

The Political Manipulation of China's Military Exercises around Taiwan

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1. News Highlights

The August 2022 issue of *Foreign Affairs* featured an article by Oriana Skylar Mastro of Stanford University and Derek Scissors of the American Enterprise Institute on whether the rise of China is “the past” or still “in progress.” In contrast to the view that China’s power has reached its peak and will gradually weaken due to depleted resources, deteriorating demographics, stagnating economics, and international countermeasures, the article argues that even if China’s economy and demographics worsen, the decline is likely to be gradual rather than abrupt. Due to its military modernization and geographic

advantage, China is more capable of projecting its military power into Asia than the US; its military strength is, therefore, still on the rise. But the article also acknowledges that an anxious China at the height of its power and an assertive China still on the rise may behave similarly externally and especially become more aggressive on territorial issues. However, the different assessments will inspire very different policy directions for the US.¹

Based on an analysis of “cognitive warfare” in the *PLA Daily*, this article examines China’s international political maneuvering following the August 2 visit of US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan. The maneuvering shows that

1. Oriana Skylar Mastro and Derek Scissors, “China Hasn’t Reached the Peak of Its Power: Why Beijing Can Afford to Bide Its Time,” *Foreign Affairs*, August 22, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/325vkumy>. The view of the article that “China’s rise is a thing of the past” is represented by Hal Brands, a researcher at the American Enterprise Institute, and Michael Beckley, a professor at Tufts University. See Michael Beckley and Hal Brands, “The End of China’s Rise: Beijing Is Running Out of Time to Remake the World,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 1, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/yckjzvn>.

China is still confident, but a confident China may not be willing to compete with the US in the long term as the report suggested, but it may rather suffer risks due to misjudgment.

2. Security Implications

2-1. China tried to grasp the right to speak about Pelosi's Taiwan visit and PLA's military exercises

In PLA's ideas, cognitive warfare "blurs the boundaries between wartime and peacetime, the frontline and rear. It crosses battlefields and national borders, going beyond just the military domain to permeate all social areas such as politics, economics, and diplomacy." The key is the struggle for the "right to define" the nature of the incident, the "right to lead" the process of the incident, and the "right to judge" the outcome of the incident. Since the nature of war is political, therefore morality and legitimacy are the focus of the struggle between the parties. From this viewpoint, China tries to achieve the

effect of "I say more, you say less," "I am right, you are wrong," and "I am the one to speak, not you" through the following manipulation of public opinion.²

First, in terms of the "right to define," China described Pelosi's visit to Taiwan as a "sneaky visit." For instance, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi accused the US of violating the "One-China Principle" and the Three Joint Communiqués; the US not only interferes in China's internal affairs and violates international law and the basic standards of international relations but is also the "biggest spoiler" of peace in the Taiwan Strait and regional stability. On August 10, China released a white paper titled "The Taiwan Issue and China's Unification Efforts in the New Era," which, in addition to repeating its long-standing advocacy for Taiwan, also included allegations against the US. Secondly, in terms of the "right to lead," the PLA's military exercises since August 4 are, in fact, part of its annual drills. Since the joint exercises involved cross-theater, multi-branch scenarios and different assumptions, they could not

2. Yang Cun-she, "Taking the Pulse of Cognitive Domain Warfare: An Analysis of the Characteristics and Development Trends of Cognitive Domain Warfare," *PLA Daily*, August 16, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/475yw6wu>. In China, "cognitive warfare" is referred to as "cognitive domain warfare."

have been planned during Pelosi's visit to Taiwan. However, the Chinese propaganda system has the exercises labeled as a demonstration of the PLA's determination and ability to "safeguard the unification of China and defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity," giving the military operations specific political connotations against the US and Taiwan while drawing international attention to stress its claims. Lastly, in terms of the "right to judge," China has not only mobilized several domestic agencies to issue statements but has also spoken out through people mainly from third-world countries, aiming to create an image of international public opinion as being on China's side. At a press conference, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying listed the support for China from international organizations and countries to build an image that "The one-China principle is a general consensus in the international community. The rightful one gets help while the wrongful one doesn't."³

2-2. China is building an Image of declining US power

Compared to the 1995-96 Taiwan Strait crisis when it sent two carrier battle groups into the Taiwan Strait, the US response to China's military exercises and even missile overflights over Taiwan this time was significantly lower key. While there are certainly different perspectives on the responses, China may interpret this as a decline in US power. Several examples seem to support this interpretation. First, the *PLA Daily* quoted Chinese military researchers' comments on the exercise, saying that the PLA's missiles flew across the densely deployed area of Taiwan's Patriot air defense missiles and "hit the target precisely under the nose of the US Navy's Aegis ships" to demonstrate its ability to break through the defenses with conventional missiles. "China doesn't care about interception since you can't stop our missiles anyway." Secondly, the Chinese Foreign Ministry issued a press release on August 10,

3. Breaking Defense, August 17, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/4xxeeavk>. For China's propaganda on the meaning of military exercises, see "PLA Successfully Held Joint Combat Exercises in the Sea and Airspace around Taiwan," *PLA Daily*, August 5, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/9d4pnsut>. For Hua Chunying's press conference, see "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying Hosts a Regular Press Conference on August 4, 2022," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, August 4, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/2yyt3hmv>.

saying that when Wang Yi would meet with the Foreign Ministers of Mongolia, South Korea, and Nepal from the 8 to the 10. He claimed that the situation in the Taiwan Strait was still in development and brought up “three cautions,” the first of which was “to be aware of the US bringing more crises... due to its embarrassment from being defeated.” Lastly, the PLA’s Eastern Theater issued a statement on the 26, saying that the exercises in the sea and airspace around Taiwan are “normalized military operations” in response to the changing situation in the Taiwan Strait. Unlike the Chinese diplomatic system, which has not previously responded positively to whether military exercises in the Taiwan Strait are the “new norm,” the Eastern Theater’s statement is apparently more explicit and assertive.⁴

The question of whether the balance

of power between China and the US has changed is still left to debate. But the Chinese actions are undoubtedly an attempt to signal a reversal of power superiority between the two countries and to influence US and international perceptions. The messages epitomize China’s attempt to “use an ‘invisible hand’ to manipulate the opponent’s will so it would feel ‘I can’t,’ ‘I don’t dare,’ and ultimately ‘I don’t want to.’”⁵

3. Trend Observation

3-1. Democracies face the dilemma of showing determination and cooling down the situation

The aforementioned example can be regarded as China’s internal and external propaganda, but they still have

4. On China’s attempt to send a political message through military exercises, see Dean Cheng, “PLA Exercises after Pelosi Taiwan Visit Were Largely Pre-planned.” For the praise of China’s military capabilities, see “The PLA has the determination, means, and ability to defend the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country: Military experts interpret our joint combat exercises around Taiwan,” *PLA Daily*, August 7, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/sdjzny3x>. For Wang Yi’s warning, see “Wang Yi Raises ‘Three Cautions’ Against New Developments in the Taiwan Strait,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China*, August 10, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/3c8ht5ts>. For a statement from the Eastern Theater, see “Eastern Theater Organizes Multi-service Joint Combat Patrols and Realistic Exercises in the Air and Sea Regions around Taiwan,” *Eastern Theater Official WeChat*, August 26, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/2s45hs29>.

5. Yang, Cun-she, “Taking the Pulse of Cognitive Domain Warfare: An Analysis of the Characteristics and Development Trends of Cognitive Domain Warfare,” *PLA Daily*, August 16, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/475yw6wu>.

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political effects that cannot be ignored. China's claims, statements, and actions are designed to demonstrate to its people and the international community that it has both the legitimacy of its sovereign claims against Taiwan and the military strength to deter the US and its allies. With the domestic propaganda machine at work, nationalism and patriotism in Chinese society may be further provoked, thus reinforcing the legitimacy of the CCP leadership and making its decisions increasingly hardline and aggressive. The PLA's analysis suggests that "when one side is strong in both hard and soft power with substantial military force, a large number of allies, and a major share of international voice, it often declares war in a high profile. On the other hand, when military actions are likely to trigger a chain reaction, they often use the term 'war' vaguely."⁶ Although China has not yet declared any war, its increasingly high-profile words and actions reflect its confidence in its own soft and hard power.

The article by Oriana Skylar Mastro

and Derek Scissors argues that a China at the peak of its power would be desperate to change the international order through aggressive actions, while a China on the rise would be more willing to back down from an unintended military conflict and less likely to start a war. But this insight may overlook the fact that a confident China that believes in its own power is also prone to misjudge the situation. Therefore, Taiwan, the US, and other democracies are caught in a dilemma of showing determination and cooling down the situation. Though public morale could be boosted if the countries respond with countermeasures or hardline statements, there is also a risk of provoking China and getting undesirable results. Conversely, self-restraining by these countries may cause frustration or anxiety among the people, which China could take as a sign of incompetence or unwillingness and use in the expanded propaganda. It is a policy challenge for democracies to weigh the two and ensure that China correctly understands the messages being delivered.

6. Yang, Cun-she, "Taking the Pulse of Cognitive Domain Warfare: An Analysis of the Characteristics and Development Trends of Cognitive Domain Warfare," *PLA Daily*, 16 August, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/475yw6wu>.

3-2. Democracies need to compete with China in the “cognitive field”

Following the logic of the PLA's “cognitive warfare,” the way Taiwan and other democracies avoid China's misjudgment by overconfidence is to engage in competition in the “cognitive arena. Given that China's “cognitive warfare” constructs itself as a convergence of military power, morality, and legitimacy, democracies must compete with China on these fronts. In terms of the military, Taiwan should keep improving its defense capability and turn it into a clear signal to China. Possible approaches in this regard include revealing China's threats to Taiwan to the international community, highlighting the results of Taiwan's military training and exercises, seeking opportunities for joint exercises or military cooperation with other countries, and selectively revealing the results of military simulations. In addition to the demonstration of strength, highlighting Taiwan's will to defend may also influence or change China's strategic perceptions. Blocking or confiscating intruding Chinese drones to deter China from escalating to more aggressive tactics is also one of the possible approaches.

As China increasingly asserts itself

as a defender of international law and the basic norms of international relations, Taiwan and other democracies should compete with it for the right to speak in terms of morality and legitimacy. For example, China has recently used the “UN-based international order” to counter the “rules-based international order” advocated by the US. Still, the UN Charter does not give states the legitimacy to threaten others to use force on the grounds of defending sovereign independence and territorial integrity. In the face of China's attempt to create a general impression that the majority of the international community is supporting its assertion by allying with third-world countries to endorse its claims, it's in line with the interests of both Taiwan and other democracies to compete with China on international opinion platforms. Taiwan should encourage its friends and allies to express their values and propositions in the international arena proactively; this prevents China from dominating international public opinion and challenges China's claimed legal and legitimate ground to increase the cost and effort required to change the status quo of the international order by its force.



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