straits relations” was mentioned, “peaceful reunification” was replaced with an emphasis on “China’s reunification.” The omission of the word “peaceful” in the context of “reunification” highlights a significant change in China’s outlook on Taiwan—demonstrating CCP’s hardened stance on Taiwan, where conciliation is no more a part of Beijing’s Taiwan dictionary. This brings into the picture a greater possibility of the use of force by China for the purposes of “reunification.”

In regards to Taiwan, the crucial concern for the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is the [de jure political status of the island](#). After 1949 the PRC maintained a formal policy asserting the need for the “liberation of Taiwan”—which until at least 1955, was understood to mean the use of force. But significant developments in the 1950s—including the partition of Korea, the signing of the US-Taiwan defence treaty, the Geneva Agreements on



*Image: PRC Premier Li Qiang (background, center left) chairs a plenary meeting of the PRC State Council to “discuss” the contents of the annual government work report, prior to its presentation at the National People’s Congress (February 18, 2024). (Image source: [PRC State Council](#))*

the partition of Vietnam, and the establishment of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO)—forced China to abandon, at least temporarily, any such goal. Between 1958 and 1979, with the shift in the PRC’s international status with its increasing recognition as the government of China and replacement of the Republic of China (ROC) at the United Nations, China’s position on Taiwan witnessed a shift from “liberation” to that of “reunification.” However, in recent times, the phrase “peaceful reunification” has been replaced with “reunification”—a narrative message further confirmed by the 2024 *Government Work Report*.

### **Other Commentary at the “Two Sessions”**

Upholding the tough tone, speaking at a press conference during the two sessions, Member of the Political Bureau of the CCP Central Committee and PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi (王毅) [sent a warning message](#), stating that:

*“Whoever engages in Taiwan independence activities on the island will be held accountable by history and whoever in the world connives at and supports Taiwan independence will get burned for playing with fire and taste the bitter fruit of their own actions.*

*All people of Chinese descent should uphold the overall interests of the Chinese nation, jointly oppose “Taiwan independence,” and support peaceful reunification.”*

The PRC’s hardened position and firmer language on Taiwan can be read under two explanations. The first of these is a reaction against the victory of William Lai (賴清德) of the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in [Taiwan’s January 2024 elections](#). Given the DPP’s traditional pro-independence outlook, its political control over Taiwan goes against Beijing’s goal of “re-

unification.” Acting indifferent to the outcome of the elections, Chen Binhua (陳斌華), a spokesperson for the State Council Taiwan Affairs Office, [stated](#) that:

*[T]he elections will not change the basic landscape and development trend of cross-Strait relations, will not alter the shared aspiration of compatriots across the Taiwan Strait to forge closer ties, and will not impede the inevitable trend of China’s reunification.*

### **Other Factors Outside “Two Sessions” Discourse Further Indicate a Harder Line**

The tough talk on Taiwan during the Two Sessions also coincides with rising tensions in the Taiwan Strait against the backdrop of China’s intensified coast guard patrols. These patrols were stepped up following an incident on February 14, involving a pursuit by Taiwan’s coast guard of a Chinese fishing craft, which the coast guard accused of trespassing in waters off the Kinmen Islands (which stand opposite the city of Xiamen, in China’s Fujian Province.). Two of the four Chinese fishermen died after their boat capsized during the pursuit, leading to increased PRC Coast Guard presence and harassment of Taiwan vessels in the area. (Editor’s note: For a fuller discussion of these incidents and their significance, see “Decoding Beijing’s Gray Zone Tactics: China Coast Guard Activities and the Redefinition of Conflict in the Taiwan Strait” by Sze-Fung Lee, elsewhere in this issue.)

Noting that the incident has “hurt the feelings of compatriots on both sides of the Taiwan Strait,” Zhu Fenglian (朱鳳蓮), spokesperson for the Taiwan Affairs Office of the PRC State Council, [stated that](#) “Both sides of the Straits belong to one and the same China, and Taiwan is an inalienable part of China’s territory.” Following this, China’s Coast Guard [launched regular law enforcement patrols](#) in the waters of the Xiamen-Kinmen area, as part of Beijing’s declared efforts to protect fishermen’s lives and property. For its part, Taiwan has [urged Beijing to refrain from changing the “status quo,”](#) stating that: “The current situation across the Strait should be controllable,” and “We don’t want to see any action that breaks the status quo.”

In addition to narrative messaging, the Taiwan factor also looms large in explaining China’s defense spending as announced during the Two Sessions. The 14<sup>th</sup> NPC announced an [annual defense budget of 1.67 trillion yuan](#) (about USD \$231.36 billion) for the fiscal year 2024, which represents an increase of 7.2 percent from 2023. This marks the ninth consecutive single-digit increase in China’s defence spending since 2016 (with the last double-digit jump of 10.1 percent recorded in 2015). In the

interim, the [PRC’s estimated yearly military budget increases](#) have been: 7.6 percent in 2016, 7 percent in 2017, 8.1 percent in 2018, 7.5 percent in 2019, 6.6 percent in 2020, 6.8 percent in 2021, 7.1 percent in 2022 and 7.2 percent in 2023 respectively. The percentage rise in 2024 is the same as that of last year (7.2 percent), and the third time in a row since 2022 that the rate increase has stood above 7 percent. One of the many reasons behind the increase in defence spending is the escalating geopolitical tensions with the United States over Taiwan.

This is further linked to Washington’s defense assistance to Taipei. For instance, in February 2024 the US government approved an arms sale valued at USD \$75 million to Taiwan—the 13<sup>th</sup> such arms sale authorized by US President Joseph Biden’s administration since 2021. In its press release, the [Pentagon’s Defense Security Cooperation Agency stated](#) that the package would include “cross-domain solutions; high-assurance devices; [GPS] receivers; communications equipment [...] technical services; and other related elements of logistics and program support,” with a categorical mention that:

*“The proposed sale will improve the recipient’s [Taiwan’s] ability to meet current and future threats by enhancing communications and network security, and providing infrastructure to allow the secure flow of tactical information.”*

It is therefore clear to China that any use of force against Taiwan will draw a strong reaction from the United States.

### **Conclusions**

A policy of talking tough on Taiwan highlights Beijing’s concerns—in particular, that the DPP, with its orientation towards independence, has the potential to create its own international space independent of the PRC’s “[One-China Principle](#).” Beijing’s hardening position is the result of frustration with the lack of progress towards “reunification” on Beijing’s terms. It is also a component of the PRC’s overall strategy—one in which, regarding the Taiwan issue, China cannot afford to have a “loss of face.” The messaging from the 2024 Two Sessions is likely indicative of a hardline policy that will continue to play itself out in other areas in the year ahead.

**The main point:** The victory of the DPP for the third time and Taiwan’s presidential election constitutes a fundamental challenge to Beijing’s long held ambition of “reunification” with the island. Beijing’s increasingly tough stance on Taiwan, as seen in the messages emerging from the annual “Two Sessions,” is not just rhetoric—it represents a more aggressive posture as

demonstrated in China's actions.

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## Decoding Beijing's Gray Zone Tactics: China Coast Guard Activities and the Redefinition of Conflict in the Taiwan Strait

By: Sze-Fung Lee

*Sze-Fung Lee is an independent researcher specializing in Chinese hybrid warfare, including foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), grand strategy, nuclear proliferation, gray zone tactics, and cognitive warfare.*

In the aftermath of a [February incident](#) near Kinmen Island (金門島) involving an unmarked Chinese craft and a Taiwan Coast Guard vessel, Beijing has seized upon the opportunity to challenge the status quo in the Taiwan Strait—once again contesting Taipei and its allies' readiness to respond to crises, and actively testing the boundaries of state coercive behavior below the threshold of a conventional confrontation. As the People's Republic of China (PRC) deploys the China Coast Guard (CCG) in the disputed waters, its [“gray zone” \(灰色地帶\) tactics](#) intertwine with legal and cognitive warfare—thereby forming a mutually reinforcing cycle that amplifies Beijing's political narratives and strategic agendas in operations across multiple domains. It assists in creating favourable conditions for the PRC's ultimate “reunification” ambitions, prior to a final stage of kinetic warfare.

This article aims to explore the broader significance of the PRC's gray zone tactics—in particular, how they serve as a part of Beijing's hybrid strategies to exploit the greatest vulnerabilities in liberal democracies—and to propose a structural framework for analysis and cross-domain deterrence (CDD) as the solution. [1]

### **A Cycle of Mutual Reinforcement**

Under Beijing's hybrid warfare strategy, gray zone tactics are highly intertwined with influence operations, and legal and cognitive warfare. The relationships between these tactics can be conceptualized as a cycle of ecosystems that mutually reinforce each other.

First of all, the PRC's use of influence operations—the utilization of various tools and tactics by different Chinese state and state-affiliated entities to strategically disseminate and steer public discourse towards Beijing's political agendas—strengthens the legitimacy and public support of its gray zone activities.



*Image: The mutual reinforcement between gray zone tactics, influence operations, legal and cognitive warfare, and how they all serve as a part of Beijing's hybrid warfare strategies.*

*(Image source: Created by the author)*

In the case of the Kinmen maritime disputes, by adopting terminologies such as “fishing boat” for the Chinese boat that capsized on February 14—instead of acknowledging its status as an illegal vessel [2]—and omitting the crew's [refusal to cooperate](#) with Taiwanese authorities, Chinese influence operations leverage linguistic nuances with cognitive warfare tactics to portray an illusion of innocence and legitimacy in relation to the illegal activity.

The Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) (國務院台灣事務辦公室) of the PRC State Council has [framed the event](#) as a “vicious incident” (惡性事件) – attributing the cause to Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) (民進黨) administration for treating mainland fishermen in a “violent and dangerous manner” (粗暴和危險的方式). Beijing has manipulated its information ecosystem to amplify this narrative across multiple platforms: including state media, key opinion leaders (KOLs), and online troll armies. For example, the state media channel *China Central Television* (CCTV)—as well as its sock puppet account Yuyuan Tiantian (玉淵譚天)—amplified TAO's narrative on Weibo and WeChat soon after the latter organization released its statement on February 14. Subsequently, Chinese troll armies like [Diba](#) (帝吧) and PRC-affiliated media such as [Today Strait](#) (今日海峽) [3] also assisted in disseminating it to international platforms such as Facebook and Line—the latter of which has a more active Taiwanese user base.

In parallel are other rolling narratives such as [“the fishermen were murdered”](#) (被謀殺), and [“Taiwan plotted this with the US”](#) (美台密謀). Such narratives present a false impression of Taiwan's wrongdoings and aggression toward “innocent” Chinese citizens, thereby justifying subsequent actions by the China Coast Guard (CCG)—including regular patrols and [boarding](#)





*Image: Screenshot of Chinese troll armies like Diba (帝吧) amplifying TAO's narrative on Facebook. (Image source: [Facebook](#) of a tourist boat under the guise of “maintaining order” and “safeguarding security [of] fishermen’s lives and property” in the waters.*

Every drop fills the bucket. These gray zone actions—PLA incursions, incoming balloons, and coast guard patrols—are the droplets. Once these gray zone activities are deployed, they are used to further strengthen PRC assertiveness. The example of forcibly boarding Taiwan’s tourist boat is part of the strategic cycle—an exaggerated act to showcase Beijing’s “control” over the disputed water.

While the CCG is conducting “law enforcement patrols” (執法巡查行動) and “comprehensive law enforcement drills” (綜合執法演練) around Kinmen, the PRC not only amplified the news but utilized language—such as the CCG “commanding” (命令) the yacht to “submit to inspection”—in order to imply China’s administration and law enforcement capability in the waters. This further denies the existence of Taipei’s [prohibited and restricted waters](#), which was set by the latter in 1992 and

had formerly been respected by China.

Stating the obvious, Beijing also invoked [United Nations Resolution 2758](#) as a “legal basis” in its influence operations to argue that Taiwan is a part of the PRC—when in fact, the resolution never dealt with the Taiwan representation issue. This sophistry reciprocally makes China and its audience feel more justified to explicitly challenge existing international narratives, and further legitimizes its increasing presence in the region.

### **Creating New Norms of State Behavior**

Beijing’s recent gray zone activities aim at declaring Chinese sovereignty and jurisdiction, as well as demonstrating its administrative and law enforcement power over the disputed area—which are all key elements constituting the principle of “*effectivités*” (i.e., effective control) in international law. The extent of legitimate “effective control” considers all kinds of factors, such as historical titles and temporal dimensions: for instance, the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands have been under [Japanese control](#) since 1972—and therefore, the CCG’s activities of “exercising control” in the East China Sea are not likely to advance their legal argument. The crux of gray zone actions is not whether or not they could logically be considered as a legitimized claim under international law, but rather the ways in which China will always take advantage of them to invent and advance its political claims and contest the international rules-based order.

As Beijing creates “new norms” (新常態) to normalize its presence in Taiwan’s territorial waters, it challenges the status quo in the Strait by insidiously contesting—slightly below the threshold of military confrontation—Taipei’s ability to exercise its sovereignty, and jurisdictional and law enforcement rights. It paves the way for Beijing to exercise full control over the area while putting Taipei and its allies in a difficult position: one in which inaction would further erode its sovereignty, yet risking an escalation of (military) conflict if the situation is not handled properly. Under these circumstances, the PRC could constantly push back these “red lines” — actively redefining what constitutes unacceptable behavior below the threshold of a kinetic war.

In short, gray zone tactics accompany, strengthen, and reinforce other hybrid warfare strategies like legal and cognitive warfare. Multi-dimensional tactics are deployed cohesively—creating a cycle that mutually reinforces China’s political narratives and strategic agendas, and eventually formulating a comprehensive approach that maximizes operational impact. Therefore, gray zone tactics should be viewed as part of broader hybrid warfare strategies.

### Structural Framework Analysis – How to View Beijing’s Gray Zone Tactics

Referencing the CCG’s established practices in the East and South China Sea (and [previous studies](#)), these activities could be classified into four phases.

- Phase One: After the accidental death of two Chinese “fishermen,” the China Coast Guard first entered Taiwan’s restricted/ prohibited waters in mid-February, 2024—thereby initiating the gray zone operation to contest Taipei’s “red line” below the threshold of a kinetic conflict.
- Phase Two: This phase is intended to normalize Beijing’s presence in the disputed waters. Since its first incursion, the CCG has boarded civilian vessels for inspection and conducted regular patrols and drills. This period of time is not long enough to have its presence “normalized,” despite the assertion of Beijing’s claim to exercise control over the area.
- Phase Three: In the upcoming months, the world can expect a third phase of exercising effective control, which will expand without effective countermeasures by Taipei. This will involve more frequent and prolonged presence of the CCG in the Taiwan Strait, akin to their previous actions in the East China Sea. In addition, the “routine law enforcement patrols” (常態執法巡查) would also presumably be extended to Penghu and Matsu Islands.
- Phase Four: The final phase would be an invasion to take over full control of the islands, and Taiwan itself.



*Image: Different phases of gray zone tactics via the case study of China Coast Guard incursion into Taiwan’s restricted/prohibited waters. (Image source: Created by the author)*

#### Gray Zone Operations within a Hybrid Warfare Framework

Beijing’s gray zone tactics are employed not only because it does not currently possess sufficient military power for a full-scale

invasion, but also as an early stage of operations to maximize possibilities for its victory in the future. It should be considered an early phase in the war.

To understand how the recent CCG activities fit into Beijing’s larger hybrid warfare strategy, other gray zone activities should also be examined. The PRC militarization in the East and South China Seas—such as the construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea, with [infrastructure](#) like operational airfields and deployment of fighter jets and surface-to-air missiles (SAMS) on those islands—serves one sole purpose: to provide forward bases and logistical support in times of war.

In regards to Taiwan, Chinese influence operations legitimize “reunification” by force. PLA fighter jets have been trespassing the median line since August 2022, once again formulating “new norms” to deny Taiwan’s sovereignty. The “salami-slicing” approach lowers awareness by overwhelming the normal human attention span via the saturation of information space and the exploitation of normalcy bias, thus constructing more favorable conditions for a future military preemptive strike.

Influence operations targeting the Taiwanese also aim at lowering their willingness to fight while coercing and seducing them to surrender, especially in terms of psychological warfare against military personnel and political figures. Indeed, soon after Beijing morphed the Kinmen accident into an escalated situation, a swirl of disinformation was circulated online. This included stories such as [“Chinese fishing boats had started retaliation against Taiwan’s Coast Guard by ramming their vessels,”](#) and [“China deployed a hundred fishing boats to besiege Kinmen”](#)—all of which were later proven to be fake news by independent fact-checking agencies. At the same time, messages targeting international audiences serve to divide public opinion, thereby slowing the response time of other states and undermining support for assisting Taiwan. Gray zone tactics alone may not be able to accomplish Beijing’s ambition for “national reunification” with Taiwan, yet they could create more favorable conditions for “reunification” prior to conventional warfare.

#### The Greatest Vulnerability: Lack of Consensus on the Taiwan Issue, and the Hybrid Warfare Threshold

As China takes advantage of gray zone activities to advance its political claims and to contest the international rules-based order more normatively, its aggression goes beyond Taiwan. The PRC’s attempt to rewrite international law broadly has implications for many countries, especially in terms of sovereignty disputes. Beijing has already done this with the Japanese over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, and is doing it with the Philippines



around the Scarborough Shoal. If this works for Taiwan, these tactics could be deployed whenever and wherever Beijing needs to advance its strategic agenda. Beijing's effort to reinvent international law with these gray zone activities challenges the status quo—not only in the Taiwan Strait, but in the entirety of the East China Sea, the South China Sea, and beyond.

As the nature of hybrid warfare exploits the vulnerabilities in liberal democracies, Beijing takes advantage of gray zone tactics to exploit the greatest weakness between them: the lack of consensus on what constitutes war and a clear threshold of unacceptable behaviors. Like-minded democracies, including Taiwan and the G7+ countries, find it difficult to foster a collective response package for countering China's hybrid warfare. This is due to: (1) strategic ambiguity; (2) differences concerning Taiwan's legal status; and (3) the lack of shared data standards, unified languages, and framework for Chinese hybrid threat monitoring and analysis across governments and civil organizations.

Previous research has overwhelmingly focused on military and economic factors surrounding a conflict—such as wargaming a cross-strait conflict, or an international economic crisis due to disruption of the island's semiconductor supply chain. These are all legitimate concerns that impact the world. Yet, Beijing is conducting a new form of hybrid warfare—integrating strategies and tactics in multiple domains and simultaneously deploying them in a single operation to maximize their impact. Under these circumstances, mere economic sanctions or traditional military deterrence would not be sufficient—only cross-domain deterrence could provide an answer.

To respond to this challenge, we need an open-source framework that conceptualizes and operationalizes deterrence by denial and punishment across multiple domains—including the gray zone, and the informational, cyber, space, military, and economic realms. This would help establish a transparent and universal discipline for Chinese hybrid threat monitoring and analysis, as well as facilitating discussion on collective countermeasures across the G7+ countries.

As Beijing challenges the boundaries of both Taiwan and the world, a comprehensive approach of cross-domain deterrence is imperative for crafting tailored strategies for a unified international response to deter PRC aggression at the brink of war.

The storm is brewing—and the world has to be ready for it.

**The main point:** Beijing's recently displayed gray zone operations around Kinmen Island intertwine with legal and cognitive warfare—thereby forming a mutually reinforcing cycle that

amplifies Beijing's political narratives and strategic agendas. Accordingly, Taiwan and its international allies must develop concepts to operationalize deterrence across multiple domains.

[1] Cross-domain deterrence is the discipline of crafting potential “retaliatory threats from one domain to prevent attacks from another.” See: James Scouras, Edward Smyth, and Thomas Mahnken, “Cross-Domain Deterrence in US–China Strategy,” Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory (2014), <https://www.jhuapl.edu/sites/default/files/2022-12/CrossDomainWeb.pdf>.

[2] The vessel was operating as what has been called a “three nos” vessel (參無船舶): no ship name, no ship certificate, and no ship registration at the port of registry.

[3] Today Strait (今日海峡) is a Facebook page managed by Fujian Straits Satellite TV (福建海峡电视台).

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## The Nexus of Cybersecurity and National Security: Taiwan's Imperatives Amidst Escalating Cyber Threats

By: Enescan Lorci

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The advent of the internet and the rapid proliferation of information and telecommunication technologies (ICTs) have wrought significant changes on the daily lives of individuals. These advancements have facilitated seamless communication through platforms such as email and social media, enabled remote work and learning opportunities, and granted instant access to an extensive array of information and services, enhancing the ease and efficiency of daily activities for millions worldwide. Moreover, beyond their civilian applications, governments and militaries across numerous nations have embraced these technologies, leading to notable improvements in operational efficiency, effective communication, and security measures. For example, governments have increasingly turned to online platforms to facilitate crucial services—like tax filing, permit applications, and voter registration—thereby streamlining administrative procedures and enhancing accessibility for constituents. Similarly, militaries have integrated ICTs into their command-and-control systems, intelligence operations, and strategic communications, bolstering their capacity for rapid response and situational awareness in dynamic operational environments.

However, despite these manifold advantages, the widespread adoption of internet and ICTs has precipitated a plethora of risks and challenges. Foremost among these is the proliferation of cybersecurity threats, including hacking, data breaches, and cyberattacks. These activities pose grave risks to sensitive information, disrupt essential services, and erode public trust in digital infrastructure. Moreover, the dissemination of misinformation and fake news across digital platforms has exacerbated social polarization, thereby undermining democratic processes and societal cohesion. Consequently, cybersecurity has emerged as a critical facet of national security, prompting states to allocate substantial resources toward fortifying their cyber defenses and detecting intrusions into critical systems. Reflecting this urgency, many nations have formulated and disseminated National Cyber Security Strategies (NCSS) as pivotal documents delineating their overarching visions, guiding principles, threat perceptions, and strategic objectives in the cyber domain.

Over the past two decades, Taiwan, long known as a hub for information technology (IT), has confronted cyberattacks originating from various states—including the People’s Republic of China (PRC), North Korea, and Russia—underscoring the significance of cybersecurity in safeguarding Taiwan’s national security. In response to these threats, Taiwan has formulated and promulgated its own [National Cyber Security Strategy \(NCSS\)](#), with the aim of fortifying its cyber defenses amid the complex dynamics of cross-Strait relations. Developing such a strategy has become increasingly imperative for Taiwan, which faces rapidly escalating cyber threats from the PRC. As documented by a [report](#) from Check Point, an international cybersecurity firm, Taiwan’s digital infrastructure endured an average of 1,509 cyberattacks per week during the initial three quarters of 2023. Notably, a significant proportion of these attacks targeting government websites and services emanated from mainland China, and encompassed both large-scale assaults and smaller-scale attempts to disrupt or impair access to governmental online platforms.

### **Escalating Cyber Threats**

The current age of cyber aggression by Chinese hackers against Taiwan can be traced back to the turn of the twenty-first century, when then-President Lee Teng-hui (李登輝) made the widely publicized [assertion](#) of Taiwan’s independent status *vis-à-vis* China. This seminal declaration resulted in rudimentary web defacement attacks, wherein Taiwanese governmental websites were infiltrated to display slogans advocating for a singular China and the display of a red flag, signaling China’s territorial unity. [1] Subsequently, China’s cyber offensive against Taiwan

has steadily escalated, in terms of both frequency and severity of attacks.

Recently, [findings](#) from the American cybersecurity firm Trellix underscored a marked surge in cyber activity, with Chinese cyberattacks on Taiwanese entities more than doubling in frequency within the 24-hour period leading up to Taiwan’s 2024 national elections on January 13. The report revealed a pronounced escalation in malicious cyber incidents, soaring from 1,758 detections on January 11 to over 4,300 on January 12. Notably, the targets of these attacks primarily comprised governmental institutions, law enforcement agencies, and financial entities—with attackers primarily focusing on accessing internal communications, police records, banking statements, and insurance data.

An analysis of Chinese cyberattacks on Taiwan reveals multifaceted strategic objectives, including the acquisition of sensitive intelligence crucial for cross-Strait negotiations and the illicit procurement of Taiwanese trade and industrial secrets. Moreover, Chinese cyber intrusions aim to subvert democratic institutions by disseminating disinformation, disrupting governmental operations through targeted assaults on critical infrastructure, impeding service delivery, and undermining public trust in governmental efficacy, ultimately eroding confidence in democratic processes. Taiwan has also served as an experimental testing ground for China’s novel cyber tools, playing a critical role in the development and refinement of new and more intricate cyber capabilities. [2]

### **Taiwan on the Defensive**

This concerning escalation of Chinese cyberattacks has galvanized both private and public sectors in Taiwan to prioritize cybersecurity management, catalyzing substantial investment in bolstering cyber defenses. Consequently, the information security market in Taiwan has seen [robust growth](#), expanding at an annual rate of 14 percent per annum since 2011, representing a growth from USD \$700 million to USD \$1.44 billion in 2017, with projections indicating sustained growth through 2019 at an annual rate of 8.7 percent.

Additionally, in response to the escalating Chinese aggression in cyberspace, Taiwanese authorities have undertaken proactive measures since the aforementioned cyber conflict between China and Taiwan in 1999. Following that attack, Taiwan established the [National Information and Communication Security Taskforce \(NICST\)](#) under the purview of the Executive Yuan in 2001, marking the inception of the government’s concerted efforts to combat cyber threats. Charged with safeguarding the

government's networks and critical infrastructure, the NICST has spearheaded successive phases of major cybersecurity initiatives, each spanning four years.

The initial two phases, spanning the years from 2001 to 2004 and 2004 to 2008, were pivotal in laying the groundwork and fortifying the nation's cyber protection infrastructure. During these phases, the NICST worked to classify government agencies based on the type and intensity of cybersecurity threats they faced, formulating tailored strategies for each. Subsequent phases, spanning from 2009 to 2012 and 2013 to 2016, sought to augment existing preparations by fostering collaboration with the private sector, heightening public awareness, and enhancing regulatory compliance among local businesses. [3] Educational institutions at various levels also embarked on initiatives to cultivate cybersecurity literacy through specialized programs and coursework. The fourth phase also saw the refinement of government policies and regulations, alongside the facilitation of the cybersecurity industry's development and initiatives aimed at nurturing talent acquisition programs. [4]



Graphic: The five phases of Taiwan's National Cyber Security Program (Source: [NCSP 2021-24](#))

### Cybersecurity under President Tsai

During the period spanning from 2017 to 2020 (the fifth phase of cyber development, as laid out in the NCSP), coinciding with the first term of President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文), Taiwan underwent another shift in its cybersecurity policy—with the government explicitly linking cybersecurity and national security. President Tsai's administration has consistently underscored the criticality of cybersecurity to Taiwan's national security, as evidenced by her remarks during official engagements. For instance, on September 18 of last year, President Tsai welcomed a cybersecurity business development mission from the United States. During her [speech to the delegation](#), she emphasized

both Taiwan's commitment to cybersecurity and its willingness to share Taiwan's experiences with fellow democracies.

This heightened emphasis on cybersecurity within the national security framework has been accompanied by a series of proactive measures initiated by the Tsai Administration to address cybersecurity challenges comprehensively. These initiatives included the establishment of a variety of cybersecurity-oriented government agencies, including the [National Information and Communication Security Office \(NICSO\)](#) under the National Security Council (NSC, 國家安全會議); the [Department of Cyber Security](#) within the Executive Yuan; and the [Information, Communication, and Electronic Force Command](#) under the Ministry of National Defense (MND, 中華民國國防部). Legislative efforts, such as the 2018 *Information and Communication Management Act* and the subsequent amendment bill of the [National Security Act in June 2019](#), have further institutionalized cybersecurity within Taiwan's national security framework, delineating cyberspace as an integral component of the nation's defensible territory.

Moreover, in 2022 Taiwan [established](#) the Ministry of Digital Affairs (MODA, 數位發展部), aimed at promoting digital policy innovation and reform across multiple domains, including telecommunications, information, cybersecurity, and internet governance. This comprehensive approach to cybersecurity culminated in the [creation](#) of the National Institute of Cyber Security (NICS) under the MODA, tasked with conducting research, making policy recommendations, and providing assistance during cybersecurity threats to both public and private sectors.



Image: President Tsai at the opening of the National Institute of Cyber Security 2023 (Source: [MODA Website](#))

President Tsai's [personal endorsement](#) of the NICS during its inauguration underscored her administration's recognition of the centrality of cybersecurity in safeguarding Taiwan's national interests, encapsulating her conviction that "cybersecurity is



national security” and affirming the institute’s pivotal role in advancing Taiwan’s cybersecurity resilience. In contrast to preceding governmental administrations, President Tsai’s administration has exhibited a heightened determination to attain cyber autonomy and bolster Taiwan’s cybersecurity capacities—transcending the traditional emphasis on defensive measures by focusing on offensive capabilities as well. This strategic orientation reflects a nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics of cyberspace, wherein reliance solely on defensive mechanisms is frequently inadequate. Within the expansive, anonymous, and highly interconnected realm of cyberspace, threats have grown rapidly in both complexity and variability, posing formidable challenges to effective defense. These characteristics, coupled with the myriad attack vectors available to malicious actors, exacerbate the exigency of fortifying cybersecurity measures. In recognition of these imperatives, the Tsai Administration has established the [Information Communication Electronic Force Command \(ICEF\)](#) as a key entity overseeing Taiwan’s offensive cyber operations.

### ***Enduring Challenges***

Despite the concerted efforts undertaken by the Tsai Administration, [assessments](#) from the Cybersecurity Program of Taiwan (2021 to 2024) have underscored the incompleteness of Taiwan’s overarching national cybersecurity apparatus. The country’s domestic cybersecurity industry remains relatively diminutive in scale, beset by inadequate output value. Hence, it has become imperative to pursue supplementary measures aimed at fortifying Taiwan’s cyber resilience and security posture. With President-Elect Lai Ching-te (賴清德) entering office in May, it will be imperative for his administration to maintain Tsai’s emphasis on cybersecurity as a cornerstone of national security policy.

In fortifying Taiwan’s cyber resilience and advancing its cybersecurity capabilities across diverse domains, the Lai Administration stands to benefit from an intensified focus on several strategic areas. Foremost among these priorities is the imperative of fostering collaboration with international stakeholders. The United States has long stood as a key partner for Taiwan in the realm of cybersecurity. Noteworthy instances of this collaboration include a joint cyber-war exercise titled [CODE \(The Cyber Offensive and Defensive Exercises\)](#) drills, whose inaugural meeting was held in 2019. Furthermore, initiatives such as the [Talent Circulation Alliance \(TCA\)](#), established by Taiwanese authorities in 2019 in conjunction with the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT), have served to facilitate talent exchange and acquisition.

In a similar vein, the two nations convened a [cybersecurity forum](#) in 2020, which provided a platform for the exchange of insights and strategies drawn from the private sector. Building upon these foundations, the forthcoming Lai Administration should not only sustain collaboration with the United States, but also expand such endeavors into a comprehensive cyber collective defense framework, ideally in conjunction with like-minded nations such as Japan, which similarly confront cyber threats emanating from China.

Moreover, Taiwan’s cyber capabilities can be substantially augmented through the cultivation of robust public-private partnerships. The burgeoning landscape of Taiwan’s cybersecurity industry, propelled by initiatives spearheaded during the Tsai Administration, helped to underscore the potential of such collaborations. As it enters office, the Lai government would be well-advised to champion and incentivize public-private partnerships aimed at fortifying the nation’s cybersecurity posture.

Another critical objective for the incoming administration should be to pursue initiatives aimed at augmenting public awareness of cybersecurity. Governments assume a pivotal role in this endeavor by implementing various measures and programs geared toward educating citizens about cybersecurity and associated threats. These efforts include the launch of national cybersecurity awareness campaigns, which shed light on cyber threats, disseminate best practices for securing digital devices and personal information, and provide guidance on identifying and reporting suspicious online activities. Notably, the Taiwanese government, through the Ministry of Education (MOE, 教育部), has already taken strides in this direction by establishing a publicly accessible cybersecurity education [web-site](#). Furthermore, educational institutions at all levels can avail themselves of cybersecurity education materials and updates via the campus information security service website.

In light of the imperative to fortify Taiwan’s cybersecurity landscape, the forthcoming administration should work to uphold and extend President Tsai’s strategic approach, emphasizing the intrinsic linkage between cybersecurity and national security. This will necessitate a steadfast commitment to fostering robust international collaboration with allied nations and industry stakeholders, both domestically and abroad. Failure to adhere to these guiding principles risks exposing Taiwan to significant security vulnerabilities, particularly against the backdrop of escalating tensions in cross-strait relations. Thus, steadfast adherence to these policies will be paramount in safeguarding Taiwan’s security interests and ensuring its resilience in the face of evolving cyber threats.

**The main point:** Over the past several decades, Chinese cyber-attacks against Taiwan have steadily escalated in frequency, complexity, and intensity. While the Tsai Administration took critical steps toward countering these operations, the incoming Lai Administration will nevertheless need to be decisive and proactive in building on her approach.

[1] Andrzej Kozłowski, “The ‘Cyber Weapons Gap’”: The Assessment of the China’s Cyber Warfare Capabilities and Its Consequences for Potential Conflict over Taiwan, *On Their Own Paths: Japan and China Responses to the Global and Regional Challenges*, 2015, 161–73.

[2] Kaushal Kishore Chandel, “China as a Factor in Taiwan’s National Cyber Security Strategy,” *Institute of Chinese Studies*, 1.94 (2021).

[3] Charles K S Wu, Hsuan-yu Shane Lin, and Yao-yuan Yeh, “Cybersecurity in Taiwan: Challenges and Responses,” *Societal Resilience and Political Legitimacy*, 2022, 68–76.

[4] Wu, Lin, and Yeh.

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## A Different Level of Diplomacy: Taiwan’s Growing Ties with US States

By: Marshall Reid

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In November of last year, North Carolina Department of Commerce Secretary Mabelle Baker Sanders [announced](#) that the state had officially opened an investments office in Taiwan. While the announcement flew somewhat under the radar at the time, it was nevertheless a significant development for Taiwan. In fact, the opening of the North Carolina office marked the culmination of what was a banner year for Taiwan’s relations with US states, with several other states—including [Arizona](#) and [Virginia](#)—inaugurating their own offices in Taiwan earlier in the year. These offices have been complemented by a flurry of other interactions, including a growing number of [delegations of state government officials to Taiwan](#). Amid the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) tireless efforts to [restrict](#) Taiwan’s ability to interact on a country-to-country basis, these growing sub-national ties with individual US states could prove increasingly valuable, potentially providing Taipei with crucial opportunities to diversify its economic connections, build political support, and en-

hance its people-to-people relations.

### **Sub-National Diplomacy Between Taiwan and US States**

While the federal government of the United States continues to be a strong supporter of Taiwan, its actions are fundamentally constrained by its overall approach to cross-Strait relations, as outlined in the [Taiwan Relations Act](#) (TRA), the [Three Communiqués](#), and the [Six Assurances](#). These documents—though broad enough to allow for a fairly comprehensive, mutually beneficial relationship—have historically prevented Washington from engaging in more direct, “official” forms of diplomacy with counterparts in Taipei. As a result of these limitations, the United States does not operate an official embassy in Taiwan, largely avoids high-profile engagements with Taiwanese officials (then-House Speaker [Nancy Pelosi’s 2022 trip to Taiwan](#) notwithstanding), and maintains a deliberately vague, circumspect tone in its international discussions of Taiwan and its status. While the majority of these constraints are largely symbolic in nature, they have nevertheless placed something of a ceiling on US-Taiwan relations, preventing the partnership from reaching the level of other, and more formal, alliances.

Recognizing these limitations, as well as the potential benefits of building ties with Taiwan, a broad range of US states have conducted their own outreach to the island democracy. Strictly speaking, these efforts have taken place in a sort of constitutional gray zone, as the US constitution explicitly forbids states from engaging in any sort of foreign diplomacy, exclusively placing such responsibilities under the purview of the federal government. However, as the [Congressional Research Service](#) (CRS) has noted, this provision has not prevented states—as well as cities and counties—from building substantive ties with foreign counterparts. Indeed, per CRS, such entities “play a more prominent role in international relations than may be generally recognized.” Generally, states have effectively circumvented Congressional oversight of these activities by simply not notifying Congress about them.

### **State Representative Offices in Taiwan**

Historically, Taiwan has provided a unique test case for this arrangement, particularly on the economic front. While the federal government has long demonstrated a reluctance to engage in comprehensive trade and investment talks with Taiwan—despite Taipei’s strong advocacy—many states have shown no such compunction. As Don Shapiro noted in his comprehensive [report on Taiwan-state relations](#), a number of states have opted to engage directly with Taiwanese counterparts, signing memoranda of understanding (MOUs), exchanging trade delegations,

and opening trade and investment offices. These efforts have unfolded alongside—but independently of—the federal government’s outreach to Taiwan.

Notably, Shapiro [emphasized](#) that such outreach is not necessarily a new phenomenon, as several states have maintained decades-long relationships with Taiwan. In fact, the high-water mark for state-level ties with Taiwan was in the early 2000s, when 22 states operated some form of representative office in the country. However, with the US-PRC relationship on the rise in the late 2000s and early 2010s, many of these states opted to close down their Taiwan offices and reallocate resources to the mainland. This shift was reinforced by the PRC’s increasingly harsh rhetoric toward Taiwan and its supporters, which led some state governments to eschew ties with Taiwan in an effort to avoid Beijing’s ire.

Thankfully for Taiwan, this trend seems to have changed course in recent years. This reversal has likely been driven by a variety of factors. Perhaps most notably, US goodwill toward the PRC has largely evaporated, with Beijing’s growing authoritarianism, increasingly undeniable human rights abuses, and abrasive diplomacy [eroding public perceptions](#) and feeding distrust. This decline in US support for China has only accelerated since 2018, in the wake of China’s [crackdown in Hong Kong](#), the [US-China trade war](#), and Beijing’s controversial [handling of the COVID-19 pandemic](#). And while the Biden Administration has taken [some steps](#) to reengage with the PRC, the relationship remains cold and distant—thereby diminishing state-level interest in expanding operations on the mainland.

At the same time, Taiwan has proven successful in distinguishing itself on the world stage, particularly on the economic front. Led by corporations such as [Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company](#) (TSMC, 台灣積體電路製造股份有限公司), Taiwan has become increasingly well-known as a source of high-tech goods, technological expertise, and foreign direct investment (FDI). Like many other nations—including Japan, Germany, and other European states—the United States has recognized this potential and sought to encourage Taiwanese investment. These efforts have been highlighted by TSMC’s 2020 [announcement](#) that it would be constructing a multi-billion-dollar semiconductor fabrication plant outside Phoenix, Arizona.

In the wake of this investment—and with US-Taiwan relations on the upswing more broadly—a growing contingent of states have sought to expand their own ties with Taiwan. As the chart below shows, the number of state representative offices in Taiwan has increased dramatically over the past five years, with 12

states setting up operations since 2019, while others—such as [New Jersey](#)—are poised to continue the trend in the near future. All told, a total of 17 states (and the US territory of Guam) have established offices, a remarkable change in such a short time.

State	Date of Office Establishment
<a href="#">Louisiana</a>	1989
<a href="#">Missouri</a>	1989
<a href="#">Idaho</a>	1990
<a href="#">Florida</a>	1990
<a href="#">Hawaii</a>	1994
<a href="#">Maryland</a>	2009
<a href="#">Wyoming</a>	2018
<a href="#">South Carolina</a>	2020
<a href="#">Montana</a>	2021
<a href="#">New Mexico</a>	2021
<a href="#">Guam</a>	2021
<a href="#">West Virginia</a>	2022
<a href="#">Pennsylvania</a>	2022
<a href="#">Minnesota</a>	2022
<a href="#">Arizona</a>	2023
<a href="#">Virginia</a>	2023
<a href="#">Washington</a>	2023
<a href="#">North Carolina</a>	2023

*Table: Current US state representative offices in Taiwan  
(Source: Compiled by author)*

As [Shapiro](#) and others have noted, these offices are by no means identical to one another. Reflecting the diversity of the states that established them, such offices exist for a variety of purposes, and are administered through a variety of mechanisms. While some exist purely to encourage Taiwanese investment in the state, others have broader mandates, including facilitating tourism, enhancing collaboration in specific industrial sectors, and streamlining bilateral imports and exports. Administratively, some offices are run directly by state agencies, while others are overseen by non-profits or state business councils.

While each state has undertaken its own unique approach to Taiwan, their interactions are generally overseen by the [American State Offices Association](#) (ASOA), which “works to coordinate, co-organize and support trade, investment, education and tourism related activities.” With 20 members—including the



aforementioned 18 states and territories, as well as two state-affiliated business organizations from Ohio and New York—the organization acts as a facilitator in Taiwan, connecting members with viable partners in the country. In doing so, it works closely with the [American Chamber of Commerce in Taiwan](#) (AmCham Taiwan).

### ***Rising Sub-National Linkages***

While the recent proliferation of state offices in Taiwan has been perhaps the most visible indication of Taiwan’s growing ties with individual US states, other developments suggest that these relationships are becoming more sustainable. Of particular note has been the surge of state-level delegations to Taiwan, which have grown increasingly common of late. As Shapiro [noted](#), “Taiwan has welcomed the leaders of Arizona (twice, by two different governors), Indiana, Idaho, Michigan, Montana, New Jersey, New Mexico, and Virginia” over the past two years alone. Generally, these visits have included large contingents of state trade officials and business representatives, who have built connections and engaged in negotiations with Taiwanese counterparts.

Partly as a result of these efforts, many states have been successful in securing substantial Taiwanese investment. These include (but are not limited to):

- Over [USD \\$40 billion](#) in investment in Arizona by TSMC
- Over [USD \\$193 million](#) in investment in New Mexico by various Taiwanese firms
- Over [USD \\$34 million](#) in investment in West Virginia by Far Eastern New Century Corporation (FENC, 遠東新世紀)
- Over [USD \\$11 million](#) in investment in Kentucky by various Taiwanese firms

Beyond investment, many states have significantly increased their bilateral trade with Taiwan, with import and export numbers surging in recent years. This growth has been particularly notable for Virginia, with Governor Glenn Youngkin noting during a [2023 delegation](#) that his state’s exports to Taiwan had increased 27 percent since 2020, while imports from Taiwan had topped USD \$1 billion annually. Outside of Virginia, other states have reported strong trade numbers, including [Arizona](#), [New Mexico](#), and [Hawaii](#).

In addition to these quantitative gains, increased engagement between US states and Taiwan has allowed for notable expansions of educational, cultural, and people-to-people ties. For instance, since 2020 alone, Taiwan has signed 26 [education-fo-](#)



*Image: Virginia Governor Glenn Youngkin meets with Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen in April 2023. (Image Source: [Taiwan Office of the President](#))*

[cused MOUs](#) with 24 states, with many focusing on Mandarin language education. With many states working to restrict or eliminate the activities of Beijing’s Confucius Institutes on college campuses, these MOUs have set the stage for Taiwan to fill the void with its [Taiwan Centers for Mandarin Learning](#) (TCML).

### ***New Paths for Taiwan***

For Taiwan, these interactions with US states could help to provide a model for navigating an increasingly perilous and claustrophobic international order. As demonstrated by the February decision by the Pacific island state of Nauru to sever ties with Taipei, Beijing’s campaign to isolate and marginalize Taiwan is unlikely to abate anytime soon. Accordingly, it will be increasingly necessary for Taiwan to develop new, more nuanced approaches to international relations, even as its list of formal partners continues to shrink. By capitalizing on its highly productive engagements with a growing list of US states, Taipei may have found a route to circumventing PRC pressure and carving out diplomatic breathing room, albeit at a sub-national level.

As [Shapiro](#) has noted, Taiwan appears to have recognized the value of these ties. In recent years, Taiwan’s diplomatic corps has worked to expand its connections with state governments and business groups. Taiwan has also dispatched numerous [trade delegations](#) to various US states, which have met with elected officials, negotiated MOUs, and broadly increased Taiwan’s visibility in the business sector. Meanwhile, Taiwan’s universities have made similar in-roads, [signing agreements](#) with state university systems and working to fill the vacuum once filled by PRC institutions.

In isolation, each of these interactions may be dismissed as rela-

tively inconsequential. In the aggregate, however, they suggest that Taiwan may be refining its approach in a meaningful way. Indeed, in [many nations](#), Taiwan seems to have turned some of its focus toward smaller, more subtle, sub-national linkages. While undoubtedly less flashy than high-level, government-to-government agreements, these sorts of ties could allow Taiwan to operate in a wider range of environments, building productive connections even in the most unlikely of locations. And though the United States is hardly an unfriendly environment for Taiwan, these recent successes indicate that this more focused approach could bear fruit elsewhere.

**The main point:** In recent years, Taiwan has proven successful in building productive ties with a growing list of US states. While these relationships are undoubtedly valuable in their own right, they could also provide a template for Taiwan to adopt a more subtle, sub-state approach to international relations going forward.

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