

China's military intimidation of Taiwan: a breaking from the geopolitical status quo?

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ABSTRACT :

Reacting to the visit to Taipei of Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the House of Representatives of the United States Congress (August 2, 2022), China launched the following week major military exercises in six maritime areas surrounding the island of Taiwan. The means used were unprecedented: 15 Chinese ships, 60 fighter planes daily flying through the Taiwan Strait, and 11 Dongfeng-type ballistic missiles fired, some of which flew over Taiwan. While Beijing has always claimed that Taiwan is an integral part of China and that its reunification is inevitable, the Chinese government has repeatedly increased its military intimidation of Taipei.

From a Chinese perspective, the exercises also served a political purpose by showing the US that the cost of intervention in Taiwan would be extremely high. Beijing's ultimate goal could be to break the current geopolitical status quo and establish a new strategic reality to undermine US-Taipei's inclination for defense efforts, making a large-scale Chinese invasion attainable.

To cope with this challenge, Taiwan is banking on a strengthened coastal defense to establish Anti-Access/Area Denial capabilities (A2/AD) along its coastline. The issue for the United States is the ability to rapidly deploy a sufficient mass of weapons and/or reinforcements. This new crisis will certainly boost the rearmament of Japan, which itself is increasingly concerned about Chinese threats to the Senkaku Islands.

The visit to Taipei on August 2, 2022, by Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the US House of Representatives, has triggered Beijing's ire towards Washington and Taiwan.

A NEW TAIWAN CRISIS AMID RENEWED MILITARY INTIMIDATION

The Chinese regime, which had previously threatened to react strongly to any visit to Taiwan of a US political authority¹, first flexed its muscles by deploying 21 combat aircraft in the Taiwanese ADIZ² right when the official US plane was landing in Taipei. The Chinese Ministry of Defense later announced major live-fire military exercises, starting on August 4, 2022, in six maritime areas surrounding Taiwan. The drills aimed to "resolutely defend national sovereignty and territorial integrity and thwart external interference and separatist efforts for Taiwan's independence"³. The daily *Global Times*, closely linked to the Chinese government, even indicated that it would serve as a rehearsal for a reunification of the island by force, thus being a *de facto* simulation of a blockade and invasion of Taiwan.

Given the upcoming 20th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, and Xi Jinping's wish to see his mandate renewed⁴, a strong Chinese reaction was expected. However, these exercises are the largest since the last major crisis in the Taiwan Strait in 1996. It is clearly a display of force to browbeat the people of Taiwan and to demonstrate to the international community the power of the new Chinese army and its willingness to use all its force to reunify the island with the mainland, should it be necessary.

These drills are indeed unprecedented in terms of the means involved. Both Chinese aircraft carriers, the *Liaoning* and the *Shandong*, which left their base ports on July 31, 2022, were involved to demonstrate globally China's mastery of naval aviation capability. They were flanked by a Type 75 amphibious assault ship, at least one Type 55 cruiser and several Type 54 frigates⁵, some of which crossed the median line⁶ with Taiwan on August 5, 2022. About 15 Chinese ships and 60 fighter planes have been operating in the Taiwan Strait every day, deliberately crossing the median line on several occasions. The Chinese have also activated some civilian ferries that could serve as a backup force for an invasion of the island, in addition to an amphibious force deployed off the coast of Fujian⁷, showing that the 160 km of strait may no longer be insurmountable for a Chinese invading force. Most importantly, on August 4, 2022, China fired 11 Dongfeng-type ballistic missiles, some of which flew over the island of Taiwan before crashing into Japan's EEZ⁸ to the east of the island, as a demonstration of China's precision strike and denial of access capabilities. Hypersonic DF-17 ballistic missiles were also allegedly deployed by China on its territory facing Taiwan⁹. Intrusions into Taiwan's ADIZ finally reached all-time highs with 68 Chinese aircraft detected on August 5, of which 49 crossed the median line¹⁰. The six exercise zones set up around Taiwan closed off some access to the island, with some naval maneuvers taking place as close as 20 km from the Taiwanese coast¹¹, and some of the restricted areas even encroaching on the island's territorial waters¹² or extending into Japan's EEZ, sparking

¹ The last one dates back to 1997 with the visit of Newt Gringrich, then Speaker of the House of Representatives.

² Air Defense Identification Zone

³ Chinese army spokesperson, *Opex360*, 03/08/2022.

⁴ *Le Figaro*, 03/08/2022

⁵ *Opex360*, 02/09/2022

⁶ The median line is the informal demarcation line between the two countries. Beijing, which does not recognize Taiwan's independence, does not acknowledge this line.

⁷ *Naval news*, 04/08/2022.

⁸ Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)

⁹ *Defence blog*, 04/08/2022

¹⁰ *Reuters*, 02/08/2022; The previous 'record' detected of Chinese aircraft entering China's ADIZ occurred in October 2021 with 56 aircraft. *The Aviationist*, 06/08/2022.

¹¹ According to the Taiwanese government, Chinese military vessels had never come so close to the Taiwanese coast.

¹² According to the spokesperson of the Taiwanese Ministry of Defence.

concern in Tokyo¹³. These large-scale exercises raised fears of a mock blockade, forcing Taiwan to interrupt commercial flights and ship traffic to its ports¹⁴. It also raised the possibility of major tensions in the semiconductor market, of which Taiwan is the main global supplier. Alongside this military pressure, Beijing has also publicly announced economic pressure on the island¹⁵ to warn of the high price that will be paid should the islanders remain supportive of independence, ahead of Taiwan's next presidential election in 2024.

CHINA'S READINESS TO GRADUALLY BREAK THE STATUS QUO AROUND TAIWAN

China has always asserted that Taiwan is an integral part of one (single) China and that reunification is inevitable. Accordingly, Beijing has long sought to isolate Taiwan diplomatically and neutralize its armed forces, with recurrent illustrations of the increasingly uneven balance of power at Taipei's expense. In recent years, China has upgraded and extended its forces positioned opposite the Taiwan Strait on the mainland. Naval drills have intensified, while the Chinese air force has increasingly carried out long-range raids around the island. China also underlined that the Taiwan Strait was an integral part of China's territorial waters. It has regularly condemned any Western ship passage through the Strait and has permanently deployed ships there. This steady and mounting pressure¹⁶ aimed to demonstrate China's projection capabilities, while the increasingly unfavorable balance of power vis-à-vis Taipei is expected to undermine the robustness of the American-Taiwanese alliance. The latest Chinese military exercises were part of this development. They were intended to demonstrate that a military blockade of the island was achievable by breaking the status quo and consequently invalidate¹⁷ the median line, in a move that would make access to Taiwan potentially harder and riskier for the United States.

For Beijing, these exercises were therefore politically motivated, aiming to bring the United States out of its strategic ambiguity regarding Taiwan. If Nancy Pelosi's visit was an excuse for such military maneuvers, in line with Beijing's threats, the Ukrainian crisis was a very timely opportunity to test US-Taiwanese reactions, at a time when the American reassurance was again being questioned in Taipei¹⁸. Indeed, China seems to have been monitoring closely the US reaction to the Ukrainian crisis to draw lessons for itself. Washington has avoided frontal intervention against Russia, instead opting for massive support in arms and equipment and attempting to mitigate the risks of escalation and co-belligerency towards Moscow, a situation that bears some similarities to the Taiwanese case. The absence of Western ships in the Black Sea since the beginning of the conflict has been perfectly well understood by Beijing, which wishes to draw upon this experience for the Taiwan Strait.

While the United States is bound to support Taiwan through the Taiwan Relations Act¹⁹ passed by Congress in 1979 following the recognition of the People's Republic of China, the precise details of its implementation have never been specified. China likely intended the summer's military maneuvers to show Washington that the cost of US intervention would be extremely high, thereby rendering the

¹³ China, in this movement, could seek the neutrality of Japan (which hosts several American bases) in the Taiwanese question... For its part, Tokyo increasingly fears a combined Chinese offensive on Taiwan and the Senkaku Islands should an open war break out.

¹⁴ Taiwan's Maritime and Port Bureau has warned ships passing through the area and several international airlines have indicated that they have changed their flights to avoid the airspace around the island. *Le Figaro*, 05/08/2022.

¹⁵ Ban on the import of Taiwanese food and agricultural products, ban on the export of silicon sand, the key to Taiwan's electronics industry.

¹⁶ For illustration, while 380 incursions of Chinese military aircraft into Taiwan's ADIZ were recorded in 2020, by 2021 there were 950, a figure that is continually rising. *Le Figaro*, 25/08/2022.

¹⁷ This Chinese strategy aims to saturate Taipei's capacities and thus facilitate the exercise of a blockade. *Reuters*, 26/08/2022.

¹⁸ In Taiwan's public opinion, confidence in a US intervention to counter a Chinese invasion stood at 34.5% in March 2022, after the outbreak of hostilities in Ukraine, while it was 65% in November 2021. *Areion news*, 11/07/2022.

¹⁹ The Taiwan Relations Act does not guarantee US military intervention on Taiwan's behalf if it is attacked by China, but states that 'the United States will make available to Taiwan the necessary defense assets and services to enable it to maintain sufficient self-defense capability. *Le Figaro*, 05/08/2022.

Taiwan Relations Act insignificant. Beijing's pressure on both Taipei and Washington could also be aimed at undermining regional alliances²⁰ under the aegis of the US, build-up to contain China in the Western Pacific, and turn them into an ineffective tool. The expansion of such alliances would therefore be in crisis, as the US Indo-Pacific strategy.

Aware of the escalation and political risks posed by Beijing, the US is still waiting and does not want to change the status quo, even if Nancy Pelosi reiterated that "the United States will not allow China to isolate Taiwan"²¹. Militarily, the American naval force has not been reinforced, with only four American ships deployed in eastern Taiwan on routine operations²², including the aircraft carrier *Ronald Reagan* and the amphibious ship *Tripoli*. In 1997, the deployment of two American air groups put an end to China's military pressure on the island, but today Washington does not seem to want to confront the Chinese challenge, which will require greater resources. The US determination to pursue military ship transits in the Taiwan Strait was nevertheless recalled²³ and further validates the US strategy of the status quo. Moreover, two American Ticonderoga-class cruisers passed through the Taiwan Strait on August 28, 2022, to signify the US dedication to the freedom of navigation and its doctrine of a "free and open Indo-Pacific"²⁴.

Yet this crisis and the military pressure from Beijing are likely to continue, as the island is vital both for Beijing's maritime projects²⁵ and for the survival of its One China policy. Moreover, during the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2022, General Wei Fenghe, China's representative, threatened: "If anyone tries to separate Taiwan from China, the Chinese army will not hesitate to start a war, at any cost"²⁶. China's Army has already announced that exercises in the Strait will be more regularly conducted. According to some academics close to Chinese military circles, China's strategy is indeed to nullify the median line and to prevent any foreign intervention through a blockade of the Bashi Strait²⁷, south of Taiwan. Gradually increasing pressures should reach a point where American and Taiwanese wills for defense efforts will simply vanish, allowing for a large-scale offensive²⁸. And indeed, this pressure does not abate, as witnessed by the crossing of the median line by 25 Chinese fighter planes on 18 August 2022, with six Chinese naval vessels still on patrol around the island²⁹, or the violations of the airspace of the Kinmen Islands by Chinese drones³⁰. The Taiwanese army is preparing for this scenario and has launched a series of anti-boarding exercises, notably in the extreme south of the island. Those efforts will also be intensified in the coming months³¹. Above all, Taipei decided to increase the Armed forces' budget by nearly 14% for the coming year, with an additional line of credit dedicated to the acquisition of modernized fighter planes³². These new aircraft will allow Taiwanese pilots to better face the repetitive harassment of Chinese aircraft that is now progressively wearing down the capabilities of the Taiwanese air force.

²⁰ AUKUS (Australia UK, USA), Quad (USA, Japan, Australia, India).

²¹ *Les Echos*, 04/08/2022.

²² *Reuters*, 02/08/2022.

²³ *Washington Times*, 09/08/2022. US military transits through the Taiwan Strait have been on a monthly average since 2018.

²⁴ *USNI*, 29/08/2022.

²⁵ Taiwan prevents China from having direct access to the Pacific, a vital space both for the deployment of its naval forces and nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (from their base in Hainan) and for access to the world ocean.

²⁶ *Le Figaro*, 05/08/2022.

²⁷ Located between Taiwan and the Philippines, this strait is considered strategic by Beijing because of the access it provides to the Pacific. *Washington Post*, 10/08/2022.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Naval Technology*, 19/08/2022.

³⁰ A Chinese drone was even shot down by Taiwanese air defence in late August in this area. *The Independent*, 01/09/2022.

³¹ *Opex 360*, 08/08/2022

³² *Le Figaro*, 25/08/2022.

THE NEED TO ADAPT DEFENCE CAPABILITIES TO THE NEW CHINESE REALITY

Facing the increasing possibility of conflict in the Taiwan Strait, the island has been aware for a long time that it needs to modernize its forces to be of greater lethality in the face of a Chinese invasion force. In 2014, Taiwan initiated a naval modernization plan, envisioning the local production of four destroyers, 12 frigates and eight submarines as replacements for its ageing fleet. The navy developed new operational concepts, including the conduct of fast raids on enemy vessels nearby Taiwanese waters. The Taiwanese navy has therefore commissioned the first units of a program of 10 to 12 fast, heavily armed and furtive corvettes (each armed with 16 anti-ship missiles) to be able to engage Chinese amphibious and/or naval air forces. Taiwan is also planning to acquire some 20 mine layers (250 tons) as part of a denial of access strategy.

Its submarine fleet is in a very critical state. Taiwan announced its intention to build six submarines (Hai Lung II program), to be delivered between 2025 and 2030. The United States has agreed to transfer technology to Taiwan, thus demonstrating its support for the island's autonomous defense, under the Taiwan Relations Act. Taipei has ordered four amphibious ships to ensure that the navy can defend or even recapture threatened Taiwanese islets, both those bordering the South China Sea (Taiping Dao, 1,500 km from the main island) and those closer to the mainland (Kinmen, Matsu, Penghu archipelago). According to the current Taiwanese operational doctrine³³, these naval assets must be capable of inflicting significant damage on any Chinese amphibious operation on the island, thus giving the US Navy time to pool its forces to break the Chinese blockade and re-establish naval air superiority in the area. In this context, the densification of coastal defense, to establish a denial of coastal access, becomes imperative. Since the Chinese exercises in the summer, the Taiwanese air force has increased its training in anti-ship missions.

For the USA, both mass and speed of deployment are becoming paramount in this type of conflict, illustrating the relevance of dual and even tri-carrier operations concepts that will be implemented from eastern Taiwan. In addition, the massive use of submarines in the Taiwan Strait to cause sufficient attrition to the Chinese invasion force will probably be favored. The use of UAV swarms against an invading Chinese force is also being increasingly explored as a means of countering a power balance that is increasingly disadvantageous to the Taiwanese army³⁴. American material support for Taiwanese forces should also increase in the coming months. Moreover, Washington announced on September 2 a new series of arms sales to Taiwan amounting to 1.1 billion dollars, comprising 60 Harpoon anti-ship missiles, 100 air-to-air missiles and the maintenance of the island's radar detection systems³⁵.

As for Japan, it has decided to increase its counter-attack capabilities by seeking to extend the range of some of its anti-ship missiles³⁶ to 1,000 km or even 1,500 km off the Chinese coast. This new decision is part of Japan's extensive naval rearmament drive. Indeed, Japan has also noted an intensification of Chinese and Russian military activity in its vicinity in recent years³⁷, Tokyo has undertaken since 2016 a vast effort to modernize its forces with a program to build 19 long-ranged attack submarines, 22 modern multifunctional frigates and the purchase of 138 F-35 type aircraft. In

³³ Porcupine Strategy or Overall Defense Concept.

³⁴ According to several wargames conducted in the United States, American forces would have only 7 to 10 days to counter a Chinese invasion. After that time, they would be forced to submit to the Chinese fait accompli unless they accepted very significant losses (a naval air group, several hundred aircraft, more than a dozen first rank ships destroyed in the fighting). *Asia Times*, 23/05/2022 and *Military Times*, 12/08/2022.

³⁵ *Le Figaro*, 02/09/2022.

³⁶ Type 12 missiles, which came into service in 2015, are used for coastal defense, especially in southern Japan. Eventually, Japanese naval vessels and F-15J aircraft could also use them. *Opex 360*, 21/08/2022.

³⁷ In June 2022, several Chinese and Russian ships were detected around the archipelago, while Chinese and Russian long-range flights are increasing in the area.

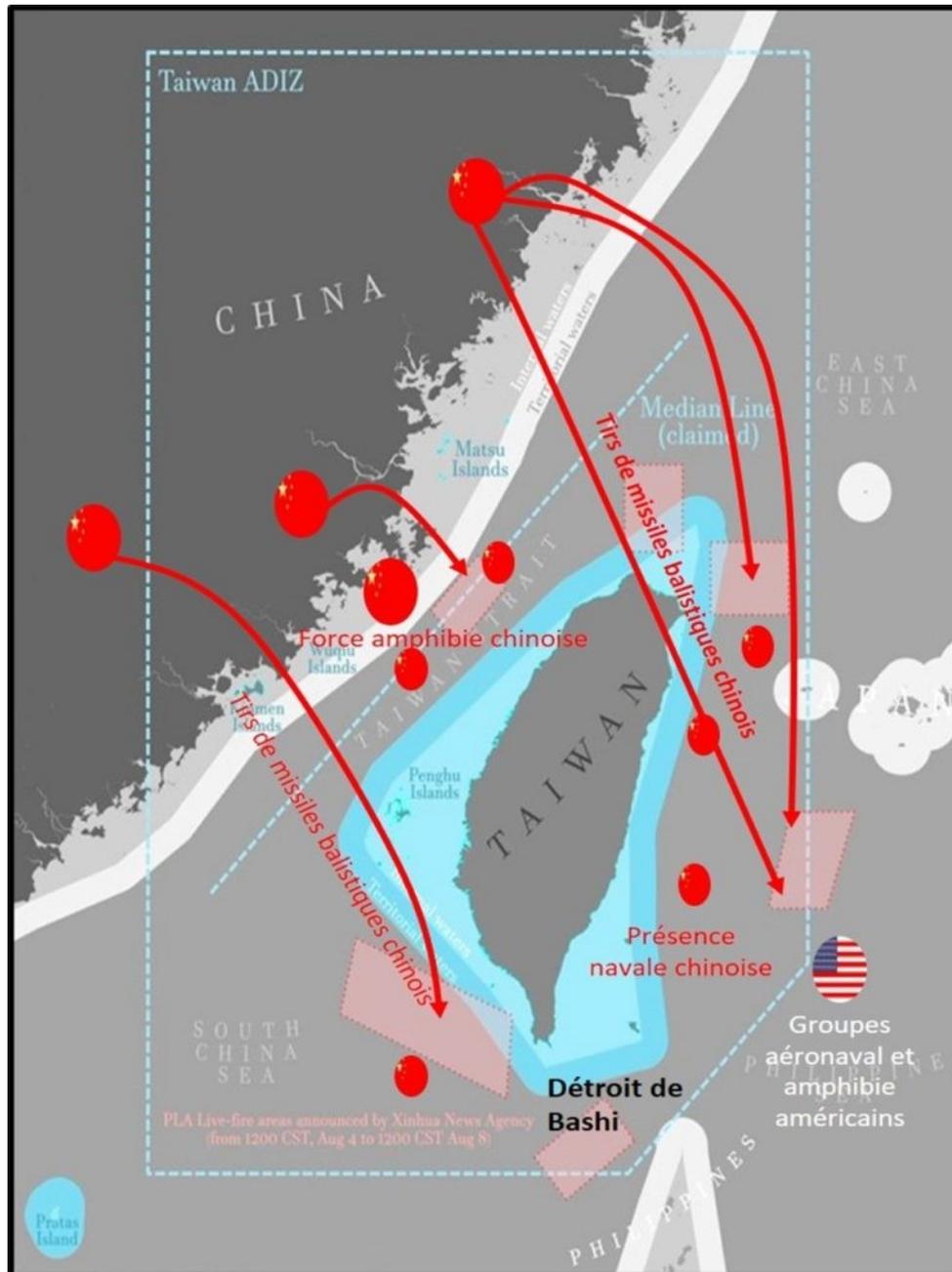
addition, a special effort has been made in the field of anti-ship warfare³⁸. This rearmament, like the transformation of the Izumo aircraft carriers into ships capable of carrying F-35 aircraft, is likely to accelerate following this new Taiwanese crisis. Moreover, the ruling party would like to double the Japanese defense budget from 1 to 2% of GDP in the coming years, which will confirm Tokyo's position as an unfailing and stalwart ally of Washington and the other Quad countries. The Chinese threat in the West Pacific, instead of weakening existing alliances, may instead lead to their consolidation, as is the case in Europe with the renewed vitality of NATO following Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.

The strategy tested by China against Taiwan in the summer of 2022 could quickly impose the scenario of a *fait accompli* that would be difficult to reverse internationally should an open conflict erupt. The necessary responses rely on rapid reaction, which must necessarily be massive, on coastal anti-ship missile batteries and on drones, used both for targeting and for the saturation of adversary defenses. This crisis in the Pacific will contribute to the accelerating rearmament efforts among the countries of the region and will certainly amplify the demands of American military personnel for an even more substantial increase in their assets in the Indo-Pacific, most probably at the expense of the European theatre, whose defense of contested areas will have to rely more on European capabilities in the future.

³⁸ Japanese willingness to procure LRASM (Long Range Anti Ship Missile) missiles from Washington in order to be able to strike and stand off any Chinese invasion force towards the Senkaku Islands. Ibid.

MAP : China's military intimidation of Taiwan (summer 2022)

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