



Pressure points: Taiwan and the Taiwan Strait

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First published November 2025

Published in Australia by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute

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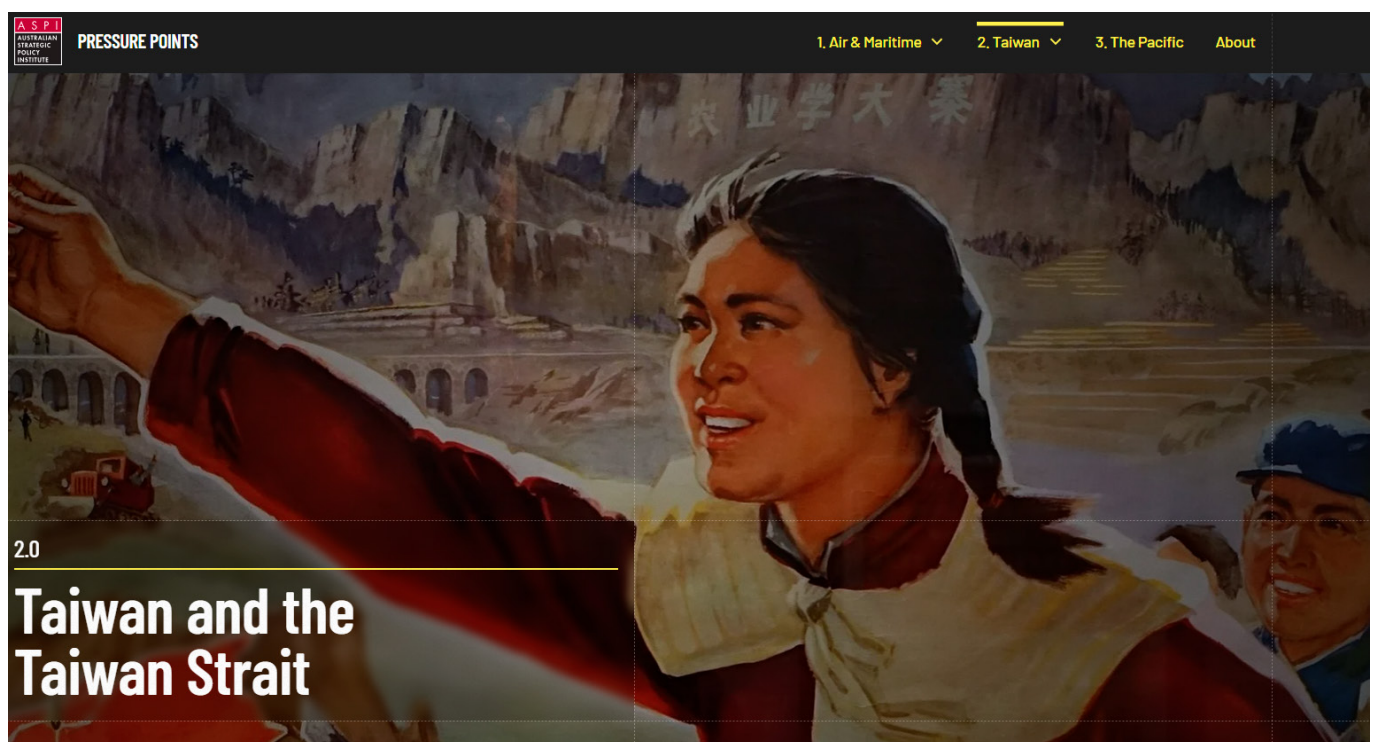
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Introduction

In 2021, *The Economist* called Taiwan ‘the most dangerous place on earth’.¹ For the island’s 23 million people, that danger isn’t abstract; it’s a daily reality shaped by the shadow of conflict. This report unpacks the complex and often misunderstood story of China and Taiwan: their complicated history, the shifting currents of public opinion, and the ways both governments prepare for conflict. It explores how Beijing increasingly wields military pressure against Taiwan and confronts the biggest question of all: what happens if China decides to seize the island by force?

The People’s Republic of China (PRC), ruled by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) from Beijing, views² Taiwan as simultaneously already an inalienable part of China and also a territory destined to come under Beijing’s control when so-called ‘separatists’ and ‘foreign forces’ are overcome.

President Xi Jinping calls³ the island the ‘core of the core’ of China’s interests, framing unification as essential to his vision of national rejuvenation. In contrast, the Republic of China (ROC), ruled from Taipei in Taiwan, has its own Constitution, democratically elected leaders and a nation-building history.⁴





Chapter 1: China's plans for Taiwan

Taiwan was inhabited by indigenous tribes for around 15,000 years before foreign and regional powers began colonising the island. The Dutch established a colony in southern Taiwan in 1624, while the Spanish briefly controlled the north from 1626 to 1642. In 1662, Ming loyalist Koxinga expelled the Dutch and set up a short-lived regime, marking the first imperial outpost established from mainland China.

The Qing Dynasty annexed Taiwan in 1683, gradually integrating it into Fujian Province and later making it a separate province in 1887 after a French attempt at annexation. After the First Sino-Japanese War, the Qing ceded Taiwan to Japan under the 1895 Treaty of Shimonoseki. Japan ruled Taiwan as a colony until the end of World War II in 1945.

Following Japan's defeat, the Allies placed Taiwan under the administrative control of the ROC. In 1947, a Taiwanese uprising against the ROC was crushed by the ruling Kuomintang (KMT) forces. In 1949, as the Chinese Civil War concluded, the Kuomintang retreated to Taiwan after losing mainland China to the communists, establishing it as the ROC's new base. Meanwhile, the CCP founded the PRC in Beijing, claiming to be the sole legitimate government of all China, including Taiwan.

That timeline highlights the weaknesses in the CCP's claim. The party has never governed Taiwan, and between 1928 and 1943 CCP leaders even recognised⁵ the Taiwanese as a distinct 'nation' or 'nationality'. The historical argument for unification is therefore less consistent and principled than Beijing presents it.⁶

China's leaders on Taiwan and unification

The CCP's longstanding One-China principle⁷ asserts that 'there is but one China in the world, Taiwan is an inalienable part of China's territory, and the government of the People's Republic of China is the sole legal government representing the whole of China.'

While CCP leaders have consistently upheld that principle since 1949, the tone, urgency and framing of their statements on Taiwan have evolved. Under Xi Jinping, their language⁸ has become increasingly assertive, nationalistic and tied to broader strategic goals. A timeline highlights these shifts:

1949: Mao Zedong on Taiwan.

In his Tiananmen Square speech⁹ founding the PRC, Mao Zedong implied that all territory formerly under ROC control, including Taiwan, would be unified under the communist government.

1950s: Mao Zedong: 'We must liberate Taiwan.'

In multiple speeches and directives, Mao and Zhou Enlai repeatedly and consistently referred¹⁰ to the goal of 'liberating' Taiwan. They noted that there are two ways of liberation: by peaceful means and by means of war, tested in the 1954 and 1958 first and second 'Taiwan Strait crises'.

1979: Deng Xiaoping: 'Message to compatriots in Taiwan.'

Under Deng, China shifted from a liberation stance to advocating a negotiated settlement between the KMT and the CCP. PRC Marshal Ye Jianying proposed¹¹ peaceful unification under a 'One country, two systems' framework in 1982.

1995: Jiang Zemin: ‘We will not renounce the use of force, but strive for peaceful reunification.’

As part of his ‘Eight-Point Proposal’¹² on Taiwan, Jiang reiterated the One-China principle, emphasising peaceful reunification, warning against any moves towards Taiwanese independence and anticipating a convergence of development bringing China and Taiwan together.

2007: Hu Jintao: On peaceful development of cross-strait relations.

At the 17th CCP Congress, following a meeting with KMT chairman Lien Chan in 2005, Hu Jintao said¹³ that China is ‘ready to have exchanges, dialogue, consultations and negotiations with any political party in Taiwan, as long as it recognises the One-China principle’.

2012: Xi Jinping: ‘Reunification is tied to national rejuvenation.’

Xi linked Taiwan’s unification to the ‘Chinese Dream’¹⁴ of national rejuvenation, setting a long-term goal for 2049.

2021: Xi Jinping: ‘Resolving the Taiwan question is a matter for the Chinese people.’

On the 100th anniversary of the founding of the CCP, Xi declared¹⁵ that Taiwan’s fate lies solely with China.

2022: Xi Jinping: ‘We will never promise to renounce the use of force.’

At the 20th Party Congress, Xi stated that China won’t renounce the use of force, although peaceful reunification is preferred.¹⁶

2024: Xi Jinping: ‘No one can stop China’s reunification with Taiwan.’

In his New Year’s address,¹⁷ Xi declared that reunification is inevitable, signalling a firm commitment to bringing Taiwan under Beijing’s control, a statement of the party’s belief in historical determinism and a rejection of compromise with the elected Democratic Progressive Party government of Taiwan.

Table 1: PRC policy and strategy under successive leaders

Leader	Policy focus	Strategy towards Taiwan
Mao Zedong	Sovereignty and national unity	Taiwan seen as part of unfinished civil war
Deng Xiaoping	Long-term unification	Proposed ‘One country, two systems’ to peacefully reunite with Taiwan
Jiang Zemin	Unification via dialogue	Promoted peaceful negotiation; strongly opposed Taiwan independence
Hu Jintao	Peaceful development, strengthening economic ties	Strengthened economic ties, promoted cross-strait exchanges
Xi Jinping	National rejuvenation, 2049 deadline	More coercive: military drills, diplomatic pressure, and global isolation of Taiwan

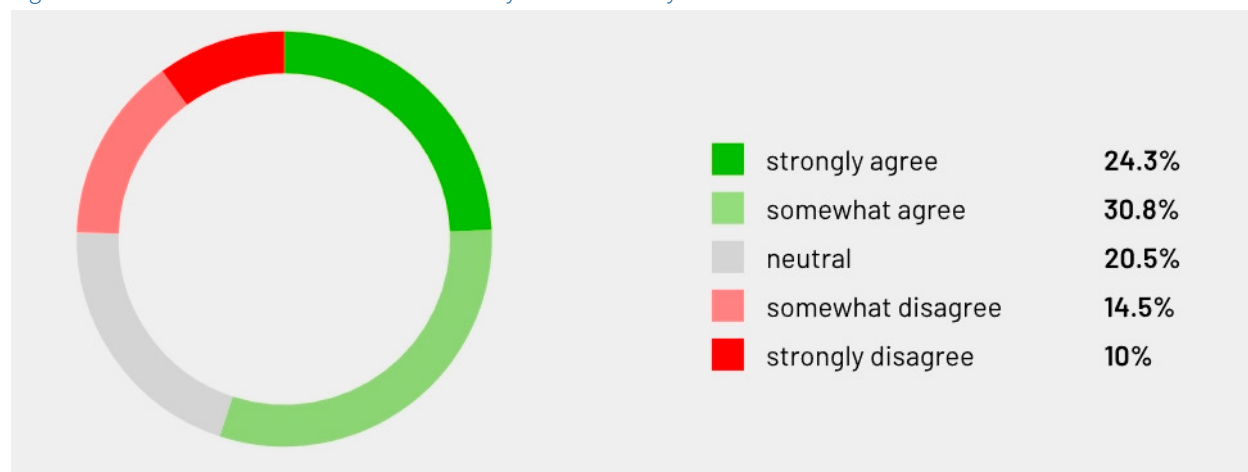
China’s civil society’s views on unification

While unification with Taiwan remains a core interest for China’s leadership, it doesn’t carry the same level of urgency for most PRC citizens. Many are focused on domestic challenges,¹⁸ including an ageing population, a slowing economy, high youth unemployment, housing market instability, environmental degradation, corruption and concerns about public services.

Most PRC citizens¹⁹ see Taiwan as an inseparable part of China—a view shaped by decades of state education and media messaging. However, over recent years, opinions have gently shifted on whether military force should be used to achieve unification. Notwithstanding the challenges of surveying public opinion in China, we nonetheless have some insight into public attitudes via several different surveys that have been conducted.

A 2025 survey conducted by the Carter Center and Emory University in Atlanta:

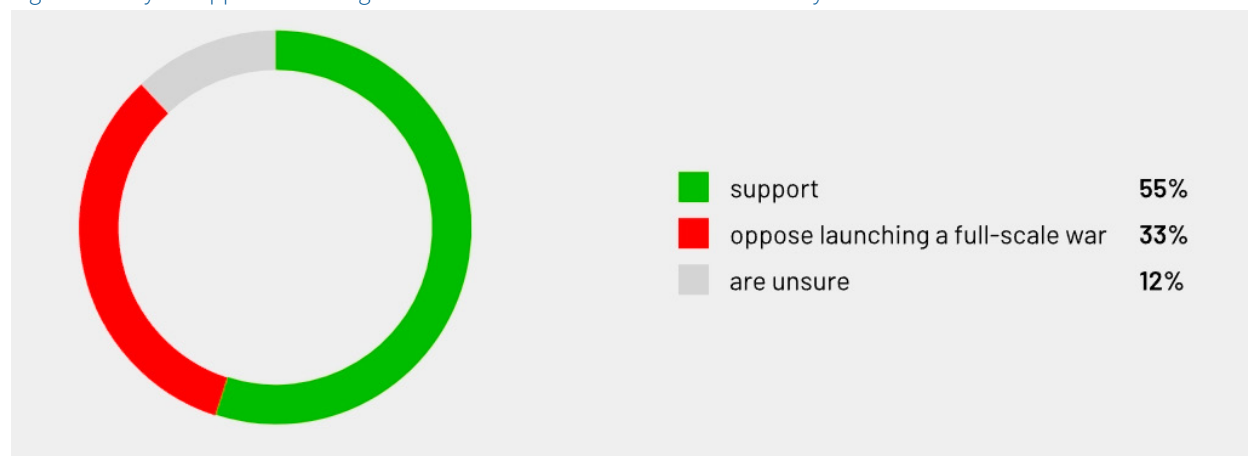
Figure 1: 'Unification with Taiwan should not be by force under any circumstances'



Source: Published in *Sovereignty, security, & US-China relations: Chinese public opinion*.²⁰

A 2023 survey²¹ from the Election Study Centre:

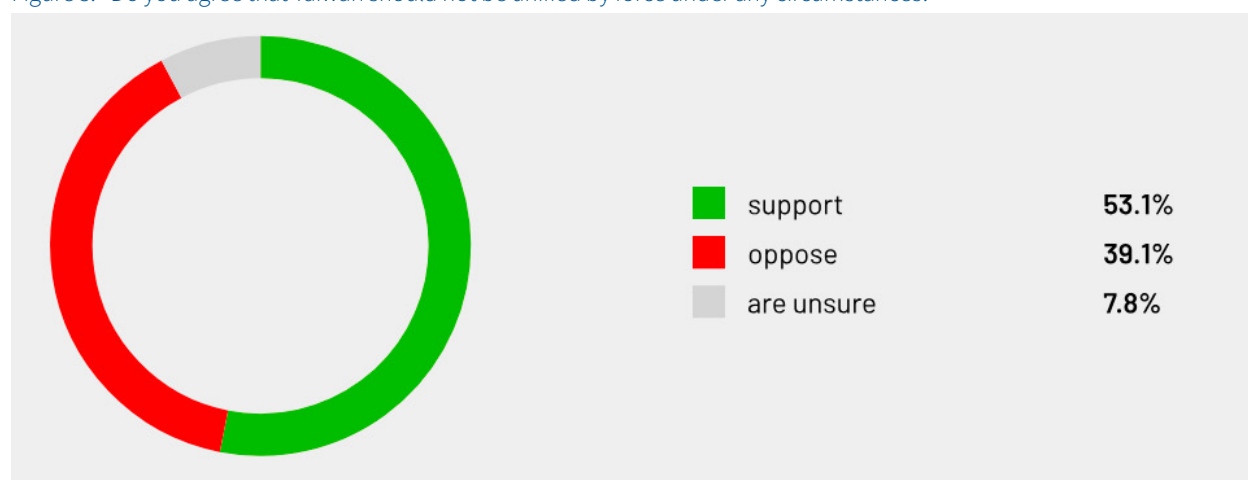
Figure 2: 'Do you support launching a unification war to take back Taiwan entirely?'



Source: Survey was conducted by the Election Study Centre. This study was published in the *Journal of Contemporary China*²² on 14 May 2023.

A 2019 survey²³ conducted by Adam Y Liu and Xiaojun Li in nine major mainland Chinese cities:

Figure 3: 'Do you agree that Taiwan should not be unified by force under any circumstances?'



Source: Survey was conducted in 2019 by Adam Y Liu and Xiaojun Li. This study was published in the *Journal of Contemporary China*²⁴ on 14 May 2023.

China's military preparations

Since 2012, President Xi Jinping has overseen the most significant restructuring of China's military since the post-Cold War reforms of the late 1990s. That has included²⁵ dissolving the four traditional military departments and replacing them with 15 new organisations under the Central Military Commission, as well as creating five joint theatre commands.²⁶ Those changes enhance coordination across the services and focus on regional operations, including potential Taiwan scenarios.

Under Xi, the People's Liberation Army (PLA)—which answers to the CCP, not the Chinese state—has become a modern, agile and technologically advanced force capable of joint operations across land, sea, air, cyber and space domains. Regular deployments and large-scale exercises around Taiwan help train the PLA for amphibious assaults, air superiority campaigns and maritime blockades—key for a force that hasn't fought a war since 1979.

The PLA's investment in cutting-edge technologies and new capabilities is intended to thwart Taiwanese defences and the militaries of those nations that may seek to come to Taiwan's aid, particularly the US. Those technologies and capabilities include, but aren't limited to, the following.

Capabilities that could target Taiwan

- Amphibious assault ships: Type 075 amphibious assault ships deploy helicopters, landing craft and marines; key assets for a potential island invasion.
- Amphibious brigades: mechanised infantry units from the PLA 72nd and 73rd Group Armies (approximately 20,000 troops) are specially trained for amphibious operations in the area of Taiwan.
- Barges and ferries: invasion barges²⁷ would be used to create bridges and ports, while civilian ferries²⁸ could support the flow of troops and equipment into Taiwan.
- Missiles: the PLA has state-of-the-art²⁹ short-range, cruise and hypersonic missiles that could target Taiwan's defences to enable rapid dominance.
- Combat aircraft: such as the J-20 stealth fighter, are designed to challenge air superiority by neutralising Taiwan's air force or the forces of a third party.
- Airborne assault capabilities: such as Z-20 and Z-8 helicopters and Y-20 transport aircraft enable the rapid deployment of troops and equipment.
- Uncrewed aircraft: such as the Wing Loong series or the new Jui Tian 'drone carrier'³⁰ provide intelligence, surveillance and precision strikes.

Capabilities targeting third-party intervention

- Area-denial weapons: DF-21D 'carrier-killer' and DF-26 missiles could target US aircraft carriers, US bases in Guam and allied ships.
- Submarines: Yuan-class diesel-electric and Shang-class nuclear-powered attack submarines patrol key straits and choke-points.
- Maritime assets: Type 055 destroyers could launch hypersonic anti-ship missiles against potential US reinforcements from Guam or Japan.
- Long-range bombers: H-6K and H-6N bombers could conduct stand-off strikes against US bases and carrier strike groups.
- Civilian assets: maritime militia³¹ (civilian ships under military direction) could be used to harass US and allied ships, clog straits and deny access.

Non-kinetic capabilities

- Cyber operations: the PLA Cyberspace Force already targets Taiwan's command, control and communications systems, financial networks and critical infrastructure.³²
- Electronic warfare: Y-9G aircraft can disrupt radar, command-and-control systems and missile guidance.
- Information and psychological warfare: Cyberspace Force Base 311³³ already uses media, texts and mobile apps to demoralise Taiwan's military and civilians.
- Antisatellite operations: the PLA Aerospace Force can employ ground-based lasers and satellite systems³⁴ to disrupt intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, navigation, and communication satellites.



Chapter 2: China's military coercion

China's coercion of Taiwan isn't a new trend. For decades, the CCP has subjected Taiwan, its government, its people and its international partners to a wide range of tactics designed to alter the *status quo* and accelerate Beijing's goal of unification.

Under Xi Jinping, that campaign has intensified and expanded. Beijing now employs military and paramilitary actions, economic pressure, espionage and interference, information and narrative warfare, cyber operations, diplomatic coercion, and lawfare. Most of those measures remain below the threshold of open conflict, and are carefully managed to avoid sparking a crisis that could escalate into war. ASPI's *State of the Strait*³⁵ on Substack tracks that pressure campaign, providing weekly updates on China's coercive actions across all those areas.

This chapter focuses on China's military coercion of Taiwan. It examines the daily presence of Chinese military forces around the island, as well as the large-scale exercises launched since 2022. Together, those activities are used to intimidate Taiwan, undermine its sovereignty and prepare the PLA for potential future conflict.

China's military coercion of Taiwan

Before 2016, the PLA maintained a relatively limited military presence near Taiwan. While occasional exercises took place, it was rare for Chinese air or naval forces to cross into Taiwan's 'air defence identification zone' (ADIZ) or operate regularly around the island. Most PLA activity focused on training exercises conducted within the Taiwan Strait or along China's own coastline.

That pattern changed significantly after the 2016 election of Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen. Once Tsai took office, the PLA began steadily increasing the frequency of air patrols and bomber flights near Taiwan. In 2016, for the first time, the PLA Air Force launched long-range bomber missions that sometimes circumnavigated the island.³⁶ At first the flights were occasional, but they soon became a regular feature of PLA activity.

In September 2020, Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense began to release real-time military updates³⁷ to document PLA incursions into its ADIZ. That greatly improved understanding of China's sustained military presence around Taiwan. By late 2020, near-daily incursions had become the norm. The trend has only intensified: in 2021, the PLA flew 972 aircraft into Taiwan's ADIZ; in 2022, 1,738; in 2023, 1,703; and in 2024, a record 3,615.

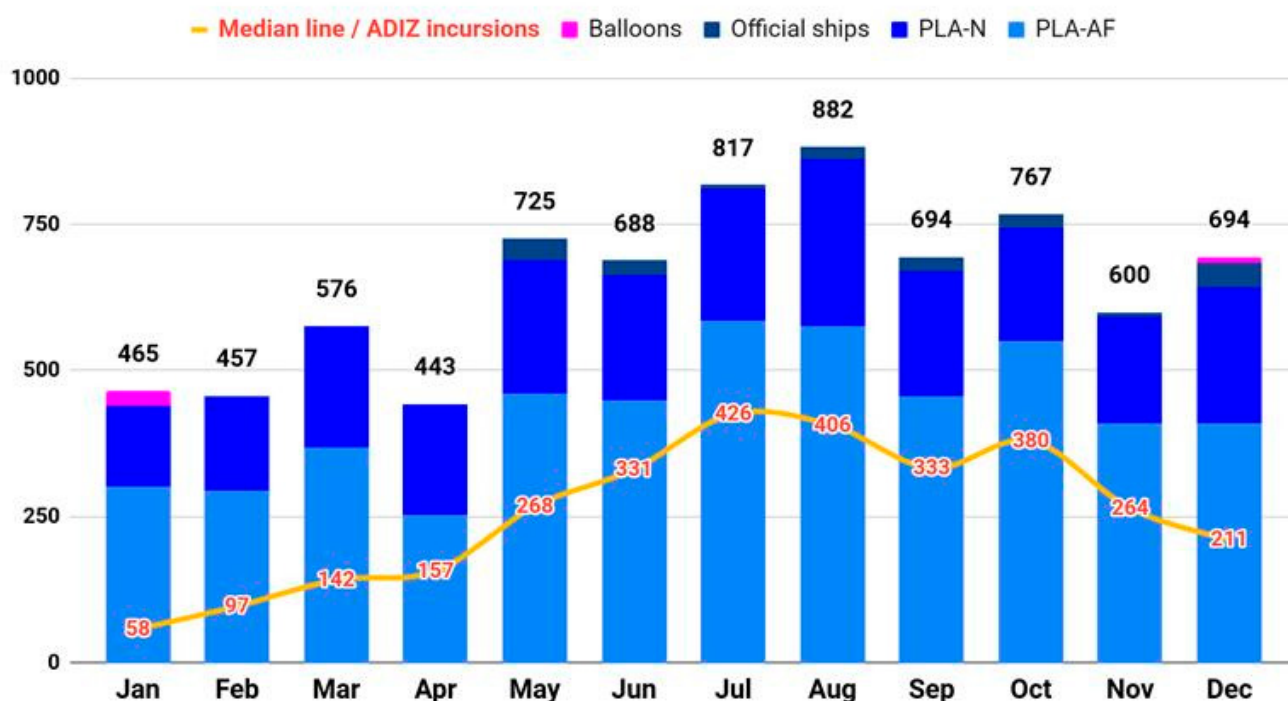
Naval activity expanded in parallel. From 2020 onwards, PLA warships began operating more frequently around Taiwan, sometimes circling the island to demonstrate presence and capability. Since 2023, the China Coast Guard (CCG) and maritime militia have increasingly coordinated with the PLA Navy, adding another layer of pressure in surrounding waters.

Today, that military activity is routine. Near-daily air crossings into Taiwan's airspace are matched by regular naval patrols, particularly to Taiwan's east and south. China has also deployed its growing fleet of aircraft carriers in exercises that simulate blockades or power-projection missions near Taiwan's eastern approaches.

Another important development is the use of uncrewed aerial vehicles (UAVs). Drones began appearing in PLA operations in 2022, especially after the visit of then-Speaker of the US House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi to Taipei. Since then, UAV missions have become a regular feature of China's military presence.

The cumulative effect of those operations is to shrink Taiwan’s operating space and normalise coercion. The detailed daily records published by Taiwan’s Ministry of National Defense capture the scale of that activity. They provide a clear picture of China’s expanding military footprint around Taiwan and the pressure it’s designed to exert (Figure 4).

Figure 4: China’s military and paramilitary activities around Taiwan in 2024



PLA-N = PLA Navy; PLA-AF= PLA Air Force; official ships = CCG and other state vessels.

For weekly updates on China’s coercion of Taiwan, sign up to ASPI’s *State of the Strait*³⁸ on Substack.

China’s military exercises around Taiwan

Since 2022, China has sharply escalated its conduct of military exercises around Taiwan. Once largely symbolic or seasonal, those drills have grown in frequency, scope and ambition, evolving into full-spectrum, joint-force rehearsals that closely simulate real-world combat.

The tempo and sophistication of those operations suggest that Beijing is shifting from mere demonstration to active preparation. The PLA is now rehearsing nearly the full range of actions it might employ in a future invasion, including precision missile strikes, air and naval blockades, joint land–sea–air coordination and small-island seizures. The PLA Rocket Force and China’s aircraft carriers are increasingly integrated into the drills, and surface combatants and aircraft are at times operating within Taiwan’s contiguous zone, or within 24 nautical miles of Taiwan’s coast.

That steady encroachment, described by a former US commander³⁹ as a ‘boiling the frog’ strategy, serves a dual purpose: training forces for conflict while psychologically pressuring Taiwan’s leadership and population. The exercises deliberately blur the line between peace and conflict. They’re intended to intimidate, to warn against moves towards permanent separation, and to signal to both domestic and international audiences that unification remains Beijing’s firm objective, and that it’s prepared to consider military options to achieve that.

A key aim is to normalise the PLA’s presence in the Taiwan Strait and surrounding waters. In the absence of sustained international pushback, Beijing has exploited this space. Operations that once drew sharp diplomatic protests have become routine, gradually shifting the threshold of what’s considered acceptable behaviour. That absence of ‘red lines’ weakens deterrence and builds a sense of inevitability around China’s claims.

China's large-scale exercises (Table 2) send a clear and calculated message: Beijing is building both the capability and the narrative for forced unification if peaceful means fail. From precision strike drills and carrier group manoeuvres to coastal blockade simulations and mock assaults on island outposts, the PLA is steadily refining its toolkit for conflict. When paired with political messaging and coercive diplomacy, those military actions form a broader strategy designed not just to prepare for war, but to win without fighting by wearing down Taiwan's resolve, isolating it diplomatically and gradually reshaping the *status quo* in China's favour.

Table 2: Summary of China's large-scale exercises since 2022

Exercise	Purpose	Aircraft and ships	Unique highlight
Encirclement drills (4–7 August 2022)	Response to Pelosi visit	68 aircraft, 13 naval vessels	First full encirclement; 11 ballistic missiles launched, some over Taiwan into Japan's exclusive economic zone
Joint Sword 2023 (8–10 April 2023)	Response to Tsai–McCarthy meeting	91 aircraft, 12 naval vessels	Precision strikes and aerial blockade; Shandong carrier involved; destroyers come within 24 nautical miles of Taiwan
Joint Sword 2024A (23–24 May 2024)	Warning after inauguration of President Lai Ching-te	111 aircraft, 46 naval vessels	CCG involved for the first time; activity targeting Taiwan's outlying islands
Joint Sword 2024B (14 October 2024)	Response to National Day speech	153 aircraft, 26 vessels	Focus on blockade and control of key ports; increased CCG involvement; Liaoning carrier deployed
Unnamed drills (9–11 December 2024)	Reaction to Lai's Pacific trip	~90 sea vessels	Simulated blocking of foreign intervention; largest PLA maritime operation since 1996.
Strait Thunder 2025A (1–2 April 2025)	Response to Lai's 17 March speech	135 aircraft, 50 vessels	Layered encirclement tactic; CCG conducted boarding and blockade; carrier within 24 nautical miles

Tracker of China's military exercises around Taiwan

2022 drills (4–7 August 2022)

Background

On 2 August 2022, US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited⁴⁰ Taiwan, making her the highest ranking American official to do so in 25 years. Beijing condemned the visit as a 'major political provocation' and announced unprecedented large-scale military exercises around Taiwan from 4 to 7 August.

Details

For the first time, the PLA conducted joint operations that completely encircled Taiwan. The PLA Rocket Force launched 11 ballistic missiles, some flying over Taiwan and landing in waters to the island's east. Several missiles reportedly⁴¹ fell within Japan's exclusive economic zone.

The PLA established six designated exclusion zones (Figure 5).⁴² Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense reported⁴³ 68 PLA aircraft and 13 PLA Navy vessels operating in the region. Of those aircraft, 49 crossed the median line of the Taiwan Strait, far surpassing previous records.

Figure 5: Exclusion zones, August 2022



Joint Sword 2023 (8–10 April 2023)

Background

In April 2023, Taiwan's President Tsai transited through the US and held an in-person meeting⁴⁴ with Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy. Beijing condemned the meeting as collusion between 'Taiwan independence forces' and external actors. In retaliation, the PLA launched a major exercise, codenamed 'Joint Sword', from 8 to 10 April.⁴⁵ Chinese state media described the drills as a direct warning to Taipei and Washington.

Details

The exercises focused on precision strikes and an aerial blockade of Taiwan (Figure 6). The PLA's aircraft carrier *Shandong* operated off Taiwan's southeastern coast, launching fighters and coordinating with destroyers that reportedly approached as close as 24 nautical miles from Taiwan's shoreline.

On 10 April, Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense reported⁴⁶ a record-high number of PLA aircraft operating around Taiwan. A total of 91 aircraft and 12 vessels were detected, of which 54 aircraft crossed the Taiwan Strait median line or entered Taiwan's ADIZ.

Figure 6: Joint Sword 2023



Joint Sword 2024A (23–24 May 2024)

Background

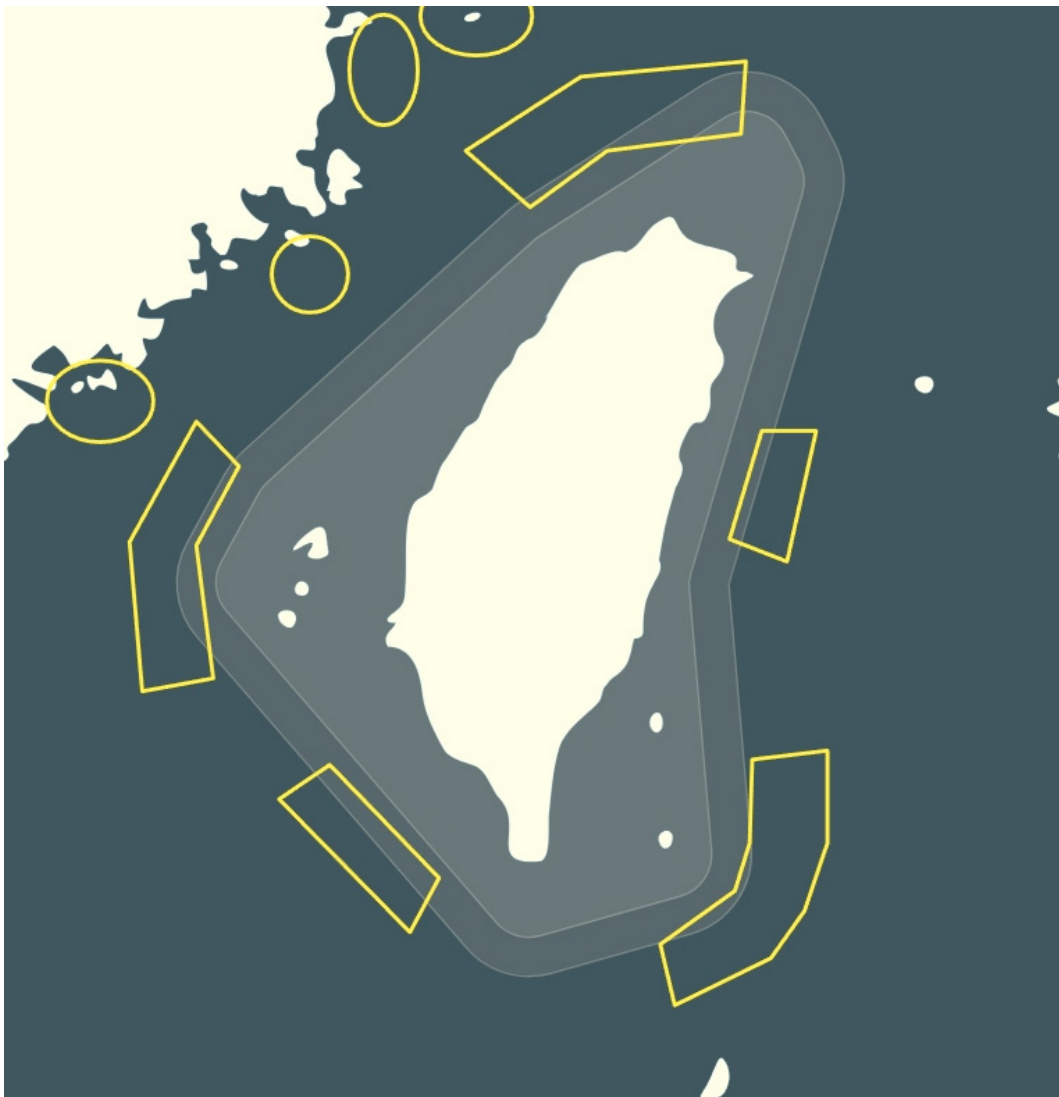
On 23 May 2024, just three days after President Lai Ching-te's inauguration and his remarks⁴⁷ underscoring Taiwan's sovereignty, China launched Joint Sword-2024A.⁴⁸ Beijing described the two-day exercise as 'a strong punishment for the separatist acts of "Taiwan independence" forces'.

Details

The exercise took place across the Taiwan Strait, around Taiwan proper, and in the vicinity of several outlying islands.⁴⁹ For the first time, the exercise was accompanied by 'comprehensive law enforcement operations' conducted by the CCG around Taiwan's offshore islands.

The PLA designated⁵⁰ five exercise zones around Taiwan and four around outlying islands (Figure 7). The exercise reportedly included⁵¹ up to 111 aircraft and 46 naval vessels encircling Taiwan. Approximately 82 PLA aircraft crossed the Taiwan Strait median line, some of them approaching as close as the 24-nautical-mile contiguous zone.

Figure 7: Joint Sword 2024A



Joint Sword 2024B (14 October 2024)

Background

On 14 October 2024, just four days after President Lai Ching-te's National Day speech⁵² declaring that 'China has no right to represent Taiwan,' the PLA launched Joint Sword 2024B.⁵³ Beijing described the one-day operation as a 'stern warning' against so-called 'separatist acts of Taiwan independence forces'.

Details

According to a PLA spokesperson, the exercise centred on joint sea–air combat patrols, the blockade and control of key ports, and simulated strikes on sea and land targets.⁵⁴ The CCG again played a visible role, dispatching four flotillas to conduct 'law enforcement patrols' around Taiwan. The *Liaoning* aircraft carrier, operating as part of a carrier battle group, was deployed to the island's east-southeast.

The PLA declared⁵⁵ six exercise zones for Joint Sword 2024B (Figure 8). The zones overlapped with Taiwan's contiguous zones, representing a notable escalation from earlier exercises. A record 153 PLA aircraft, 14 naval vessels, and 12 CCG ships were reported operating near Taiwan, in the highest single-day count of Chinese aircraft activity to date.⁵⁶

Figure 8: Joint Sword 2024B



2024 drills (9–11 December 2024)

Background

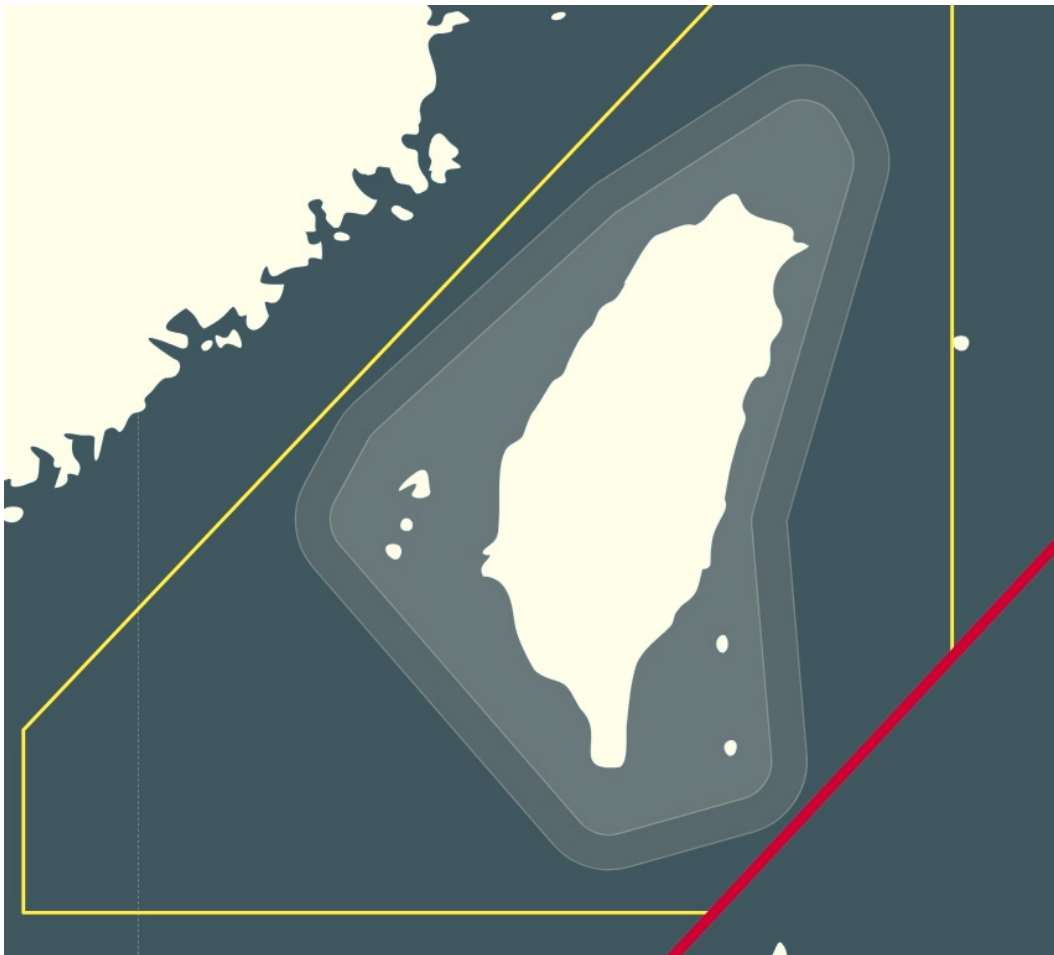
Soon after President Lai Ching-te returned from a diplomatic tour⁵⁷ of Pacific allies, which included transit stops in Hawaii and Guam, the PLA launched a large-scale exercise. Unlike earlier drills, those manoeuvres weren't publicly named or formally announced by Beijing.⁵⁸

Detail

The exercise featured around 90 naval and coastguard vessels⁵⁹ operating across an expansive area: waters around Taiwan, the southern Japanese islands, and sections of both the East and South China seas (Figure 9). This represented a significant geographical expansion compared with earlier drills, simulating operations to block foreign intervention across the First Island Chain and east of Taiwan.

The PLA announced⁶⁰ seven restricted air space zones from 9 to 11 December, while simultaneously conducting operations around and east of the island. The exercise was reportedly⁶¹ the PRC's largest maritime operation since the 1996 Taiwan Strait crisis. The CCG again played a central role, with three vessels, including one of its largest, sailing east of Taiwan.

Figure 9: 2024 drills



Strait Thunder 2025A (1–2 April 2025)

Background

On 13 March 2025, President Lai Ching-te outlined⁶² 17 strategies to strengthen Taiwan's national security. Less than three weeks later, on 1 April, the PLA launched Strait Thunder 2025A. Chinese officials⁶³ framed the exercise as a direct response to what they described as provocative policies by Lai's 'pro-independence' administration.

Details

The exercise focused on regional control, blockade operations and precision strike scenarios (Figure 10).⁶⁴ The CCG played an active role, conducting coordinated boarding and blockade operations. Analysts⁶⁵ highlighted the emergence of a dual-layer 'cabbage strategy': an inner ring of maritime militia, CCG and PLA Navy forces encircling Taiwan, and an outer ring designed to harass foreign military forces seeking to intervene.

The PLA declared⁶⁶ that Strait Thunder 2025A would take place in the middle and southern sea areas of the Taiwan Strait. The *Shandong* aircraft carrier group participated, manoeuvring within 24 nautical miles of Taiwan in its closest approach to date. In total, the PLA deployed 135 aircraft, 38 naval vessels and 12 official vessels, underscoring the growing scale and complexity of its joint-force operations.⁶⁷

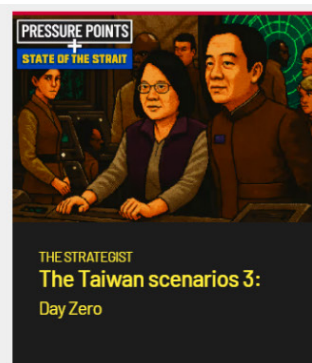
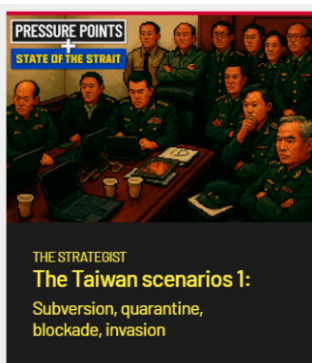
Figure 10: Strait Thunder 2025A



Chapter 3: War games: how might China seek to forcibly unify Taiwan?

On 10 June 2025, ASPI conducted a series of war games exploring four potential scenarios that President Xi might pursue to forcibly unify Taiwan. The findings were published⁶⁸ in ASPI's *The Strategist* in July 2025.

The following analysis explores what each scenario could look like. Each scenario may unfold in various ways, and factors such as Taiwan's actions and the international response are likely to heavily influence Beijing's decisions.



Subversion

During the Spanish Civil War, nationalist forces advancing on cities such as Madrid relied on what was called a 'fifth column': a covert network of sympathisers within republican-held territory who worked to undermine the government from within. During the Chinese Civil War, the CCP employed comparable tactics against the KMT.

Could a similar scenario unfold in Taiwan? According to a former Taiwanese military intelligence director, more than 5,000 people are already operating in Taiwan on behalf of the CCP.⁶⁹

The activation of a fifth column to incite civil unrest across Taiwan could be highly effective. It could debilitate Taipei's ability to govern and maintain stability, potentially by exploiting existing fault lines in Taiwanese politics. That could provide Beijing with a pretext to deploy what it might call 'stabilisation' forces. A fifth column could plausibly target critical infrastructure, disrupting power grids, railways, air traffic control and water-treatment facilities. Bomb threats, arson attacks and incitement of riots would further destabilise society. Combined with Beijing's formidable cyber capabilities, China could sow chaos and division while publicly denying any involvement. That would give Beijing the opportunity to shape the narrative, spread propaganda and justify intervention as a response to what it could claim is an internal matter.

Phase 1: One week before crisis

China's goals

- Destabilise Taiwan by activating covert networks, creating social and economic disruption and posturing military forces to signal readiness.

China's likely moves

- **Announcement:** Beijing addresses the international community, claiming Taiwan is gripped by unprecedented chaos. It accuses foreign agents and radical separatists of driving the island towards civil war. China warns that, unless stability is restored, it may 'assist' the Taiwanese people in re-establishing peace, while stressing that the situation is strictly an internal matter.
- **Covert operations:** Fifth-column assets disrupt Taiwan's critical infrastructure, including power grids, railways, air traffic control and water-treatment facilities. Anonymous threats appear in major cities, while criminal networks are mobilised to spread disorder.
- **Cyber:** PLA cyber units cripple government websites, banking systems and media outlets. Fake social-media accounts spread rumours of political collapse and leadership defections. International communications are disrupted to isolate Taiwan.
- **Posture:** The PLA Navy expands its presence off Taiwan's east and west coasts under the guise of 'humanitarian readiness'. CCG patrols intensify. The PLA Air Force escalates incursions into Taiwan's ADIZ, normalising high-tempo activity. Rocket forces mobilise but remain undeployed, underscoring latent threat.



Phase 2: Crisis

China's goals

- Undermine Taiwan's efforts to dismantle PRC networks, escalate tensions, and build both domestic and international support for potential intervention.

China's likely moves

- **Announcement:** Beijing declares that Taiwan's government has lost control. It warns that, unless order is restored within seven days, China will deploy 'peacekeeping forces'. Simultaneously, it lobbies the UN and the global South for international backing.
- **Covert ops:** Covert units launch coordinated attacks. Explosions at substations trigger rolling blackouts. Arson and false-flag operations target government buildings, and critical defence facilities are sabotaged. Undersea internet cables are cut to deepen Taiwan's isolation.
- **Disinformation:** PLA cyber forces disable independent media and civil-society platforms. Covert actors amplify narratives blaming Taipei for civil collapse, while rumours of looming shortages of water, electricity, fuel and energy seek to spark public panic.
- **Posture:** Naval support vessels, including hospital ships and landing platform docks, are repositioned to reinforce the 'humanitarian' narrative. Marine brigades and the People's Armed Police are staged for evacuation missions. Meanwhile, logistics and munitions stockpiles are built up in Fujian Province, and airlift units are placed on stand-by.



Phase 3: One week into the crisis

China's goals

- If conditions allow, deploy 'peacekeepers' to secure Taiwan and establish a pro-China stabilisation authority.

China's likely moves

- **Deception:** Beijing announces that the 'Taiwan Autonomous Emergency Authority' (a prefabricated proxy government) has formally requested PLA peacekeepers. Ceasefire zones and curfews are declared, while China promotes dialogue and a staged road map to unification with the puppet authority.
- **Deployments:** If domestic and international conditions appear favourable and the risk of escalation is low, the PLA may deploy airborne and marine units to seize airports, ports and key Taiwanese leadership.
- **Stabilisation:** As part of a PLA deployment, the CCG and People's Armed Police also move into Taiwan to take on policing roles, while PLA Marines provide reinforcement in urban centres and other high-risk areas.
- **Outreach:** Beijing intensifies diplomacy with ASEAN, the UN and developing countries to bolster its narrative, while opening talks with the US to manage escalation.



Quarantine

As China increasingly integrates its coastguard into military exercises around Taiwan, the prospect of a quarantine scenario has gained growing attention. In such a scenario, Beijing could manufacture a crisis to justify the imposition of a quarantine around the island. For example, it might claim that all inbound and outbound shipments require inspection due to national-security concerns, such as alleged arms transfers or biological threats. The threat of an interruption to shipping is unnerving for an island that imports most of its fuel⁷⁰ and much of its food.

A quarantine would aim to impose economic and psychological costs, erode public confidence in the Taiwanese Government and heighten social and political pressure. By disrupting trade and daily life while avoiding the overt aggression of a full military assault, such a campaign could foster an environment more conducive to coercive negotiation or unification on terms defined by the CCP.

With more than 150⁷¹ large ocean-going vessels and more than 400 smaller boats, the CCG is well equipped to enforce such a quarantine. Probably operating in coordination with the PLA Navy, which would stand off at a distance, the CCG could try to divert commercial shipping and apply great pressure on Taiwan's government. That would probably be accompanied by cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns designed to sow confusion, disrupt governance and further isolate Taiwan. If external support were insufficient or slow to materialise, the cumulative pressure could force Taipei to the negotiating table on Beijing's terms.

Phase 1: One week before quarantine

China's goals

- Create a crisis that justifies limited escalation and sets the stage for a quarantine.

China's likely moves

- **Pretext:** Beijing claims that inbound shipments to Taiwan must undergo inspection due to national-security concerns, citing alleged arms deliveries or biological threats.
- **Positioning:** Large numbers of CCG vessels move into the Taiwan Strait and southern waters under the cover of 'exercises'. The PLA Air Force and Rocket Force are placed on alert while maintaining a low-profile posture.
- **Presence:** PLA Navy combatants deploy to key maritime choke-points, including the Taiwan Strait, Bashi Channel and Miyako Strait, while officially remaining on 'exercise' status.
- **Disinformation:** PLA cyber units and affiliated operators prepare campaigns to sow confusion and weaken Taiwan's information environment.



China's goals:

Create a crisis that justifies limited escalation and sets the stage for a quarantine.

	PRETEXT	▼
	POSITIONING	▼
	PRESENCE	▼
	DISINFORMATION	▼

Phase 2: Quarantine

China's goals

- Implement the quarantine while calibrating escalation to pressure Taiwan's government into concessions.

China's likely moves

- **Interdictions:** Beijing declares a 'security control zone' around Taiwan's approaches, warning that noncompliance constitutes illegal entry into Chinese jurisdiction. Captains and crews are threatened with legal consequences. CCG vessels begin enforcing stop-and-search operations just outside Taiwan's 24-nautical-mile zone.
- **Overwatch:** Additional PLA Navy vessels deploy to the Taiwan Strait and waters east and north of Taiwan to deter foreign naval intervention. Submarines track third-party movements.
- **Pressure:** The PLA Air Force conducts aggressive crossings into Taiwan's ADIZ without entering sovereign airspace. Concurrent cyberattacks target Taiwan's customs systems and shipping databases, disrupting port and airport operations.
- **Disinformation:** Beijing publicly offers assistance to 'defuse the crisis' while intensifying disinformation. Chinese messaging portrays PRC actions as law enforcement, framing Taiwan's responses as reckless and provocative.



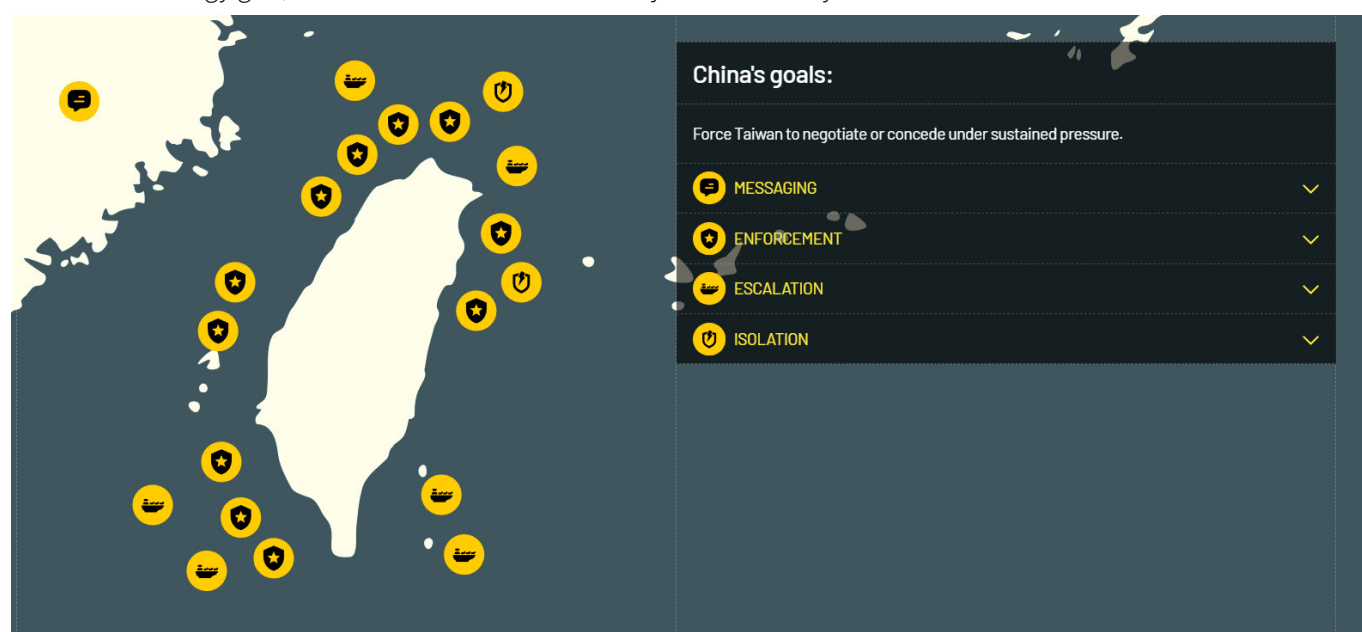
Phase 3: One week into the quarantine

China's goals

- Force Taiwan to negotiate or concede under sustained pressure.

China's likely moves

- **Messaging:** Beijing offers a framework for restoring normal trade and transit, contingent on major concessions from Taipei: reaffirming One China, halting independence-related activities, and working towards unification on terms defined by the CCP.
- **Enforcement:** The cost of foreign freight into Taiwan rises as CCG inspections expand to include air cargo and foreign tankers, especially energy shipments. Some vessels are detained in international waters for extended periods.
- **Escalation:** PLA Navy carrier strike groups deploy east of Taiwan in a show of force. State media broadcasts missile-test footage to intimidate Taiwan and deter outside intervention.
- **Isolation:** China disrupts or severs subsea internet cables, worsening Taiwan's digital isolation. Cyberattacks on Taiwan's energy grid, media networks and financial systems intensify.



Blockade

Since 2022, China has steadily increased the scale and tempo of its military exercises around Taiwan. In 2022, it took the PLA four days to encircle the island during drills. By 2023, that timeline was reduced to two days. By 2024, Chinese warships were able to complete a full maritime encirclement within just 24 hours.

A blockade would go far beyond a quarantine. Rather than selectively targeting vessels suspected of carrying ‘contraband’, it would be absolute, halting all shipping and air traffic to and from Taiwan.

PLA writings⁷² explicitly consider kinetic action as an integral part of a blockade. But a blockade could also be executed with less than kinetic options China could deploy its navy to close major ports, use its air force to disrupt flight operations, and position aircraft carriers, submarines and missile systems to deter foreign intervention. Undersea internet cables might be cut, while cyberattacks cripple communications and critical infrastructure. On-island operatives, including special forces or fifth-column actors, could conduct sabotage to intensify pressure on Taipei. Beijing would be likely to manufacture a pretext to justify those moves.

But, regardless of the reasoning, a blockade is typically regarded as an act of war and carries real risk of military intervention from the US and others.

Phase 1: One week before the blockade

China’s goals

- Create a pretext for a blockade, begin force positioning and increase pressure on Taiwan.

China’s likely moves

- **Announcement:** A senior CCP spokesperson declares that Taiwan’s government has crossed a ‘red line’ by pursuing independence.
- **Drills:** China’s navy and CCG announce ‘maritime inspection exercises’ near Taiwan’s major ports. Navigational warnings establish temporary exclusion zones.
- **Deployments:** PLA Navy warships, aircraft carriers and submarines are positioned east and west of Taiwan, preparing for encirclement. The PLA Air Force increases patrols in Taiwan’s ADIZ.
- **Instability:** Covert forces in Taiwan spark civil disturbances and spread disinformation to undermine public confidence in the government.



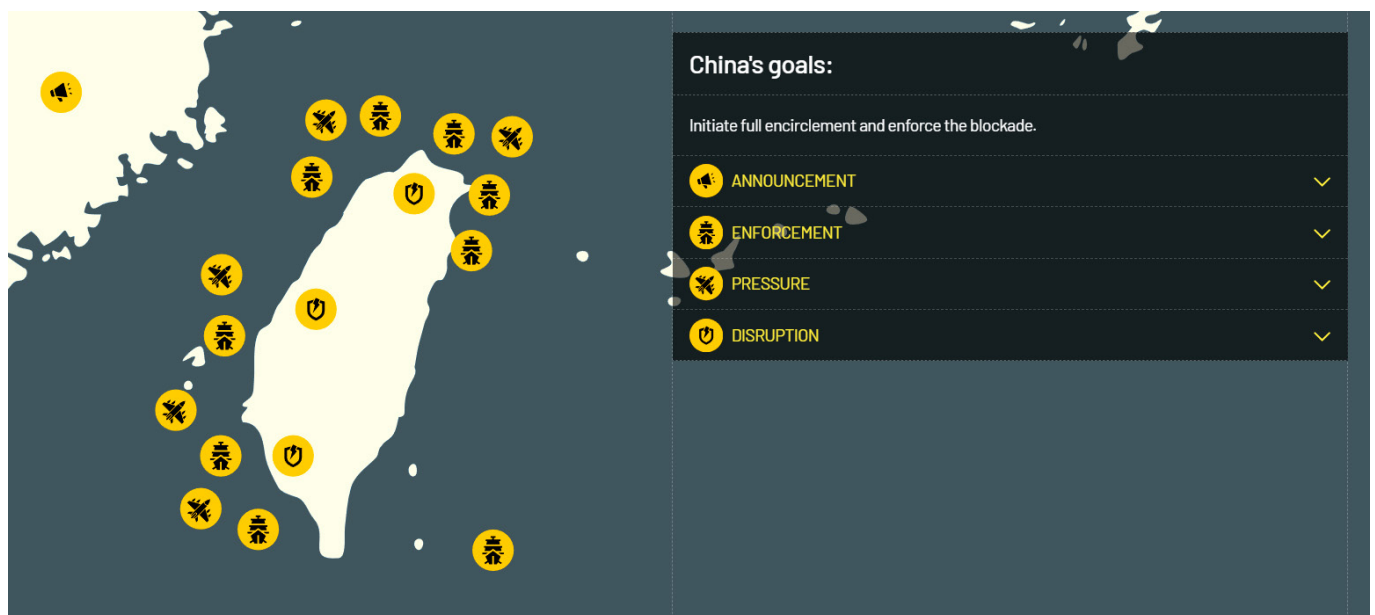
Phase 2: Blockade

China's goals

- Initiate full encirclement and enforce the blockade.

China's likely moves

- **Announcement:** Beijing declares the start of 'limited operations', framing the blockade as a temporary measure until Taipei agrees to talks on Beijing's terms. Foreign governments are warned not to interfere in what China calls an internal matter.
- **Enforcement:** The PLA Navy establishes a maritime perimeter around Taiwan. Crews of CCG vessels board tankers and container ships for inspections.
- **Pressure:** The PLA Air Force uses crewed and uncrewed aircraft to restrict air traffic and assert control near Taiwan's airspace. The PLA Rocket Force launches ballistic missiles over and around the island. Submarines and carrier strike groups are deployed east of Taiwan to deter outside intervention.
- **Disruption:** PLA cyber units target critical infrastructure, including air traffic control and media networks. Special forces and PRC-aligned networks conduct sabotage against essential services and government facilities.



Phase 3: One week into the blockade

China's goals

- Deepen the crisis and compel Taiwan to make political concessions.

China's likely moves

- **Announcement:** Beijing offers a path to de-escalation, demanding Taiwan reaffirm the One-China framework and work towards unification on terms defined by the CCP.
- **Enforcement:** The blockade is tightened, although limited humanitarian shipments are allowed through after Chinese inspection, aimed at reducing international criticism.
- **Pressure:** The PLA Air Force declares and enforces a no-fly zone around Taiwan. Missile forces are placed on high alert. Amphibious assault drills are conducted off Taiwan's coast to signal readiness for escalation.
- **Disruption:** PLA cyber operations expand, disabling parts of Taiwan's energy grid and transportation systems while continuing to disrupt military and civilian communications.



The map shows Taiwan in white against a dark blue background. Numerous yellow circular icons are placed around the island, each containing a different symbol: a megaphone, a missile, a Chinese character (representing the One-China policy), and a crossed-out circle. To the right of the map is a dark grey sidebar with the title 'China's goals:' and a list of four goals, each preceded by a yellow icon and followed by a downward arrow.

China's goals:	
Deepen the crisis and compel Taiwan to make political concessions.	
	ANNOUNCEMENT
	ENFORCEMENT
	PRESSURE
	DISRUPTION

Invasion

According to the US Central Intelligence Agency, Xi Jinping has directed the PLA to be prepared to invade Taiwan by 2027.⁷³ That doesn't necessarily mean Beijing will launch an invasion in that year, but rather that China's armed forces should be capable of carrying one out if ordered to do so. Unlike in Russia's invasion of Ukraine, China can't simply advance across a land border. Taiwan is separated from the mainland by the Taiwan Strait, which is 130 kilometres wide at its narrowest point.

China could mask preparations for an invasion by presenting them as large-scale joint exercises. Previous drills have already included missile units, marines and naval forces, strategic bombers, fighter jets, cyber elements and logistics units. If Xi were to give the order, the opening phase would be likely to begin with a massive missile barrage against Taiwan's air bases, radar sites, naval ports and command centres. At the same time, the PLA Air Force would launch waves of fighters, drones and bombers to suppress Taiwan's air defences, while amphibious and airborne units advance from China's eastern seaboard.

The opening days of such a conflict would almost certainly bring intense, brutal fighting as Taiwan's military attempted to repel the assault. The human and strategic costs would be immense on both sides. If the US chose to intervene, the crisis could escalate rapidly, pushing the world to the brink of a global conflict.

Phase 1: One week before invasion

China's goals

- Justify an invasion and complete force preparations.

China's likely moves

- **Announcement:** A senior CCP spokesperson declares that Taiwan's government has crossed a 'red line' by pursuing independence.
- **Exercises:** The PLA intensifies routine drills around Taiwan, including live-fire naval exercises, cyber defence training and amphibious landings on Chinese-held islands.
- **Preparation:** Amphibious assault ships, missile launchers and aircraft are repositioned under the cover of ongoing drills. Field hospitals and medical personnel deploy near embarkation points and military airfields. A PLA carrier group sails toward Taiwan's western approaches, while submarines and other naval assets move into position east and south of the island. Nuclear forces begin signalling a deterrent posture.
- **Cyberattacks:** Coordinated intrusions target Taiwan's command-and-control networks, power grids and critical infrastructure. At the same time, disinformation floods Taiwanese social media with false narratives to spread panic and mistrust.



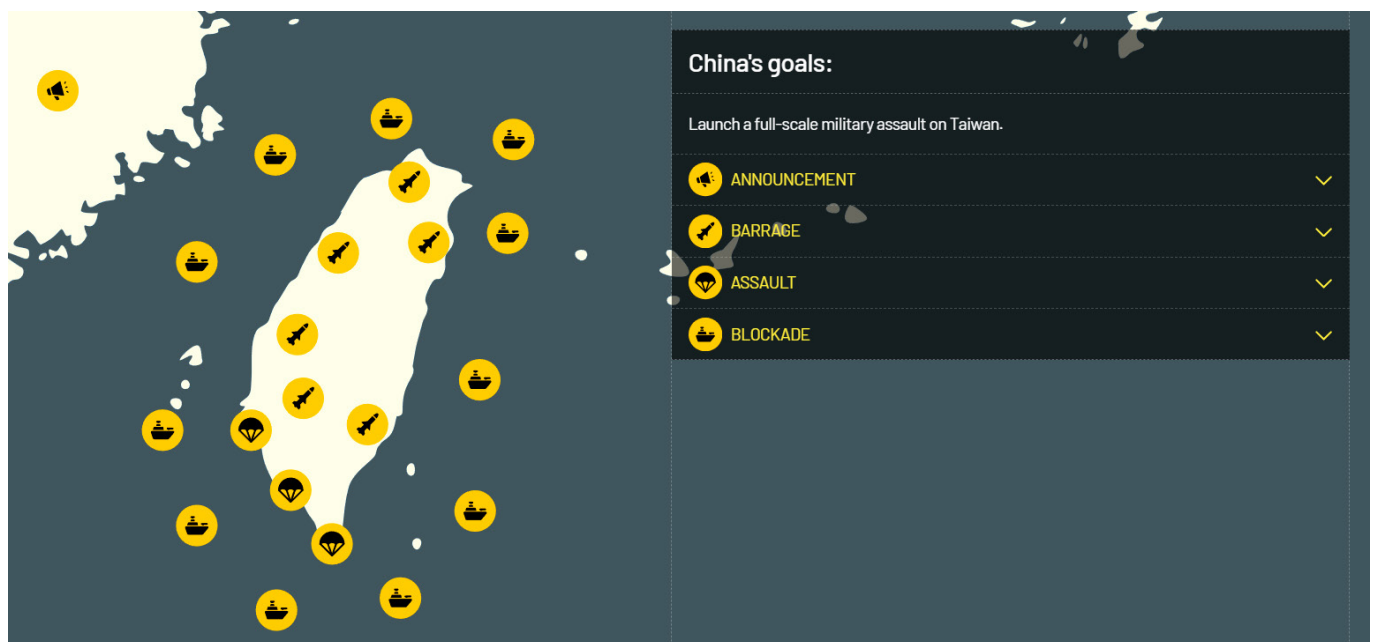
Phase 2: Invasion day

China's goals

- Launch a full-scale military assault on Taiwan.

China's likely moves

- **Announcement:** The CCP Politburo declares that China has initiated a 'limited domestic operation' to restore peace, crush separatists and reunify the motherland. Beijing warns foreign governments not to interfere.
- **Barrage:** The PLA Rocket Force unleashes saturation missile strikes against Taiwan's air bases, radar stations, naval ports and command centres. Waves of fighters, drones and bombers follow to suppress Taiwan's air defences.
- **Assault:** Amphibious landings begin along Taiwan's southwestern coast. Airborne units are dropped behind defensive lines to seize airports, bridges and communications hubs. Special forces and pre-positioned networks on the island conduct sabotage.
- **Blockade:** The PLA Navy establishes a maritime exclusion zone around Taiwan. Carrier strike groups and submarines patrol the strait and Taiwan's eastern seaboard to deter or intercept potential US and Japanese reinforcements.



Phase 3: One week into the invasion

China's goals

- Consolidate territorial gains, maintain momentum and deter third-party intervention.

China's likely moves

- **Political:** CCP-backed governance structures are installed in occupied areas, projecting stability and reconstruction. Beijing promotes a 'One China, two systems with Taiwanese characteristics' framework. Direct warnings are issued to Washington, Tokyo and others that any intervention will trigger escalation.
- **Attacks:** Amphibious and airborne reinforcements continue arriving. Missile strikes persist, while PRC-aligned networks on the island destroy remaining military infrastructure and disrupt communications.
- **Push:** PLA ground forces advance towards Taipei and other major cities. Fierce urban combat is expected as Taiwanese troops entrench. The PLA employs loudspeakers, leaflets and social media to call for surrender, exaggerating its battlefield successes.
- **Deterrence:** PLA submarines and carrier groups maintain pressure to Taiwan's south and east. Long-range missile systems are deployed in western Taiwan to threaten and deter approaching third-party forces.





Chapter 4: How is Taiwan responding to China's aggression?

A (complicated) history of preparing for war

Over the decades, Taiwan's defence strategy has undergone several major shifts, which helps to explain the current approach and challenges that Taiwan faces today.

Taiwan's defence planning began in 1949 with ambitious goals to retake the Chinese mainland. Over time, it shifted through phases focused on forward defence, layered deterrence, and ultimately to a strategy centred on whole-of-society resilience and asymmetric capabilities.

Each of those changes reflected not only shifting political and military realities across the Taiwan Strait but also evolving thinking in Taipei about what would most credibly keep Taiwan safe.

1949–1979: US support and the era of forward defence

In the years following 1949, Taiwan's strategy was shaped by the hope of reclaiming the mainland.⁷⁴ The ROC President, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, had retreated to Taiwan with that goal in mind, initially viewing the move as temporary. But the reality quickly set in: Taiwan lacked the military strength and sustained US backing to achieve that aim.

Taiwan thus pivoted to a forward defence strategy. Up to 150,000 troops were stationed on offshore islands such as Kinmen and Matsu, just miles from the Chinese coast.⁷⁵ Those heavily fortified outposts were designed to deter or delay a Chinese invasion and demonstrate Taiwan's resolve to hold territory near the mainland.

US support was pivotal. The Mutual Defense Treaty (1954) stationed American forces on Taiwan and underpinned Taipei's security during the Taiwan Strait crises of 1954 and 1958, when artillery exchanges and brinkmanship tested both sides.

1979–2000: Isolation sets in and defence-in-depth takes over

The 1970s brought a major shift.⁷⁶ US President Richard Nixon's 1972 visit to Beijing and Washington's formal recognition of the PRC in 1979 ended official ties with Taiwan, including the Mutual Defense Treaty. However, the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 committed the US to supplying defensive weapons but stopped short of guaranteeing intervention. The Reagan administration's 'Six Assurances' (1982) further clarified that arms sales would continue indefinitely.

With shrinking international support, Taiwan pursued self-reliance. Its 'defence-in-depth'⁷⁷ strategy aimed to stop an invasion at multiple layers: engaging enemy forces in transit, striking offshore, and defeating them at the beachhead. Modernising the military and ramping up domestic arms production helped to ensure that any invasion would be costly and prolonged, allowing time for potential US intervention.

Taiwan's democratic transition in the early 1990s further reshaped its strategy. The KMT formally abandoned claims to mainland territory in the so-called '1992 Consensus' and tentatively agreed with the CCP that there was 'one China', although the two sides interpreted that concept differently.⁷⁸

Tensions flared again during the third Taiwan Strait crisis (1995–96), when Beijing fired missiles near Taiwan in response to perceived moves away from the One-China framework. US carrier groups were dispatched, but the crisis exposed weaknesses in Taiwan's defence-in-depth, particularly its vulnerability to missile threats.

2000–2016: From 'active defence' to 'hard ROC'

When the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) came to power in 2000, Taiwan's military was shrinking, and defence spending had fallen below 3% of GDP. Cross-strait relations were also deteriorating.⁷⁹ Unlike the KMT, the DPP doesn't subscribe to the 1992 Consensus and rejects the concept of 'one China'.

President Chen Shui-bian introduced 'active defence', focusing on pre-emptively striking PLA forces before they could reach Taiwan. Investments included long-range precision weapons capable of hitting targets deep inside China. Beijing responded⁸⁰ with the 2005 Anti-Secession Law, asserting the right to use 'non-peaceful means' to achieve unification.

When the KMT returned to power in 2008, President Ma Ying-jeou took a different approach. He favoured reducing tensions and adopted the 'hard ROC' (resilient operations concept) strategy.⁸¹ The strategy focused on making Taiwan's military more mobile, dispersed and survivable, ready to ride out a surprise attack and deny the PLA a quick victory. The approach aligned with the KMT's more conciliatory cross-strait policy and recognised the diplomatic and strategic risks of launching pre-emptive actions.

A key shift of 'hard ROC' was moving towards an all-volunteer, professional military force. During Taiwan's martial law era, the military had around 600,000 troops. By 2016, that number had fallen to just 215,000, and defence spending had dropped to 1.8% of GDP, even as the PLA modernised and expanded.

2016–present: Asymmetric resilience

President Tsai Ing-wen of the DPP was elected in 2016, ushering in a shift towards asymmetric defence through the 'overall defence concept' developed by Admiral Lee Hsi-ming.⁸² That strategy prioritised mobile, cost-effective systems, such as drones, naval mines and missile batteries, over conventional forces, aiming to deter and, if necessary, resist a PLA invasion.

Under Tsai, defence spending rose steadily, reaching 2.5% of GDP by 2024.⁸³ Measures included strengthening domestic defence industries, extending mandatory military service⁸⁴ from four months to one year, and reforming the reserves for greater responsiveness.

Recognising that modern conflicts extend beyond the military, Tsai also emphasised civil defence, preparing civilians for emergencies and reinforcing a whole-of-society approach. Tsai also deepened US ties through strategic dialogue, training and arms cooperation, enhancing Taiwan's deterrence while seeking to avoid escalation.

Since May 2024, DPP President Lai Ching-te has built on those foundations. In response to escalating CCP pressure, Lai has pledged to raise defence spending⁸⁵ to over 3.3% of GDP in 2026 and 5% by 2030, continue the shift towards asymmetric capabilities, and further integrate societal resilience⁸⁶ into Taiwan's defence posture.

A shorter timeline

1949: ROC government retreats to Taiwan after Chinese Civil War defeat.

1954: The first Taiwan Strait crisis.⁸⁷ The US and ROC sign a mutual defence treaty.⁸⁸

1958: The second Taiwan Strait crisis.⁸⁹ China resumes bombardment of Jinmen and Mazu.

1971: The UN adopts Resolution 2758,⁹⁰ recognising the PRC as the sole legitimate representative of 'China' at the UN and expelling the representatives of Chiang Kai-shek.

1979: The US normalises ties⁹¹ with the PRC and ends the Mutual Defense Treaty with the ROC.

1979: The US Congress passes the Taiwan Relations Act,⁹² ensuring arms sales and unofficial ties.

1982: The US quietly provides Taipei with the 'Six Assurances'.⁹³

1987: Martial law is lifted⁹⁴ in Taiwan, and political liberalisation begins.

1991: Taiwan abandons⁹⁵ the objective of taking the Chinese mainland by force.

1992: The 1992 Consensus⁹⁶ between the CCP and KMT provides a mechanism to seek common ground while reserving differences.

1995–1996: The third Taiwan Strait crisis⁹⁷ occurs when China fires missiles near Taiwan.

2005: China passes the Anti-Secession Law,⁹⁸ asserting the right to use ‘non-peaceful means’ to achieve unification.

2016: Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen elected; the PRC halts cross-strait dialogue.⁹⁹

2017: Taiwan publicly adopts the ‘overall defence concept’.¹⁰⁰

2024: Taiwan extends¹⁰¹ mandatory military service from four months to one year.

The impact of Taiwan’s evolving defence strategy

Taiwan’s repeated shifts in defence strategy since 1949 have significant implications for its security and preparedness. The contrast between President Ma’s ‘hard ROC’ approach and the asymmetric, whole-of-society model pursued under presidents Tsai and Lai illustrates how deeply Taiwan’s defence posture is influenced by party ideology and political priorities.

On the military

Rather than being purely threat-driven, Taiwan’s strategies often reflect broader political values, such as a preference for conciliatory engagement versus hard deterrence. While that’s understandable in a democracy, each time the political leadership pivots, there’s a risk of half-implemented reforms and wasted resources. Such shifts can also create institutional dissonance. It takes years to properly train, equip and align a military with a specific doctrine.

On procurement

Each strategic pivot undermines the long-term planning that has supported military modernisation, and constant realignment to procurement priorities and cancelling or altering of major acquisitions and defence programs undermines the Taiwan military’s ability to keep pace with the PLA. Shifting from large, conventional platforms to smaller, agile systems under the asymmetric model, for instance, means discarding some legacy investments.

On society

The most recent shift towards a whole-of-society defence model under Tsai and Lai places new demands on civilian readiness. But Taiwan’s society, which is urbanised, prosperous and with limited experience of war, may be less willing to support such a model, given the lack of sustained political investment.

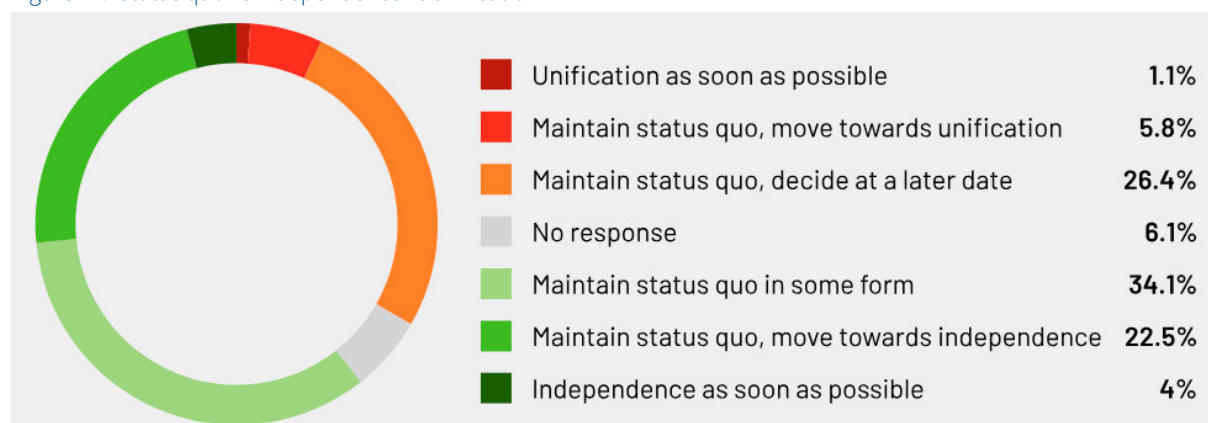
Civil-society views on identity and conflict

How do the Taiwanese themselves perceive the world around them? Despite living under constant coercion and the ever-present threat of invasion, most simply strive to carry on with their daily lives.

Surveys offer a window into public sentiment, revealing what it means to be Taiwanese today. While a significant portion of the population supports maintaining the *status quo*, there’s growing backing for greater recognition of Taiwan’s sovereignty. Most Taiwanese are concerned about the risk of war, they strongly identify as Taiwanese rather than Chinese, and a majority express a willingness to defend their country if necessary. The experience of Hong Kong, where the CCP abandoned earlier promises to respect its unique identity and system of governance, has served as a cautionary lesson, reinforcing the importance of democracy and strengthening the public’s resolve to protect Taiwan’s way of life.

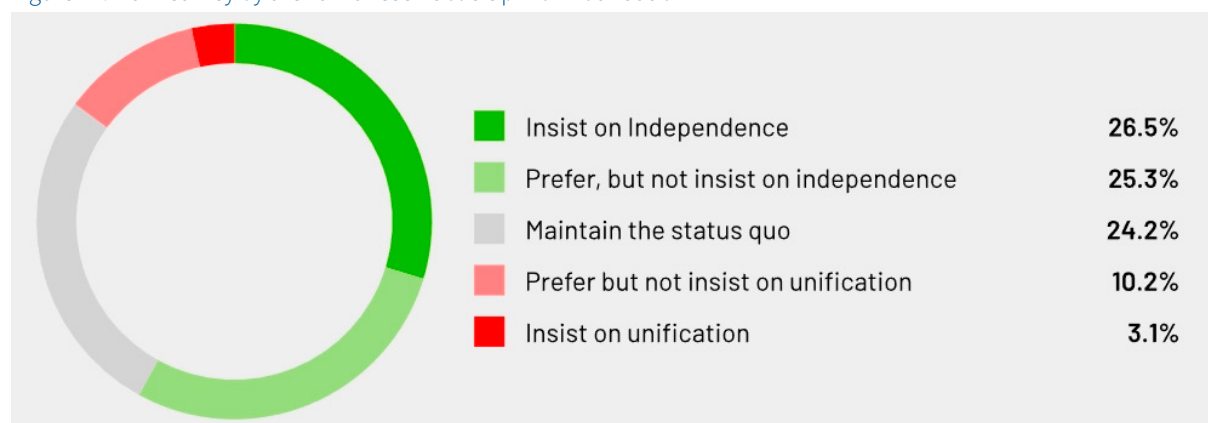
Recent findings paint a picture of a society that values stability and pragmatism in foreign policy, cherishes a distinct national identity, and remains deeply aware of the security challenges it faces (figures 11 to 19).

Figure 11: Status quo vs independence vs unification



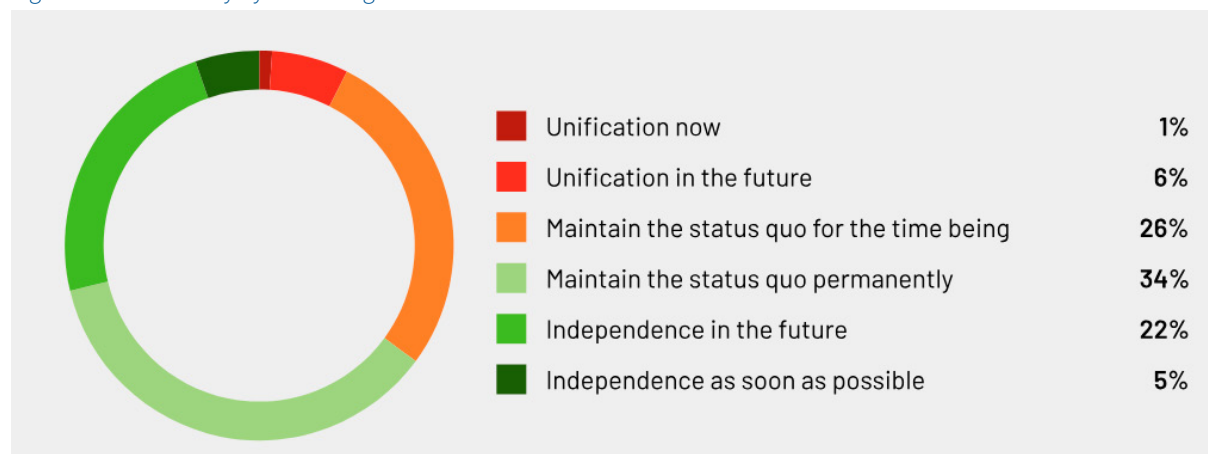
Sources: 2024 survey, Election Study Center, National Chengchi University.¹⁰²

Figure 12: 2024 survey by the Taiwanese Public Opinion Foundation



Source: Taiwanese Public Opinion Foundation.¹⁰³

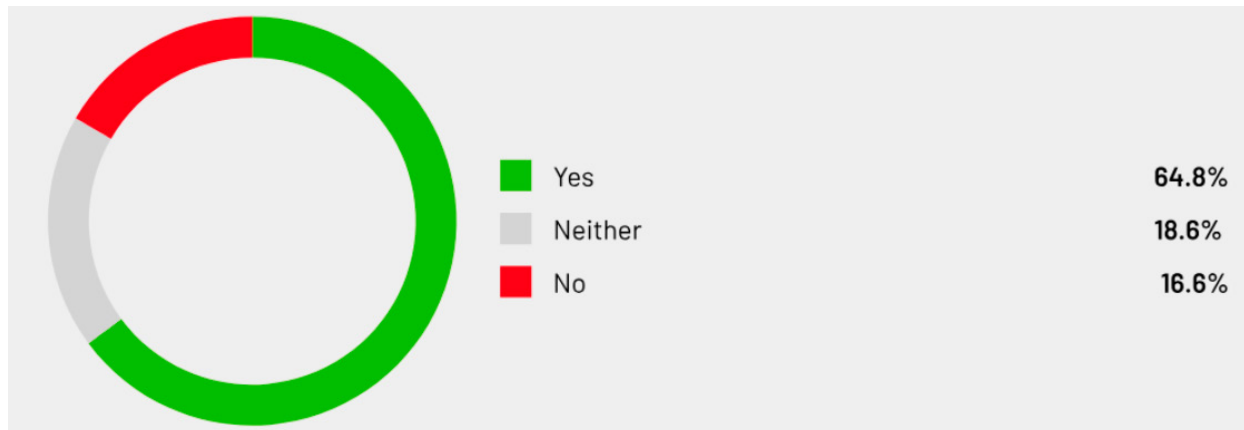
Figure 13: 2024 survey by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and Taiwan's Institute for National Defense



Sources: Chicago Council on Global Affairs and Taiwan's Institute for National Defense.¹⁰⁴

Views on war

Figure 14: 2023 Brookings survey: 'Do you worry about a cross-strait war?'



Source: Brookings.¹⁰⁵

Figure 15: 2025 Global Views survey: 'Is war likely in the next three years?'



Source: 2025 Taiwan People's Sentiment Survey.¹⁰⁶

Figure 16: Willingness to defend Taiwan



Source: INDSR survey, 2024; Academia Sinica, 2020;¹⁰⁷ American Portrait Survey, 2025.¹⁰⁸

Taiwanese or Chinese?

Figure 17: Pew Research Center 2023 survey

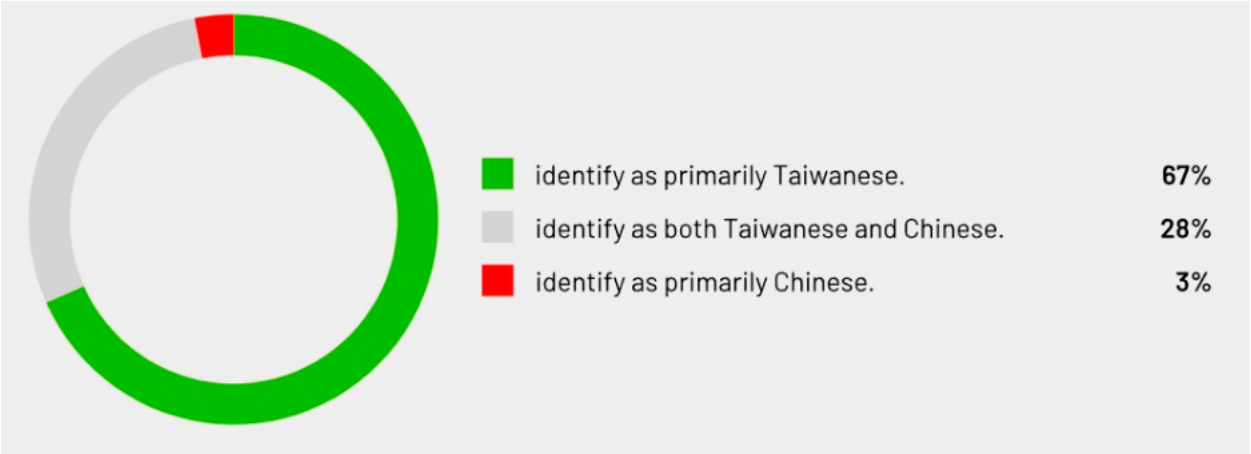


Figure 18: National Chengchi University Election Study Center 2023 survey

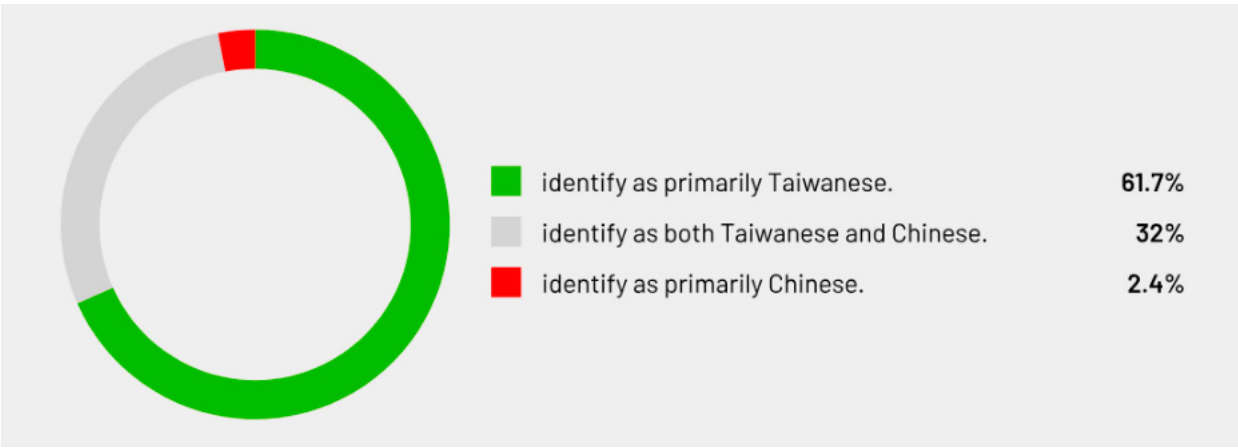
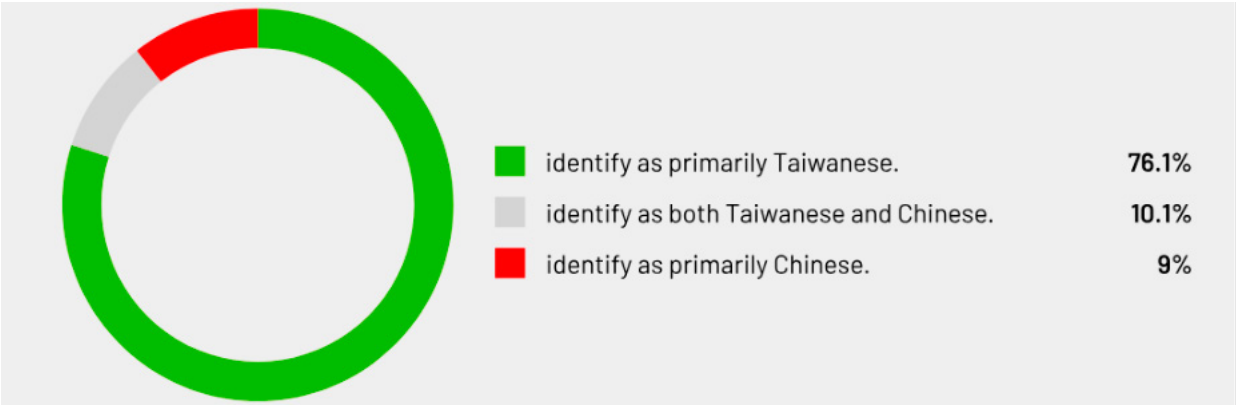


Figure 19: Taiwan Public Opinion Foundation 2024 survey



The government's approach to conflict and deterrence

Preparing for conflict in the Taiwan Strait extends beyond military planning. In his inaugural address, current President Lai Ching-te outlined the 'Four Pillars of Peace',¹⁰⁹ which is a multipronged strategy¹¹⁰ to strengthen deterrence, manage tensions and enhance national resilience. Building on his predecessor's foundation, this framework offers a comprehensive guide to understanding Taiwan's current security approach (Table 3).

Table 3: Taiwan's 'Four Pillars of Peace'

Pillar	Key objectives	Challenges
Strengthening National Defense	Increase defence budget and modernise the military. Produce and procure asymmetric and advanced defence capabilities. Build civil defence resilience including through the Whole-of-Society Defense Resilience Committee. ¹¹¹	Cross-sector coordination (defence, energy, infrastructure, health care) remains complex. Chinese military activity is increasing in frequency and scale. A divided legislature continues to block defence funding.
Improving Economic Security	Diversify trade and investment away from China (31.7% of exports still go to China / Hong Kong). ¹¹² Seek new trade agreements and deepen ties with other countries. Build economic resilience.	Taiwan remains vulnerable to economic coercion by Beijing, particularly in its tech industry. Export shift requires long-term structural adjustments and investment in new markets.
Deepening Democratic Partnerships	Expand cooperation with democratic nations. Strengthen critical supply chains, such as for semiconductors. Step up exchanges on national defence and security.	China continues to isolate Taiwan, including by pressuring ¹¹³ Taiwan's 12 remaining formal allies. Taiwan's ambiguous international legal status constrains its ability to form deeper bilateral partnerships. Taiwan is also barred ¹¹⁴ from many multilateral forums, such as the World Health Organization, in which state recognition isn't a prerequisite for admission.
Cross-strait Leadership and Stability	Advocate peace and dialogue with Beijing on the conditions of parity and dignity. Stress mutual respect ¹¹⁵ and no preconditions. Reject political and military intimidation.	China sees Lai as a separatist, accusing him of escalating tensions. ¹¹⁶ Beijing views the DPP as shaping Taiwanese opinion towards permanent separation. ¹¹⁷

Striking the right balance

President Lai Ching-te must walk a political and strategic tightrope, balancing external threats and internal divisions. His efforts to prepare for potential conflict with China, while seeking to maintain democratic legitimacy and public trust, involve managing four major forces.

China

The dilemma: Lai must appear strong without giving Beijing an excuse to escalate. For example, in March 2025, Lai outlined¹¹⁸ 17 countermeasures to China's growing infiltration.

Key challenges: China responded forcefully to those efforts, launching a large-scale military exercise, Strait Thunder 2025A, shortly after Lai's speech.¹¹⁹ Beijing chooses the timing and means of responding, which is something Lai can't control.

The balancing act: Lai must appear resolute without being cast as a provocateur, avoiding unnecessary moves that China could choose to justify further escalation.

Domestic politics

The dilemma: Lai governs with a minority in a parliament¹²⁰ dominated by the KMT and the Taiwan People's Party (the third biggest political party in Taiwan). Both parties are generally more conciliatory towards China.

Key challenges: In early 2025, the opposition passed defence budget cuts¹²¹ that undermined Lai's plans to strengthen Taiwan's military. Additional reductions have targeted civil-society programs, cybersecurity and the coastguard.

The balancing act: The DPP must advance Taiwan's national defence while navigating a fragmented and often obstructive legislature and an increasingly polarised domestic political environment.

The military

The dilemma: Taiwan's military retains a legacy of KMT-era hierarchy and doctrine and is often sceptical¹²² about reforms led by the DPP.

Key challenges: Lai is pushing for rapid transformation, but elements within the military continue to favour conventional platforms and centralised command structures.

The balancing act: Lai needs to modernise the military while managing internal resistance and preserving cohesion.

Civil society

The dilemma: Public support is essential, but fragile. Economic pressures and civil-liberties concerns are shaping perceptions of Lai's policies.

Key challenges: Rising housing prices and stagnant wages have fuelled public dissatisfaction,¹²³ undermining backing for key strategic initiatives. Meanwhile, proposals such as military tribunals¹²⁴ to combat espionage have faced pushback from critics who view them as a step back towards authoritarianism.

The balancing act: The DPP must safeguard Taiwan while preserving the democratic freedoms and social stability that it aims to protect.

Taiwan's military preparations

Taiwan is arguably more outmatched and outgunned by China's military than at any time since 1949. Yet Taiwan is responding, albeit with far fewer resources. In 2024, President Lai appointed Wellington Koo as Taiwan's Minister of National Defense—a bold and highly unusual choice, given Koo's lack of prior military experience.¹²⁵

Traditionally, that position has been filled by former generals, whose military expertise was highly valued. However, past defence ministers have been criticised¹²⁶ for adhering to outdated mindsets that prioritise conventional warfare and large, flashy equipment. Such perspectives often limited their ability to implement reforms aligned with the government's increasingly urgent priorities.

Koo appears to be breaking with convention. Despite facing internal challenges and resistance to reform,¹²⁷ he's moving the military in a positive direction, advancing reforms¹²⁸ that strengthen training and enhance Taiwan's asymmetric capabilities.

Preparing the force

Training the force

- Outdated drills have been retired: bayonet charges and goosestepping¹²⁹ are gone, replaced by realistic, combat-focused training.
- 'Han Kuang' exercises have been revamped: Taiwan's largest war games¹³⁰ now span:
 - 14 days of computer-aided simulations
 - 10 days of live-fire combat drills
 - 24-hour brigade-level endurance tests, including night combat.

- Urban warfare facilities¹³¹ are under construction, and drone operations¹³² are now part of core training, reflecting the modern battlefield.

Strengthening conscription and the reserves

- In 2023, Taiwan reinstated one-year conscription,¹³³ reversing the 2013 cut to four months:
 - New conscripts now train with advanced systems,¹³⁴ such as Stinger and Javelin missiles, gaining real capability in asymmetric warfare.
- The 1.66-million-strong¹³⁵ reserve force is receiving:
 - double the annual training days (from 7 to 14 days)¹³⁶
 - modernised training centres and new training brigades¹³⁷
 - a focus on rapid mobilisation and critical wartime support roles.

Civil-military integration

- Old civil defence drills, once symbolic siren tests,¹³⁸ have been replaced with realistic, city-wide resilience exercises:¹³⁹
 - Exercises now take place in the heart of Taiwan's cities.¹⁴⁰
 - 24/7 convenience stores act as emergency supply hubs.
 - Citizens rehearse roles in communications, logistics and emergency response.
- Civil-society groups such as Forward Alliance¹⁴¹ offer training in:
 - first aid and crisis-survival skills
 - civil-defence readiness for all ages.
- The All-Out Defense Mobilization Agency¹⁴² (established in 2021) oversees this effort, coordinating:
 - reserve call-ups
 - air-raid shelter readiness
 - essential stockpiles for prolonged crises.

Asymmetric capabilities

Taiwan is shifting its defence priorities¹⁴³ away from traditional, large, and expensive platforms, such as tanks and conventional fighter jets, towards asymmetric capabilities. Those assets are acquired through both US procurement and a growing focus on indigenous weapons development, reflecting a strategic recalibration aimed at countering the PLA's overwhelming conventional advantages.

Indigenous weapons development

- Anti-ship missiles: The Hsiung Feng II and III are designed to target PLA surface vessels and amphibious landing craft, denying the PLA the ability to establish beachheads.
- Air and missile defences: Systems such as the Tien Kung III can intercept PLA fighters, bombers and incoming ballistic missiles.
- Missile corvettes: Tuo Chiang-class corvettes are highly manoeuvrable, stealthy platforms built for littoral strike missions, complicating PLA maritime operations.
- Indigenous submarines: Hai Kun-class submarines are designed to disrupt PLA naval logistics, intercept amphibious forces and provide a hidden layer of defence.
- UAVs: Cardinal short-range UAVs reflect lessons learned from the Ukraine war; Taiwan is expanding drone production and developing new drone units¹⁴⁴ for potential PLA contingencies.
- Sea mines and mine-layers: Min Jiang-class vessels can rapidly deploy minefields in the Taiwan Strait and key landing approaches, forcing PLA amphibious operations to slow or reroute.

Notable US platforms

- Anti-armour weapons: Javelin missiles allow ground forces to disable PLA armoured and amphibious vehicles during landings.
- Man-portable air defence systems: Stinger missiles can counter low-flying aircraft, helicopters and drones supporting PLA landings.
- Coastal defence and anti-ship missiles: Harpoon missiles can disrupt PLA vessels approaching Taiwan, impeding amphibious landings and logistics.
- Long-range precision artillery: HIMARS (High Mobility Artillery Rocket System) provides mobile, precise fire support against PLA staging areas.
- Integrated air and missile defence: Patriot missile batteries can intercept PLA ballistic missiles, cruise missiles and aircraft approaching Taiwan.
- Tanks and armoured vehicles: M1A2 Abrams tanks (108 ordered) strengthen Taiwan's ground forces against PLA breakthroughs and support counterattacks.
- Fighter jets: F-16V jets provide advanced air combat capabilities, including interception, defensive air operations and precision strike.

Rather than attempting to match the PLA's sheer scale and firepower, Taiwan emphasises agility, stealth and survivability. By deploying smaller, mobile systems in dispersed and concealed locations, it aims to impose disproportionate costs on any invading force. Taiwan appears to be learning the lessons from Russia's invasion of Ukraine on how a smaller force can take on a much larger, and more powerful, military. That asymmetric approach also aligns with Taiwan's constrained defence budget and smaller personnel numbers, maximising effectiveness despite resource limitations.



Chapter 5: Supporting Taiwan's preparedness

Supporting Taiwan's defence and security is a complex and sensitive challenge. Beijing regards Taiwan as part of China and fiercely opposes any foreign involvement in its security, framing such actions as interference in China's internal affairs. Countries offering aid, whether military, diplomatic or symbolic, risk provoking retaliation, particularly given China's ability to exert pressure through restrictions on trade, investment and market access.

Legal constraints add another layer of complexity. Most countries, including the US, don't formally recognise Taiwan as a sovereign state. That limits the scope of official engagement, and many governments instead maintain only informal ties with Taipei. Those relationships are often structured around a country's 'One-China policy', which typically differs significantly from Beijing's 'One-China principle' (that distinction is outlined in detail below).

The US is Taiwan's primary security partner, providing arms sales, training and strategic support. There's little substitute for the full range of support that Washington offers, although some countries contribute bespoke training programs, political support or limited security cooperation under the banner of informal relations. Others conduct naval transits of the Taiwan Strait, signalling a commitment to the *status quo*, international law and freedom of navigation.

Supporting Taiwan requires a delicate balance. Too little assistance could leave Taiwan exposed to coercion or military pressure; too much could provoke Beijing into a more aggressive response or hasten the path to conflict. As a result, many governments pursue calibrated measures, strengthening Taiwan's ability to defend itself without providing explicit security guarantees that could trigger escalation.

One-China policy vs the One-China principle

US 'One China policy'

The US recognises the PRC as the sole legal government of China but only *acknowledges* Beijing's claim that Taiwan is part of China. Washington's position is anchored in three sets of documents:

- the US–PRC joint communiqués of 1972, 1978 and 1982¹⁴⁵
- the Taiwan Relations Act (1979)¹⁴⁶
- the Six Assurances given to Taipei in 1982.¹⁴⁷

Together, those documents shape a framework that allows for unofficial ties with Taiwan and continued security support.

Other countries

Several other states adopt a similar approach, maintaining their own version of a One-China policy, recognising Beijing but leaving Taiwan's status ambiguous. For example, the 1972 Australia–PRC joint communiqué declared:

The Australian Government recognises the Government of the People's Republic of China as the sole legal Government of China [and] acknowledges the position of the Chinese Government that Taiwan is a province of the People's Republic of China.¹⁴⁸

That formulation recognises Beijing without fully endorsing its territorial claim over Taiwan.

The PRC’s ‘One-China principle’

Beijing, by contrast, insists on the One-China principle, which leaves no ambiguity. Its 2022 white paper, *The Taiwan question and China’s reunification in the new era*, states:

Taiwan is part of China. This is an indisputable fact supported by history and the law. Taiwan has never been a state; its status as part of China is unalterable.¹⁴⁹

How the US and other countries support Taiwan’s preparedness

The US, alongside a handful of other partners, supports Taiwan’s defence and security primarily through indirect and carefully calibrated measures. Those efforts aim to strengthen Taiwan’s capacity for self-defence while avoiding steps that might trigger retaliation from Beijing.

United States

The US remains Taiwan’s most important security partner. Under the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979, Washington commits to providing Taiwan with the means to defend itself, although it stops short of making a formal pledge of direct military intervention.

Arms sales

Since 1979, US support has centred on arms sales¹⁵⁰ designed to help Taiwan build a credible, resilient and cost-effective deterrent. Transfers have included advanced aircraft, missiles, air-defence systems and naval assets, which are critical for countering potential PLA amphibious, missile and air campaigns (Table 4).

Table 4: US arms transfers to Taiwan (1979 to 2024)¹⁵¹

Weapon category	Number ordered
Aircraft	841
Air-defence systems	181
Armoured vehicles	1,742
Artillery	311
Engines	1,295
Missiles	17,431
Sensors	431
Naval weapons	27
Ships	42
Total	22,301

Military training

After a period of virtually no overt US military presence in Taiwan throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the scope of US–Taiwan training has expanded markedly. By 2025, around 500 US personnel,¹⁵² including Special Operations forces,¹⁵³ National Guard units, Marine Corps trainers, and Security Forces Assistance Brigades, were operating in Taiwan.

Congressional disclosures¹⁵⁴ confirm that Taiwanese military personnel receive defence and security training in the US. In 2025, hundreds of Taiwanese troops reportedly participated in exercises at Camp Grayling, Michigan, alongside US forces and those of nine other international partners. In addition, Taiwanese officers attend US military institutions,¹⁵⁵ and graduates from West Point, the Naval Academy and the Air Force Academy are among their ranks.

Other countries

Several countries sustain discreet security ties with Taiwan, including robust economic and cultural links.

Historical engagement

Singapore has long maintained a carefully calibrated defence relationship with Taiwan. A military attaché is stationed¹⁵⁶ at its *de facto* embassy in Taipei, and since 1975 Singapore has conducted large-scale training on the island under Project Starlight,¹⁵⁷ making use of Taiwan's terrain for infantry, artillery and armoured exercises. Cooperation has also expanded into areas such as cyber defence and UAV research.

Israel developed a close but discreet¹⁵⁸ defence partnership with Taiwan from the 1970s through to the early 1990s, supplying anti-ship missiles, radar and other advanced systems valued at an estimated US\$852 million.¹⁵⁹

In Europe, France supplied Taiwan with frigates¹⁶⁰ and Mirage fighter jets¹⁶¹ before halting new arms sales in 1994 under Chinese pressure. The Netherlands built two Zwaardvis-class submarines¹⁶² for Taiwan in the 1980s—a move that led Beijing to recall its ambassador¹⁶³ in protest.

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, between 1979 and 2024 at least 11 UN member states transferred military-relevant systems to Taiwan.¹⁶⁴ They included the UK, Switzerland, Japan, Italy, Germany, Denmark, Canada and Singapore, and exports ranged from missiles and radars to naval vessels and aircraft engines (Table 5).

Table 5: Arms transfers to Taiwan (1979 to 2024)

Supplier	Aircraft	Air-defence systems	Engines	Missiles	Sensors	Naval weapons	Ships	Total
UK			250					250
Switzerland		74						74
Singapore				20			8	28
Netherlands					16		2	18
Japan	22							22
Italy					4	14		18
Israel	1						50	51
Germany				200			4	345
France	60			1,440	16	6	6	1,538
Denmark	18							18
Canada					27			27

Emerging engagement

Rising tensions in the Taiwan Strait and increasingly assertive Chinese military activity have prompted more countries to explore ways of supporting Taiwan's security, often through discreet forms of security engagement.

In the Indo-Pacific, stability in the Taiwan Strait is increasingly viewed as directly tied to national defence interests. Japan reportedly¹⁶⁵ now maintains an active-duty defence attaché in Taipei, and its official defence documents increasingly frame Taiwan's security as integral to Japan's own. The Philippines, under President Marcos Jr, has reportedly¹⁶⁶ loosened restrictions on official contacts with Taiwanese counterparts and expanded operational coordination. The Philippine Coast Guard has even conducted¹⁶⁷ joint patrols with Taiwan's coastguard in the Bashi Channel, which is a strategic waterway between the two territories.

In Europe, Russia's war in Ukraine has sharpened concerns about authoritarian expansionism. That has led countries such as the UK,¹⁶⁸ Lithuania¹⁶⁹ and the Czech Republic¹⁷⁰ to strengthen cooperation with Taiwan through defence-technology partnerships, cybersecurity exchanges and training initiatives. While those efforts are often kept deliberately low-profile to avoid provoking Beijing, they nonetheless signal growing concern over Beijing's coercion and a desire to maintain the *status quo* across the Taiwan Strait.

Both Australia and Canada continue to adhere to their respective ‘One-China’ policies but are increasingly finding space to support Taiwan within those limits. Australia has stepped up diplomatic advocacy¹⁷¹ for stability in the strait while deepening engagement with Taipei through nascent intelligence sharing¹⁷² and cybersecurity cooperation.¹⁷³ Canada has pursued similar low-profile initiatives, expanding technology exchanges,¹⁷⁴ cybersecurity cooperation¹⁷⁵ and diplomatic support¹⁷⁶ for regional stability, while carefully avoiding formal military commitments.

China’s response to countries supporting Taiwan

Beijing firmly opposes any military or security engagement with Taiwan. China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs frequently condemns¹⁷⁷ such actions as violations of international commitments and as signals of encouragement to so-called ‘Taiwan independence forces’.

China has suspended dialogues, including military exchanges¹⁷⁸ and even nuclear talks,¹⁷⁹ with the US in response to arms sales to Taiwan, while sanctioning multiple US defence companies.¹⁸⁰

In rare cases, Beijing has extended retaliation to other states. In 2021, China downgraded diplomatic ties¹⁸¹ with Lithuania to the *chargé d’affaires* level and blocked trade¹⁸² after Vilnius allowed Taiwan to open a *de facto* embassy under the name ‘Taiwanese Representative Office’.

Countries that challenge China’s excessive claims in the Taiwan Strait

China’s stance on the Taiwan Strait

Beijing’s military assertiveness isn’t limited to Taiwan itself; it also extends across the Taiwan Strait. China uses its armed forces to assert and enforce excessive claims in the strait.

The PRC Government rejects the idea that the Taiwan Strait qualifies as a channel for ‘international navigation’, as defined in Article 37 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).¹⁸³ Instead, Beijing argues¹⁸⁴ that the strait is too narrow to meet that threshold and insists that the waters ‘from both shores towards the middle of the Strait’ constitute a mix of China’s internal waters, territorial sea, contiguous zone and exclusive economic zone.

On that basis, China claims that foreign military vessels transiting the strait under the principle of ‘innocent passage’ are violating its sovereign rights. To enforce that stance, the PLA Navy, and at times the CCG, closely monitor and shadow foreign ships. In recent years, including in 2023,¹⁸⁵ Chinese vessels have engaged in increasingly assertive and risky manoeuvres to intimidate transiting navies. Those actions are typically accompanied by strong diplomatic protests, delivered both in Beijing and to the governments of the transiting states.

How countries support freedom of navigation in the Taiwan Strait

In response, a growing number of countries now conduct naval transits through the Taiwan Strait to contest China’s excessive claims and to reaffirm key principles of UNCLOS. Those operations highlight the importance of unimpeded passage and reinforce broader commitments to a free and open Indo-Pacific.

Approaches, however, vary. Some states make their transits highly visible, framing them as deliberate demonstrations of support for international law and freedom of navigation. Others prefer a quieter, low-profile approach, with minimal public attention but clear signalling to Beijing, whose vessels almost always shadow such movements.

Publicly available data indicates that at least 10 countries are active in the Taiwan Strait (Table 6).

Table 6: Taiwan Strait transits, by country

Country	Completed one TST	Multiple recent TSTs	TSTs at least annually	Country publicises TSTs	Transits with partners	Transits with aircraft
US	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Canada	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Australia	✓	✓	✓		✓	
UK	✓	✓		✓	✓	
France	✓	✓				
New Zealand	✓			✓	✓	
Japan	✓	✓	✓			
Germany	✓			✓		
Netherlands	✓			✓		
Turkey	✓					

TST = Taiwan Strait transit.

United States

The US maintains the most active non-PLA military presence in the Taiwan Strait. In 2024, US Navy vessels conducted at least six transits in January, March, August and October. In addition, US Navy P-8 Poseidon aircraft flew over the strait in September and November. Those operations are routinely publicised,¹⁸⁶ underscoring Washington's commitment to uphold navigational rights and operate wherever international law allows. The US also coordinates with partners: following a joint US–Canada transit in June 2023, another was carried out in October 2024.

Canada

Canada has steadily increased its presence since adopting its Indo-Pacific Strategy in November 2022. Canadian naval vessels now transit the Taiwan Strait roughly three times per year.¹⁸⁷ Canada conducts operations both independently and alongside partners, including with the US¹⁸⁸ and with Australia.¹⁸⁹ In line with its emphasis on transparency, Canada has also embedded journalists on board its ships, including those transiting the strait, to raise awareness of the operational challenges posed by China's assertiveness.

Australia

Australia is the other country that probably conducts regular transits of the strait. However, as the Australian Government doesn't advertise transits, the tempo is difficult to determine. China challenged an Australian transit all the way back in 2001, while another transit was confirmed¹⁹⁰ in November 2023. In September 2024, Australia's HMAS *Sydney* and New Zealand's HMNZS *Aotearoa* jointly transited¹⁹¹ the strait. On 6 September 2025, Australia reportedly¹⁹² conducted another joint transit, this time with Canada.

United Kingdom

The UK's Royal Navy typically sails through the Taiwan Strait when its vessels are operating in the region. In 2021, HMS *Richmond* became the first British vessel to conduct a transit since 2008. In June 2025,¹⁹³ the patrol vessel HMS *Spey*, permanently stationed in the Indo-Pacific, completed a strait transit. On 12 September 2025, the UK conducted its first bilateral transit,¹⁹⁴ sailing alongside a US warship.

France

France also transits when its vessels are deployed in the Indo-Pacific. A Floréal-class frigate sailed through the strait¹⁹⁵ shortly after President Macron's 2023 state visit to Beijing. The surveillance frigate *Prairial* repeated the operation¹⁹⁶ in October 2024, highlighting France's willingness to reinforce freedom of navigation in the region.

New Zealand

On 25 September 2024, the replenishment vessel HMNZS *Aotearoa* transited the strait in the first confirmed New Zealand transit since 2017. The operation was conducted jointly with Australia's HMAS *Sydney*. Wellington confirmed the transit¹⁹⁷ as a 'routine activity' in accordance with international law and the right to freedom of navigation.

Japan

Japan had long avoided transiting the Taiwan Strait but shifted course in 2024. On 25 September,¹⁹⁸ the destroyer JS *Sazanami* sailed through the strait, followed by additional transits in February¹⁹⁹ and June 2025.²⁰⁰ While Japan's Ministry of Defense declined to comment publicly, those operations represent a significant evolution in Tokyo's security posture.

Germany

In September 2024, two German naval vessels transited the Taiwan Strait in the first German passage in more than 20 years. During its earlier Indo-Pacific deployment in 2021–22, Berlin had deliberately avoided the strait. The 2024 operation was confirmed²⁰¹ by Germany's Defence Minister, who reiterated that the Taiwan Strait constitutes international waters.

Netherlands

The Dutch frigate HNLMS *Tromp* transited the strait in May 2024, marking a notable policy shift. In 2021, another Dutch vessel, HNLMS *Evertsen*, had deliberately avoided the waterway. The 2024 passage was confirmed²⁰² by the Royal Netherlands Navy.

Turkey

In May 2024, the Turkish Navy made a rare appearance in the region when the antisubmarine frigate TCG *Kınalıada* transited²⁰³ the strait *en route* to Japan. The voyage underscored Turkey's growing global naval presence, even if its role in the Indo-Pacific remains limited.

What more can be done to support Taiwan?

A stronger Taiwan is a deterrent to Beijing's unification ambitions, but balancing deterrence with the risk of escalation remains a central challenge for countries seeking to preserve peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. That dilemma sits at the heart of policymaking for governments navigating the Taiwan question, as they must weigh the risks of supporting Taiwan against the potentially greater risks of inaction.

While supporting Taiwan carries political, economic and security risks, allowing Beijing to advance its strategic objectives unopposed poses an even greater threat to regional stability. The *status quo* isn't static; it's increasingly dynamic and unstable, shaped by China's growing military presence, frequent exercises and coercive tactics.

Left unchecked, those incremental changes risk normalising China's dominance in the Taiwan Strait, undermining freedom of navigation and shifting the balance of power in Beijing's favour, and potentially encouraging the CCP to believe that it can successfully resolve the Taiwan question through force. Maintaining stability therefore requires tangible actions that both strengthen Taiwan's resilience and increase the costs to China of further escalation.

The US needs assistance

The US must remain the primary counterweight to Beijing's ambitions. Yet its resources aren't limitless, and its commitments are already stretched across multiple regions, including Europe and the Middle East. Relying solely on the US to deter Chinese coercion and maintain the *status quo* is insufficient. Broader coalitions of like-minded countries are essential to share the burden, signal collective resolve and reinforce the credibility of deterrence.

Regional partnerships and frameworks

Developing more integrated regional partnerships (such as through frameworks proposed²⁰⁴ by former US Assistant Secretary of Defense Ely Ratner) are essential to pushing back against Beijing's advances. Structured frameworks can facilitate deeper integration of regional security strategies, enabling countries to pool capabilities, share burdens and reinforce each other's deterrent signals.

Closer partnerships among countries also facilitate activities such as combined military exercises, joint scenario planning and real-time intelligence sharing. Those measures build not only operational capacity but also political credibility, suggesting to Beijing that coercion against Taiwan could trigger coordinated responses from a broad coalition.

Continued and visible military transits of the Taiwan Strait are also vital. Such transits serve three interlinked purposes: they uphold freedom of navigation under international law, signal international opposition to unilateral attempts to change the *status quo* and reaffirm that the strait isn't Beijing's territorial sea. In doing so, they strike at the heart of China's efforts to redefine international norms in its favour.

A normalised pattern of transits by like-minded partners, including the US, Canadian, Japanese, Australian, New Zealand and European navies, makes it harder for Beijing to claim that those operations are provocative or illegitimate. Instead, routine and visible passages establish lawful presence as the norm. Such normalisation reassures regional states that navigational freedoms won't erode under Chinese pressure.

Support to Taiwan

Beyond partnerships and multilateral frameworks, more can be done to sustain the regional balance by bolstering Taiwan's security, resilience and integration into global systems. Support can take many forms; here, the focus is on strengthening Taiwan's defence and security sectors.

The US is already Taiwan's primary security partner, providing arms sales, training and intelligence sharing. Yet other countries can also discreetly step up within the boundaries of their One-China policies. That diversifies Taiwan's support base and reinforces the credibility of a global coalition committed to a free and open Indo-Pacific.

A practical framework for assisting Taiwan's security can be built around five interlinked pillars: people-to-people engagement; technology cooperation; diplomatic support; training and resilience; and shared planning. Each pillar offers meaningful, scalable actions according to each partner's political constraints and capacity.

1. People-to-people engagement

Expanding dialogues and exchanges is a low-risk, high-impact way to enhance mutual understanding and build readiness. Taiwan's vibrant academic and civil-society networks make it a natural partner for such engagement. Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogues, bringing together think tanks, academic institutions and civil-society groups, provide valuable opportunities to share experiences, compare approaches and clarify the nature of Chinese threats, from cyber intrusions to air and maritime coercion.

Personnel exchanges involving retired military officers, policy experts and legislators also create informal but durable channels for sharing security perspectives. Deepening those links ensures that Taiwan's perspective is better understood abroad, countering Beijing's efforts to isolate it diplomatically. Such networks can also be drawn upon in times of crisis, providing trusted avenues for consultation and coordination.

Models already exist. Canada's parliamentary friendship groups²⁰⁵ and Australia's academic-level security conferences²⁰⁶ with Taiwan demonstrate how countries can maintain robust unofficial ties while operating within the constraints of their One-China policies.

2. Working together on new and emerging technologies

Taiwan is a leader in advanced manufacturing and a critical node in global supply chains. That position gives it both strategic importance and unique vulnerabilities. As emerging security challenges such as drone warfare and cyber threats reshape the character of conflict, Taiwan and its partners have significant opportunities to pursue joint innovation.

Cooperation on dual-use technologies, such as drones and resilient communications networks, not only strengthens military readiness but also enhances civilian resilience. There's considerable scope to connect Taiwanese research and development hubs with innovation ecosystems in Japan, Europe and other advanced economies.

Supply-chain security is another vital area for cooperation. Taiwan's dominance in semiconductor production makes it a target during crises. Joint efforts to diversify sourcing, build redundancy and establish stockpiles of key components can significantly reduce Taiwanese and global vulnerabilities.

3. Diplomatic support in vulnerable regions

China's influence campaigns have been particularly active in the Pacific, in Southeast Asia and among Taiwan's remaining diplomatic allies. Nations can counter Beijing's efforts by increasing their own diplomatic and development presence in those vulnerable regions. Aligning assistance with Taiwan's existing programs and priorities offers a credible and attractive alternative to Chinese loans and infrastructure projects.

Support for Taiwan's participation in international organisations is another crucial dimension, especially where internationally recognised statehood isn't a requirement for participation. Backing Taipei's observer status in bodies such as the World Health Organization and climate-related forums reinforces its role as a responsible stakeholder in the global community.

Quiet but consistent advocacy within ASEAN and other multilateral forums can also help to ensure that Taiwan's concerns (particularly over maritime stability, trade and economic access) remain on the agenda, even in settings in which formal recognition is politically off-limits.

4. Training and exchanges for whole-of-society resilience

As Russia's invasion of Ukraine has reminded the world, modern conflict isn't just about military capability; it's about the ability of an entire society to absorb shocks and continue functioning during coercion or conflict.

Civil-military integration training is a critical component. Preparing reserve forces and mobilising civil society to support the standing military can significantly enhance Taiwan's defensive depth. Programs designed to train personnel in logistics and support functions make Taiwan less vulnerable to a single-point failure in the event of a crisis.

Opportunities for Taiwan's reserve officers, civil-society leaders and technical specialists to engage with overseas training academies and partner institutions would raise readiness levels and broaden the country's resilience toolkit. Such exchanges allow Taiwan to benefit from the hard-earned lessons of others, whether from Europe's experience with hybrid warfare or from regional partners' expertise in disaster response.

Importantly, states have flexibility in how they deliver that support. Direct military-to-military exchanges are often constrained by diplomatic considerations, but creative alternatives exist. Partnerships between first responders, such as local police, fire brigades and emergency medical services, offer valuable opportunities to strengthen resilience without breaching political sensitivities.

5. Shared planning for maritime and energy security

Taiwan's ability to sustain essential imports of energy, food and raw materials is fundamental to its resilience in times of crisis or natural disaster. Strengthening cooperation in those areas provides a practical avenue for engagement.

Partner nations can engage in quiet but meaningful contingency planning with Taiwan across several areas. Countries can work with Taiwan to enhance maritime safety, port resilience and energy continuity planning. Shared initiatives might include improving maritime domain awareness through information sharing, developing protocols for disaster-response logistics, and ensuring that key ports can operate effectively under stress.

Joint workshops and scenario-based planning exercises can be held under the umbrella of regional disaster preparedness or humanitarian assistance. Such programs strengthen regional readiness for a range of contingencies, from typhoons to large-scale disruptions of shipping routes, while building habits of coordination that would prove valuable in more serious crises.

Regional maritime exercises could test those concepts. Even when Taiwan isn't directly involved, exercises can be structured to test capabilities, such as convoy escort and replenishment at sea, that would be critical in supporting Taiwan during a crisis. This indirect approach allows partners to strengthen relevant operational skills while avoiding diplomatic sensitivities.

Conclusion

The defence and security of Taiwan can't rest on military deterrence alone. It requires a whole-of-society approach backed by a coalition of international partners. A framework based on people-to-people engagement, technology cooperation, diplomatic support, resilience training and shared planning offers a practical path forward for countries seeking to strengthen Taiwan's resilience while managing escalation risks.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

ADIZ	air defence identification zone
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CCG	China Coast Guard
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
DPP	Democratic Progressive Party
GDP	gross domestic product
hard ROC	hard resilient operations concept
KMT	Kuomintang
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China
ROC	Republic of China
UAV	uncrewed aerial vehicle
UN	United Nations
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea

