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## China and Taiwan: The Way Forward?

*By Loro Horta*

### SYNOPSIS

*Since Xi Jinping began his second term as President of China, Beijing embarked on a determined campaign to isolate Taiwan. Using diplomatic, economic, political and military means, China has tried to contain the independence movement on the island and to pressure Taiwan into reunification with the mainland. However, this goal proves elusive and is now complicated by dynamics beyond the influence and control of the main protagonists.*

### COMMENTARY

In the past five years, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has conducted an ever-growing number of military exercises near Taiwan. Incursions by Chinese aircraft and Chinese naval manoeuvres close to Taiwan's air space and waters are becoming routine. In December 2022, Taiwan [reported the largest incursion](#) by the Chinese air force into its Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ). A formation of 71 aircraft including fighter jets and drones entered Taiwan's ADIZ with 43 crossing the Taiwan Strait median line, an unofficial buffer between the two sides.

Such activities have practical military objectives as well as psychological and economic objectives. They allow the PRC to test Taiwan's air defences, particularly in their reaction times to the different routes the Chinese aircraft take and the Taiwanese air bases that responded to the intrusions, and the ability of the Taiwanese military to coordinate with various civilian and security services on the island. By regularly conducting such incursions, China hopes to exhaust Taiwan's much smaller air force and create a negative impact on Taiwan's economy by scaring off foreign investors.

On 6 March 2023, Taiwan's defence minister warned that Taiwan must be on alert this year for a "[sudden entry](#)" by Chinese military into areas closer to its territory.

The PRC's recent actions have been backed up by statements along the lines that while China wants peaceful reunification, it will use [all means to achieve it](#), and by statements warning that China will not wait indefinitely for reunification. In the past, Beijing would react strongly in response to specific acts on the part of Taiwan that China regarded as moves towards independence, such as in 1995 when Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui [visited the United States](#) on a "private visit". On that occasion, China conducted its first military exercises in the Taiwan Strait in decades.

## **Unintended Consequences**

As the People's Liberation Army (PLA) grew more powerful, China began to believe that it could [take Taiwan by force](#) or to intimidate it into submission. President Xi adopted a tough stance on Taiwan and other territorial issues such as Chinese claims in the South China Sea to shore up nationalism and to consolidate his power. Many Chinese and foreign observers have noticed that Xi is the most powerful Chinese leader since Mao Zedong. In their view, reunifying Taiwan with the mainland would certainly make Xi one of the greatest leaders in modern Chinese history.

There is, however, a different view that China's confrontational attitude has had the opposite effect. It has not isolated Taiwan nor diminished its insistence to remain separated from China. A decade ago, Taiwan was very isolated with less than 20 mostly small and poor countries having diplomatic ties with it. US and European officials abstained from visiting the island and US weapons sales were limited.

Today, Taiwan enjoys a higher and more prominent level of international support than previously. China's actions led US President Joe Biden to openly state (more than once) that his administration [would defend Taiwan](#) against a PRC attack. Japan, which has a pacifist constitution, and which traditionally maintained a silence on the Taiwan issue, hinted that it may come to [the defence of Taiwan](#) if there was an attack. South Korea also stated that it would oppose any attempt to change the status quo in the Taiwan Strait by force. Australia has also agreed to stationing larger numbers of US troops and equipment on its territory, including nuclear capable strategic bombers.

In August 2022, Nancy Pelosi, then Speaker of the US House of Representatives, became [the most senior American official](#) to visit Taiwan in decades. More recently, on 5 April, her successor, Kevin McCarthy met Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen in California when she stopped over on a week-long journey that included visits to Belize and Guatemala in Central America a few days earlier. It has been speculated that Kevin McCarthy may visit the island too.

Several European parliamentarians have also visited or are planning to visit Taiwan. Significantly, the Baltic state of Lithuania has formalised its relations with Taiwan and Lithuanian political leaders have travelled to Taiwan.

## **A Need to Recalibrate?**

If the PRC had hoped to intimidate Taiwan's population, that does not seem to be working. There are reports that a growing number of Taiwanese have [volunteered for military training](#). Taiwan neglected its defence for decades, to the chagrin of

Americans concerned with China's plans vis-à-vis the island. In recent years, Taiwan [has increased its defence spending](#) and investments in its domestic arms industry.

Russia's failure to secure a quick and decisive outcome in its war on Ukraine seems [to have dented Beijing's confidence](#) in a military solution. Meanwhile, Taiwanese confidence in their resilience as an entity separate from China, appears on the uptake. Both sides are surely recalibrating their strategies going forward.

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