

ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF CHINA'S MILITARY EXERCISES IN RESTRAINING TAIWAN'S LEADERSHIP

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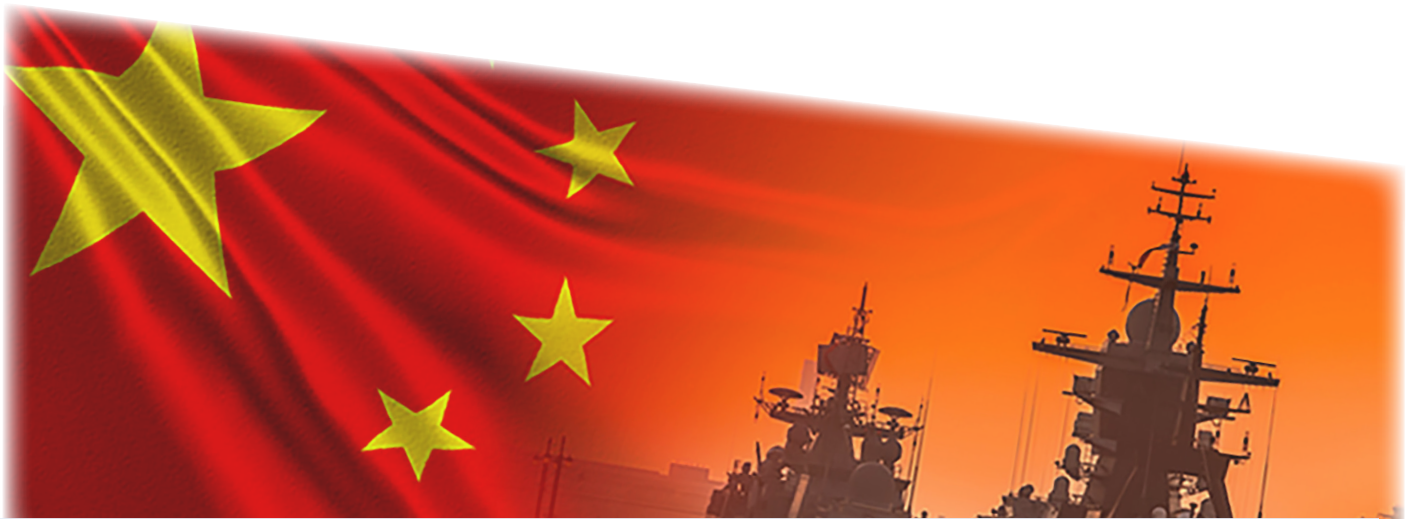


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Beijing has been using coercive approaches to restrain Taiwan's voices for decades. The Third Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1995 and 1996 set a precedent for Beijing conducting large-scale military exercises to deter Taiwan's leadership from advocating sovereignty and deepening its relations with other countries. Between 2022 and 2024, China conducted several large-scale military exercises around Taiwan in response to statements made by Taiwan's leadership. With many military exercises being conducted as part of its coercive strategies, Beijing still faces the challenge of restraining Taiwan's leadership. Under the leadership of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), Taiwan has consistently advocated for its sovereignty and sought greater engagement in international affairs. The effectiveness of China's military exercise as a coercive tool to restrain Taiwan's leadership thus is questionable. This brief analyzes the effectiveness of China's use of military exercises to impact the behaviors of Taiwan's leadership, focusing on the period between 2022 and 2024.

Introduction to Beijing's Coercive Strategy

Cross-strait relations have deteriorated since the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) assumed power in 2016. Unlike the previous Kuomintang (KMT) government, which fostered close ties with Beijing, the DPP is considered a pro-U.S. party dedicated to distancing Taiwan from China. While cross-strait

relations remain frozen due to DPP's presence in the office, the scale of the military exercises around Taiwan has intensified since 2022 as Beijing has expressed growing dissatisfaction with the increased interaction between Taiwan and the U.S., as well as the rhetoric of Taiwan's leadership. In August 2022, in response to former U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, China launched a full-scale military exercise around Taiwan, the largest of its

kind up to that point. In April 2023, China held another large-scale military drill aimed at Taiwan in response to former President Tsai Ing-wen's meeting with former U.S. House Speaker Kevin McCarthy.

In May 2024, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) conducted the Joint Sword – 2024A military exercise around Taiwan, three days after the inauguration of the current President of ROC, Lai Ching-te. On October 14, 2024, the People's Republic of China (PRC) launched the year's second large-scale military exercise around Taiwan, Joint Sword – 2024B, four days after the Republic of China's (ROC, Taiwan) National Day. The increasing frequency of large-scale Chinese military drills around Taiwan reflect the growing tension in the Taiwan Strait.

In light of these developments, it is crucial to assess the implications of Beijing's military activities around Taiwan. This brief analyzes the effectiveness of Beijing's military exercises in impacting Taiwan's leadership behaviors, focusing on the period

China's frequent military exercises, especially when in concomitance with events like the ROC's National Day or high-profile U.S. visits, serve as reminders of the high costs Taiwan might incur by crossing these lines. By projecting readiness and increasing the intensity of exercises, Beijing aims to prevent moves toward sovereignty that would challenge its authority.

between 2022 and 2024. To understand Beijing's strategic framework, it examines Beijing's actions through the lens of coercion theory. The analysis explores the impact of these exercises in shaping Taipei's cross-strait strategies and foreign policy.

Coercion operates by influencing an adversary's choices through a calculated use of threats or limited force.¹ In this framework, Beijing's actions can be seen as a combination of deterrence and compellence, each with distinct objectives.

Deterrence refers to actions aimed at discouraging Taiwan from moving closer to formal independence or openly defying Beijing's "One-China Principle," actions that separate Taiwan's sovereignty from the PRC. Most statements and actions related to the so-called "Two-state Theory (which is also known as Special State-To-State Relationship)," "Two Chinas," and the distinction between "Taiwan and China" are considered actions of separation from Beijing's perspective. The "Two-state Theory" is a concept that sees the relationship between the PRC and Taiwan as state-to-state, while "Two Chinas" refers to the concept that there are two Chinas in the world: one is the ROC and one is the PRC. Both concepts are rejected by Beijing. China's frequent military exercises, especially when in concomitance with events like the ROC's National Day or high-profile U.S. visits, serve as reminders of the high costs Taiwan might incur by crossing these lines. By projecting readiness and increasing the intensity of exercises, Beijing aims to prevent moves toward sovereignty that would challenge its authority.

In contrast, Beijing's compellence strategy could induce Taiwan to take proactive steps in alignment with China's interests, such as refraining from international engagements that imply sovereignty or curtailing rhetoric that emphasizes independence. Beijing's use of compellence strategies can be seen when it escalates or introduces new elements to military exercises following specific speeches or actions by Taiwan's leadership, pressing them to

soften their stance or avoid overt statements on sovereignty.

In essence, deterrence is aimed at maintaining the status quo by imposing costs on unwanted behaviors, while compellence pushes Taiwan's leadership to modify behaviors seen as working in opposition to Beijing's goals. However, this coercive approach is not without challenges. The visible and intensifying nature of these actions risks eroding China's reputation by casting it as a regional destabilizer.

To assess the effectiveness of Beijing's use of military exercises to deter and compel Taiwan and its like-minded partners, this issue brief applies two major indicators to analyze materials. First, whether Taipei ceases or becomes more cautious in actions perceived as advocating independence following the military exercises. Second, whether Taiwan and its supporters adjust their behaviors to align with Beijing's stances as a result of the exercises.

China's Large-scale Military Exercises around Taiwan (2022-2024)

In August 2022, China perceived Pelosi's visit to Taiwan as an attempt by the U.S. to change the cross-strait status quo and as an intrusion into China's internal affairs.² To reiterate its firm position on the "One-China Principle" and warn Taiwan not to pursue independence, the PLA launched a large-scale live-fire military exercise.³ Its unprecedented scale marked the beginning of frequent large-scale military exercises around Taiwan. Taiwan and its like-minded partners, the U.S., Australia, and Japan, condemned Beijing's actions as destabilizing the regional peace and breaking the cross-strait status quo.⁴ In April 2023, China held another large-scale military drill aimed at Taiwan in response to former President Tsai Ing-wen's meeting with former U.S. House Speaker Kevin McCarthy in California.⁵ These military exercises aimed to deter Taiwan from deepening its network as a sovereign state and the

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U.S. or other countries from changing the status quo of the Taiwan Strait. Even though China conducted large military exercises in August 2022 and April 2023, it did not deter Taiwan's leadership from continuously engaging with its allies or compel Taiwan and its supporting countries to adjust their behaviors.

On May 23, 2024, three days after President Lai Ching-te's inauguration, the Joint Sword – 2024A military exercise was launched. In his inauguration speech, Lai stated: “I hope that China will face the reality of the ROC's existence, respect the choices of the people of Taiwan” and “The Republic of China and the People's Republic of China are not subordinate to each other.”⁶ In Beijing, such a statement was considered an act of diehard separatism, aiming to pursue a “Two-state Theory.”⁷ To deter this behavior and urge Taipei not to seek de facto independence, the Joint Sword – 2024A military exercise was conducted. This exercise also attempted to compel Lai to tone down his rhetoric.

However, the Joint Sword – 2024A and previous large-scale exercises have not deterred Lai from firmly believing in Taiwan's sovereignty. On June 16, Lai gave an address at the centennial celebrations held at the Republic of China Military Academy, stating: “Only with sovereignty, can there be a country,

and only with Taiwan, can there be the Republic of China.”⁸ On August 23, the Anniversary of the Kinmen bombardment, Lai urged Taiwanese people to “defend the ROC and protect Taiwan and its outlying islands of Penghu, Kinmen, and Matsu.”⁹ On the same occasion, he also mentioned that the Taiwanese people do not want to be ruled by the Chinese Communist Party. These two speeches might not be seen as major incidents that could lead directly to a hostile military exercise by China, but they again crossed Beijing’s red line.

On October 10, President Lai delivered a National Day Address.¹⁰ In the address, Lai mentioned that Taiwan is open to collaborating with China to combat climate change and infectious diseases and maintain regional security. Many felt that Lai was extending an olive branch to China for positive cross-strait development.¹¹ However, Beijing perceived Lai’s statement in the speech as “the People’s Republic of China has no right to represent Taiwan” and reflective of a “New Two-state Theory.”¹² Moreover, on October 12, former President Tsai Ing-wen headed to the Czech Republic to participate in Forum 2000, where she also delivered a speech emphasizing Taiwan’s democracy and its international collaboration in tackling the issue of coercion.¹³

The result of the PLA’s military exercises has not matched Beijing’s hopes since Taiwan’s former leaders and President Lai continuously reiterated the equal status between Taipei and Beijing and moved ahead with visits to like-minded countries.

Given these consecutive incidents since June 2024, which did not align with Beijing’s view, China launched the exercise Joint Sword—2024B on October 14, without forewarning. Again, this exercise combined deterrence and compulsion strategies. Beijing conducted this large-scale exercise to deter Taipei from declaring independence and compel Taiwan’s leadership and like-minded partners to refrain from advocating for Taiwan’s sovereignty and international engagement.

The result of the PLA’s military exercises did not match Beijing’s hopes since Taiwan’s former leaders and President Lai continuously reiterated the equal status between Taipei and Beijing and moved ahead with visits to like-minded countries. From November 30 to December 6, President Lai led a delegation to the Republic of the Marshall Islands, Tuvalu, and the Republic of Palau, the ROC’s diplomatic allies. During the trip, the delegation had stopovers on U.S. soil in Hawaii and Guam.¹⁴ This indicates that previous military exercises have been ineffective in impacting how Taiwan’s leadership portrays Taiwan as an independent entity internationally and how Taipei and the international community interact. Beijing was expected to conduct another round of military exercises as a response to the visit.¹⁵ However, it did not give any forewarning during Joint Sword – 2024A and Joint Sword – 2024B, another shift in its strategy.

After President Lai’s trip, during December 9-11, China’s naval activity on its east coast along the first-island chain caught the attention of international security experts. The naval activity was the most extensive in 30 years.¹⁶ The exact purpose of this naval activity is uncertain since Beijing only announced seven reserved areas and did not announce the activity as a military exercise or provide any precise information.¹⁷ Taiwanese experts and the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) do not consider this naval activity to be a response to President Lai’s trip to Taiwan’s Pacific allies and visit to U.S. territories.¹⁸ In the meantime, some

experts believe China is attempting to internalize the Taiwan Strait, test grey zone tactics by withholding information, deter neighboring countries such as Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines from reiterating its stance on Taiwan, and demonstrate its capability of controlling the region to the incoming Trump administration through this activity.¹⁹ This considerable naval activity is thus not directly linked to the recent behaviors of Taiwan's leadership. Even though it is uncertain what Beijing's political reason for conducting this activity is and exactly how it relates to the PRC's objectives, the naval activity is still part of Beijing's coercive strategy. Through this naval activity, Beijing showcases its capability of controlling the region and continues to set the norm of conducting military activity without forewarning.

Effectiveness of Utilizing Military Exercises to Coerce Taiwan's Leadership

The timing of Chinese large-scale military exercises around Taiwan is linked to moments when Taiwan's leaders cross Beijing's red line in official addresses and meetings. China rejects any rhetoric that portrays Taiwan as a sovereign state. These military exercises aim to deter Taiwan's leaders and international partners from promoting Taiwan's sovereignty and to compel them to tone down rhetoric advocating Taiwan's sovereignty and international participation. To an extent, these frequent military exercises have successfully served as a warning. First, Taiwan's like-minded partners continuously adhere to their "One-China Policy." Second, based on the delicate changes in President Lai's speeches in 2024, Beijing's military exercise did compel Lai to slightly modify his tone on cross-strait relations. At the inauguration, he used a firm tone when stating his belief in defending Taiwan's sovereignty and the equal status between Taiwan and China. Compared to the inauguration address, the speech on National Day toned down the emphasis on China as a threat to Taiwan. Instead, Lai expressed a willingness to

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collaborate with Beijing. However, Beijing has thus far failed in stopping Lai from advocating for Taiwan's sovereignty and deepening its ties with other countries. Apart from extending an olive branch to China in the National Day Address, Lai again highlighted the equal status between Taiwan and China, which did not fit well with Beijing's "One-China Principle."

Moreover, these military exercises may have backfired in a significant way, worsening China's image in Taiwan and internationally. Domestically, KMT, the party considered more pro-China, has condemned these military exercises multiple times over the past two years.²⁰ This backlash may allow DPP and KMT to foster a rare alignment on cross-strait and foreign policy, which Beijing would prefer to avoid. Additionally, DPP and KMT are now in the process of figuring out how to collaborate smoothly in the Legislative Yuan, as the two parties have a similar number of seats. Potential cross-party collaboration and increasing pressure from Beijing could impact KMT's future stance on cross-strait relations. Besides, in December 2024, surveys by the National Chengchi University show that the majority of Taiwanese people are in

favor of maintaining the status quo. Respectively, 34.1 percent support maintaining the status quo indefinitely, 26.4 percent support maintaining the status quo while deciding Taiwan's status later, and 22.5 percent in favor of maintaining the status quo while moving toward independence.²¹ This situation still favors Beijing's view of avoiding Taiwan seeking formal independence.

Nonetheless, the growing pressure from military exercises could shift public opinion. In this sense, Beijing's coercion might push the Taiwanese public and politicians to reconsider their position. Internationally, the European Union (EU) openly condemned China's military exercises around Taiwan, stating that it could increase the tension in the Taiwan Strait.²² The EU also passed a joint motion on October 24, 2024, stating that United Nations (UN) resolution 2758 does not take a position on Taiwan's status while reinforcing its support for the status quo in the Taiwan Strait.²³ If Beijing continues to overtly suppress Taiwan, China might risk alienating its partners in the EU while strengthening global support for Taiwan.

The effectiveness of China's military exercises in deterring Taiwan's leadership or compelling its supporting partners to modify their rhetoric is questionable. To reach the goal of restraining the rhetoric of Taiwan's leadership, Beijing has increased the scale of its military exercises and added more drills to deter and further compel Taiwan and its like-minded partners. The growing scale and frequency of the military exercises indicate that Beijing's military exercises are ineffective in restraining the rhetoric and actions of Taiwan's leadership. This lack of effectiveness may push Beijing to seek new tactics, including the conduct of military exercises and activities without prior warning or explanation. In the past, China usually made prior announcements about its military exercises; this gesture was not seen in recent military exercises and actions.

Although Beijing's coercive strategy may not

significantly alter Taiwan's political rhetoric and interaction with its like-minded partners, it effectively pushes Taiwan to increase its defense budget and adjust its compulsory military service policy. Meanwhile, the U.S. has increased its military sales to Taiwan.²⁴ This shows that while the military exercises maybe ineffective in restraining rhetoric from Taiwan's leadership or compelling Taiwan's like-minded partners, it successfully pressured Taiwan and the U.S. to adjust their defense policy and strategy. The effectiveness in impacting Taiwan's defense policy and its relevant partners shows that China's coercive strategy is still useful for Beijing to pressure Taiwan's leadership in a practical way that can affect Taiwan's society and defense capability even though it has, thus far, had limited returns in terms of political and diplomatic outcomes.

Implications of Chinese Large-scale Military Exercises

The ineffectiveness of military exercises to coerce Taiwan's leadership into adjusting its behaviors toward the international community may explain why Beijing has stopped announcing these exercises. Instead of publicizing military exercises in response to specific actions or statements made by Taiwan's leadership, China now utilizes the opportunity to practice its military drills in silence. This shift allows Beijing to catch Taiwan off guard and reduce its readiness. By moving away from explicit coercion, Beijing adopts a more implicit approach to perform military exercises and actions that effectively impact Taiwan's defense policy.

Based on the pattern of Chinese military exercises around Taiwan and the style of President Lai's speeches, more military exercises around Taiwan are to be expected. Since Joint Sword – 2024A and Joint Sword – 2024B were conducted without forewarning, Beijing seems to be setting a new norm. Without providing forewarning and finishing time, Beijing aims to normalize its military actions around Taiwan and decrease Taiwan's alertness

by doing it constantly. This trend might create more tension in the Taiwan Strait, which could increase the possibility of accidental conflict. For instance, the cross-strait hotline established at the end of 2015 allegedly exists in name only. If there is any misunderstanding between the two sides, the possibility of calming the situation through communication is low. The outcome could endanger Taiwan's security and destabilize regional security.

Frequent Chinese military actions could lead to people getting familiar with the same and Taiwan could thus be caught off-guard. How to avoid unnecessary strife while maintaining citizens' awareness of potential cross-strait conflict is an urgent issue that the Taiwanese government should explore. If civil society is unaware of related risks, it would offer Beijing more space to divide Taiwan's national defense capacity.

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