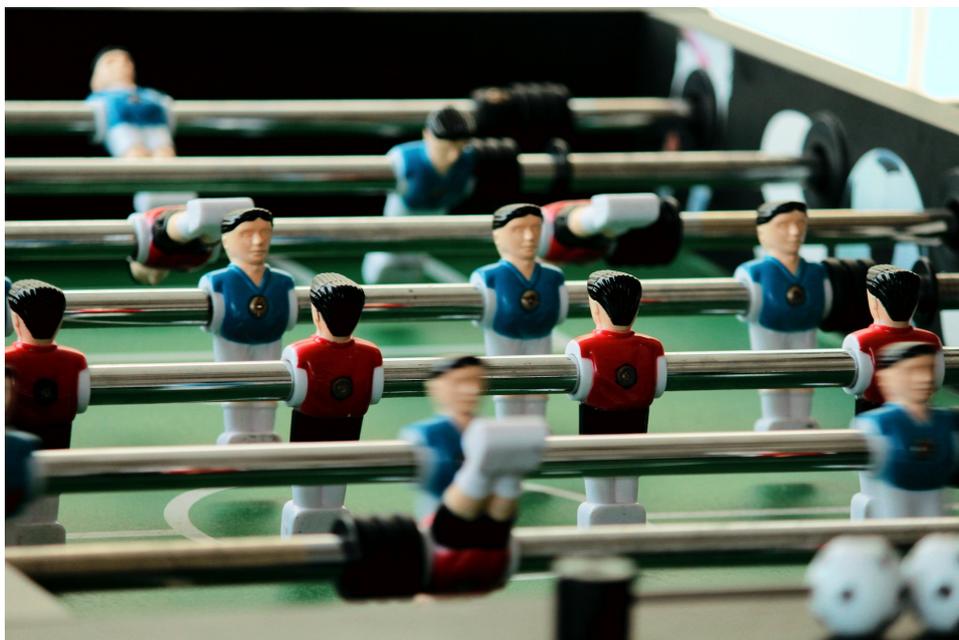


The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the authors and RSIS. Please email to Editor IDSS Paper at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

BEIJING'S GEGENPRESSING OFFENSIVE AGAINST TAIWAN *Will It Work?*

*Following United States House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, an enraged China responded with a series of military drills and live-firing exercises around the island, as part of a broader pre-existing counteroffensive. **BENJAMIN HO** assesses that while such a strategy has its advantages, it also suffers from several potential pitfalls.*



Kicking back in the game of international politics: is China too busy playing hard for a win on Taiwan?
Photo by Alex Rosario on Unsplash.

On 6 August, China launched a series of military drills and live-firing exercises in the Taiwan Strait, in response to United States Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taipei three days earlier. Images and video clips of these drills and exercises, featuring China's latest war machinery and weapons, were beamed across China as Beijing signalled its anger at Pelosi's visit while sending a thinly-veiled threat to

Taipei's pro-independence elements. China's suspension of cooperation with the United States in several areas, particularly defence relations, has exacerbated tensions with Washington, further reducing the shrinking common ground between the two countries.

As many analysts have observed, these exercises and drills have had the effect of shifting the status quo as far as cross-strait relations are concerned, and demonstrated Beijing's resolve to further its claims on Taiwan. To draw a football analogy, one might argue that China is exerting suffocating pressure on Taipei using a strategy called *gegenpressing*.

China's *Gegenpressing* Offensive

The German term *gegenpressing* means "counter-pressing". Coined in the football context, in essence, it is about winning the ball back immediately after losing it in the opponent's half of the pitch. The goal is to prevent the opponent from regrouping in a systematic manner and pressure them into making mistakes in their own half of the field, so as to maximise the chances of scoring while minimising the opponent's ability to launch their own attacks. The term was made popular by the current Liverpool Football Club, owing to its German coach Jürgen Klopp's footballing philosophy.

The past two years of the coronavirus pandemic have witnessed China going on an offensive as far as the Taiwan issue is concerned. From buying over diplomatic allies to blocking Taiwan's participation in international forums such as the World Health Organization and embarking on psychological warfare to sow distrust of their own government among Taiwanese citizens, all is fair game as far as Beijing is concerned. After all, Taiwan, in the eyes of Beijing, is a renegade province (the lost ball) with the destiny of being reunified with the mainland on terms set by the Communist Party of China (CPC) — peacefully, or otherwise. As noted by Macquarie University's Bates Gill in his latest book, *Daring to Struggle: China's Global Ambitions under Xi Jinping*, "China's approach to its remaining territorial claims — and especially regarding Taiwan — seem to leave only two outcomes: triumph or catastrophe. Either result can only come at a very high cost."

The belief among Chinese leaders is that without the support of the United States, Taiwan would be too weak to protect itself, and that Washington is simply playing the Taiwanese card to contain China and cause problems for the CPC. Likewise, when Beijing criticised the United States and the West for supporting the 2019 Hong Kong protest movement, it did so on the conviction that the United States and its allies were the main instigators of any form of anti-China opposition, not just relating to the Taiwan issue but also to that emerging in Southeast Asia. To that end, its *gegenpressing* strategy — in attempting to oppose and attack Western actions wherever possible — reflects a mindset that seeks to marry nationalist fervour with an avowedly anti-Western worldview that regards the United States and its allies as existential enemies.

Blind Spots amid the Bluster

While such a binary worldview has undoubtedly served Beijing — and particularly the CPC — well by nurturing in the Chinese population a siege mentality towards the

outside world, it has several blind spots that could blunt the edge of China's very *gegenpressing* strategy.

Rising Domestic Anxiety

For much of 2020 and 2021, mainland China — in contrast to the rest of the world — was a haven of normalcy even as the coronavirus pandemic stalked across the globe. The Chinese government's early and heavy-handed lockdowns ensured that much of China was generally cocooned from the worldwide pandemic, with the exception of sporadic flare-ups. However, the surge of the Omicron variant of the virus this year in many parts of China, particularly in major cities like Shanghai and Beijing, has generated substantial unhappiness domestically, in relation to a new round of harsh lockdowns after an intermediate relaxation, even as the rest of the world opens up and resumes economic activity.

Indeed, one of the chief requirements of an effective *gegenpressing* strategy is to possess a strong backline with which to anchor the defensive (read "strong domestic") position, so that the offensive elements have the freedom to attack the opponent. While the Chinese censors have ensured that critical voices remain muzzled and unable to expand their influence domestically, the social anxiety caused by China's Covid Zero strategy (now called "dynamic-zero") has affected the lives and livelihoods of the Chinese. Many wealthy Chinese — who are used to globe-trotting lifestyles — are now starting to pack their bags and leave China. One [Bloomberg](#) story reported that some 10,000 Chinese nationals with a combined worth of US\$48 billion are looking to leave China owing to the enforced domestic restrictions. This may just be the tip of the iceberg, suggesting not all is well back home.

Slowing Economic Growth

The slowdown in the Chinese economy, too, has weakened the Chinese government's social compact with its citizens. For more than four decades since China launched its economic reforms and began opening up, the CPC's support base among its people has centred on economic growth. Many Chinese citizens — in pursuit and hope of a better life for their children — made their Faustian bargain, electing to give up some of their personal freedoms in exchange for economic gain.

Recent economic figures, however, have put paid to that agreement, as shown by the bleak job market. One [report](#) showed that half of the 2022 cohort of graduates have had no job offers — in terms of numbers, some 10.76 million fresh graduates are seeking jobs now. Citing the National Bureau of Statistics of China, the report notes that the unemployment rate among those aged 16 to 24 stood at 16 per cent in March this year, up from 13.6 per cent a year ago. The reality reflected by these sobering statistics would have had an impact on the morale of the Chinese, blunting their motivation to work for the greater good of the nation. For China's counter-pressing strategy to work, it would require intense commitment on the part of the Chinese people to a single overriding goal. But as the proverbial pot of gold becomes harder and harder to find, there will be considerably less enthusiasm among those whose efforts are being enlisted to sacrifice themselves for the greater good of the country.

Xi, Invincible and All-knowing?

Part of the challenge of a counter-pressing strategy is the need for all the players and key actors to each know their place in the system. This would be to facilitate that ability to seamlessly transition from defence to offence and vice versa, which indicates the entire team having their eyes on the ball, literally and metaphorically. More importantly, it requires the coach to possess a game plan capable of harnessing the strengths of his players while devising clever stratagems to compensate for any observed weakness. This is where comparisons between football and politics end.

Given Xi Jinping's arrogation of personal power and consolidation of his power base, the Chinese institutions that deal with issues on the ground are increasingly being stripped of their autonomy to "speak truth to power". This situation raises a bigger problem, which is that of effective decision-making and whether Xi himself is able to make the right decisions. As Russia's miscalculation and struggles in the ongoing conflict in Ukraine have shown, President Vladimir Putin's top military and political advisers have very possibly fed him the kind of information and intelligence *he wanted*, rather than the accurate information *he needed*. Studies of the Great Chinese Famine (1958–1962) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) have highlighted the problem of disinformation being ironically fed upwards — rather than just downwards, as ordinary people might be more accustomed to expecting — when experts fear disagreeing with an all-powerful leader.

While this may not necessarily be the case with Xi, it is a warning that if Beijing does not heed the lessons of the past, history may well repeat itself, given the growing parallels between Mao's and Xi's regimes. This is potentially very dangerous, especially if Xi miscalculates the American resolve to come to Taiwan's aid, and Taipei's own determination to defend itself.

Benjamin HO is an Assistant Professor in the China Programme at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, and Deputy Coordinator of the Master of Science (International Relations) programme, both at RSIS. Part of his research interests include relating the study of politics to popular cultural forms like film, music, and as a Liverpool Football Club supporter, sport.