

COALITION DEFENSE OF TAIWAN

Exploring a PRC Short-of-War Coercion Campaign to Seize Taiwan's Kinmen Islands and Possible Responses

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Key Takeaways

- The People's Republic of China (PRC) began aggressively challenging Taiwan's jurisdiction over its outlying islands, especially Kinmen, in February 2024. Repeated Chinese Coast Guard incursions in Taiwan-controlled waters around Kinmen aim to normalize the PRC's "law enforcement" jurisdiction in the area.
- The PRC can escalate current lines of effort (LOEs) to erode Taiwan's sovereignty over its outlying territory of Kinmen in a short-of-war coercion campaign to seize control of the island group in the near term.
- The PRC can escalate coast guard activities to initiate a quarantine around Kinmen that denies passage to Taiwanese government ships and economically squeezes the islands. The PRC can enhance Kinmen's isolation by imposing a no-fly zone and sabotaging communication infrastructure, before finally coercing Kinmen to demilitarize under PRC oversight.
- US unpreparedness or unwillingness to intervene amid domestic and international distractions increases the likelihood of this scenario. Trends in Taiwan's domestic politics that diminish the PRC's confidence in its ability to achieve "peaceful reunification" also contribute to the likelihood of such a coercion campaign.

- PRC efforts to seize Kinmen will strike at Taiwan’s political will to resist "unification." A successful incorporation of Kinmen by the PRC would significantly diminish Taiwan’s faith in the United States’ will to come to Taiwan’s aid and its own ability to defend itself.
- The United States, Taiwan, and their partners must prepare for the possibility of PRC short-of-war coercion against Taiwan’s outlying islands by “pre-bunking” CCP propaganda narratives that justify such a campaign, strengthening the resilience of communication infrastructure in Taiwan’s outlying territories, and bolstering Taiwan’s maritime law enforcement around the islands.
- The United States and partners should respond to PRC efforts to seize control of Kinmen by maximizing the economic and reputational costs for the PRC, thwarting the quarantine and communication blockade of Kinmen, and communicating its will to strengthen US defense commitment to Taiwan as a consequence of PRC aggression.
- The United States should respond to a successful PRC seizure of Kinmen by significantly increasing its troop deployments and arms sales to Taiwan, coordinating joint coast guard patrols with Taiwan and other partners, and amending relevant laws to help protect Taiwan’s outlying islands from further coercion.

Introduction

The archipelagos of Kinmen and Matsu are uniquely vulnerable among Taiwan’s territories. Both island groups are located over 100 miles from the main island of Taiwan but just off the PRC’s coast: the westernmost of the Matsu islands is around six miles from the PRC, while Kinmen’s main island is as close as two miles from the PRC city of Xiamen. The islands have remained under Republic of China (ROC) control since the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) under Mao Zedong failed to conquer them at the end of the Chinese Civil War. Kinmen and Matsu remained the primary arenas of PRC–ROC armed conflict from 1955 to 1979. The PRC heavily bombed Kinmen and Matsu during the Taiwan Strait Crises of 1955 and 1958, and both sides intermittently exchanged volleys of both lethal and nonlethal artillery fire until the United States normalized relations with the PRC in 1979.

The PRC continues to claim the islands as its own, as it does with all ROC territories. Its approach to these islands looks very different today, however. The PRC of Xi Jinping is an aspiring superpower whose development is deeply integrated with the global economy; it is far more cautious about military conflict than was the isolated and fanatical regime of Mao Zedong. Beijing’s contemporary efforts to annex Kinmen and Matsu blend economic enticements, nonviolent coercion, legal warfare, information operations, infrastructure construction, and miscellaneous “gray zone” lines of effort to manipulate public opinion on the islands and erode Taiwan’s control of its territories. These efforts are sophisticated and long-term in outlook. They show a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) willing to wait patiently to achieve its goals, but nonetheless making gains that are difficult for Taiwan to reverse.

Taiwan’s presidential election in January 2024 precipitated an escalation of the PRC’s efforts against Taiwan’s outer islands — particularly Kinmen. Although these efforts are still far less dramatic than the bombardments of the 1950s, they may yet prove to be more effective. This paper will lay out the PRC’s lines of effort against Kinmen and Matsu since January 2024 and present a scenario in which an

extension of such efforts may evolve into a short-of-war campaign to seize Kinmen within the next six months.

Background

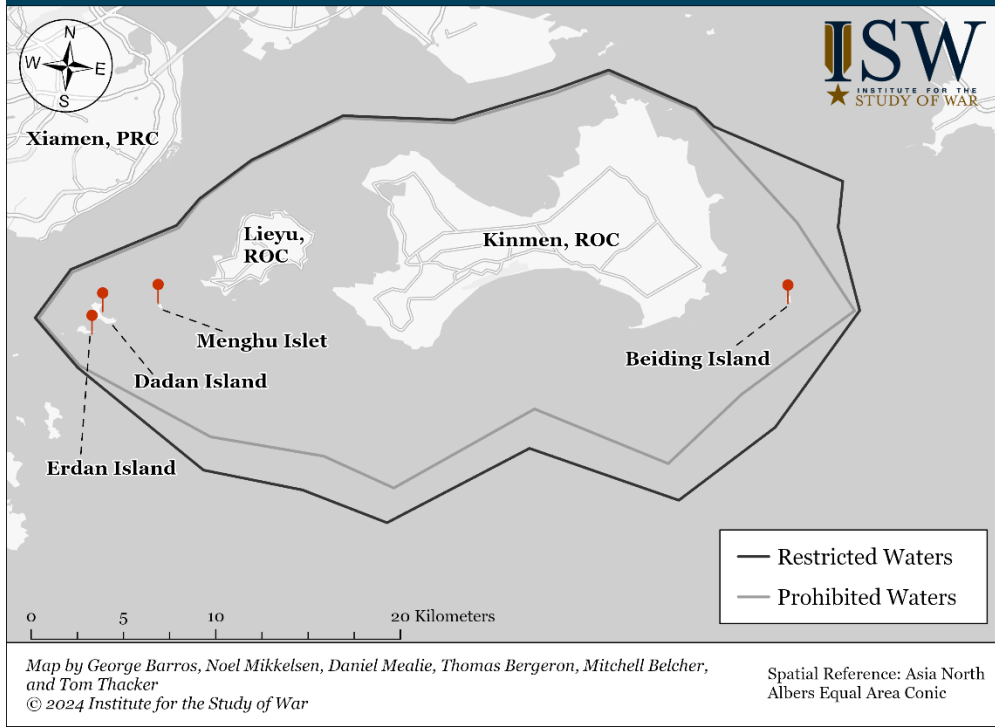
In January 2024, the Republic of China (Taiwan) held a pivotal presidential election. William Lai Ching-te of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) won a contentious three-way race with 41% of the vote, defeating opponents from the Kuomintang (KMT) and Taiwan People's Party (TPP). Lai, who was the incumbent vice president under then-president Tsai Ing-wen, thus delivered an unprecedented third consecutive term to the DPP despite far-reaching PRC efforts to influence Taiwan's elections. On the other hand, the DPP lost its majority in the legislature for the first time since 2016. While no party gained an absolute majority in the 113-member Legislative Yuan (LY), the KMT and TPP collectively won enough seats to give the opposition a legislative majority. Lai thus faces a divided government.

The PRC was deeply unhappy with Lai Ching-te's presidential victory. The CCP accuses Lai and the DPP of separatism aimed at declaring Taiwan's formal independence from China. The CCP severed official communications with the DPP government of Taiwan in 2016 on this pretense. [1] After Lai won the election, the PRC began a campaign of pressure or "punishment" of Taiwan and the DPP. It convinced Nauru, then one of Taiwan's last remaining diplomatic allies, to re-establish relations with Beijing and cut ties with Taiwan two days after Lai's victory.[2] It imposed tariffs on key Taiwanese industries.[3] It escalated People's Liberation Army (PLA) air incursions into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) each month, reaching nearly unprecedented numbers by July.[4] It welcomed former Taiwan president Ma Ying-jeou and sitting legislators from his party, the KMT, to Beijing in an effort to legitimize the DPP's opposition as a negotiating partner on Taiwan's behalf.[5] It carried out a massive military exercise around Taiwan days after Lai took office.[6] And perhaps most significantly, it launched new efforts to erode Taiwan's control over its outlying islands.

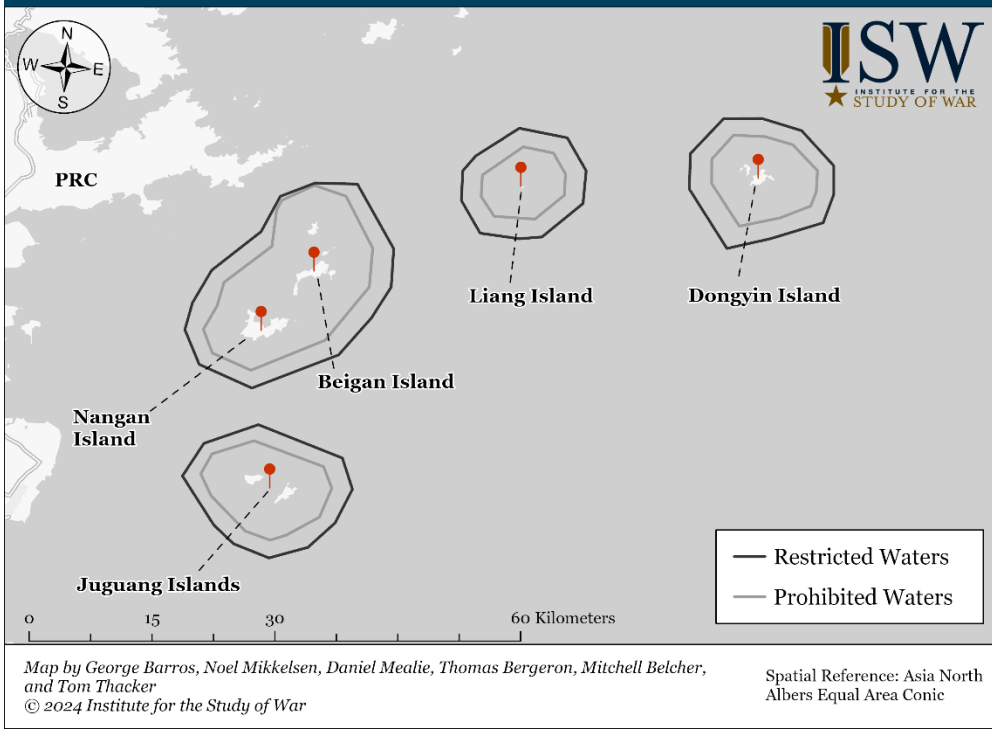
The cornerstone of Beijing's coercion campaign against Taiwan's outlying islands involves the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) making incursions into Taiwan-controlled waters to conduct "law enforcement" patrols. Taiwan conceded its claim to territorial waters around Kinmen and Matsu in 2009, largely due to those island groups' proximity to the PRC.[7] It instead claims concentric maritime boundaries of "prohibited" and "restricted" waters around the islands. Taiwan's "prohibited waters" are functionally equivalent to territorial waters, which means that Taiwan exercises the right to restrict some transit and enforce its laws as it does in sovereign waters. "Restricted waters" are functionally equivalent to a contiguous zone, an area of sea extending past territorial waters in which a country may exercise the control necessary to enforce its laws.[8]

The PRC claims all of Taiwan and its associated waters as PRC territory. It had largely respected Taiwan's de facto jurisdiction in waters around Kinmen and Matsu before 2024, however, and has cooperated with Taiwan on law enforcement.[9] In February 2024, following a tragic incident that killed two PRC fishermen in prohibited waters around Kinmen, the PRC explicitly denied the existence of any Taiwanese "prohibited and restricted waters." Beijing began asserting its right to conduct law enforcement patrols in these waters at will. Without the protective "bubbles" of their maritime boundaries, the Kinmen and Matsu islands are located entirely within the PRC's internationally recognized territorial waters. The PRC wishes to integrate them fully. It has pursued a range of law enforcement, military, economic, legal, and other means to accomplish this end.

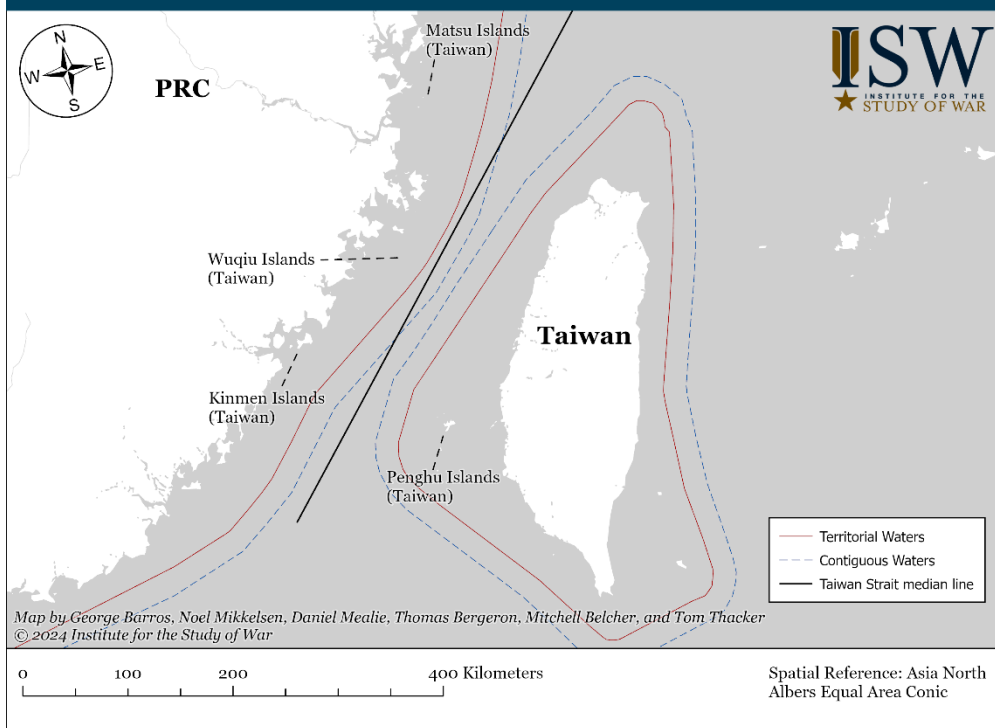
Restricted and Prohibited Waters around Taiwan's Kinmen Islands



Restricted and Prohibited Waters around Taiwan's Matsu Islands



PRC and ROC Maritime Boundaries in the Taiwan Strait



Line of Effort (LOE): Maritime incursions

On February 14, 2024, a vessel of Taiwan's Coast Guard Administration (CGA) discovered an unnamed and unregistered PRC motorboat illegally fishing within Taiwan's prohibited waters near the Kinmen Islands. The CGA vessel attempted to detain the fishing boat, but the boat refused to pull over and instead fled to escape custody. The boats engaged in a high-speed chase that ended in a collision. The Chinese motorboat capsized, and two of its four crew members drowned. The CGA took custody of the fishermen and their boat. It released the surviving fishermen on February 21.^[10] The PRC accused the CGA of malicious or "vicious" behavior in the aftermath of the incident. In a lengthy series of negotiations on Kinmen that lasted until March 6, semi-official PRC representatives demanded that Taiwan return the boat and bodies of the deceased to the PRC, provide a full explanation and apology for the incident, and give compensation for the families of the victims. The negotiations collapsed without a resolution as the two sides were unable to come to a consensus. The CGA said the PRC side "insisted on making demands that did not comply with [Taiwan's] legal system."^[11] The negotiations resumed on July 30 and ended with an undisclosed agreement. Taiwan returned the boat and bodies and paid compensation to the families but did not admit fault in the collision.^[12]

The February 14 capsizing incident was the trigger event for an organized and ongoing PRC effort, led by the CCG, to contest Taiwan's control of the waters around Kinmen and other outlying Taiwanese islands. A statement from the PRC's Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) on February 17 accused Taiwan of "brutal" behavior toward PRC fishermen and publicly denied the existence of any "restricted or prohibited waters" around Kinmen.^[13]

The CCG announced on February 18 that it would begin regular patrols and inspections in the waters near Kinmen and Xiamen, a major PRC port city near Kinmen.^[14] On February 20, a CCG maritime surveillance ship crossed the maritime boundary into Kinmen's restricted waters for the first time.^[15]

Since February, the CCG has normalized patrols in the waters around Kinmen and made deliberate incursions into Kinmen's restricted or prohibited waters as part of what it calls regular "law enforcement patrols." Neither the CCG nor Taiwan's CGA has publicized the date and details of every one of these incursions, but the CGA said that an incursion on July 19 was the 32nd of such in 2024. A CGA press conference in June said that the CCG intruded into Kinmen's restricted or prohibited waters an average of five times per month since February and maintained a constant presence in PRC waters around Kinmen every day of June up to June 14.^[16]

Most of the publicized incursions have involved four CCG vessels entering Kinmen's restricted waters simultaneously and leaving after one or two hours. These patrols sailed into Kinmen's prohibited waters at least six separate times, including at least four times in May. The CCG has occasionally announced its patrols around Kinmen and even published maps of its patrol routes on March 15 and May 3, both of which passed through prohibited waters. The PRC state-run social media account Yuyuan Tiantian, which is affiliated with state broadcaster CCTV, claimed on May 12 that the CCG patrols have eliminated any notion of "restricted and prohibited waters" around Kinmen in practice and that the "Kinmen model" could eventually be applied to the entire Taiwan Strait. Another post by Yuyuan Tiantian on June 26 quoted a scholar from the state-run Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) who framed that the "Kinmen model" of maritime law enforcement as a successful example of promoting the "one country, two systems" scheme of integrating Taiwan with the PRC and said that it could "provide an alternative plan for completely resolving the Taiwan issue and achieving cross-strait reunification in the future." The post also said the CCG has expanded the scope, timing, and intensity of its "law enforcement" around Kinmen since February 2024. It has increased the frequency of patrols, moved to "round-the-clock" CCG presence around Kinmen, and shifted from fixed-route patrols in formation to "law enforcement areas" which individual CCG ships can patrol freely "at any time."^[17]

Most but not all of the PRC's incursions in the maritime boundaries of Taiwan's outlying islands were carried out by the CCG and focused on Kinmen. There are several exceptions, however. PRC fisheries vessels joined CCG incursions into Kinmen's waters on May 9 as part of a "search and rescue" drill. The incursion also featured the largest number of PRC official ships to violate Kinmen's maritime boundaries at once, including four CCG ships that entered Kinmen's prohibited waters on that day. On May 23 and 24, CCG ships sailed through the restricted waters around the Taiwanese islands of Wuqiu and Dongyin. Dongyin is part of the Matsu archipelago, while Wuqiu is a small island group administered as part of Kinmen County but located 133 kilometers northeast of Kinmen. These incursions two days in a row were part of the PRC's two-day Joint Sword-2024A military exercise around Taiwan. The Joint Sword exercise included military drills in nine locations including around Wuqiu, Dongyin, Kinmen, and the core Matsu islands in coordination with the CCG. On May 29, two PLA supply ships with the structures of amphibious landing craft entered Kinmen's restricted waters. There is also at least one unconfirmed report of a PRC Maritime Safety Administration (MSA) ship sailing as close as 0.2 nautical miles north of Kinmen through prohibited waters on March 19.^[18]

CCG and PRC activities around Taiwan's outlying islands spiked in May in the lead-up and aftermath of Lai Ching-te's inauguration as president of Taiwan on May 20. Including the two days of incursions around Wuqiu and Dongyin during the Joint Sword exercise, CCG, PLA, and other entities carried out at least 11 incursions into Taiwan's restricted and prohibited waters in May: around one third of all reported incursions to date. The CCP considers Lai and his political party, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), to be dangerous separatists and has stated an intent to "punish" Lai for what it interprets as pushing Taiwanese independence. Besides incursions into Taiwan-controlled waters, the CCG has also notably expanded the scope and frequency of its operations in international waters around Taiwan, including east of the Taiwan Strait median line near Taiwan's Penghu Islands and east of the main island of Taiwan.

LOE: Law enforcement actions against Taiwanese vessels

The CCG thus far has not attempted direct law enforcement action against Taiwanese vessels during its patrols into Kinmen's restricted and prohibited waters. Nevertheless, there have been three instances of direct CCG action against Taiwanese nationals in waters around Kinmen since the February 14 capsizing incident. All three instances represent rare or historically unprecedented escalations of PRC law enforcement against Taiwan.

On February 19, days after the capsizing incident, the CCG boarded and inspected a Taiwanese sightseeing boat for 30 minutes after the boat veered into PRC waters to avoid some shoals in the area. The CGA noted that tourist boats from the PRC often cross maritime boundaries into Kinmen's waters, but the CGA assumes good faith and has never inspected the PRC boats.^[19]

On March 18, the CCG rescued two fishermen from Kinmen whose boat ran out of fuel and drifted into PRC waters. It released one of the fishermen days later but continued to detain the second fisherman after discovering that he was an active-duty non-commissioned officer of the Kinmen Defense Command. PRC authorities accused the fisherman, surnamed Hu, of lying about his identity. Hu remained in PRC custody for nearly five months before being released on August 7, shortly after Taiwan and the PRC reached an agreement over the February 14 capsizing incident.^[20]

On July 2, the CCG detained a Taiwanese fishing boat, the *Da Jin Man 88*, for illegally fishing in PRC waters northeast of Kinmen during a PRC fishing moratorium. CCG vessels rebuffed CGA ships attempting to rescue the Taiwanese boat. The CCG escorted the boat to the port of Quanzhou and detained its crew there for over a month. The PRC released four of the boat's crew members on August 13, a week after releasing the fisherman Hu, but continues to hold the boat's captain and the boat itself for further investigation.^[21] The incident was the first time the PRC had detained a Taiwanese vessel in 17 years. It is common for Taiwanese and PRC fishermen to fish in each other's waters, sometimes illegally, but the two coast guards usually expel such vessels rather than detaining them. Taiwanese media reported that the CCG became more aggressive in expelling Taiwanese boats fishing in PRC waters since it detained the *Da Jin Man 88*.^[22] At least one Taiwanese fisherman claimed that his fellow fishermen have become much more afraid of fishing near the PRC coast or around Kinmen since July 2.^[23]

These are the only three instances of the PRC boarding or detaining Taiwanese vessels in the last six months. The boarding of the Taiwanese sightseeing boat on February 19 was very likely a direct

retaliation for the deaths of the two PRC fishermen in the February 14 capsizing incident. Hu's detention may have been connected to the February 14 incident as well. It occurred shortly after the bilateral negotiations about the incident collapsed in early March; the PRC ultimately released Hu a week after Taiwan agreed to return the bodies of the PRC fishermen on July 30. The detention and release of the *Da Jin Man 88* crew occurred in the weeks immediately before and after the July 30 negotiations, respectively, which suggests the detention of that boat may also have been related to the PRC securing its objectives in those talks. The small number of such incidents and their connection to a specific PRC grievance that has now been resolved suggests that direct action against Taiwanese vessels, besides warning and expulsion, is not currently a major component of the PRC's coercive efforts against Taiwan. Even a small number of CCG actions against Taiwanese boats can still have a deterrent effect, however.

The CCG has also increased its activities east of the median line in the Taiwan Strait near Taiwan's Penghu islands. Taiwanese media reported "constant" CCG patrols of the median line and numerous instances of the CCG trying to expel Taiwanese fishing boats fishing in the area in the summer of 2024.[24] The incidents occurred in international waters that both the PRC and ROC claim as part of their Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The CCG has not intruded into Taiwan's territorial waters or contiguous zone near the Penghu Islands to date, however.

Taiwanese fishermen have reported that the CCG does not equally enforce the law against PRC fishing boats in Taiwan's waters. Some have observed unlicensed, unregistered, and unnamed PRC fishing boats crowding protected areas within Kinmen's prohibited water boundaries with fishing nets and even removing the nets placed by Taiwanese fishermen.[25] The boat that capsized on February 14 was one such boat. Unregistered PRC fishing boats have also fished in large numbers in waters near the Taiwanese Penghu islands and near the median line of the Taiwan Strait, apparently in violation of the PRC's summer fishing moratorium.[26] A large number of PRC boats in Taiwanese waters can deplete the fish stock for Taiwanese fishermen, overwhelm Taiwan's Coast Guard's ability to enforce the law, increase the probability of a confrontation in which Taiwan miscalculates, and reduce Taiwanese people's satisfaction with and trust in their own law enforcement authorities. Some analysts speculate that the PRC may deliberately send unregistered fishing boats into Taiwanese waters to solidify PRC control and to conduct surveillance and monitoring.[27]

The CGA's statistics on the number of foreign fishing boats it expelled or detained for illegal fishing, nearly all of which were from the PRC, show an increase of about 30% in the first six months of 2024 compared to the same period in 2023.[28] These numbers are not above average compared to previous years since 2016, however, and the incidents covered in the statistics occurred in waters all around Taiwan and not primarily around Kinmen and Matsu.[29] Taiwan Ocean Affairs Council Minister Kuan Bi-ling said in October 2023 that illegal fishing and sand dredging in Taiwan's waters decreased due to the CGA's vigorous law enforcement and more stringent legislation passed in the LY.[30] It is unclear whether the number of PRC fishing boats entering Taiwan's waters actually decreased or whether the lower numbers simply reflect the fact that the CGA is detaining and expelling fewer of those boats.

LOE: Aerial activities

The PRC's coercion campaign against Taiwan's outlying islands in 2024 has been largely maritime and has only occasionally included aerial activities. Many of the aerial activities around Taiwan's outlying

islands during this period are not directly attributable to PRC state action. Nevertheless, an escalation of the activities observed so far could have significant effects on flight safety and Taiwan's control of airspace over and around its outlying islands.

A PLA Z-10 armed military helicopter flew over waters near Kinmen on February 23. It is unclear whether it flew directly over Kinmen's prohibited or restricted waters. Some PRC and ROC media characterized the helicopter's presence as an act of psychological intimidation against Taiwan.[31]

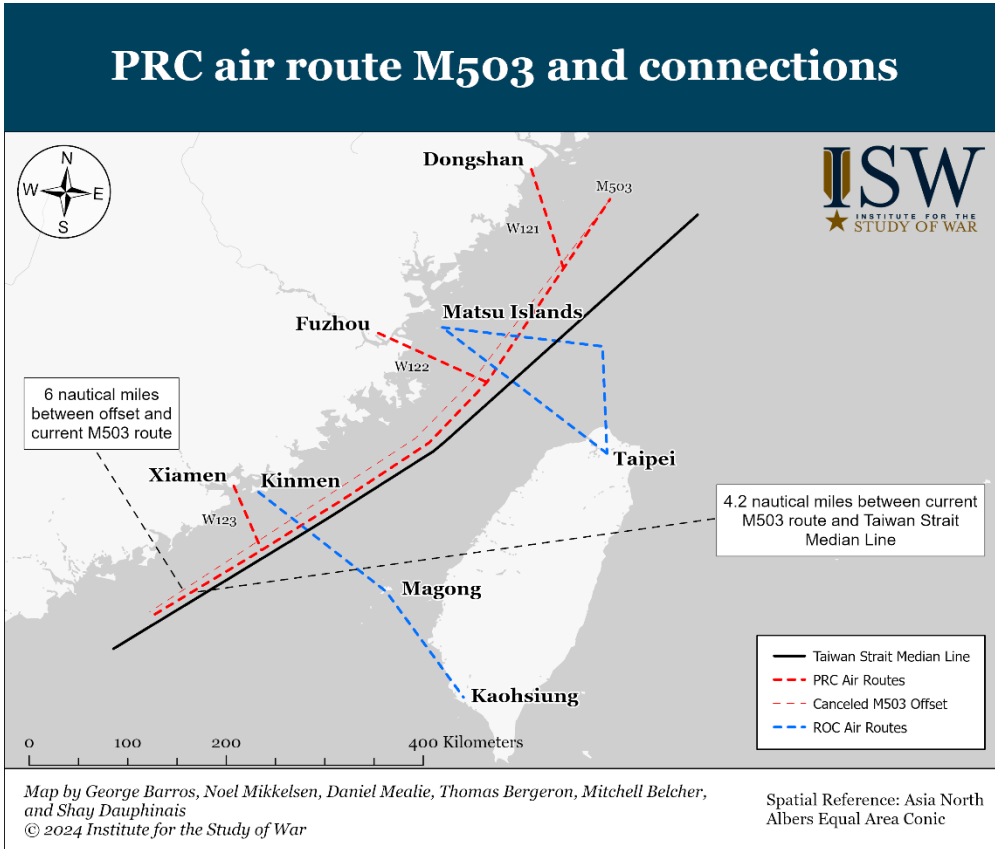
A PLA drone flew near an airport on Taiwan's Matsu Islands and disrupted two flights on July 2. The ROC Army Matsu Defense Command detected the PRC military drone hovering 5 nautical miles from Matsu's Nangan Airport. The drone remained in the area for 20 minutes and caused two civilian flights to delay landing at the airport.[32] The drone did not enter the airspace above Matsu's restricted or prohibited waters.[33] This is the first reported instance of a PLA drone approaching Taiwan's outlying islands outside of a military exercise.

There have also been several instances of ostensibly civilian PRC drones flying directly over Kinmen and filming or dropping propaganda materials at Kinmen military facilities. PRC drones flew over and filmed ROC facilities on the small garrison island of Erdan, the Mashan Observation Post on Kinmen's main island, and other locations and other islands of Kinmen on at least March 29, April 8, May 25, and June 8. Some of the drones also dropped propaganda leaflets urging Taiwan to "come back" and urging Taiwanese soldiers not to resist unification and not to sacrifice their lives for "Taiwan independence." [34] The PRC's Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) attributed such incidents to "spontaneous action by mainland netizens" expressing their hope for unification.[35] ROC military officials have called such incursions "gray zone intrusions" and "cognitive operations" to undermine Taiwanese and international confidence in Taiwan's military. ROC military personnel did not shoot down the drones, possibly because they flew out of range of conventional firearms.[36]

Although it is difficult to definitively attribute each of these civilian drone incursions to the CCP, the frequency of drone incursions over Taiwan's outlying islands has coincided with heightened aggression by the PRC against Taiwan before. Kinmen experienced a spate of PRC drone incursions in August 2022 after then-US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan. The PRC responded to Pelosi's visit with large-scale military exercises that encircled Taiwan. Kinmen experienced 29 drone incursions the same month, many of which were ostensibly "civilian." [37] Unarmed civilian drones are far less likely than military drones to trigger a military response from Taiwan.

A final aerial component of the PRC's efforts against Taiwan's outlying islands involved the PRC's Civil Aviation Administration of China (CAAC) unilaterally adjusting civilian flight routes to fly closer to Taiwanese territories. The CAAC unilaterally canceled an offset of flight route M503, which runs north to south over the Taiwan Strait, on February 1, so that planes would fly several kilometers closer to the median line of the Taiwan Strait.[38] The CAAC activated two additional flight routes on April 19 that connected the cities of Xiamen and Fuzhou to the M503 route. Xiamen and Fuzhou are PRC cities near Taiwan's Kinmen and Matsu islands, respectively, so the new flight routes have the effect of increasing air traffic around Taiwan's outlying islands.[39] Increasing the volume of flights in the sensitive airspace near Kinmen, Matsu, and the Taiwan Strait median line serves to strain Taiwanese resources as Taiwan must monitor, assess, and prepare to respond to each flight as a potential airspace incursion.

Taiwan’s Civil Aviation Administration (CAA) said the unilateral adjustment of the M503 route and the addition of the new connecting routes posed a danger to air traffic in the area.[40] The PRC’s TAO denied that there were any security concerns about the new flight routes and also denied the existence of a median line in the Taiwan Strait.[41]



LOE: Economic integration

The PRC’s ongoing efforts to economically integrate Kinmen and Matsu predate Taiwan’s 2024 election by many years. Targeting Taiwan’s economically vulnerable and isolated outer islands enables the PRC to establish its influence at a local level without having to engage with the DPP-controlled central government.

The PRC State Council unveiled a far-reaching cross-strait integration initiative known as the Fujian Cross-Strait Integration Zone in September 2023 with the aim of deepening cross-strait economic linkages.[42] The plan entails 21 specific measures to cultivate Fujian province as a model cross-strait integration zone through the development of communication and transportation infrastructure to enhance connectivity, encouraging Taiwanese residents’ participation in social and public welfare activities in the mainland, and providing incentives to encourage Taiwanese businesses to engage in Fujian’s commercial sector.[43] The plan emphasizes facilitating Taiwanese enterprises’ market access with special trade measures and strengthening industrial cooperation through joint ventures in technology and the digital economy. Undertaking a province-wide integration project serves to amplify the gravity of potential economic linkages, attracting interest beyond Taiwan’s outer islands and

pursuing stronger connections with interested stakeholders on the Taiwan mainland. The PRC Ministry of Commerce released new details about the initiative on January 9, two days before Taiwan's presidential election.^[44] In addition to economic integration, the plan also pushes for social connections and exchanges between Fujian and Kinmen. On June 16 the PRC's Ministry of Education released additional information on the initiative's educational cooperation components, saying that the Ministry would be taking steps to encourage Taiwanese students and teachers to go to Fujian to further their academic studies and careers.^[45]

The Fujian provincial government in the PRC launched a series of initiatives on April 28 aimed at building political support in Taiwan for cross-strait integration.^[46] Among the services that the Fujian provincial government announced is the "Fuzhou-Matsu City Pass," a 300 RMB (approximately 42 USD) benefits card that facilitates the travel and settlement of Matsu residents in Fuzhou. The card offers Matsu residents discounted rides on transportation and hotels in Fuzhou, free tours of Fuzhou's major cultural attractions, housing benefits, and dedicated hotline consultation for children's education, employment, and entrepreneurship.^[47] The Fujian government also announced that it will promote the construction of transportation and industrial infrastructure, such as airports, high-speed rails, highways, and ports, to increase connectivity between Fuzhou and Matsu.

The Fujian government announced the new programs on the same day that KMT Legislative Caucus Whip Fu Kun-chi met with TAO Director Song Tao. The PRC's announcement during Fu's visit follows a pattern of showcasing cooperative policies to portray the KMT as a good faith partner that produces favorable outcomes for cross-strait relations.

Promoting economic ties between Fujian and Taiwan's outer islands furthers the PRC's efforts to establish greater political influence over ROC municipalities. The purpose of intertwining the local economies and increasing cross-strait interaction is to positively affect the livelihoods of residents in Taiwan's outer islands and make decoupling a politically unpopular policy. The PRC has already made political inroads by promoting cross-strait travel links. The PRC and ROC islands of Kinmen and Matsu expanded links in transportation, trade, and postal services in 2008 after decades of lobbying by the PRC. The PRC refers to these services between the PRC and Taiwan's outer islands as the "Three Little Links."^[48] The PRC's promotion of cross-strait travel has resonated with Kinmen residents, especially with those among whom political support for a bridge to connect the island to the mainland is strong.^[49]

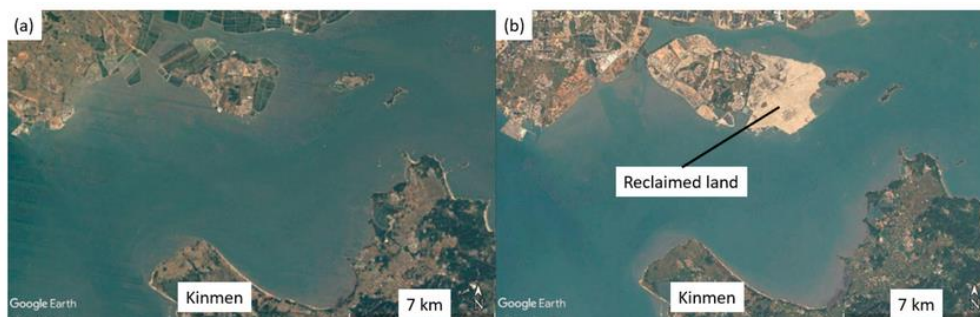
The PRC suspended individual travel to Taiwan in 2019 due to cross-Strait tensions, and both the PRC and ROC stopped tour groups from traveling to the other country during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. While Taiwan's government pushed for group tours to resume in 2023, PRC tour groups are still not allowed to visit Taiwan. In April 2024, the PRC announced that residents of Fujian could visit Matsu, as part of efforts to increase people-to-people and business exchanges across the Strait. The first tourist group from Fujian arrived in Matsu in August 2024.^[50]

The PRC formally proposed a road linking Kinmen and Xiamen in its 2022 National Highway Network Plan.^[51] Former Kinmen County councilor Chen Tsang-chiang also stressed Kinmen's need for a bridge to Xiamen, calling it a "connection to an economic lifeline."^[52] Chen is the chairman of the "Kin-Xia Bridge Construction Promotion Association," an advocacy group that seeks to realize the bridge's creation for the economic benefit of Kinmen residents.^[53] In addition to increasing cross-

Strait ties and increasing economic opportunities, the bridge would allow Kinmen to serve as the location for official cross-Strait dialogue. The association collected enough signatures in September 2023 to kickstart the process of initiating a formal referendum.[54] The TAO expressed its support for the Kinmen-based association’s efforts on September 27, and used the opportunity to talk up the potential benefits and improvements to the standard of living that could be realized by pursuing the wider Cross-Strait Integration Development Zone in Fujian.[55] The bridge is also part of a scheme proposed by some local Kinmen councilors in 2023 to turn Kinmen into a demilitarized “peace island.”[56]

Taiwan’s DPP government remains staunchly opposed to building more physical linkages between Kinmen and the PRC, viewing the bridge as another mode for the PRC to strengthen its influence and gradually assimilate Kinmen.[57] The Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) officials say that the bridge would make it easier for the PLA to invade and capture Kinmen. The MAC worries that PRC efforts to integrate Kinmen with Fujian will pose a significant threat to Taiwanese sovereignty, which could potentially expand into other outlying islands.[58]

The PRC unilaterally began work on its half of the Kinmen–Xiamen bridge to connect Xiamen to the future Xiang’an Airport, which the PRC is building on Dadeng Island, north of Kinmen’s main island. Taiwanese media reported that the PRC had been reclaiming land between Dadeng Island and Xiaodeng Island since 2013 for the airport, which will replace Xiamen’s existing Gaoqi International Airport.[59] The Xiang’an airport is currently only six miles from Kinmen’s Shangyi Airport, resulting in significant airspace overlap. The PRC touts this airport as a part of the Xiamen-Kinmen “City of Life Circle,” a project to enhance regional connectivity, foster economic development, and promote Cross-Strait exchange. It envisions that the second half of a Kinmen–Xiamen bridge project will connect Kinmen to the Xiang’an airport.[60] The ROC government worries that the Xiang’an Airport, which is expected to be operational in 2026, will pose a significant risk to flights leaving Kinmen. As the two airports would share around 70% of their airspace, constant coordination would be required to ensure flight safety. This could be a significant issue, as the PRC has already shown a willingness to disregard safety measures and unilaterally change flight routes around Taiwan without consultation with their ROC counterparts. Additionally, PRC land reclamation efforts have changed the physical environment and halved the distance between PRC territory and the island of Kinmen to under 2 miles (3 kilometers), posing a significant risk to Taiwanese interests.



Progress of island reclamation of Dadeng Island for the Xiang’an Airport between (a) December 2010 and (b) December 2020.[61]

The PRC has capitalized on the political environment in Kinmen and Matsu to promote cross-strait integration. Next to Lienchiang County, encompassing the ROC's Matsu islands, Kinmen County has the highest KMT voting percentage in the country. The KMT presidential candidates received 75% and 61% of the vote in 2020 and 2024, respectively.[62] The KMT's strong influence in Kinmen presents an opportunity for the PRC to exploit political leanings to promote economic integration initiatives favorable to its strategic interests in Taiwan.

Scenario: A Short-of-War Seizure of Kinmen

The following section lays out one plausible scenario in which the PRC could build upon the activities described above to execute a seizure of Taiwan's Kinmen Islands through short-of-war coercion within the next six months. This scenario is not intended to be a prediction of what the PRC will most likely do or how Taiwan and other nations will respond. It is also not a definitive assessment of what the PRC currently intends to do. Rather, the scenario is intended to illustrate how the PRC's lines of effort against Kinmen to date may evolve into a short-of-war coercion campaign to seize Kinmen, what observable indicators may point to such a campaign taking place, what events and decisions from both sides of the conflict could allow for the PRC's success in this effort, and what sort of calculus would lead the CCP to pursue this course of action in the near term.

A similar series of events around Taiwan's Matsu Islands could lead to the PRC capturing those islands in a similar fashion. ISW has observed far fewer PRC activities around Matsu (compared to Kinmen) to support such a campaign, however.

Stage 1: Escalating law enforcement activities around Kinmen

In the following three to four months, the CCG normalizes incursions into Kinmen's restricted and prohibited waters until such incursions occur nearly daily. The CCG expands its designated "patrol area" to include waters closer and closer to Kinmen, including prohibited waters. CCG ships begin to enter Taiwanese waters north of Kinmen, where there is no "buffer zone" of restricted waters between the PRC's territorial waters and Taiwan's de facto territorial waters. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) ships may occasionally participate in these patrols to test Taiwan's response. However, the CCG is the primary driver of the effort to send the message that these patrols are legitimate law enforcement activities and that the PRC has the legal jurisdiction and responsibility to patrol in Kinmen's waters. The Taiwanese coast guard's resources are stretched thin, and it is unable to respond to the high volume of simultaneous incursions around Kinmen by the numerically superior CCG.

The CCG also more aggressively enforces PRC laws around Kinmen and other parts of the Taiwan Strait. It expels and occasionally detains Taiwanese fishing boats for illegal fishing in PRC waters in violation of PRC regulations. It boards and searches Taiwanese vessels in its waters for "contraband." It uses water cannons against some Taiwanese vessels. It particularly steps up these law enforcement actions against Taiwanese vessels within PRC territorial waters to the east and south of Kinmen, which all ships must pass through on the way to Kinmen. Taiwan's coast guard fails to prevent the CCG from arresting at least some Taiwanese citizens. The PRC may offer incentives to Taiwanese nationals to legitimize PRC authority in some way, for example by encouraging them to apply for fishing permits with PRC authorities as a means of avoiding CCG harassment.

These CCG efforts challenge Taiwan's effective control over its own waters, strain the Taiwanese coast guard's resources and manpower, reduce Taiwanese people's confidence in the DPP government's ability to protect them, harm the livelihoods of Taiwanese fishermen, and deter some Taiwanese economic activity in the contested waters.

Stage 2: Testing the ROC's military response

After normalizing frequent patrols into Kinmen's restricted waters and aggressive law enforcement in the surrounding area, the PRC begins attempts to board and detain Taiwanese vessels in waters that the PRC does not undisputedly control, including within Kinmen's maritime boundaries and parts of Taiwan's claimed Exclusive Economic Zone. When Taiwan physically confronts CCG ships or attempts to engage military assets to defend its citizens, the PRC frames such actions as escalations by Taiwan and uses them as an excuse to escalate further, for instance by increasing the number of CCG vessels operating in the Kinmen area or blasting CGA vessels with water cannons. In this scenario, Taiwan cannot manage a response that is sufficient to deter the PRC.

The PRC also begins to test and strain Kinmen's air defenses. It first flies ostensibly civilian surveillance drones directly over Kinmen's military bases and reroutes civilian flight routes to fly closer and closer to Kinmen, including the airspace over Kinmen's prohibited waters. Taiwan chooses not to shoot down the drones or scramble aircraft to respond. The PRC then flies PLA military drones or even manned military aircraft increasingly close to Kinmen and eventually in the airspace above prohibited waters. These incursions are intended to test Taiwan's red lines for air defense. Taiwan redefined its definition of a "first strike" on its territory during the Tsai Ing-wen administration to include an enemy air or sea incursion into Taiwanese territory, even if the incursion does not include a kinetic strike.^[63] Taiwan does not officially claim any territorial waters around its outlying islands, however; although the designated "prohibited waters" are functionally similar to territorial waters, Taiwan may choose not to launch a kinetic counterattack in response to incursions into those waters or the airspace above them. If Taiwan does shoot down a PRC drone over Kinmen, PRC officials frame this as Taiwanese aggression.

Stage 3: "Quarantining" Kinmen

Several months into this campaign, the CCG orchestrates or takes advantage of an unfortunate incident in waters around Kinmen to declare a crisis and paint Taiwan's government as aggressive and irresponsible. Narratives in PRC media and planted in Taiwanese media frame the incident to put maximum blame on Taiwan and the DPP, justifying increased CCG presence and stricter control in the area and reducing sympathy for the Taiwanese government in the immediate term. They amplify any missteps by the Taiwanese government to strengthen this narrative. This is similar to how the PRC responded to the February 14 capsizing incident. PRC officials and media frame as escalatory any reinforcements Taiwan tries to send to Kinmen. PRC propaganda connects any new deliveries of lethal equipment to Kinmen with US arms sales to Taiwan, highlights the presence of US Green Berets on Kinmen, and points to Taiwanese military drills on the islands to claim that the "Taiwan authorities" intend hostile action against the PRC at the behest of the United States. PRC state media has already begun this narrative: the state social media account Yuyuan Tiantian claimed on June 26, for instance, that a \$360 million US arms sale to Taiwan on June 18 would be "basically certain" to include drones to be deployed on Kinmen.^[64]

The PRC then deploys armed Coast Guard vessels to set up a “quarantine” zone around Kinmen and prevent the delivery of any additional weapons or “contraband” to the islands. They search all Taiwanese vessels passing into this zone to confiscate supposed “contraband” and arrest “separatists.” The quarantine still allows most civilian ships to pass after an inspection but blocks the passage of most ROC government vessels. The CCG claims to find contraband or other illegal activities in its inspections and uses these “discoveries” to justify maintaining the quarantine. CCG vessels fully blockade all marine traffic to small garrison islands of Kinmen County such as Dadan, Erdan, and Beiding, which do not have civilian populations. PRC aviation authorities impose a no-fly zone in the area, claiming the unstable situation is a danger to flight safety. The CCG can take advantage of Kinmen’s proximity to the PRC mainland to maintain the “quarantine” for months and restrict the delivery of goods to Kinmen. These efforts may exclude the Wuqiu islands, which are administratively part of Kinmen County but geographically 133 kilometers (about 82 miles) from the rest of the islands.[65] PRC plans do not need to adhere to Taiwan’s administrative divisions.

In the meantime, the PRC also attacks Kinmen’s communication infrastructure with deniable cyberattacks and by damaging the submarine cables that connect Kinmen to Taiwan. These attacks slow down Kinmen’s internet and mobile communication, financial system, and economic activity. PRC boats severed both of Matsu’s submarine cables in February 2023 with similar disruptive effects, including an archipelago-wide internet outage that lasted 50 days.[66] The quarantine around Kinmen makes Taiwan’s efforts to repair its damaged communication infrastructure even more difficult, if not impossible. The PRC might also target the cables connecting Kinmen to the PRC mainland to ensure a total communications blockade, or it might leave those cables intact and use them to become Kinmen’s sole internet provider and enforce a “Great Firewall”-style Internet censorship regime on Kinmen.

The PRC “quarantine” of Kinmen immediately causes cross-strait tensions to skyrocket and severely damages whatever goodwill the PRC has built with the KMT. The Taiwanese government and major political parties unify in condemning the PRC’s actions but vacillate and quarrel on how to mount an effective response without triggering escalation. Taiwan sends CGA ships to Kinmen but fails to break through the quarantine in tense standoffs with the CCG. Taiwan appeals to aid from the United States and other countries, a move that the PRC frames as further evidence that Taiwan’s “separatist” government is colluding with foreign powers against China.

The United States is unwilling to substantively intervene in this scenario, however. The crisis around Kinmen coincides with President Joe Biden’s “lame duck” period, the apex or aftermath of a contentious presidential election, and costly wars in Ukraine and the Middle East that occupy US attention and resources. The White House and other US policymakers find many excuses to avoid potentially escalatory actions against the PRC. The United States does not have diplomatic relations with Taiwan and lacks any formal commitment to defend Taiwan. The Taiwan Relations Act defines Taiwan to include “the islands of Taiwan and the Pescadores [Penghu],” excluding outlying islands like Kinmen and Matsu.[67] The US-ROC Mutual Defense Treaty that existed from 1955–1980 intentionally did not cover Kinmen and Matsu, either.[68] US policymakers and commentators point out that the PRC has not launched any kinetic attacks and that tiny offshore islands like Kinmen are not very important to US national security interests anyway, especially when weighing the costs of armed conflict against a fellow nuclear-armed military superpower. PRC information warfare amplifies such narratives. The United States imposes sanctions but fails to deter the PRC’s efforts around Kinmen. Washington

attempts to de-escalate the situation diplomatically, even quietly withdrawing the US troops on Kinmen as a concession to the PRC and out of fear for the soldiers' safety. It pressures Taiwan to make concessions as well. Other countries such as Japan and Australia do not come to Taiwan's aid without the United States leading the way.

Stage 4: Taiwan concedes

The PRC spreads propaganda within Taiwan and especially in Kinmen itself that blames the DPP for the crisis and raises fears of the possible consequences for Kinmen residents if the ROC government does not cease "provoking" Beijing. Seeing no way out of the situation, no sign of meaningful US support, and mounting demands from the populace, the Kinmen County government pleads with Taipei to concede so that it can get relief.

Beijing's demand is that Kinmen disarm itself, remove any foreign troops, and become a "demilitarized zone" (DMZ), which it says will de-escalate tension. A bipartisan group of Kinmen local councilors proposed a plan for a Kinmen DMZ in 2023 to prevent their county from becoming a target of PRC aggression, so the CCP capitalizes on pre-existing support for this plan in Kinmen and portrays it as a Taiwanese idea.^[69] It insists on PRC involvement in implementing and enforcing this demilitarized zone, however. As part of the process, PRC authorities are allowed to land on Kinmen and its associated islands to ensure the ROC military bases have been disarmed and vacated of Taiwanese soldiers, who are arrested if they resist. The PRC uses Kinmen military and civilian personnel it has bribed or otherwise compromised to reduce Kinmen's resistance.^[70] The PRC immediately provides food and other necessary supplies to Kinmen to build goodwill with the populace, while continuing to prevent Taiwanese government ships from making supply deliveries. The PRC eventually establishes its own outposts and government liaison offices in Kinmen with the justification of overseeing the demilitarization and keeping the peace. It may operate these institutions jointly with Kinmen's civilian authorities.

The PRC has always claimed Kinmen and other ROC islands as its own territory, so it does not need to formally declare annexation. It instead maintains some ambiguity about Kinmen's change of status to avoid unwanted conflict escalation while it gradually solidifies its de facto control of the islands. The CCG continues to patrol Kinmen's waters to control the ROC personnel, equipment, supplies, or services that are allowed to reach the islands. The ROC national government does not formally surrender its sovereignty over Kinmen, but Taipei nonetheless loses the ability to administer Kinmen County in practice.

In the longer term, the PRC builds up Kinmen as an exemplar of the "One Country, Two Systems" scheme it wishes to impose on Taiwan. The PRC helps Kinmen build infrastructure and invests in Kinmen's economy, delivering a substantial boon to the small island group's economic prosperity. It takes over maritime law enforcement for Kinmen, even cracking down on illegal fishing by PRC nationals in the waters near Kinmen. On the other hand, it avoids overt meddling in Kinmen's political system, aside from arresting the occasional "separatist." The CCP can afford to largely let Kinmen manage its own internal governance because Kinmen's politics are already dominated by pan-Blue and relatively PRC-friendly politicians. The CCP will use its media and information warfare to promote narratives of Kinmen's freedom and economic prosperity, thus increasing the appeal of such a model for Taiwan's other outlying islands and eventually Taiwan itself.

The PRC eventually completes and opens its Xiang'an airport in 2026 and uses its leverage and influence over the Kinmen government to approve the construction of the Xiamen–Kinmen bridge project, despite the central ROC government's refusal to sanction this project. This bridge solidifies PRC control over Kinmen and will allow the PRC to move military and law enforcement personnel to Kinmen in the future, such as in an “emergency” immediately preceding a broader war against Taiwan. The bridge's connection of Kinmen to the massive Xiang'an airport also makes the new airport a popular option for travelers to Kinmen, outcompeting Kinmen's own small airport until most travel to Kinmen goes through the PRC.

After a successful PRC short-of-war campaign to seize control of Kinmen, Taiwan hardens its defense posture in its remaining territories and works to develop strategies to prevent similar “short-of-war” island seizure tactics from working in the future. However, the loss of ROC territory without a fight severely harms morale within the Taiwanese military and society and devastates confidence in Taiwan's government. It also seriously harms Taiwan's faith that the United States and other friendly nations will come to Taiwan's aid in a war. The loss of Kinmen may trigger a political crisis in Taiwan including a no-confidence vote against President Lai Ching-te. Politicians and citizens, including some within the DPP, will blame Lai either for provoking the PRC's coercive campaign or for failing to defend Taiwan's territory. In the aftermath, Taiwan's posture toward the PRC takes a much more conciliatory turn as the DPP loses future elections and softens its perceived pro-independence stance. The KMT and other opposition parties successfully push for measures to cool down tensions, increase diplomatic and economic engagement with the PRC, and reduce reliance on the United States.

CCP Decision Calculus

The sequence of events presented above is a best-case scenario for the Chinese Communist Party if it chooses to pursue a short-of-war coercion campaign to capture Kinmen. The success of this campaign hinges on Taiwan, the United States, and other countries failing to respond meaningfully to thwart the PRC's actions and ultimately conceding to PRC demands.

The reality is that such a campaign against Kinmen is full of risks for the CCP, however. The foremost risk is unwanted conflict escalation. Taiwan, the United States, and other aligned governments could interpret the “quarantine” around Kinmen as an act of war that justifies a forceful response. Miscalculations by PRC and ROC personnel during maritime confrontations could also lead to violent incidents that may spiral out of control. In either case, the situation creates a risk of conflict escalation to an intensity and scope that the PRC is not prepared to handle. Aside from the risk of escalation, the CCP's quarantine against Kinmen may fail to secure the concessions it hopes for. Kinmen may display unexpected economic resilience and political resistance to CCP demands. The quarantine may be too porous to sufficiently impact Kinmen's economic stability or cut it off from the ROC government services. On the other hand, an overly strict quarantine could harm the PRC's own economic interests by obstructing or deterring the flow of economic activity to the entire region, including the major PRC port of Xiamen. The entire campaign also carries the risk of permanently harming the PRC's relations with other countries, even if those countries do not intervene to stop the seizure of Kinmen. It will likely lead to renewed efforts by Taiwan to harden its defenses against both conventional and coercive threats from the PRC, with support from the United States and partnered nations.

There are several considerations that might lead CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping to decide upon this course of action in the near term despite the risks, however.

First, Xi may be losing faith in the CCP's ability to achieve "peaceful reunification." The prospect of "peaceful reunification" relies on a relatively friendly, or at least conciliatory, government in Taipei. The CCP has pointed to the 2008–2016 presidential administration of Ma Ying-jeou as its preferred model of peaceful cross-strait relations.^[71] It maintains exchanges with former president Ma and his political party, the KMT, to legitimize the KMT as an interlocutor on behalf of Taiwan rather than the "separatist" Democratic Progressive Party.^[72] The DPP won its third consecutive presidential term with the election of Lai Ching-te in January, however; by the end of Lai's first term in 2028, the KMT will have been out of power in Taiwan for 12 years. The CCP's economic integration efforts and incentives for Taiwanese businesspeople, its information operations, its cross-strait exchanges and forums, its outreach to Taiwanese opposition parties, and other persuasion tactics have failed to reverse the trend of Taiwanese people identifying less and less with the "Chinese nation" and increasingly supporting Taiwanese independence. CCP intimidation and military deterrence efforts have also failed to prevent DPP election victories and at worst even backfired and increased support for the DPP. Xi may perceive that the DPP itself has grown bolder in its support for Taiwanese independence. Most troubling of all, he may worry that the KMT is moderating its pro-unification stance, which Beijing insists is a common basis for cross-strait relations. As the KMT seeks to appeal to younger voters, it has abolished the conservative Huang Fuh-hsing department of the party and distanced itself from former president Ma. Xi may see Taiwan's long-term political trends getting worse and worse for him unless he takes drastic action.

Second, Xi may see a unique opportunity in the next six months presented by the political dynamics of Taiwan and the United States, which he could assess will prevent both governments from responding in an effective or escalatory way. In Taiwan, the new Lai administration is still relatively inexperienced. The DPP holds a minority in the Legislative Yuan for the first time since 2016. It faces frequent political battles with the opposition coalition of the KMT and TPP, which are trying to hinder the DPP's agenda and to implement reforms to check the administration's executive powers. In the United States, President Joe Biden is in his lame-duck period after announcing his withdrawal from the 2024 presidential race. The US domestic political landscape is turbulent and divisive amid the ongoing election, the foreign policy establishment is preoccupied with ongoing wars in Ukraine and Gaza, and the US populace has little appetite for more war. Xi may believe these factors will preclude a timely and forceful US response to his Kinmen campaign before the inauguration of a new US president in January 2025.

There are many characteristics of this particular short-of-war approach to seize Kinmen that may appeal to Xi in the near term over other forms of compellence against Taiwan. First, Kinmen's small size and close proximity to the PRC make it very hard for Taiwan to defend and feasible for the PRC to surround with primarily Coast Guard vessels. Second, the operation's reliance on non-military assets and broadly nonviolent means would make it more difficult for Taiwan or the United States to justify a military response. The islands of Kinmen (and Matsu) are much less important to US interests than Taiwan proper: they have small populations, little strategic value, and no critical technologies that the United States wishes to keep out of Beijing's hands, such as high-end semiconductor fabs. Third, this campaign is much cheaper, less risky, and easier to de-escalate than more kinetic operations against

more distant targets. If the campaign is going poorly or threatens to trigger escalation, the CCG can simply end its quarantine and declare victory in some more limited goal, such as thwarting the shipment of dangerous equipment to Kinmen and proving the capabilities of PRC “law enforcement” around Kinmen.

The benefits of seizing Kinmen are less about the strategic value of Kinmen itself than about the psychological effect such an operation would have. Militarily, Kinmen is little more than a minor hurdle the PRC would have to clear in a potential future invasion. Seizing Kinmen in advance would ease the PRC’s future military plans and reduce Taiwan’s strategic depth, but the islands do not provide a decisive advantage to either side. More importantly, a PRC seizure of Kinmen without a war would be the ROC’s first loss of territory since the PRC seized the Yijiangshan and Dachen islands in 1955. The loss would strike a severe blow to Taiwan’s confidence in its self-defense capability and in its relationship with the United States, presumed to be its chief security guarantor. The operation would therefore increase the chances that Taiwan capitulate in a future conflict. The operation would also be a psychological victory for the PRC domestic audience, raising domestic support for Xi’s governance and strengthening the credibility of his promise to “reunify” Taiwan by 2049 or earlier.

Implications for the United States

The Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) has served as the foundation of the modern US-Taiwan relationship since the United States and ROC broke off diplomatic relations in 1979. While the United States no longer has a binding legal commitment to defend Taiwan, the TRA enshrines in law the US interest in resisting threats to Taiwan, providing defensive arms to Taiwan, and opposing “any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means.” The law does not solely concern the use of military force. It references boycotts and embargoes to shape Taiwan’s future as threats to Western Pacific regional security that would be of “grave concern” to the United States. It also states a US policy to “maintain the capability [...] to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of the people on Taiwan.”^[73] This category of “other forms of coercion” would include most of the lines of effort that are central to the scenario described above. Although the TRA’s definition of “Taiwan” omits Kinmen and Matsu, it must be understood that the PRC’s coercive efforts to integrate those islands are not targeted at the islands alone, but at the political will of Taiwan as a whole. These courses of action serve primarily to demoralize the Taiwanese people and destroy their political will to resist “reunification.”

A short-of-war coercion campaign by the PRC to seize Kinmen must therefore be of serious concern to the United States. Any US effort to deter or repel PRC military aggression against Taiwan rests heavily on the strength of the US-Taiwan relationship and on Taiwan’s will to fight for itself. The PRC’s successful incorporation of Kinmen would have a devastating impact on Taiwan’s faith in the United States to defend it, on the Taiwanese people’s faith in their government’s ability to protect them, and therefore on the credibility of US deterrence against the PRC. Inaction from the United States would also undermine the faith of US allies and partners in the United States’ ability and willingness to defend them and to uphold the regional security order against PRC aggression. Reduced confidence in the United States’ commitment and leadership will weaken the impetus among regional countries to take collective action to resist PRC aggression.

These psychological effects would embolden the PRC to conduct a future annexation campaign against Taiwan, increase the PRC's chances of success in such a campaign, and even raise the likelihood that Taiwan will concede its sovereignty without a fight.

In the described short-of-war coercion scenario, Washington faces the challenge of reacting effectively against the PRC's attempt to incorporate Kinmen without triggering dangerous escalation. Neither the United States nor any of the parties involved will want to fight a war over Kinmen. US measures against the PRC coercion thus should seek to avoid any direct use of force or military incursions into PRC territory. Within these parameters, the most salient objective that the United States and its allies should pursue is to deter the PRC from the described course of action by changing its decision-making calculus and making such actions less likely to succeed. A second but equally vital objective is to mitigate the harm caused to US and Taiwanese interests, including Taiwanese morale, if the PRC campaign does succeed.

The report will here offer three sets of policy recommendations for the United States, Taiwan, and other aligned nations to address the PRC short-of-war seizure of Kinmen scenario. The first set of recommendations are pre-emptive measures that should be implemented as soon as possible to deter such a coercion campaign and reduce its chance of success. The second set are reactive measures that should be used selectively in direct response to specific PRC actions, such as the quarantine and communication blockade of Kinmen. These measures are meant to counteract specific PRC actions during the crisis period either directly or by imposing costs on the PRC higher than the benefit the PRC expects to receive from its actions. The third set of recommendations are measures to be taken in the aftermath if the PRC succeeds in seizing control of Kinmen. These measures are intended to impose additional costs on the PRC in order to deter future PRC aggression, mitigate the severity of the damage to US and Taiwanese interests, and defend against similar campaigns in the future.

Pre-emptive measures

- **Increase the resiliency and capacity of offshore islands' communication infrastructure.** Taiwan should increase the resilience of Kinmen's and Matsu's communications infrastructure to counter the PRC's efforts to informationally isolate the islands. Kinmen's proximity and connectivity to the PRC make it especially exposed to cable cutting and qualify it as a priority locale for implementing satellite services. Taiwan's national telecom provider Chunghwa Telecom signed a deal with a UK-based Low Earth Orbit (LEO) satellite company in 2021 to acquire satellites to start providing coverage for Taiwan.^[74] Pursuing the acquisition of more satellites and equipment to increase bandwidth to handle large amounts of traffic can protect Kinmen's connectivity in crisis. Taiwan should simultaneously accelerate the development of its domestic LEO satellite program and ensure that service extends to Kinmen, Matsu, and other offshore islands.^[75]
- **Develop a Taiwanese merchant marine force.** A merchant marine force of Taiwanese-flagged vessels would be responsible for transporting critical supplies during a blockade or quarantine. The merchant marine force or a similar deputized militia of civilians should also be authorized to carry out law enforcement activities such as expelling boats from Taiwanese territorial waters, cutting nets used in illegal fishing operations, confiscating fishing equipment,

and otherwise protecting Taiwanese territory from illegal PRC activities. This force of vessels could free up CGA resources and personnel to confront coercive CCG activities when needed.

- **Selective Intelligence Disclosures.** The United States, Taiwan, and partners should conduct selective intelligence disclosures or “pre-bunking” to preemptively expose the PRC’s intentions and counter the pretenses that it claims to justify its actions. Similar to the United States and United Kingdom’s concerted intelligence disclosures immediately prior to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, such disclosures can prompt internal reactions that disrupt the PRC’s planning and decision calculus. Intelligence disclosures also raise international awareness of the crisis and enable Taiwan’s supporters to coordinate potential responses and punitive actions. Intelligence disclosures also counter PRC narratives surrounding the situation, including “lawfare” and public opinion warfare.
- **Reaffirm Taiwan’s rights.** The US, Taiwan, and allies should reaffirm Taiwan’s rights under international law. These include Taiwanese air, maritime, and territorial boundaries, as well as Taiwan’s rights within its own territory. All states should prepare a joint statement in support of Taiwan and decrying PRC coercion as a violation of Taiwanese sovereignty under international law. This messaging should continue through all stages before, during, and after the campaign.
- **Targeted domestic information campaigns.** Taiwan should begin messaging targeted at the Kinmen populace discussing the dangers of CCP control. These messages should use Hong Kong as an example of how the CCP can transform and control populations under its control and does so despite initial promises to respect local self-governance.
- **Establish a larger CGA presence around Kinmen.** Taiwan should significantly increase CGA law enforcement measures in the waters around Kinmen, including deploying more CGA ships and personnel to the area, to respond more effectively to PRC coercion and illegal activities. This increased activity should be paired with messaging communicating to the Kinmen populace that the CGA is capable of defending Taiwanese territory.
- **Create a joint US-Taiwan course of action to defend Taiwanese sovereignty.** In response to PRC coercion, Taiwan and the United States need to communicate their willingness to use whatever economic, political, and even military responses are necessary to protect Taiwanese offshore islands and defend Taiwanese sovereignty.
- **Coordinated information campaigns clarifying the nature of the CCG.** US, Taiwanese, and allied messaging should stress that the CCG is a paramilitary organization under the ultimate control of the Central Military Commission. This counters PRC narratives that CCG actions are normal law enforcement measures, and instead portrays them accurately as aggressive short-of-war coercive activities that advance Beijing’s strategic goals. This messaging should continue through all stages of the crisis, even if the PRC ultimately succeeds, to avoid normalizing such coercive behavior and persuade the international community to remain vigilant and intolerant of PRC short-of-war coercion.

Reactive measures

- **Coordinate information campaigns condemning CCG actions.** As the PRC implements a quarantine around Kinmen, the United States, Taiwan, and other countries should intensify messaging aimed at undermining the PRC narrative that the CCG actions are “normal” law enforcement in areas of Chinese jurisdiction and that Taiwan provoked such measures. The messaging should aim to convince the international community that the PRC’s actions are aggressive and unprovoked. It should stress that the CCG is a paramilitary organization that is ultimately subordinate to the Central Military Commission and that its actions constitute a forcible change to the status quo in the Taiwan Strait in service of PRC strategic aims. ROC authorities and partner countries should amplify incidents in which the PRC quarantine blocks shipments of civilian goods to Kinmen or blocks the transit of Taiwanese or foreign civilians to Kinmen. They can use these incidents to demonstrate that the “quarantine” is not about stopping criminal activity but about squeezing Kinmen economically, denying it access to goods and services, and seizing control of the waters. This messaging should be targeted both at the international community and the people of Kinmen.
- **Convey to the PRC the costs associated with forcibly taking Taiwanese territory.** The United States must make clear that a PRC seizure of Kinmen through coercive means would fundamentally change the US approach to defending the rest of Taiwan. As soon as the PRC begins a quarantine or blockade around Kinmen, the United States should call for Beijing to remove the quarantine and state that if it uses forceful coercion to undermine Taiwan’s control of Kinmen or other Taiwanese islands, the United States will significantly increase its military presence in and around Taiwan and increase the provision of security assistance to Taiwan.
- **Use messaging to impose economic costs on Xiamen and beyond.** This messaging should warn commercial vessels and travelers to avoid the Xiamen-Kinmen area due to risks of arbitrary detention and conflict escalation. The port of Xiamen is one of the busiest in the world. It maintains container shipping routes with 152 ports in 57 countries and ranks 13th on the UN port liner shipping connectivity index, which is a measure of ports’ integration with global import and export shipping networks.^[76] Xiamen’s proximity to Kinmen makes it vulnerable to economic disruptions centered on Kinmen. Disruption to the normal flow of commercial marine traffic would be a natural effect of heightened tensions near Kinmen if merchants perceive risk of escalation to violence. The United States and its partners are positioned to capitalize on this vulnerability by communicating the risk to the international community. Increased awareness of the risks caused by the PRC’s actions against Kinmen and the threat of escalation strengthens merchants’ incentive to delay or redirect shipping away from Xiamen. Reduced throughput in one of the PRC’s busiest ports translates to shipping route and supply chain disruptions that raise costs for producers and consumers alike. Disruptions to international commerce will fuel political pressure from international stakeholders on the PRC to maintain the status quo and not destabilize the area.
- **Counter PRC cyberwarfare.** Allied actors should counter PRC cyberattacks and sabotage of Kinmen’s communications and critical infrastructure with tit-for-tat but deniable actions against Xiamen. The United States and its partners can cut off satellite communications and other services they provide to PRC vessels operating far from the PRC as well as services in the area around Kinmen and Fujian Province. PRC distant water fishing vessels rely heavily on US-based

satellite service providers to maintain connectivity.^[77] The United States and allied countries can also help Kinmen overcome a communications blockade by providing alternative means of communication, such as Starlink satellites, if Taiwan does not already have such capabilities itself.

- **Coordinate allied military response.** The United States and allies can make a show of force by sending warships to transit the Taiwan Strait, as the United States did to end the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis. The United States can send a signal of its resolve and successful coalition-building by coordinating this transit with one or more allied countries, such as Japan, Australia, or a NATO ally. The United States and allies should immediately schedule joint coast guard training activities with Taiwan and provide indirect support to help the CGA confront CCG ships maintaining the quarantine.
- **Effectively counter PRC sea and air control.** Taiwan needs to develop a comprehensive response to PRC enforcement activities around Kinmen and other offshore islands. This will include sending the CGA to escort commercial vessels carrying essential goods to Kinmen. These ships must resist being boarded by PRC authorities and work to break the quarantine and deliver goods to Kinmen. The CGA also needs to intensify law enforcement actions around Penghu and other parts of Taiwan. It should empower merchant marine or maritime forces to carry out these law enforcement operations to lighten the burden on CGA assets occupied with breaking the quarantine and defending Kinmen. Taiwan must also intensify its responses to PRC aerial activity. This includes shooting down or capturing non-military drones that fly over offshore islands. If the PRC imposes an administrative no-fly zone over Kinmen, Taiwan should publicly reject the PRC’s right to block air travel to Kinmen and send manned and unmanned aircraft to challenge this no-fly zone. Some of the Taiwanese aircraft can carry supplies for Kinmen civilians to provide relief from the “quarantine.”
- **Impose sanctions.** The United States and allies can exert economic pressure on the PRC by imposing financial sanctions and trade restrictions on key technology companies, financial institutions, and state-owned enterprises that are critical to driving the PRC’s economic growth. The intent behind these measures is to destabilize vital industries, disrupt supply chains, and create financial turmoil to raise the costs of further coercive actions against Kinmen. These sanctions can also target CCP officials to highlight individuals’ complicity in driving PRC aggression in the Taiwan Strait.
- **Emphasize the risk of establishing Kinmen as a “peace island.”** Taiwan should resist the PRC demand for a de-militarized zone. It should work to convince the people and political leaders of Kinmen that such a setup will put them in danger by rewarding the PRC’s coercive behavior and enabling annexation. Resist concessions that enable the PRC the power to put personnel on Kinmen, to enforce demilitarization, or to use CCG ships to continue to block the passage of Taiwanese vessels.

Measures to deter future PRC aggression

- **Amend relevant US laws to help protect Taiwan’s outlying islands.** The US Congress and president should pass an amendment to the Taiwan Relations Act to include provisions about helping Kinmen and Matsu resist coercion from the CCP.
- **Conduct joint coast guard operations.** The United States should expand coast guard cooperation exercises with Taiwan and other allies in the region. Joint exercises will increase interoperability between the coast guards, making the United States, Taiwan, and allies more prepared to resist future PRC coercion or military operations.
- **Increase US support for the Taiwanese military.** The US should increase the number of its troops employed to Taiwan. As of 2023, a few hundred US troops, including special operations forces and US Marines, have been sent to train in Taiwan. Moderately increasing that number to 500 allows for more cooperative training, sends a strong message of US support, and reduces the likelihood of triggering a dangerous PLA response. Additionally, the US and allied navies should increase the frequency of transits through the Taiwan Strait accompanied with information releases directed towards the PRC. Finally, the US should increase its military aid to Taiwan. US and Taiwanese defense officials need to work together to identify areas of weakness and work to address deficiencies within the Taiwanese military.
- **Increase Taiwanese troop presence on all offshore islands.** In response to the PRC taking control of Kinmen, Taiwan needs to ensure that Matsu, Penghu, and the other offshore islands are well defended. Increasing troop presence in the other offshore islands, developing plans for subsequent blockades or quarantines, and further developing protective measures for connective infrastructure are among the actions Taiwan must take to defend the rest of its territory.

Conclusion

Just as Taiwan is uniquely vulnerable among the US allies and partners in East Asia, its outer islands of Kinmen and Matsu are Taiwan’s most vulnerable territories. Long excluded from US defense commitments due to the perception that they are impossible to defend, the tiny island groups are now targets of a broad range of coordinated PRC measures to coerce, persuade, or otherwise influence them to integrate with their giant neighbor. The political landscape on the islands is already dominated by PRC-friendly views. Politicians and residents alike are enticed by the economic benefits of PRC investment, trade, tourism, and infrastructure linkages. Kinmen and Matsu residents are also much likelier to identify as “Chinese” than are residents of Taiwan proper, 100 miles away. On the other hand, the small military and coast guard presence on the islands could hardly withstand any serious aggression from the PRC.

The loss of these territories would strike at the core centers of gravity for deterrence in the Taiwan Strait: Taiwan’s political will to resist PRC aggression and its relationship with the United States. The United States’ failure to effectively respond to such a crisis would have cascading negative effects on the faith of US allies like Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines in the US defensive umbrella. Maintaining Taiwanese sovereignty over these islands is thus a precarious but vital task.

This report has shown one plausible scenario in which the PRC could seize the Kinmen islands through means short of war. A coordinated PRC short-of-war coercion campaign of this scale would be

unprecedented. Beijing used its coast guard to seize Scarborough Shoal from the Philippines in 2012, but Scarborough Shoal was uninhabited and unoccupied; Kinmen is home to nearly 140,000 people including about 3,000 military personnel.[78] A closer analogue is the early stages of Russia's seizure of Crimea in 2014, but the PRC has been more cautious in using military aggression than Russia under Vladimir Putin.

Nevertheless, "reunifying" Taiwan, including Kinmen, is one of Beijing's central strategic goals. Many of the lines of effort involved in the coercion campaign that this report describes are already in place. The PRC certainly has the capability to execute the campaign successfully. The main unknown upon which this scenario depends is the CCP's political will, a variable that is often opaque and depends upon Beijing's subjective perceptions of US and Taiwanese political dynamics. It is therefore essential that authorities in Taiwan and the United States take concrete steps to prepare for this possibility to deter the campaign, directly counter each of its lines of effort, and mitigate the severity of its impact on deterrence in the Taiwan Strait as a whole.

Washington, Taipei, and allied governments must coordinate efforts to harden Taiwan's infrastructure and defenses around its outlying territories, counter PRC information warfare, punish PRC aggression, defend Taiwan's sovereign rights, and take the steps necessary to ensure the continued integrity of deterrence in the Taiwan Strait.

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