

The Chinese Communist Party's Gray Zone Tactics Against Taiwan



Derek Grossman

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The GTI “Counter Ideological Work and Political Warfare” Research Series

This report is the third of a planned five-part series of GTI policy backgrounder reports on the means and methods employed in Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ideological work and political warfare directed against Taiwan—efforts that are intended to undermine Taiwan’s democratic system, its social cohesion, and its ability to resist coercive efforts for “reunification” on the CCP’s terms. The remaining research reports will be forthcoming throughout 2025. The topics to be addressed will be:

- [*The Chinese Communist Party’s Political Warfare Directed Against Taiwan: Overview and Analysis*](#), by John Dotson (May 2024)
- [*The Chinese Communist Party’s Ideological Frameworks for Taiwan Policy*](#), by John Dotson (August 2024)
 - *The Chinese Communist Party’s Gray Zone Tactics Against Taiwan*, by Derek Grossman (current report, March 2025)
 - CCP Espionage operations against Taiwan, by Peter Mattis and Cheryl Yu (forthcoming)
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Introduction

Chinese Gray Zone Tactics Against Taiwan: Background and Goals

In recent years, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has shown a rising propensity to resort to so-called “gray zone” (*huise didai* 灰色地帶) operations against the Republic of China (ROC) government on Taiwan. Gray zone tactics are non-military coercive actions beyond normal diplomatic, economic, and security measures that remain below the threshold of war.¹ Led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the PRC has ramped up its use of gray zone tactics versus Taiwan in order to shift the power balance of the dispute and gain strategic advantages—whether to convince Taipei that it must expeditiously “reunify” with the mainland, or else enable a future PRC war against the island. Gray zone operations serve as one of the seven core elements of CCP political warfare—alongside information manipulation, “lawfare,” economic coercion, united front work, espionage, and cyber operations—and are intended to reinforce the others by eroding Taiwan’s exercise of territorial sovereignty, wearing down its military and law enforcement resources, and eroding the sense of security held by its citizens.²

The CCP’s modern day emphasis on gray zone tactics

1 “A New Framework for Understanding and Countering China’s Gray Zone Tactics,” RAND, Santa Monica: CA, 2022. This RAND Policy Brief was derived from work done in RAND Project AIR FORCE and documented in *Competition in the Gray Zone: Countering China’s Coercion Against U.S. Allies and Partners in the Indo-Pacific*, by Bonny Lin, Cristina L. Garafola, Bruce McClintock, Jonah Blank, Jeffrey W. Hornung, Karen Schwindt, Jennifer D. P. Moroney, Paul Orner, Dennis Borrman, Sarah W. Denton, and Jason Chambers, RR-A594-1, 2022 (available at www.rand.org/t/RR-A594-1).

2 John Dotson, *The Chinese Communist Party’s Political Warfare Directed Against Taiwan: Overview and Analysis*, Global Taiwan Institute, May 2024, https://globaltaiwan.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/OR_CCP-Political-Warfare.pdf.

is very much consistent with conceptualizations of Chinese advantage-seeking over the millennia. The ancient philosopher and founder of Taoism, Laozi, spoke of *shi* (勢) in a metaphysical context as “the external shaping force of the environment that molds each object contained within that environment.”³ China’s famous war philosopher, Sun-Tzu (or Sun-tzu), placed *shi* onto the battlefield and remarked “To win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the highest excellence; the highest excellence is to subdue the enemy’s army without fighting at all.”⁴

The CCP’s use of gray zone tactics are designed to acquire strategic advantages over Taiwan without provoking war.

Today, the CCP’s use of gray zone tactics are likewise designed to acquire strategic advantages over Taiwan without provoking war. Whether routinely entering Taiwan’s air defense identification zone (ADIZ) with its military aircraft, or conducting cyber operations against ROC civilian and

military targets on a daily basis, the CCP has sought to weaken Taiwanese resolve to resist an eventual PRC attempt to “reunify” with Taiwan.

This short paper will examine the CCP’s use of gray zone tactics against Taiwan across the maritime, air, and cyberspace domains. It will then consider the PRC’s expansion into new domains, and the types of gray zone activities Beijing is pursuing or may pursue in these domains. Finally, the paper will offer several concluding thoughts and recommendations for Taiwan and the United States, as well as allies and partners, to help mitigate and counter these destabilizing Chinese activities.

3 Qi Zhu, “Shi in Architecture: The Efficacy of Traditional Chinese Doors,” PhD diss., (Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 2008), 13–14.

4 Sun-Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Roger T. Ames, New York: Ballantine Books, 1993, 111.

Observed Types of Chinese Gray Zone Tactics to Coerce Taiwan

Across the Indo-Pacific, the PRC in recent years has conducted gray zone operations against a range of different nations—to include not only Taiwan, but also India, Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam, and others. This report will focus on Taiwan, in relation to which the PRC has engaged in observed gray zone tactics in the maritime, air, and cyberspace domains. It is also likely that Beijing will adapt gray zone tactics from additional domains to further coerce Taiwan in the future, such as the use of gray zone tactics on land—especially if the PRC invades the island and successfully establishes a beach head from which to project additional power. It is also conceivable that the PRC will eventually employ gray zone tactics against Taiwanese outer space assets in the coming years, just as it is already doing against the US space program.

What follows is a brief summary of the types of Chinese gray zone tactics versus Taiwan observed thus far. This section is not meant to be comprehensive; rather, it is aimed at highlighting key examples of CCP gray zone tactics in these respective warfighting domains.

Chinese Gray Zone Tactics at Sea

Attention given to the PRC's gray zone tactics at sea usually focuses on the South China Sea, and to a lesser extent, the East China Sea. In the South China Sea, Beijing's expansive "Nine-Dash Line" sovereignty and territorial claim—which encompasses more than 80 percent of this body of water and stretches well beyond its exclusive economic zone (EEZ)—is spuriously based on historical territorial rights and is in contravention of international law and norms of behavior as codified under the United Nations of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). To enforce its claims, the CCP routinely deploys assets from its People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), China Coast Guard (CCG), and fishing militia, officially known as the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM). The purpose of these forces is essentially to establish a *de facto* operating presence in disputed waters and

to challenge rival ships that intrude in Beijing's self-declared EEZ. The CCG and PAFMM in particular have engaged in numerous gray zone tactics in this region, to include ramming, shadowing, blocking, water-cannoning, shining military grade lasers, sonic blasting, and others. In the East China Sea, the CCG and PAFMM resort to gray zone tactics less so, but similar operations nonetheless exist there as well.

When it comes to coercing Taiwan with gray zone tactics at sea, Beijing primarily employs the PLAN, CCG, and civilian ships. The most prominent example has been multi-service military exercises that since August 2022 have encircled the island on three separate occasions.⁵ These drills are a clear attempt to erode the ROC military's operating space and to pressure Taipei with the threat of military force if it does not capitulate to the CCP's "One China Principle" that Taiwan is an inseparable part of the PRC.⁶

China began encirclement drills following then-US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022 to meet with then-President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文). In response, Beijing instructed the PLA's Eastern Theater Command to conduct joint live-fire exercises and to simulate a military blockade of the island—an event commonly referred to as the "Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis."⁷ For the first time, the PRC declared six closure areas around Taiwan—four of which were on the southern and eastern sides of the island, meant to demonstrate that the PLA now has the capa-

5 Only major encirclement drills are considered here. For completeness, it is important to note that two other major exercises occurred during this time frame—in April 2023 following then-President Tsai Ing-wen's US transit and meeting with then-U.S. House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, and in August 2023 after then-Vice President Lai Ching-te's US transit—though neither counted as an encirclement drills and both were lower key.

6 For a discussion of the PRC's definition of its "One China Principle," see the second paper in this series: John Dotson, *The Chinese Communist Party's Ideological Frameworks for Taiwan Policy*, Global Taiwan Institute, August 2024, 3-5, https://global-taiwan.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/OR_CCP-Ideological-Frameworks-for-TW-Policy.pdf.

7 Christopher Twomey, "The Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis is Just Starting," *War on the Rocks*, August 22, 2022.

bilities to operate beyond Taiwan’s northeastern flank (traditionally the ROC military’s main focus for defense). Significantly, Beijing purposefully designated three closure areas to overlap within Taiwan’s 12 nautical mile territorial waters to underscore that Taiwan is not an independent and sovereign nation entitled to such a benefit under international law and norms of behavior. Although there is a dearth of publicly available information on the movements and operations of specific PLAN assets during this crisis (perhaps due to sensitivities related to collection and analytical methods), it is clear that the PLAN was integrally involved in this blockade simulation.⁸

The last two PLA encirclement drills—known as *Joint Sword 2024A* (聯合利劍-2024A) and *Joint Sword 2024B* (聯合利劍-2024B)—occurred in May and October of 2024, respectively, and were similarly designed to simulate a military blockade of Taiwan. Following ROC President Lai Ching-te’s (William Lai, 賴清德) inauguration speech in May, Beijing responded by instructing the PLA Eastern Command to launch *Joint Sword 2024A*.⁹ During this round of exercises, Beijing declared fewer closure areas around Taiwan—five instead of six—but the one near Taipei was significantly larger, in a likely effort to intimidate the ROC leadership. For the first time, Beijing further added four smaller closure areas in waters surrounding the outlying islands near the Chinese mainland—Dongyin, Kinmen, Matsu, and Wuqiu.

Unlike the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis, there is more publicly available information on PLAN and CCG movements and operations during the *Joint Sword* drills. The PLAN, for example, deployed 27 vessels on a single day—the most up to that time. Additionally, the CCG made a strong appearance in this event, deploying at least 16 vessels in total. Some of these patrolled the waters around the Wuqiu and Dong-

ying islands “to test its joint patrol, rapid reaction, and emergency response capabilities.”¹⁰ In an unprecedented move, the CCG entered the territorial waters of Wuqiu and Dongying island as well. The CCG separately operated on the eastern seaboard of Taiwan, off the coast of Hualien, to commence a water cannoning exercise against what appeared to be a Chinese boat in a demonstration of gray zone tactics that might be used against ROC vessels. CCG assets were also spotted off the southern approach to the Taiwan Strait. In all cases, the CCG clearly played an augmenting and supplementary role to PLAN operations.

The most recent encirclement drill, *Joint Sword 2024B*, followed President Lai’s October 2024 National Day speech.¹¹ As was the case during the 2022 exercise, Beijing declared six military exclusionary zones for *Joint Sword 2024B*, though the size of the zones was smaller. Furthermore, the exercise only lasted approximately 13 hours instead of multiple days. Nonetheless, the PLAN and CCG brought an impressive array of assets with which to threaten Taiwan. *Joint Sword 2024B* featured the highest single-day deployment of vessels (26), though *Joint Sword 2024A* featured a higher number (27). But overall, *Joint Sword 2024B* featured the highest number of PLAN ships on record encircling Taiwan. Yet the most significant part of *Joint Sword 2024B* was the CCG deployments—both against mainland Taiwan and its outer islands. The CCP instructed at least 13 CCG vessels to sail toward Taiwan, and several of them for the first time traversed through the military exclusionary zones. CCG assets also deployed in larger numbers (at least 16 vessels) against outer islands—namely Dongying and Kinmen—and included the neighboring Senkaku/Diaoyu islands as well, which are disputed between China, Taiwan, and Japan. It is unclear whether the CCG was officially on patrol

8 John Dotson, “An Overview of Chinese Military Activity Near Taiwan in Early August 2022, Part 2: Aviation Activity, and Naval and Ground Force Exercises,” *Global Taiwan Brief*, Global Taiwan Institute, September 7, 2022.

9 “How is China Responding to the Inauguration of Taiwan’s President William Lai?,” *China Power*, CSIS, May 2024.

10 “How is China Responding to the Inauguration of Taiwan’s President William Lai?,”

11 “Analyzing China’s Escalation After Taiwan President William Lai’s National Day Speech,” *China Power*, CSIS, October 2024.

in all of these cases and would have interdicted intruding ships; but at a minimum, they were establishing an operating presence that is part of gray zone tactics to reduce the territorial breathing space of Taipei.

Regardless, during peacetime, the CCG has been ramping up patrols of Taiwan's outer islands. The PRC has justified this policy stemming from an event that occurred on February 14, 2024 off the coast of Kinmen Island.¹² On that day, the Taiwan Coast Guard attempted to inspect a PRC small boat and it fled. Regrettably, the boat capsized and two of the four occupants perished. Without evidence, Beijing accused the Taiwan Coast Guard of causing the accident, and in response, has since been patrolling the outer islands for “law enforcement” purposes.¹³ According to one recent study that analyzed automatic identification system (AIS) data of CCG vessels from 2020 to 2024, the researchers concluded that CCG incursions into the territorial waters of Taiwan's outer islands rose in 2024—yet another form of gray zone tactics meant to restrict the outer islands' freedom of movement just off their own shorelines.¹⁴

In addition to CCG incursions, Beijing further engages in undersea gray zone coercion, and the primary observed form has been the severing of undersea telecommunications cables that connect Taiwan to its outer islands and the world beyond. In the most recent case from February 2025, the Taiwan Coast Guard detained a Togo-flagged Chinese cargo ship suspected of cutting an undersea cable connecting Taiwan and the Penghu Islands.¹⁵ In an earlier incident, in January 2025, a Chinese cargo ship suspiciously dragged



Image: ROC Coast Guard personnel inspect an unnamed Chinese fishing vessel that capsized in the vicinity of Kinmen Island following an attempt to flee from inspection (February 14, 2024). The incident was invoked by the PRC as justification for more intrusive patrols by the PRC Coast Guard around Taiwan's outlying islands.¹⁶

its anchor across an undersea cable near Taiwan's northern Keelung harbor, disrupting telecommunications to global networks.¹⁷ The ship apparently had two sets of AIS equipment that could be alternated in order to avoid detection at certain times. Initial reports indicated that the ship was the Cameroon-flagged *Shunxin-39* (順興39), but considering that this ship was not registered in the International Maritime Organization and instead came up as the Tanzania-flagged *Xingshun-39* (興順39), it is likely Beijing switched the name order for the same ship to mask its true identity. This is hardly the first time Taiwan has had to deal with this type of Chinese coercion. In 2023, two undersea cables connecting Taiwan to Matsu were damaged in the same week, further raising suspicions regarding at least 30 instances of damaged cables from 2017 to 2023.

12 John Dotson, “Beijing’s Increasing Maritime Gray Zone Operations Around Taiwan’s Outer Islands,” *China Brief*, The Jamestown Foundation, March 29, 2024.

13 Ibid.

14 “A New Normal for the China Coast Guard at Kinmen and Matsu,” Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, CSIS, December 6, 2024.

15 Wayne Chang, “Taiwan Detains Chinese-crewed Ship Suspected of Cutting Undersea Cable,” *CNN*, February 26, 2025.

16 Image source: Wikimedia Commons / Taiwan Coast Guard, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%E5%88%9D%E4%BA%94%E9%96%8B%E5%B7%A5%E6%97%A5%E8%B6%8A%E7%95%8C%E6%8D%95%E9%AD%9A%EF%BC%81%E9%99%B8%E7%B1%8D%E6%BC%81%E8%88%B9%E6%8B%92%E6%AA%A2%E8%BF%BD%E9%80%90%E7%BFB%BB%E8%A6%86_4%E4%BA%BA%E8%90%BD%E6%B5%B7%E9%87%802%E6%AD%BB_1.jpg.

17 Brian Hioe, “Another Severed Submarine Cable Raises Alarm in Taiwan,” *The Diplomat*, January 16, 2025.

One final and interesting point on China's gray zone tactics versus Taiwan has been the relative absence of PAFMM forces. This approach stands in stark contrast to the CCP's robust and routine use of PAFMM in the South China Sea. One leading theory as to why Beijing treads more lightly with PAFMM against Taiwan is two-fold.¹⁸ First, the Taiwan Strait is a much smaller geographic area than the South China Sea, requiring far fewer assets to conduct gray zone activities near and within it. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, the PRC tends to use PAFMM in an attempt to mask its fingerprints; whereas in the case of Taiwan, it wants Taipei and all other nations to know that Taiwan is an internal matter, meaning more overt assets like CCG and PLAN can be employed. This last explanation, however, does not seem aligned with China's clandestine attempts to cut undersea cables. Regardless, it is a matter worth continued study.



Image: The Shunxin-39 (AKA Xing Shun 39), a Hong Kong-registered vessel suspected of sabotaging undersea telecommunications cables off the coast of Taiwan in early January. Such undersea cable sabotage has emerged as another element of the PRC's gray zone operations directed against Taiwan.¹⁹

¹⁸ Ryan D. Martinson, "Missing the Gray Zone? China's Maritime Militia Forces Around Taiwan," *The Diplomat*, December 24, 2024.

¹⁹ Image source: Lloyd's List / Taiwan Coast Guard, <https://www.lloydslist.com/LL1152160/Taiwan-is-hunting-one-cable-cutting-vessel-disguised-with-three-separate-digital-identities>.

Chinese Gray Zone Tactics in the Air

In addition to its employment of gray zone tactics at sea, the CCP continues to press Taiwan in the air domain. Starting in 2019, the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) began to make routine incursions into the island's air defense identification zone (ADIZ) without authorization from the ROC government. Since then, Beijing has sortied fighter jets, bombers, reconnaissance aircraft, and other assets into Taiwan's ADIZ. In 2020, the PRC seemingly decided to stop respecting the existence of the centerline in the Taiwan Strait as well. Prior to this year, PLAAF crossings of the centerline were quite rare. However, the PRC decided to purposefully cross the center line in response to then-US Undersecretary of State Keith Krach's visit to Taiwan.²⁰

The next major milestone in PLAAF-led gray zone operations came during the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis in August 2022. During this event, Beijing deployed an assortment of fighter aircraft (J-11s, J-30s, and J-16s) to conduct missions such as crossing the centerline *en masse* at the northern approach and patrolling or threatening the southern approach to the Taiwan Strait. On the second day, the PLAAF sortied a record number of its aircraft up to that point—47 in all—and even after the exercise, the PLAAF along with PLAN aviation assets continued to make near-daily incursions into Taiwan's ADIZ.²¹ Most ominously, however, was Beijing's decision to authorize the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF) to live-fire at least four ballistic missiles over Taiwan's sovereign airspace, and several other missiles that landed near the island in the military exclusionary zones. Fortunately, the PRC to date has not repeated this gray zone tactic of extreme intimidation.

Between the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis and *Joint Sword 2024A* (May 2024), Taiwan's then-President Tsai transited California and met with then-Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy in April 2023. In response, Beijing launched the inaugural *Joint Sword* exercise and unleashed 91 sorties into Taiwan's ADIZ—the larg-

²⁰ Dotson, "An Overview of Chinese Military Activity Near Taiwan in Early August 2022, Part 2."

²¹ *Ibid.*

est single-day total up to that point. Although *Joint Sword 2024A* involved fewer aircraft, *Joint Sword 2024B* (October 2024) witnessed the largest single-day deployment on record—153 military aircraft simultaneously into Taiwan’s ADIZ. Furthermore, the PLAAF intruded into Taiwan’s ADIZ at the highest record rate in its history during this exercise.²²

In the most recent and alarming development yet, the PLA in late February 2025 conducted live-firing exercises just 40 nautical miles off the coast of Taiwan “without warning,” according to the ROC defense ministry.²³ It is reasonable to conclude that China will continue close-in military activities as its confidence grows and opposition remains minimal and manageable.

Outside of the context of Chinese military exercises, Beijing has clearly ramped up both the number of incursions into Taiwan’s ADIZ and crossings of the centerline. On the first point, one estimate at the conclusion of 2024 was that the PRC had launched at least 3,000 sorties into the island’s ADIZ—a more than three-fold increase since just 2021.²⁴ Recent analysis of the ROC’s Ministry of National Defense (MND, 國防部) data demonstrates that PLAAF crossings continue to rise: from 240 in 2021 to 269 in 2022, and from 271 in 2023 to 313 in 2024.²⁵ Also worryingly, PLAAF and PLAN aviation in recent years have demonstrated a rising proficiency at conducting air operations on the eastern flank of

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Taiwan, which has forced Taipei to simultaneously divide its focus among western and eastern approaches.²⁶

On the asymmetric side, the PRC has used other means to challenge Taiwan in the air domain. After discovering that China had likely sent a hot air balloon in 2023 to spy across the continental United States, Taiwan and other nations revealed that they had experienced the same gray zone tactics.

Although the true purpose of these spy balloons continues to be debated, at a minimum, they are designed to collect intelligence and probably intimidate those they traverse. The CCP, for example, dispatched spy balloons at an “unprecedented scale,” according to the ROC’s MND, before and after Taiwan’s 2024 presidential election.²⁷ The most recent spy balloon mission occurred at the time of this writing (February 2025) and involved six balloons off

the coast of Taiwan.²⁸ The last incident before this was in November 2024, when MND assets spotted a balloon over the sea to Taiwan’s north.²⁹

Finally, one has to wonder whether the PRC is also covertly using small commercial drones, launched by civilians, as yet another form of gray zone coercion against Taiwan.³⁰ Starting just before the

22 Dotson, “An Overview of Chinese Military Activity Near Taiwan in Early August 2022, Part 2.”

23 “China Holds ‘Shooting’ Drills Off Taiwan’s Coast, Vows ‘Reunification’ Push,” *Voice of America*, February 26, 2025.

24 Andy Hsueh and Jaime Ocon, “More Than 3,000 Chinese Warplanes Breaches Taiwan’s ADIZ in 2024,” *Taiwan Plus*, December 31, 2024.

25 Cheng-kun Ma, K. Tristan Tang, “Military Implications of PLA Aircraft Incursions in Taiwan’s Airspace 2024,” *China Brief*, The Jamestown Foundation, January 17, 2025. (Please note: the title of this article is inaccurate: China has never flown military aircraft over Taiwan’s sovereign airspace—only within its ADIZ. Nevertheless, the author assesses that these researchers did an accurate job of analyzing MND data on PLAAF centerline breaches.)

26 Benjamin Lewis and Thomas Shattuck, “A New Frontier: PRC Flight Activity to the East of Taiwan,” *Global Taiwan Brief*, Global Taiwan Institute, September 4, 2024.

27 Brad Dress, “Why Chinese Spy Balloons Are Back in Force Over Taiwan,” *The Hill*, January 29, 2024 and “Taiwan Reports Chinese Balloon, First Time in Six Months,” *Reuters*, November 24, 2024.

28 Dharvi Vaid, “Taiwan Detects Airplanes, 6 Balloons From China Near Island,” *Deutsche Wells*, February 7, 2025.

29 “Taiwan Reports Chinese Balloon, First Time in Six Months,” *Reuters*, November 24, 2024.

30 Yiyao Alex Fan, “PRC Gray Zone Activities Against Taiwan: Civilian Drone Incursions,” *China Brief*,

Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis, PRC citizens began to fly drones over the airspace of Kinmen and Matsu. Such activities continued during *Joint Sword 2024A* when a company used drones to drop propaganda leaflets. Beijing has publicly addressed the issue by saying “Chinese drones flying over China’s territory, that is not something worth being surprised at.”³¹ To date, analysts have been unable to credibly attribute these drone sorties to PRC state actors.

Chinese Gray Zone Tactics in Cyberspace

Another domain in which the CCP conducts gray zone operations is cyberspace. According to a recent government study published by the ROC’s National Security Bureau (NSB, 國家安全局), Chinese cyber hacking against the government in 2024 reached approximately 2.4 million attempts *per day*—an astonishingly high volume that underscores Beijing’s relentlessly aggressive attempts to compromise the internal workings and effectiveness of Taiwan’s national government.³² The NSB further found that the steepest rises in Chinese cyberattacks since 2023 were against the telecommunications sector (up 650 percent), transportation targets (up 70 percent), and defense supply chain targets (up 57 percent). The enormous uptick in telecommunications hacking suggests that the PRC seeks to infiltrate ROC government networks to neutralize them ahead of a Taiwan conflict. Moreover, the CCP seeks to create an atmosphere of growing confusion and fear, applicable to both peacetime and crisis, in which the Taiwanese people believe that Beijing can disrupt or disable vital government services at will. Finally, Chinese cyber hackers also use the opportunity to disseminate disinformation via the cyberspace domain as part of the PRC’s broader psychological operations.

The main official actor in Chinese cyber hacking

The Jamestown Foundation, December 20, 2024.

31 “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian’s Regular Press Conference on August 29, 2022,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, August 29, 2022.

32 “Daily Cyberattacks on Taiwan Government Double in 2024: NSB,” *Focus Taiwan*, January 5, 2025.

efforts is Beijing’s Cyberspace Force (CSF, 網路空間部隊). CSF is the cyber component of the recently-disestablished PLA Strategic Support Force (PLASSF)—which maintained a much wider mission of integrating cyber, electromagnetic, and space warfare data into a single unit and then leveraging it in support of the PLA Army (PLAA), PLAAF, PLARF, and PLAN. Now, however, the CSF is probably in a stronger position as it has a distinct mission upon which it can exclusively focus, rather than dealing with the entirety of information operations.³³ Like US Cyber Command (CYBERCOM), Beijing’s CSF is responsible for both offensive and defensive operations. On the offensive side, CSF is charged with disrupting, disabling, and destroying key targets, whether military or civilian, to facilitate PLA operations against Taiwan. On the defensive side, CSF’s mission is to prevent Taiwan from conducting similar operations against the PRC.

Although CSF is important to the CCP’s hacking operations, it is only one component of a broader and murkier digital force that also enlists other government officials and civilians as well. According to one unclassified estimate, the PRC’s hacker force could range from 50,000 to 100,000 personnel, with a budget of hundreds of millions of dollars.³⁴ US government classified estimates may be even higher, given Beijing’s heavy emphasis in recent years on forging civilian-military fusion as a force multiplier.

Beijing has selectively ramped up its cyber operations at key, opportunistic moments, and will almost certainly continue to do so. For example, during Taiwan’s presidential campaign in 2019, Chinese hackers boosted the Kuomintang Party’s (KMT, 國民黨) candidate and opposition to Tsai’s reelection, Han Kuo-yu (韓國瑜), by manipulating social media accounts in Taiwan.³⁵ Likewise, in the run-up to the last presidential election in January 2024, there was a significant surge in Chinese hacking attacks—though interestingly, they did not

33 Meia Nouwens, “China’s New Information Support Force,” IISS, May 3, 2024.

34 Klon Kitchen, “Taking Taiwan Through Cyber,” American Enterprise Institute and Defending Taiwan, Undated.

35 Paul Huang, “Chinese Cyber Operatives Boosted Taiwan’s Insurgent Candidate,” *Foreign Policy*, June 26, 2019.

seem aimed at supporting on nominee over another. Rather, the hackers focused on government offices, police departments, and financial institutions.³⁶

But the PRC certainly does not need a Taiwanese presidential election or other sensitive moment to justify launching cyberattacks against critical targets. For example, in 2020 Beijing used the ColdLock ransomware virus to produce an electronic payment outage across 25 percent of the island’s gas stations.³⁷ ColdLock reportedly hit more than 10 critical infrastructure targets, to include the gas industry, and it may have attacked Taiwan’s highly sensitive semiconductor industry as well.³⁸ The CCP’s cyber hacking operations are designed to engender confusion and lack of faith among the Taiwanese people in their government’s ability to ensure that its networks are resilient in the face of such a Chinese onslaught. In the words of James Andrew Lewis, a researcher on Chinese cyber hacking at CSIS based in Washington, DC, “the population of Taiwan will be a target for text, email, and video messages—perhaps generated by new artificial intelligence (AI) tools—intended to create confusion and emphasize the futility of resistance.”³⁹

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New Domains for Chinese Gray Zone Tactics

The PRC is always coming up with new and inno-

vative gray zone tactics to coerce its rivals. For example, earlier this year, Beijing debuted the use of a sonic blasting device to force away rival Philippine vessels in the South China Sea. Rather than try to predict the new gray zone tactics China might employ against Taiwan, this section considers the new domains into which Beijing is already expanding, and what its gray zone operations might look like within them.

One such domain is on land. Although the CCP has been heretofore unable to achieve any meaningful advantages for itself on mainland Taiwan, the outer islands are a different story. On the island of Kinmen in particular, Beijing in recent years has successfully engaged with the local government, incrementally and subtly attempting to pull it out of alignment with the central government back in Taipei.⁴⁰ Starting in 2001, Kinmen and the PRC established the “Three Small Links” (小三通) of transportation, postal services, and trade—predating by seven years the ROC’s national-level agreement with the PRC in 2008

on the establishment of the “Three Links” (三通). By 2018, the PRC-Kinmen water pipeline was completed, supplying 70 percent of Kinmen’s water from the mainland.⁴¹ Then, with the new KMT government in 2019, Kinmen sought to further strengthen ties with the mainland to include additional plans for China to supply gas and electricity to the island, and to construct a bridge to connect Kinmen with China’s Xiamen Airport—known as the “New Three Links.” The county magistrate at the time, Yang Cheng-wu (楊鎮浯), also sought more tourism, and he traveled to Fujian to discuss all of these plans. Beijing, for its part, has strongly encouraged all of these moves. In 2023, over 700,000 tourists traveled between Kinmen to Xiamen via ferry—most of them Taiwanese and many looking

36 Jeff Seldin, “Cyber Attacks Spike Suddenly Prior to Taiwan’s Election,” *Voice of America*, February 13, 2024.

37 CyCraft Technology Corp, “China-Linked Threat Group Targets Taiwan Critical Infrastructure, Smokescreen Ransomware,” June 1, 2021.

38 Cyberint, “Targeted Ransomware Attacks in Taiwan,” May 14, 2020.

39 James Andrew Lewis, “Cyberattack on Civilian Critical Infrastructures in a Taiwan Scenario,” CSIS, August 2023.

40 Derek Grossman, “One Country, Two Systems, Lots of Problems,” *Foreign Policy*, June 21, 2019.

41 Ian Murphy, “China’s Infrastructure War Against Kinmen,” *Taiwan Insight*, June 7, 2024.

to shop on mainland China.⁴²

Although there is still no physical bridge in place, it would hardly be surprising were this to happen in the coming years given the overall trajectory of PRC-Kinmen ties. This would add another crucial dimension to the CCP's slow, steady, and quiet attempts to reintegrate Kinmen with the mainland, in spite of Taipei's preferences. This is tantamount to the CCP employing infrastructural gray zone tactics on land: these projects are not merely part of the local infrastructure, but also provide Beijing with a means to change the norms and status quo on the ground in its favor.

Outer space is another domain where CCP gray zone tactics are likely to become manifest in the future. To be sure, the ROC's space program is relatively nascent, especially compared to China, Russia, and the United States. But because of Chinese gray zone tactics against Taiwan's telecommunications network, particularly with regard to undersea cable cutting, Taipei has had to seek diversification for the sake of redundancy and survivability.⁴³ Thus, Taiwan is actively exploring ways to indignously launch new satellites into orbit beginning in 2026 to support future civilian and military requirements.

Taipei has looked at Starlink as a potential way of rapidly fielding a large constellation, similar to Ukraine—but for a number of reasons, it has decided in favor of OneWeb instead. Regardless, Chinese scientists have already begun examining how Beijing could field countermeasures to a robust Taiwanese satellite constellation of the future. For example, a recent PRC computer simulation showed that Beijing could effectively approach and disable up to 1,400 Starlink (or comparable) satellites within 12 hours—by using just 99 of their own

satellites to do it.⁴⁴ Beijing believes that directed-energy weapons, X-ray lasers, microwaves, and enhanced surveillance and monitoring techniques could be the key to disrupting Taiwan's plans. Of note, none of these methods would necessarily require a direct kinetic attack on the ROC's satellites; rather, Beijing might only temporarily disable Taiwan's satellites, known as “dazzling,” which would align well with gray zone tactics in space meant to provide the PRC with strategic advantages.

42 “Kinmen-Xiamen Crossing Attracts Taiwanese Shoppers and Tourists,” *Taipei Times*, May 19, 2024.

43 Eric Cheung, “Developing Taiwan's Own ‘Starlink’ Crucial for Island-wide Emergency, Space Agency Says,” *CNN*, May 4, 2024.

44 Stephen Chen, “Chinese Scientists Simulate ‘Hunting’ Starlink Satellites in Orbit,” *South China Morning Post*, January 12, 2025 and Gabriel Honrada, “China Plans to Blow Starlink Out of the Sky in a Taiwan War,” *Asia Times*, January 14, 2025.

Concluding Thoughts and Recommendations for Taiwan and Its Friends

As this report demonstrates, Taiwan is under constant pressure from the CCP's gray zone tactics in multiple domains, and its behavior will likely continue to spread into new domains in the years to come. The ROC has already taken multiple steps to address these threats, such as dispatching the Taiwan Coast Guard to counter CCG operations, intercepting Chinese military aircraft with ROC assets within its ADIZ, and bolstering Taiwan's cyber defenses. However, Beijing unfortunately persists because it still perceives that there are strategic advantages to be gained. But the reality is quite different: indeed, the CCP's gray zone tactics are actually pushing Taiwan further away from China into the welcoming embrace of the United States and its allies, rather than convincing it to peacefully reunify with the mainland.⁴⁵

One of the logical recommendations, then, is to more effectively convey to the PRC that gray zone tactics are failing to achieve their core objective of coercing Taiwan into submission within "One China." Taipei might be able to achieve this in several ways. It should, for example, continue to strengthen friendships with like-minded democratic partners—especially the United States, but also increasingly Australia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and European powers like France and the United Kingdom—to directly link China's pursuit of gray zone tactics to Taipei seeking stronger foreign partnerships. The ROC might also specifically highlight the role that Beijing's gray zone tactics are playing in its own decision-making calculus—i.e., by clearly noting in policy statements and speeches that these operations are having the opposite of the intended effect. Taipei could not only link China's gray zone tactics to Taiwan's strengthening partnerships, but it could also go bolder and begin to signal that the ROC might

⁴⁵ David Sacks, "China's Gray Zone Offensive Against Taiwan Is Backfiring," *Foreign Affairs*, November 8, 2024.

have to engage in clearer demonstrations of its sovereignty, such as by making an outright rejection of the "1992 Consensus"—a statement of "One China"—in the face of deep and multitudinous challenges to it. Of course, this will involve a careful balancing act, as an outright independence declaration or something akin to it would provoke war with China—but something less than that could make Beijing reconsider its current approach.

A second point is that Taiwan has to find a way to disabuse the Chinese leadership of the notion that, short of coercing the island's reunification, Beijing's gray zone activities are also not providing China with any new strategic advantages. This may be more difficult given that Beijing clearly sees new strategic advantages in smothering Taiwan across multiple domains. But all certainly is not lost. Taipei should begin by prioritizing which of the CCP's gray zone tactics constitute the greatest threat to the island's security, and try to focus the majority of resources and personnel to mitigate this particular threat.⁴⁶ While debatable, it would seem that of

Taiwan should seek to expose China's gray zone activities as much as possible in order to garner additional foreign support to deal with them.

all threats covered here, the most pressing is in the air domain—in which the PLAAF and PLAN aviation have completely transformed the operational and strategic environment. Hence, the ROC should consider new ways to add some uncertainty into the PRC's calculations, such as by consciously intercepting fewer PLAAF and PLAN flight within its ADIZ. Doing this would prompt Beijing to exercise a bit more caution when dealing with the ROC Air Force because they would not necessarily know what to expect in their reaction to on-

⁴⁶ Such a methodology for mitigating gray zone tactics is proposed and described at length in Lyle J. Morris, Michael J. Mazarr, Jeffrey W. Hornung, Stephanie Pezard, Anika Binnendijk, Marta Kepe, "Gaining Competitive Advantage in the Gray Zone: Response Options for Coercive Aggression Below the Threshold of Major War," RAND, Santa Monica, CA, 2019.

going ADIZ incursions. Right now, the ROC Air Force has become entirely too predictable, and Beijing has correspondingly fallen into a comfort zone of a “new normal.” Taiwan might also invest in counter-air assets, like drones and more advanced air defense systems, to enhance deterrence against these PRC threats.

Finally, Taiwan should seek to expose China’s gray zone activities as much as possible in order to garner additional foreign support to deal with them. Just to Taiwan’s south, the Philippines has been locked in a longstanding sovereignty and territorial dispute against China over South China Sea claims within its EEZ. Beijing has employed a broad variety of gray zone tactics there, and one of Manila’s responses has been to record them in order to reveal these actions to the world—known as “assertive transparency” or the “transparency initiative.” This has helped Manila not only prove that the CCP is conducting gray zone tactics, but has also galvanized regional and global sympathy for the Philippines. Taiwan should pursue a similar approach, though its own transparency should be supplemented with other substantive changes to its overall strategy; the Philippines’ transparency initiative alone has failed to counter Chinese gray zone behavior.

Taiwan must strive harder to mitigate and push back against China’s coercive gray zone behavior. To be sure, Taipei is already doing an admirable job, especially in the sea and cyber domains—but much more can and should be done to further protect Taiwan’s sovereignty and security in the years to come.