



Slicing away at the status quo: Beijing's cross-strait strategy

By Gray Sergeant

In March 2023, His Majesty's (HM) Government's Integrated Review Refresh identified the Taiwan Strait as an area where the United Kingdom (UK) would contribute to 'supporting stability'. The review re-affirmed the UK's long-standing opposition to 'any unilateral change in the status quo' and promised to 'support all parties to work together to ensure that heightened tensions do not lead to escalation.'¹

By 'unilateral change in the status quo', HM Government undoubtedly refers to a situation in which the People's Republic of China (PRC), through force or coercion, attempts to annex Taiwan. This would appear to be the type of scenario which Whitehall has stepped up planning for in recent years.² Yet, over the last year, the status quo *has* changed, and it *will* continue to change so long as Beijing's 'grey zone' tactics do too.

At its simplest, the grey zone refers to the space between peace and war, where, as General Sir Nicholas Carter, the former Chief of the Defence Staff, stated: 'a weapon...no longer has to go "bang"'. He went on to say:

¹ 'Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a more contested and volatile world', Cabinet Office, 13/03/2023, <https://bit.ly/48eklrJ> (checked: 11/12/2023).

² Gray Sergeant, 'Taiwan in the Integrated Review Refresh: More than a mention', *Britain's World*, 14/03/2023, <https://bit.ly/41lyfpR> (checked: 11/12/2023).



‘Energy, cash – as bribes – corrupt business practices, cyber-attacks, assassination, fake news, propaganda and indeed military intimidation are all examples of the weapons used to gain advantage’.³

Given the all-encompassing nature of this term, activities included in assessments of cross-strait grey zone tactics have ranged from military manoeuvres and cyber attacks to efforts to exclude Taiwan from international fora and leverage economic dependencies – measures which the PRC has deployed against other countries in the region, such as Japan and Australia.⁴ This Explainer will cover actions from the summer of 2022 onwards, primarily overt manoeuvres by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), which have enabled Beijing to encroach further on Taiwan and its offshore islands, Kinmen and Matsu.

This stretch of time is marked by a few particularly tense periods in cross-strait relations, beginning with the fallout from the visit of Nancy Pelosi, then United States (US) Speaker of the House of Representatives, to Taipei in early August 2022. In response, Beijing launched military exercises around the main island, which far exceeded the scale of their operations during the 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis. Live fire drills were conducted in seven zones around Taiwan (during which four missiles flew over the main island). Joint military operations involving unprecedented incursions into Taiwan’s Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) were also carried out, with many of the aircraft involved crossing the Taiwan Strait median line.⁵

In April 2023, following a meeting in California between Tsai Ing-wen, the President of Taiwan, and Pelosi’s successor, Kevin McCarthy, Beijing announced ‘Joint Sword’ exercises around Taiwan. During this, operations involving aircraft carriers and large numbers of aircraft took place, albeit on a smaller scale compared with the previous summer’s.⁶ More muted still was Beijing’s military reaction when, a few months later, Lai Ching-te, Taiwan’s Vice President and

³ General Sir Nicholas Carter, Speech: ‘Dynamic security threats and the British Army’, Ministry of Defence (UK), 23/01/2018, <https://bit.ly/3RDD1M4> (checked: 11/12/2023).

⁴ Bonnie Lin et al., ‘Competition in the Gray Zone: Countering China’s Coercion Against US Allies and Partners in the Indo-Pacific’, RAND Corporation, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3RBcU8B> (checked: 11/12/2023); and, ‘ROC National Defence Report 2023’, Ministry of National Defence Republic of China, 15/09/2023, <https://bit.ly/3GDTnOH> (checked: 11/12/2023).

⁵ Bonnie Lin et al., ‘Tracking the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis’, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 05/08/2022 (last updated 08/11/2023), <https://bit.ly/3RMieq5> (checked: 11/12/2023).

⁶ Bonnie Lin et al., ‘Tracking China’s April 2023 Military Exercises around Taiwan’, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 10/04/2023 (last updated 08/11/2023), <https://bit.ly/3GDB5gA> (checked: 11/12/2023); and, Eric Chan, ‘Operationalising Symbolic Encirclement: a Comparison of PLA Exercises Following Recent High-Profile Visits’, Global Taiwan Institute, 19/04/2023, <https://bit.ly/3GEucLM> (checked: 11/12/2023).



presidential candidate for the Democratic Progressive Party, also transited the US. In the following days, ADIZ incursions ‘only’ occurred 37 times.⁷

Although these periods of heightened cross-strait tensions are notable, PLA military manoeuvres have not substantially reduced after these peaks. Rather, like other coercive measures deployed by the PRC, they have become a near-daily reality for Taiwan’s government, military, and people.

Box 1: Multi-domain coercion (weaponising trade)

During the three occasions mentioned above, Beijing combined economic measures with its military manoeuvres. In August 2022, the China Customs Administration suspended imports of 2,000 Taiwanese food products. By broadening the type of product banned to include processed foods, Beijing had, according to Chiu Chui-cheng, Deputy Chair of Taiwan’s Mainland Affairs Council, acquired ‘enormous extortion powers’.⁸

No new bans were announced following Tsai’s visit to the US, but Beijing announced it would investigate Taiwan’s ‘restrictive [trade] measures’ against Chinese products.⁹ After Lai’s transit, Chinese officials, referencing this investigation and its outcome, threatened to end preferential tariffs given to Taiwanese goods as part of the cross-strait Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA).¹⁰

Understanding Beijing’s approach

The PRC wants to subsume Taiwan and leaders in Beijing have consistently refused to rule out the use of force to achieve this objective – although, as its 2022 White Paper on Taiwan reiterates, achieving this by ‘peaceful means’ is Beijing’s ‘first choice’.¹¹

⁷ Thomas Shattuck, ‘One Year Later: How Has China’s Military Pressure on Taiwan Changed Since Nancy Pelosi’s Visit?’, Global Taiwan Institute, 20/09/2023, <https://bit.ly/4aiEyPh> (checked: 11/12/2023).

⁸ Kathrin Hille and William Langley, ‘China suspends 2,000 food products from Taiwan as Nancy Pelosi visits’, *Financial Times*, 03/08/2022, <https://bit.ly/3tbnJ82> (checked: 11/12/2023).

⁹ Ralph Jennings and Kandy Wong, ‘Mainland China launches probe into Taiwan’s “trade barriers” affecting 2,400 products’, *South China Morning Post*, 12/04/2023, <https://bit.ly/3v1OFHN> (checked: 11/12/2023).

¹⁰ Chien-ling Liu, ‘Taiwan urges China not to “politicise” trade issues with investigation’, *Focus Taiwan*, 18/08/2023, <https://bit.ly/47SoQZn> (checked: 11/12/2023).

¹¹ ‘White Paper: The Taiwan Question and China’s Reunification in the New Era’, The Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council and The State Council Information Office, 10/08/2023, <https://bit.ly/3TkjFNj> (checked: 11/12/2023).



In pursuit of this ultimate goal and to prevent actions which make Taiwan's de-facto independence appear more permanent, Beijing deploys a variety of military, economic and political tools. This includes efforts to promote integration between both sides of the strait, such as the 21-point plan to enhance connections between Taiwan and Fujian province announced in September 2023.¹² However, since the election of Tsai in 2016, Beijing has leaned heavily on punitive measures. This overall approach, which has been dubbed 'coercion without violence', punishes, intimidates and isolates Taiwan with the aim of breaking the will of the Taiwanese people and their government.¹³

Grey zone military manoeuvres towards Taiwan are part of this coercive approach. Incursions into Taiwan's ADIZ, to take one example, aid this effort in multiple ways.¹⁴ Not only are these moves intended to wear down the Taiwanese people psychologically, but they also physically stretch the country's military. As early as March 2021, due to the costs of scrambling its air force, Taiwan's military announced it would no longer intercept every incursion.¹⁵

Above all else, Beijing wants to isolate Taiwan; Chinese air incursions frequently occur when Taiwan receives support from its partners. The PRC's reactions to Taiwan's recent interactions with the American speakers of the House of Representatives are a case in point. Moreover, the highest number of air incursions in 2022 occurred not after a high-profile visit but on 25th December 2022 (in total, 71 Chinese aircraft entered Taiwan's ADIZ), coinciding with a new US defence authorisation law which boosted military assistance for Taiwan.¹⁶

The manoeuvres and other exercises have two further purposes. Firstly, they allow the PLA to practice manoeuvres which could be conducted during cross-strait contingencies, including a blockade and invasion, through training and intelligence collection. The scale and sophistication of recent exercises, chiefly those conducted in August 2022 and April 2023, point to a pre-planned effort by the PLA to strengthen its operational coordination and preparedness.¹⁷

¹² Orange Wang and Ralph Jennings, 'Beijing outlines "interconnected living" plan for Taiwan and Fujian', *South China Morning Post*, 13/09/2023, <https://bit.ly/41dLAAJ> (checked: 11/12/2023).

¹³ Richard Bush, *Difficult Choices: Taiwan's Quest for Security and the Good Life* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2021) pp. 227–247.

¹⁴ For interpretations Beijing's ADIZ incursion goals see: J. Michael Cole, 'A primer on China's aircraft intrusions into Taiwan's ADIZ', Macdonald-Laurier Institute, 05/10/2021, <https://bit.ly/3RCmUhY> (checked: 11/12/2023); and, Hsiao-Huang Shu and Tsunghan Wu, 'Uncovering PLA's Sharp Incursion into Taiwan Airspace', Institute for National Defence and Security Research, 19/12/2021, <https://bit.ly/3TfHAoz> (checked: 11/12/2023).

¹⁵ Ben Blanchard, 'Taiwan says tracks intruding Chinese aircraft with missiles, not always scrambling', *Reuters*, 29/03/2021, <https://bit.ly/3uTORZI> (checked: 11/12/2023).

¹⁶ Yimou Lee, 'Taiwan reports China's largest incursion yet to air defence zone', *Reuters*, 26/12/2022, <https://bit.ly/3TnHROX> (checked: 11/12/2023).

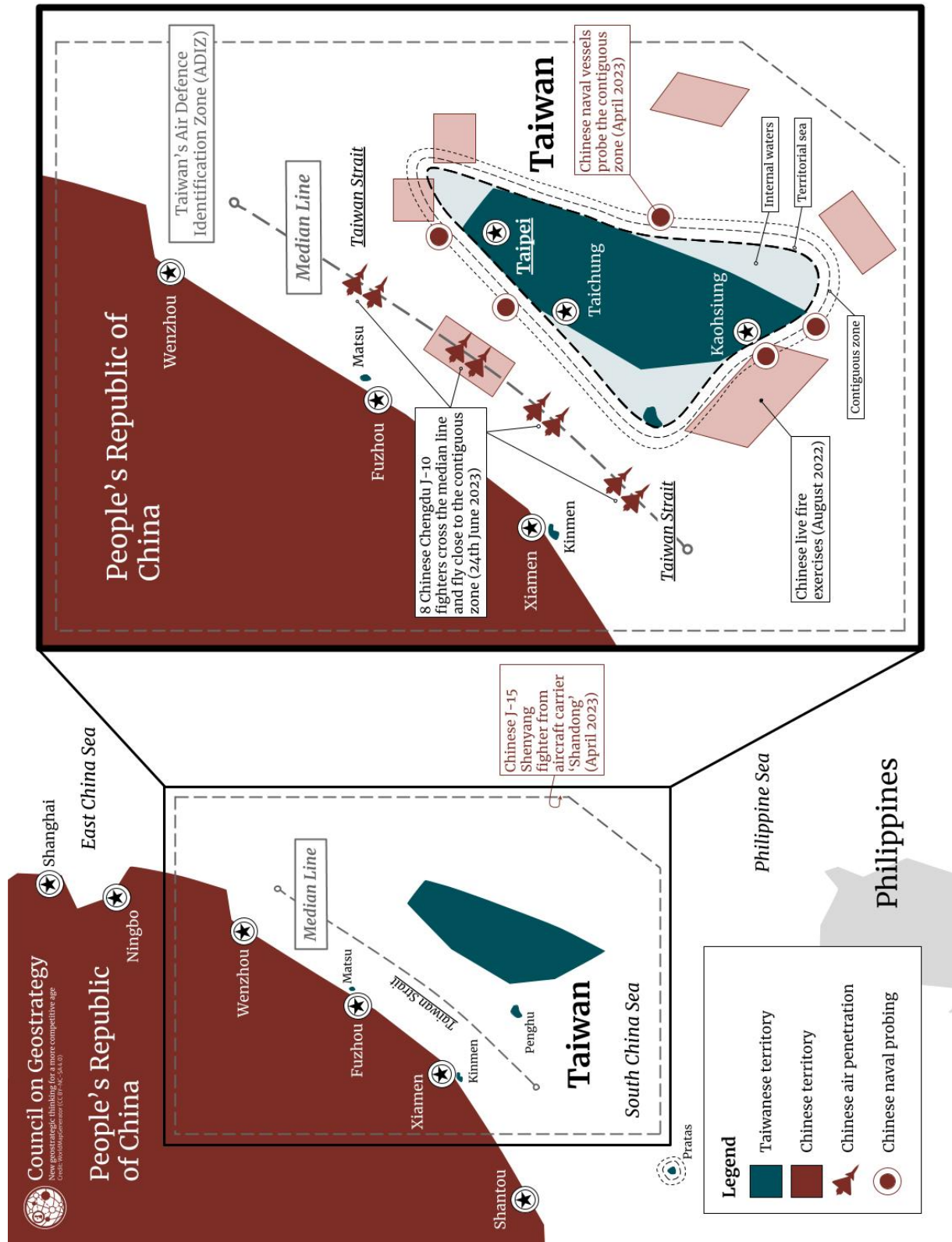
¹⁷ Eric Chan, 'Operationalising Symbolic Encirclement: a Comparison of PLA Exercises Following Recent High-Profile Visits', Global Taiwan Institute, 19/04/2023, <https://bit.ly/3GEucLM> (checked: 11/12/2023).



Secondly, these grey zone actions ‘salami slice’ away at the barriers which used to exist between the PRC and Taiwan. In doing so, Beijing normalises carrying out both constant and large-scale military manoeuvres around Taiwan. Although the ADIZ covers more than Taiwan’s airspace (see Map 1), these actions, particularly median line crossings, risk desensitising the outside world to this behaviour and enhancing the PLA’s ability to launch a surprise attack should Beijing ever decide to use force. Moreover, these actions assert Chinese control over the strait and the waters and air around Taiwan and its offshore islands. Taiwan has been hemmed in – its contiguous zone (24 nautical miles from its coast) is the new frontline facing the prospect of PLA penetration.



Map 1: Chinese encroachments towards Taiwan (August 2022–2023)





Creating a ‘new normal’ in the air

Taiwan’s Ministry of National Defence (MND) has publicly released incursions into its ADIZ since September 2020. While such incursions occurred in 2016 and 2017, it was not until late 2020 that the frequency and number of aircraft involved increased significantly. This trend has continued. From August 2022 to July 2023, 2,129 Chinese aircraft entered Taiwan’s ADIZ across 294 days, a substantial increase from 1,226 the year before and 541 the year before that.¹⁸

It is not just the scale which has changed. One significant feature of the ‘new normal’ is the PRC’s unilateral abolition of the median line. This line, running down the Taiwan Strait, had acted as a barrier between Taiwan and the PRC since the 1950s.¹⁹ Although Beijing never formally accepted the line’s existence, the PLA’s very infrequent crossings prior to 2022 point to tacit acknowledgement. In 2020, for example, the line was only violated over the course of two days. Whereas, during the month of Pelosi’s visit, the Chinese military violated the median line on a near daily basis, with the number of aircraft involved totalling 302. From the beginning of August 2022 to the end of July 2023, the median line was crossed on 144 different days, with the number of aircraft involved totalling 978.²⁰

Since then, the PLA has encroached further, putting greater pressure on Taiwan’s military. On 24th June 2023, Taiwan’s MND reported that eight J-10 fighters crossing the median line ‘got close’ to the country’s 24 nautical mile contiguous zone.²¹ More recently, PLA sorties have flown, for protracted periods of time, parallel with the median line on the Taiwan side rather than simply dipping in and out as previously reported.²²

Beijing has also begun encircling Taiwan. Previously, PLA air incursions were largely confined to the southwestern portion of Taiwan’s ADIZ. This is unsurprising given this area, which includes the Bashi Channel, is a critical

¹⁸ Taiwan’s ADIZ, having been established in the 1950s, technically overlaps with Chinese territory. However, the data used here only refers to incursions, reported by Taiwan’s MND, on the Taiwan side of the strait, what has been called ‘Taiwan’s de-facto ADIZ’. For the data source, see: Gerald C. Brown, Ben Lewis, and Alex Kung, ‘Taiwan ADIZ Violations Database’, Google Sheets, 2023, <https://bit.ly/4acjklZ> (checked: 11/12/2023).

¹⁹ For more on the Median Line’s history, see: Raul Pedrozo, ‘China’s Threat of Force in the Taiwan Strait’, *Lawfare*, 29/09/2020, <https://bit.ly/3RjzuBd> (checked: 11/12/2023).

²⁰ Gerald C. Brown, Ben Lewis, and Alex Kung, ‘Taiwan ADIZ Violations Database’, Google Sheets, 2023, <https://bit.ly/4acjklZ> (checked: 11/12/2023).

²¹ ADIZ data from beginning of August 2022 to end of July 2023, see: Ben Blanchard, ‘Taiwan says Chinese air force approached close to island’s coast’, *Reuters*, 24/07/2023, <https://bit.ly/3RlmCe7> (checked: 11/12/2023).

²² Activity of this kind was carried out by PLA fighter aircraft (J-10s and J-16s) on 10th, 13th, and 21st of September and the 3rd and 11th of October 2023, see: Gerald C. Brown, Ben Lewis, and Alex Kung, ‘Taiwan ADIZ Violations Database’, Google Sheets, 2023, <https://bit.ly/4acjklZ> (checked: 11/12/2023).



gateway connecting the PRC to the wider Pacific. The presence of Chinese aircraft specialising in intelligence gathering and submarine monitoring would frequently be reported here.²³ From August 2022 onwards, Chinese aircraft began flying in the northeastern and eastern portions of Taiwan's ADIZ. This latter area, where over the course of 12 months, 57 aircraft flew,²⁴ is particularly sensitive given that the east coast has traditionally been seen as safer in the event of an attack owing to it being shielded by the mountain range running down the island.²⁵

The PLA has achieved this air encirclement through two innovations. The first is by the launching of aircraft from the sea. On several occasions in March 2023, Harbin Z-9s were launched from ships in the eastern ADIZ, marking the start of frequent visits to this area by this type of anti-submarine helicopter.²⁶ During the 'Joint Sword' exercises the following month, J-15s were launched from the Shandong aircraft carrier into the eastern ADIZ. The presence of these fighter jets, for the first time in the ADIZ, indicates the PLA was 'practising strikes on Taiwan from an encirclement-style posture'.²⁷

The second recent innovation is the use of uncrewed aerial vehicles (UAVs). At the beginning of September 2022, Taiwan's MND started publicly releasing information related to this type of aircraft, which has accounted for approximately 10% of incursions since.²⁸ On 27th April 2023, a TB-001 drone, which Chinese state media claims can carry a heavy weapons payload, circumnavigated Taiwan inside the ADIZ.²⁹ This feat, the first of its kind reported, has since been repeated.³⁰ Given that these aircraft are uncrewed, there

²³ Silva Shih et al., 'Why the Chinese Military Has Increased Activity Near Taiwan', *Commonwealth Magazine*, 02/11/2021, <https://bit.ly/3NonRrM> (checked: 11/12/2023).

²⁴ Gerald C. Brown, Ben Lewis, and Alex Kung, 'Taiwan ADIZ Violations Database', Google Sheets, 2023, <https://bit.ly/4acjklZ> (checked: 11/12/2023).

²⁵ Lawrence Chung, 'Taiwanese military's plan to use mountain barrier as natural shield called into question as PLA expands presence to the east', *South China Morning Post*, 29/07/2023, <https://bit.ly/3RCnJay> (checked: 11/12/2023).

²⁶ During May 2023 there were six reported occurrences (on the 14th, 17th, 18th, 20th, 22nd, and 24th), see: Gerald C. Brown, Ben Lewis, and Alex Kung, 'Taiwan ADIZ Violations Database', Google Sheets, 2023, <https://bit.ly/4acjklZ> (checked: 11/12/2023).

²⁷ Helen Davidson, 'China ends military drills after simulating strikes on Taiwan', *The Guardian*, 10/04/2023, <https://bit.ly/3Tkl4Dz> (checked: 11/12/2023).

²⁸ Ben Lewis, '2022 in ADIZ Violations: China Dials Up the Pressure on Taiwan', Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 23/03/2023, <https://bit.ly/486KQis> (checked: 11/12/2023).

²⁹ Ben Blanchard, 'Taiwan says Chinese combat drone circled', *Reuters*, 28/04/2023, <https://bit.ly/3Nl2mbj> (checked: 11/12/2023).

³⁰ For example on 2nd and 5th of May, 28th August, and 26th October, see: Gerald C. Brown, Ben Lewis, and Alex Kung, 'Taiwan ADIZ Violations Database', Google Sheets, 2023, <https://bit.ly/4acjklZ> (checked: 11/12/2023).



are concerns they could be used in the future to fly riskier routes even closer towards Taiwan.³¹

Box 2: Flying Drones Over Kinmen

On 28th July 2022, Chinese UAVs were detected passing through, for the first time, Taiwan's airspace over Matsu's Dongyin Island. Following Pelosi's visit on 3rd August 2022, Chinese drones penetrated airspace around Kinmen, Taiwan's other set of offshore islands, and continued to do so for several days afterwards.³² On 16th August 2022, a drone hovered over the Erdan islet off Little Kinmen (Lieu), videoing two Taiwanese soldiers hurling rocks at it – footage which was circulated on Chinese social and state media.³³

Following these events, Taiwan's MND announced that it would, in the next year, deploy drone defence systems to its offshore islands.³⁴ On 30th August 2022, for the first time, soldiers on Kinmen live-fired at a drone which flew away in the direction of Xiamen and two days later, they shot down a drone in restricted airspace over the waters around Kinmen's Shi islet.³⁵

Encroaching on the seas

The PLA Navy's (PLAN) operations around Taiwan are more difficult to track. Unlike reports of air incursions, Taiwan's MND only began reporting the presence of vessels on 5th August 2022, and even then, the type and route of said vessels are not mentioned. Moreover, vessels tracked are not necessarily in the

³¹ Tobias Burgers and Scott N. Romaniuk, 'How UAVs Could Spark a Military Conflict in the Taiwan Strait', *The Diplomat*, 22/10/2021, <https://bit.ly/3TjVX3J> (checked: 11/12/2023); and, Ying Yu Lin, 'PLA Drones Off Taiwan's East Coast: The Strategic Implications', *The Diplomat*, 20/05/2023, <https://bit.ly/3RzO6Or> (checked: 11/12/2023).

³² Bonny Lin et al., 'Tracking the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis', Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 05/08/2022 (last updated 08/11/2023), <https://bit.ly/3RMieq5> (checked: 11/12/2023).

³³ The provenance and ownership of this drone remain unclear. See: Did Tang, 'Taiwan tightens drone defences as China shows off aerial images', *The Times*, 26/08/2022, <https://bit.ly/3t9jH01> (checked: 11/12/2023).

³⁴ Ben Blanchard and Yimou Lee, 'Taiwan to deploy drone defence systems after rock-throwing video emerges', *Reuters*, 25/08/2022, <https://bit.ly/46YRl6h> (checked: 11/12/2023).

³⁵ Kathrin Hille, 'Taiwan shoots at Chinese drone over outlying island for first time', *Financial Times*, 30/08/2022, <https://bit.ly/3RBNCHx> (checked: 11/12/2023); and, Kathrin Hill, 'Taiwan shoots down suspected Chinese drone for first time', *Financial Times*, 01/09/2022, <https://bit.ly/3RCJuqI> (checked: 11/12/2023).



ADIZ; rather, they are reported as being ‘around Taiwan’.³⁶ In the year since, the average number of naval vessels reported around Taiwan per month was 138. The numbers peaked during the two following months, August and September 2023, with 202 and 225 vessels reported, respectively.³⁷

Like air incursions, it is not only the number but the location of vessels (when publicised) which are a cause for concern. Like aircraft, PLAN warships have been reported in the waters on the Taiwan side of the strait. Immediately after Pelosi’s visit, 10 PLA craft crossed the median line and remained in the area on 5th August 2022.³⁸ Chinese naval vessels, however, appear to have encroached further than PLA aircraft. During the April 2023 exercises, according to satellite imagery, dozens of Chinese and Taiwanese vessels engaged in standoffs at the edge of Taiwan’s contiguous zone. Replies from PLAN warships to Taiwanese radio warnings included: ‘The 24 nautical mile contiguous zone does not exist. Taiwan is an inalienable part of China’.³⁹ The precise location of these vessels, as with similar reports, remains unclear.⁴⁰

Although there have been no reports of Chinese vessels entering Taiwan’s territorial waters, these waters were intruded on by three of the seven live-fire drill zones announced during the PLA’s August 2022 exercises. Moreover, these areas were close to strategically important ports, including those at Kaohsiung and Keelung, control over which would be important in a cross-strait contingency.⁴¹

³⁶ For the changes in MND reporting and criticisms of the vagueness of these new reports, see: Thomas J. Shattuck, Benjamin Lewis, and Kenneth Allen, ‘Taiwan Should Follow the Philippines’ Model for Revealing China’s Gray Zone Tactics’, *The Diplomat*, 03/11/2023, <https://bit.ly/3RC7Sjb> (checked: 11/12/2023).

³⁷ Gerald C. Brown, Ben Lewis, and Alex Kung, ‘Taiwan ADIZ Violations Database’, Google Sheets, 2023, <https://bit.ly/4acjklZ> (checked: 11/12/2023).

³⁸ Yimou Lee, ‘China’s military makes dozens of crossings of Taiwan median line’, *Reuters*, 05/08/2022, <https://bit.ly/3Rg18z7> (checked: 11/12/2023).

³⁹ John Feng, ‘Satellite Image Captures China Warship Standoff Around Taiwan’, *Newsweek*, 11/04/2023, <https://bit.ly/3RCc63q> (checked: 11/12/2023).

⁴⁰ Reports of PLA naval incursions into the contiguous zone remain unclear. Similarly, recent allegations involving foreign naval ships entering the waters around Taiping Island, in the South China Sea, have generated conflicting claims, see: Cheng-chung Wang and Joseph Yeh, ‘US, Chinese warships did not enter Taiping Island waters: CGA’, *Focus Taiwan*, 13/11/2023, <https://bit.ly/3Nouc6y> (checked: 11/12/2023).

⁴¹ Bonny Lin et al., ‘Tracking the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis’, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 05/08/2022 (last updated 08/11/2023), <https://bit.ly/3RMieq5> (checked: 11/12/2023); and, Did Tang, ‘Taiwan tightens drone defences as China shows off aerial images’, *The Times*, 26/08/2022, <https://bit.ly/3t9jH01> (checked: 11/12/2023).

**Box 3: Cutting cables around Matsu**

On 2nd February 2023, a Chinese fishing vessel severed one of the two cables connecting the Matsu islands with Taiwan. Six days later, a Chinese freighter cut the second cable. As a result, residents were left with rudimentary internet access. While Taiwan's National Communications Commission has stated that given the difficulties in obtaining evidence, they have 'not concluded that the damage was intentional', some analysts have argued that deliberate sabotage remains a real possibility.⁴²

Coincidence or not, the incident raises security concerns. Currently, 14 submarine cables serve as the 'primary communication network' for Taiwan's internet, which would be 'substantial[ly]' impacted if the cables were damaged.⁴³ Following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Audrey Tang, Taiwan's Minister of Digital Affairs, expressed her country's desire to build up a backup satellite network which would ensure internet connectivity in the event of 'intense military aggression'.⁴⁴ In late-2023, UK-based Eutelsat OneWeb announced that it had entered into a multi-million-dollar exclusive agreement to deliver such coverage.⁴⁵

Asserting control over the strait

In the first half of 2022, Chinese military officials repeatedly told their American counterparts that the Taiwan Strait was not international waters.⁴⁶ Following reports of these private remarks, Beijing, invoking the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and Chinese laws, publicly asserted that: 'China has sovereignty, sovereign rights and jurisdiction over the Taiwan Strait.'⁴⁷

⁴² Elisabeth Braw, 'China Is Practicing How to Sever Taiwan's Internet', *Foreign Policy*, 21/02/2023, <https://bit.ly/3RCCQjh> (checked: 11/12/2023); and, Huizhong Wu and Johnson Lai, 'Taiwan suspects Chinese ships cut islands' internet cables', *Associated Press*, 18/04/2023, <https://bit.ly/4agV5Di> (checked: 11/12/2023).

⁴³ Yau-chin Tsai, 'The Influence of Matsu Undersea Cable Interruption on Taiwan's National Defense Security', Institute of National Defence and Security Research, 28/08/2023, <https://bit.ly/3TkyuQi> (checked: 11/12/2023).

⁴⁴ Karina Tsui, 'Taiwan, looking to Ukraine, pursues internet backup', *Washington Post*, 06/10/2022, <https://bit.ly/4agsFcr> (checked: 11/12/2023).

⁴⁵ 'Chunghwa Telecom selects Eutelsat OneWeb for Low Earth Orbit (LEO) satellite services', Eutelsat OneWeb, 15/11/2023, <https://bit.ly/3RgybTQ> (checked: 11/12/2023).

⁴⁶ Peter Martin, 'China Alarms US With Private Warnings to Avoid Taiwan Strait', *Bloomberg*, 12/06/2022 (updated 13/06/2022), <https://bit.ly/4acydVs> (checked: 11/12/2023).

⁴⁷ 'Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 13/06/2022, <https://bit.ly/3RDOrQi> (checked: 11/12/2023).



While the PRC's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) covers the Taiwan Strait, Beijing appears, with its objections to the presence of foreign military vessels, to overstate its rights over these waters. UNCLOS states that foreign vessels have the right to navigate freely through EEZs as if they were on the high seas.⁴⁸ Evidently, Beijing wishes to delegitimise the passage of US warships and aircraft through the strait. More recently, this desire has been physically expressed. In June 2023, a PLAN warship came within 150 yards of the USS Chung-Hoon, forcing the American destroyer to slow down to avoid collision.⁴⁹

When Tsai met McCarthy, Beijing once again sought to demonstrate its jurisdiction over the Taiwan Strait. On 5th April 2023, the PRC's Fujian maritime safety administration announced a three-day special joint patrol, including 'on-site inspections', in the central and northern parts of the strait, including on the Taiwan side.⁵⁰ During the operation, Chinese state television broadcast images of the Haixun 6, the ship tasked with carrying out this patrol, being shadowed by the Taiwanese coast guard.⁵¹ While there were no reports of vessels being stopped during the operation, the announcement has been viewed as a harbinger of what the PRC might do if it wished to escalate.⁵²

The difficulty of deterring

Grey zone tactics present dilemmas for countries seeking to support peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. These tactics are difficult to deter given that they are, by their very nature, designed to stay below the threshold which would warrant a military response. Direct confrontation risks turning a small disturbance into a regional crisis. Yet failure to respond to the PLA's growing

⁴⁸ More details on the different zones within the Taiwan Strait and interpretations of Beijing's claims versus UNCLOS, see: Lynn Kuok, 'Narrowing the differences between China and the US over the Taiwan Strait', International Institute for Strategic Studies, 13/07/2022, <https://bit.ly/47UnkGm> (checked: 11/12/2023); and, Jill Goldenziel, 'China Claims To Own The Taiwan Strait. That's Illegal.', *Forbes*, 28/06/2022, <https://bit.ly/41em7qN> (checked: 11/12/2023).

⁴⁹ Ted Hesson, 'Chinese warship passed in "unsafe manner" near destroyer in Taiwan Strait, US says', *Reuters*, 04/06/2023, <https://reut.rs/4ahq5mm> (checked: 11/12/2023). This is not an isolated incident. For further examples of the PLA's recent risky operational manoeuvres, see: US Department of Defense, Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 12/10/2023, <https://bit.ly/3v0yqL3> (checked: 11/12/2023).

⁵⁰ 'China to inspect ships in Taiwan Strait, Taiwan says won't cooperate', *Reuters*, 06/04/2023, <https://reut.rs/3RBSUmn> (checked: 11/12/2023).

⁵¹ Ben Blanchard and Yimou Lee, 'Taiwan braces for new China pressure tactic in strait', *Reuters*, 06/04/2023, <https://bit.ly/3RDeqaw> (checked: 11/12/2023).

⁵² Bonny Lin, 'Analysing China's Escalation after Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen's 2023 US Transit', Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 26/04/2023, <https://bit.ly/41eZuCD> (checked: 11/12/2023).



assertiveness around Taiwan may embolden Beijing. Such an expansion would raise concerns in many other Indo-Pacific countries, as PLA manoeuvres around Taiwan already do. The April 2023 exercises, for example, were described by Yasukazu Hamada, Japan's Minister of Defence, as 'intimidating'.⁵³

Naturally, however, this problem is most acute for Taipei. The PRC has a variety of means to coerce Taiwan further. On the trade front, it could cancel or revise the ECFA (it is telling that Chinese investigations into Taiwan's trade practices are due to be concluded alongside the Taiwanese elections in January 2024). In the strait, it could attempt to enforce an inspection operation and step up pressure around the offshore islands. Towards the main island itself, PLAN warships and aircraft, now regularly operating in the ADIZ, may encroach further.

Observers have speculated that 'it's only a matter of time before the PLA breaks through Taiwan's contiguous zone boundaries' and that 'PRC UAVs will push towards Taiwan's territorial waters/airspace'.⁵⁴ Such moves would put 'enormous strain' on Taiwan's armed forces.⁵⁵ Moreover, such an escalation would risk Taiwanese retaliation. On 5th October 2022, Chiu Kuo-cheng, Taiwanese Minister of Defence, announced a rethink of Taiwan's policy of 'not firing the first shot'. Given changes in the PRC's tactics, he warned that the military 'will view any crossing of aerial entities (into Taiwan's territorial airspace) as a first strike'.⁵⁶

How should the UK respond given its commitment to cross-strait peace and stability? For starters, grey zone military manoeuvres should be called out in strong terms. So far, HM Government has, rather mildly, criticised the PLA's growing presence in Taiwan's ADIZ as 'not conducive to regional peace'.⁵⁷ Britain has a role in shaping global opinion and ensuring the blame for destabilising activities lay squarely at the door of the aggressor. Such communication would be especially important should Taiwan ever fire on PLA incursions into its territory.

A military presence led by the US with support from its allies and partners around Taiwan is also important. Following Beijing's recent pronouncements

⁵³ Yimou Lee and Ben Blanchard, 'China continues "combat training" around Taiwan after drills end', *Reuters*, 11/04/2023, <https://bit.ly/3tf5RJC> (checked: 11/12/2023).

⁵⁴ Chung Ting Huang, 'How to Avoid Wars? US Military Needs to Form New Norms across the Taiwan Strait', Institute for National Defence and Security Research, 11/08/2023, <https://bit.ly/3TeWDaM> (checked: 11/12/2023); and, Eric Chan, 'Redefining First Strike: Implications for Taiwan's Defense and Deterrence Strategy', Global Taiwan Institute, 19/10/2022, <https://bit.ly/3TjrAuW> (checked: 11/12/2023).

⁵⁵ Jyun-yi Lee et al., 'China's Incursion into Taiwan's "Air Defence Identification Zone" and its Implications for Regional Security', Jean-Christophe Noël (ed.), *People's Liberation Army Air Force*, Vortex, 06/2023, <https://bit.ly/3GDLvgc> (checked: 11/12/2023).

⁵⁶ Wayne Chang and Brad Lendon, 'Taiwan will treat Chinese military flights into its airspace as "first strike", defence minister says', *CNN*, 06/10/2022, <https://cnn.it/3GifLGs> (checked: 11/12/2023).

⁵⁷ 'UK-Taiwan Friendship and Co-operation – Volume 708: debated on Thursday 10 February 2022', Hansard, 10/02/2022, <https://bit.ly/3v1YWNl> (checked: 11/12/2023).



and encroachment across the median line, this is particularly important in the Taiwan Strait. HM Government should assert its belief that the strait contains a corridor in which vessels are free to navigate, and when the Carrier Strike Group visits the region in 2025, a warship should breakaway and transit accordingly, as HMS Richmond did in 2021. Coordination with other maritime powers, such as Japan, Australia, the Netherlands and France, should also be encouraged in upholding freedom of navigation.

Finally, given the multidimensional nature of the PRC's grey zone tactics towards Taiwan, Britain could look to support Taiwan in other areas – for example, by taking steps to boost the country's economic prosperity and thus reduce Beijing's ability to leverage cross-strait trade. This could be achieved by championing Taiwan's bid to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), of which the UK is the second largest economy.⁵⁸ Additionally, HM Government could better support Taiwanese participation in international fora in order to reduce its isolation.⁵⁹ Additional bilateral steps to enhance UK-Taiwan ties would have a similar effect.⁶⁰ Whitehall should ensure that there is cross-departmental coordination to facilitate this type of multidomain response. These actions may not deter Beijing from undertaking additional grey zone actions, but they could mitigate the worst aspects of its campaign of coercion.

Conclusion

Beijing's grey zone warfare against Taiwan is relentless. PLA military manoeuvres around the main island are an almost daily occurrence. Taiwan's medium line, which acted as a barrier ensuring stability, has been unilaterally abolished. Moreover, Chinese air activity in Taiwan's ADIZ has, in the past year, grown in scale and frequency. With another record-breaking number of PLA air incursions taking place in mid-September 2023, when 103 Chinese warplanes

⁵⁸ Membership of the CPTPP will give Britain influence over the blocs development, including future accession requests, see: Marianne Schneider-Petsinger, 'Real value for the UK in joining CPTPP is strategic', Chatham House, 31/03/2023, <https://bit.ly/3RBUq83> (checked: 11/12/2023).

⁵⁹ For example, HM Government can take several steps to support Taiwanese participation in international organisations, including United Nations specialised agencies, see: Gray Sergeant, 'Expanding Taiwan's international participation', *Britain's World*, 20/09/2023, <https://bit.ly/3TkAlVg> (checked: 11/12/2023).

⁶⁰ Examples of such actions can be found in: Gray Sergeant, 'Developing a progressive Taiwan policy', New Diplomacy Project, 23/01/2022, <https://bit.ly/4ahs5Lo> (checked: 11/12/2023).



entered the Taiwanese ADIZ (40 of which crossed the median line), Beijing's bellicosity shows no sign of abating.⁶¹

Military exercises of this kind not only destabilise the Taiwan Strait but the wider region too. Recent incidents between the PRC and the Philippines in the South China Sea demonstrate how grey-zone tactics can easily escalate into collisions between rival forces. They also stand in direct opposition to the principle that differences between the PRC and Taiwan be resolved peacefully. As such, the UK and its allies, as well as developing plans for a future crisis, must now deploy a multi-domain response to the PRC's current challenge to the cross-strait status quo.

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⁶¹ Amy Chang Chien and Chris Buckley, 'China Sends Record Number of Military Planes Near Taiwan', *New York Times*, 18/09/2023, <https://bit.ly/3TfSXFN> (checked: 11/12/2023).



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