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**China's Hybrid Warfare Against Taiwan:
Motives, Methods, and Future Trajectory¹**

Tarik Solmaz²

Abstract

Since President Tsai Ing-wen took office as President of Taiwan in 2016, hybrid warfare has become a central aspect of China's strategy to undermine the Taiwanese government, which Beijing views as "separatist." The evolution of Chinese efforts suggests that more aggressive measures, including military border incursions, threats of force, and large-scale drills, are increasingly coming to the fore within Beijing's hybrid warfare toolbox. With China's growing apprehension towards Taipei, its hybrid actions can be expected to continue after the election of President Lai Ching-te at the start of 2024 and, potentially, to escalate. Nevertheless, the likelihood of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan remains low in the next few years due to Taipei's cautious approach, characterised by its avoidance of a unilateral declaration of independence, coupled with several strategic factors. However, it is essential not to underestimate the risk of a Chinese military attack on Taiwan, as Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 unequivocally demonstrated that hybrid warfare is not the only tool used by revisionist states; traditional warfare is here to stay.

¹ This research article is based on empirical data collected during my PhD research project. This research is undertaken at the University of Exeter, Strategy and Security Institute.

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Introduction

The 2016 Taiwanese presidential elections marked a significant turning point in cross-Strait relations with the victory of Tsai Ing-Wen of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) over pro-Beijing Kuomintang candidate Eric Chu. President Tsai and the DPP's refusal to recognise the "1992 Consensus", a declaration that both sides of the Taiwan Strait are part of one China and will work towards national reunification, has become a central point of contention. Beijing has consistently emphasised that Taiwan's recognition of the "1992 Consensus" is a prerequisite for positive cross-Strait relations. As a result, since 2016, China, viewing the self-governed island as an inalienable part of its national territory, has been waging a comprehensive hybrid warfare campaign against Taiwan.³

In its simplest definition, hybrid warfare is a form of conflict that blends military and non-military instruments while avoiding a full-scale war. This type of conflict operates in the shadows, blurring the lines between war and peace. The hybrid warfare model enables states to maintain ambiguity and plausible deniability, shielding them from the consequences of their subversive actions.⁴

As a "textbook" example of hybrid warfare, China's intimidatory actions against Taiwan embody such features. The main aim of China's hybrid warfare activities has been to remove Taiwan's ruling party, the DPP, from power without going to open war with the Taiwanese army. Yet, the fact that Russia transitioned its prolonged hybrid warfare campaign against Ukraine into a conventional military operation on 24 February 2022 has fuelled concerns over whether Taiwan might face a similar fate soon.⁵

This article posits that an immediate Chinese invasion of Taiwan is less likely than many think owing to Taipei's cautious approach, characterised by its avoidance of a unilateral declaration of independence, coupled with several strategic factors. However, Beijing's hybrid tactics are expected to intensify. This argument is based on the observation that the longer the DPP remains in power, the more aggressive measures are employed in China's hybrid warfare campaign against Taiwan. In addition, despite the low probability of a direct war in the short term, it is crucial not to undervalue the risk of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. Russia's full-scale military operation against Ukraine has clearly shown that hybrid warfare activities are not the sole elements in revisionist states' foreign policy toolkit, and regular warfare is here to stay. Furthermore, the potential consequences of a Sino-Taiwanese War, which could severely harm international peace and security, underscore the need for caution and vigilance.

The remainder of this article is organised as follows: First, it delves into the historical background of the China-Taiwan conflict. Then, it analyses the main elements of the Chinese hybrid warfare operations against Taiwan. Subsequently, it shifts our focus to the future of Chinese hybrid warfare efforts. Next, the article presents recommendations on the subject. Finally, it offers a concise summary of the conclusions drawn from our analysis.

³ Tsai Ing-wen, "President Tsai Issues Statement on China's President Xi's 'Message to Compatriots in Taiwan'," *Office of the President, Republic of China*, 2 January 2019, <https://english.president.gov.tw/>; Thomas J. Shattuck, "The Race to Zero?: China's Poaching of Taiwan's Diplomatic Allies." *Orbis* 64, no. 2 (2020): 336. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2020.02.003>.

⁴ North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), "Countering Hybrid Threats," NATO, 7 March 2024, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_156338.htm.; Andrew Mumford and Pascal Carlucci, "Hybrid Warfare: The Continuation of Ambiguity by Other Means," *European Journal of International Security* 8, no. 2 (2022): 194–197, <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2022.19>.

⁵ See, for example, Michael Schuman, "Is Taiwan Next?," *The Atlantic*, 24 February 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2022/02/vladimir-putin-ukraine-taiwan/622907/>; Roger McShane, "Will Taiwan be the Ukraine of Asia?," *The Economist*, 18 November 2022, <https://www.economist.com/the-world-ahead/2022/11/18/will-taiwan-be-the-ukraine-of-asia>.

Historical Background

From 1927 until 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) insurgents, under the leadership of Mao Zedong, fought a protracted irregular and later full-scale war against the Kuomintang-led government of the Republic of China (ROC) and its leader, Chiang Kai-shek for control of the country. The CCP forces finally triumphed and drove the nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek from mainland China to Taiwan island, where nationalists announced Taipei as the temporary capital of the ROC.⁶

On 1 October 1949, Mao Zedong, who was then Chairman of the CCP, officially proclaimed the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), but without effective control over Taiwan.⁷ Yet, the PRC had no intention of leaving the island in the hands of the Kuomintang.^{8,9}

In the 1950s, the PRC had several confrontations with the Kuomintang-led ROC government across the Taiwan Strait. A significant event was the First Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1954, which broke out over strategic islands near the Chinese mainland. This conflict began in September 1954 when Beijing initiated shelling on Jinmen Island and later expanded its operations to include the Mazu and Dachen Islands.¹⁰ On 18 January 1955, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the armed wing of the CCP, attacked and captured Yijiangshan Islands. This assault resulted in the entire ROC military post of 720 soldiers being killed or wounded.¹¹ Later that month, the US Congress passed the Formosa Resolution, granting President Dwight D. Eisenhower authority to defend Taiwan's offshore islands.¹² Additionally, on 3 March 1995, the US and the ROC signed a mutual defence treaty, pledging American support in case of PRC attacks on the island.¹³ The crisis concluded in May 1955 after China ceased its shelling.¹⁴

The Second Taiwan Strait Crisis unfolded in 1958 as a direct continuation of the first crisis, with China resuming its shelling of the islands of Jinmen and Mazu. Additionally, Chinese vessels blockaded the islands from Taiwanese supply ships. Responding to this escalation, the United States dispatched amphibious assault ships, fighter jets, and anti-aircraft missiles to deter the Chinese military. American involvement played a pivotal role in ceasing the Chinese shelling and reducing tensions in the region.¹⁵

In the decades that followed, both Beijing and Taipei claimed to be the sole legitimate government representing the whole of China, and therefore, bilateral relations remained quite tense. Yet, neither country waged an overt armed conflict. Despite the absence of further actual armed conflicts following

⁶ Kerry K. Gershaneck, *Political Warfare: Strategies for Combating China's Plan to "Win without Fighting"*, (Quantico, Virginia: Marine Corps University Press, 2020), 99.

⁷ John Curtis, *Taiwan: History, Politics and UK Relations*, UK House of Commons Library Research Briefings (28 March 2024), 9. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9254/>.

⁸ Gershaneck, *Political Warfare*, 99.

⁹ Winberg Chai. "Relations between the Chinese Mainland and Taiwan: Overview and Chronology." *Asian Affairs* 26, no. 2 (1999): 59–64. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30172770>.

¹⁰ "The Taiwan Straits Crises: 1954–55 and 1958," Office of the Historian, US Department of State, n.d., <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1953-1960/taiwan-strait-crises>.

¹¹ Han Cheung, "Taiwan in Time: Yijiangshan: Moving the Americans to Action?," *Taipei Times*, 12 January 2020, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/feat/archives/2020/01/12/2003729106>.

¹² Susan V. Lawrence, "Taiwan: The Origins of the U.S. One-China Policy," *Congressional Research Service*, 27 September 2023, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12503/1>.

¹³ Ian Easton, "Will America Defend Taiwan? Here's What History Says," *Hoover Institution*, 30 June 2021, <https://www.hoover.org/research/will-america-defend-taiwan-heres-what-history-says>.

¹⁴ Ian Easton, "Will America Defend Taiwan?"

¹⁵ Bruce A. Elleman, *Taiwan Strait Standoff: 70 Years of PRC–Taiwan Cross-Strait Tensions*, (London: Anthem Press, 2021), 87-108.

the Taiwan Strait Crises of 1954-1955 and 1958, no formal settlement or peace agreement was reached, and technically, the civil war between the two countries has not ended.¹⁶

Nonetheless, in November 1992, China and Taiwan reached an agreement known as the “1992 Consensus,” whereby both sides acknowledged there is only one China and that Mainland China and Taiwan both are part of that one China.¹⁷ However, the “1992 Consensus” remained somewhat ambiguous and subject to different interpretations. For Beijing, the “1992 Consensus” indicates that both sides of the Taiwan Strait belong to one China, with the PRC being the one China.¹⁸ According to the Kuomintang (KMT), it indicates “one China, different interpretations.”¹⁹ As for the DPP, it has never affirmed the framework of the “1992 Consensus.”²⁰

It should also be mentioned that the “1992 Consensus” was a semi-official agreement based on meetings of only semi-official representatives of the PRC and the ROC.²¹ Ma Ying-jeou, who favoured closer ties with China, became the first Taiwanese leader to formally recognise the “1992 Consensus.”²² Thus, his presidency (2008-2016) ushered in a new phase in China-Taiwan relations. Throughout his eight years in office, Ma strengthened Taiwan’s ties with Beijing while setting aside political disputes with China. Accordingly, Taiwan signed several agreements with the PRC to promote collaboration in several areas, including transportation, tourism, judicial assistance, trade, investment, and safety standards. Furthermore, he became the first ROC leader to meet with an incumbent General Secretary of the CCP.²³ As such, during the Ma Ying-jeou presidency, when bilateral relations were relatively friendly, China’s attitudes toward Taiwan were based more on persuasion and less on coercion. Such an approach aimed to enhance interactions with people across all sectors in Taiwan, with the goal of winning ‘hearts and minds’.²⁴

On 16 January 2016, the Democratic Progressive Party and its candidate, Tsai Ing-wen, won a landslide victory in Taiwan’s parliamentary and presidential elections.²⁵ Tsai Ing-wen’s election as President led to alarmism in Beijing due to Tsai and her party’s rejection of the “1992 Consensus.”²⁶ Since then, China has conducted large-scale disruptive operations to remove the DPP from power.

¹⁶ John Culver, “The Unfinished Chinese Civil War,” *The Interpreter*, 30 September 2020, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/unfinished-chinese-civil-war>.

¹⁷ John Dotson, “The CCP Commemorates the 30th Anniversary of the ‘1992 Consensus’ —and Seeks to Change Its Meaning” Global Taiwan Institute, 21 September 2022, <https://globaltaiwan.org/2022/09/the-ccp-commemorates-the-30th-anniversary-of-the-1992-consensus-and-seeks-to-change-its-meaning/>.

¹⁸ Lindsay Maizland, “Why China-Taiwan Relations Are So Tense,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, 8 February 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/china-taiwan-relations-tension-us-policy-biden>.

¹⁹ Maizland, “China-Taiwan Relations.”

²⁰ Maizland, “China-Taiwan Relations.”

²¹ Nils Peterson, Matthew Sperzel, Daniel Shats, and Kaylin Nolan, “China-Taiwan Weekly Update,” *Institute for the Study of War*, 18 April 2024, <https://www.iswresearch.org/2024/04/china-taiwan-weekly-update-april-18-2024.html>.

²² Derek Grossman and Brandon Alexander Millan, “Taiwan’s KMT May Have a Serious ‘1992 Consensus’ Problem”, *RAND*, 25 September 2020, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2020/09/taiwans-kmt-may-have-a-serious-1992-consensus-problem.html>.

²³ Yu-Jie Chen, “‘One China’ Contention in China–Taiwan Relations: Law, Politics and Identity,” *The China Quarterly* 252 (2022): 1026. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741022001333>.

²⁴ Emily S. Chen, “China’s Hearts-and-Minds Policy in Taiwan,” *The Diplomat*, 20 November 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/11/chinas-hearts-and-minds-policy-in-taiwan/>.

²⁵ Richard C. Bush, “Taiwan’s Election Results, Explained,” *Brookings*, 16 January 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/taiwans-election-results-explained/>.

²⁶ “DPP Denies Existence of ‘1992 Consensus,’” *Taipei Times*, 25 December 2010, <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2010/12/25/2003491835>; Stacy Hsu, “Tsai Cites Public’s Will Over ‘Consensus,’” *Taipei Times*, 23 July 2016, <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/front/archives/2016/07/23/2003651597>.

Hybrid Warfare Operations

Since Tsai took office in 2016, hybrid warfare has become a central aspect of Beijing's approach to subvert Taiwan's democratically elected government, which it regards as "separatist". The Chinese hybrid warfare campaign against Taiwan can be divided into two main periods: from 2016 to 2020, encompassing Tsai's first presidential term, and from 2020 to the end of 2023, covering her second term.

During Tsai's first term in office, China primarily relied on non-kinetic measures, with kinetic instruments playing a secondary role.²⁷ Diplomatic pressure was a significant aspect of China's hybrid activities in that period of time. Beijing initiated efforts aimed at undermining Taiwan's international legitimacy by persuading Taipei's diplomatic allies to switch their allegiance. Consequently, between 2016 and 2020, several states, including São Tomé and Príncipe, Panama, Burkina Faso, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, the Solomon Islands, and Kiribati, terminated their diplomatic ties with Taiwan in favour of establishing relations with China.²⁸

China's hybrid actions also included propaganda and disinformation, with dual aims: undermining confidence in Taiwan's democratically elected leader, Tsai Ing-wen, and cultivating a positive image of mainland China among the Taiwanese populace. Beijing's psychological operations relied on three key pillars: state-controlled media outlets such as *People's Daily*, *China Daily*, *Global Times*, *Xinhua*, and *CCTV*; Taiwanese media platforms sympathetic to Beijing's narrative; and social media channels, where China deployed trolls and fake accounts to manipulate public sentiment.²⁹

As part of its hybrid efforts against Taiwan, Chinese-controlled cyber-warfare operatives have conducted extensive cyber-attacks targeting Taiwanese websites. According to Taiwan News, in 2017 alone, Taiwan's military websites experienced over two hundred million cyber-attacks perpetrated by Chinese hackers. The report further identified the Ministry of National Defence, the National Defence University, the Recruitment Centre of the National Armed Forces, hospitals affiliated with the Medical Affairs Bureau of the Ministry of National Defence, and the Political Warfare Bureau of the Ministry of National Defence as the five most targeted military and military-associated networks.³⁰ A *Financial Times* news report published on 24 June 2018 stated that "Taiwan has been hit by a jump in serious cyber-attacks from China during the past two years in the latest sign that Beijing is only increasing its pressure as the US reaffirms its support for the self-ruled island."³¹

²⁷ David Ignatius, "China's Hybrid Warfare against Taiwan," *The Washington Post*, 14 December 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2018/12/14/chinas-hybrid-warfare-against-taiwan/>.

²⁸ Shattuck, *China's Poaching*, 335.

²⁹ Aaron Huang, "Combatting and Defeating Chinese Propaganda and Disinformation: A Case Study of Taiwan's 2020 Elections," (Harvard Kennedy School, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2020); Linda Zhang, "How to Counter China's Disinformation Campaign in Taiwan," *Military Review*, 100, no. 5, (September-October 2020): 21-32. <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/September-October-2020/Zhang-Disinformation-Campaign/>.

³⁰ Sophia Yang, "200 Million Cyber Attacks Hit Taiwan's Military Networks in 2017," *Taiwan News*, 28 May 2018, <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/3441894>.

³¹ Edward White, "Taiwan Hit by Jump in Cyber Attacks from China." *Financial Times*, 25 June 2018. <https://www.ft.com/content/8e5b26c0-75c5-11e8-a8c4-408cfba4327c>.

Despite Beijing's hybrid warfare activities, President Tsai Ing-wen secured a second term in the January 2020 election with a landslide victory over the China-friendly Kuomintang candidate, Han Kuo-yu.³² In response, China intensified its hybrid efforts against Taiwan. Notably, while non-kinetic measures persisted during Tsai's second term, there was a noticeable increase in the deployment of military instruments within Beijing's operations. Xi Jinping's decision to drop the word 'peaceful' from reunification rhetoric after Tsai's second win was a clear indication of the shifting balance towards "kinetic" actions and increasing threats.³³

From June 2016 to June 2020, the number of incursions by the Chinese military numbered less than 100.³⁴ However, following Tsai Ing-wen's historic re-election victory in January 2020, Chinese military incursions into Taiwan's Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) experienced a dramatic upsurge. In 2020, the PLA carried out at least 380 incursions into Taiwan's ADIZ.³⁵ This marked the highest number since 1996, when tensions between Beijing and Taipei were heightened owing to the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis.³⁶ The following year, this figure more than doubled to 972. By 2022, the number surged to 1,737, with a staggering 1,714 Chinese warplanes tracked entering Taiwan's ADIZ in 2023.³⁷

Beijing has frequently showcased its military strength through large-scale drills. A notable instance occurred in August 2022, following a visit by then-House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan. The PLA conducted exercises encircling the island, involving units from various branches such as the Navy, Air Force, Rocket Force, Strategic Support Force, and Logistic Support Force, all under the PLA Eastern Theater Command (ETC).³⁸ Similarly, in August 2023, following a visit by Taiwan's Vice President Lai Ching Te to the United States (US), the PLA conducted military exercises focused on achieving maritime and airspace control, conducting underwater searches, and implementing anti-submarine actions around Taiwan.³⁹

In addition to military intimidation, Chinese officials have frequently issued explicit threats of force against Taiwan, underscoring Beijing's resolve to unify mainland China with the island. For instance, in 2021, China's Defence Ministry spokesperson, Colonel Wu Qian, unequivocally stated that Taiwan's independence would lead to war.⁴⁰ Similarly, during his address at the 20th Shangri-La Dialogue in 2023, Defence Minister General Li Shangfu asserted, "If anyone dares to split Taiwan from China, the

³² Lily Kuo, "Taiwan Election: Tsai Ing-Wen Wins Landslide in Rebuke to China," *The Guardian*, 12 January, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/11/taiwan-re-elects-tsai-ing-wen-as-president-in-clear-message-to-china>.

³³ Yew Lun Tian and Yimou Lee, "China Drops Word 'Peaceful' in Latest Push for Taiwan 'Reunification'," *Reuters*, 22 May 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN22Y06P/>.

³⁴ April Fong, "Obama's vs. Trump's Taiwan Policies: Understanding China's Military Incursions in the Taiwan Strait" (PhD thesis, Harvard University, 2020), 57-67, <https://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/37373250>.

³⁵ William Langley, "PLA Warplanes Made a Record 380 Incursions into Taiwan's Airspace in 2020, Report Says," *South China Morning Post*, 6 January 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3116557/pla-warplanes-made-record-380-incursions-taiwans-airspace-2020>.

³⁶ The Third Taiwan Strait Crisis (1995-1996) was triggered by Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui's visit to the United States, which angered Beijing. In response, China carried out a series of war games, military drills, and missile tests near Taiwan. For details about the Third Taiwan Crisis, see, Andrew Scobell, "Show of Force: Chinese Soldiers, Statesmen, and the 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis." *Political Science Quarterly* 115, no. 2 (2000): 227-46. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2657901>.

³⁷ "Taiwan Incursion Updates – Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance," n.d., <https://missiledefenseadvocacy.org/missile-threat-and-proliferation/todays-missile-threat/taiwan-missile-updates/>.

³⁸ "PLA Eastern Theater Command Conducts Joint training Exercises Around Taiwan Island, 3 August 2022," *China Military Online*, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/Exercises/News_209184/16001379.html.

³⁹ Liu Xuanzun, "UPDATE: PLA Holds Joint Drills Around Taiwan Island Following Separatist Lai's Provocative 'Stopovers' in US," *Global Times*, 19 August 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202308/1296578.shtml>.

⁴⁰ "China Warns Taiwan Independence 'Means War' as US Pledges Support," *BBC NEWS*, 29 January 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-55851052>.

Chinese military will resolutely safeguard China's national sovereignty and territorial integrity, at all costs, without hesitation, and without fear of any opponent."⁴¹

Beijing's "upgraded" grey-zone tactics failed to prevent the victory of DPP candidate Lai Ching-te in the recent January election, where he prevailed over the Beijing-friendly Kuomintang candidate Hou Yu-ih.⁴² Similar to President Tsai, Taiwan's president-elect and incumbent vice president Lai reject the "1992 Consensus" and is committed to safeguarding the island's de facto independence from mainland China. Hence, Beijing, characterising Lai as a "troublemaker" and a "dangerous separatist," will likely continue to harbour deep distrust of Taipei in the near future.⁴³ This raises questions about the trajectory of China's hybrid warfare against Taiwan.

What Might Come Next?

Beijing's hybrid warfare actions, a complex blend of kinetic and non-kinetic instruments, have been steadily intensifying over the past eight years. This evolution is evident in actions such as repeated military border incursions, large-scale military exercises, and overt threats of force. These activities underscore Beijing's evolving approach, which places greater emphasis on coercive tactics and military posturing to assert its influence over Taiwan.

Beijing's perception of Taiwan's President-elect, Lai Ching-te, as a "troublemaker" and "dangerous separatist" is a crucial factor in understanding China's future actions. Given this perception, it is foreseeable that China will likely seek to intensify its hybrid activities in the coming years. The kinetic aspects of Beijing's hybrid warfare activities may, therefore, become more visible in the near future. Moreover, Beijing may employ maritime militias, known as "little blue men," which are used across the South China Sea on a broader scale to harass and intimidate Taiwan.⁴⁴

Despite the escalating hybrid warfare activities, China has several compelling reasons to avoid a full-scale conflict with Taiwan. One primary reason is Taiwan's adherence to the status quo. China has consistently warned Taipei against any move towards formal independence, stating that it would lead to war.⁴⁵ While Taiwanese leaders have consistently maintained that Taiwan is already a sovereign and independent country, they have refrained from making a formal declaration of independence to avoid provoking Beijing.⁴⁶ Such a cautious approach has kept the threat perception from reaching an alarm threshold for China. Taiwan's president-elect, Lai Ching-te, has emphasised maintaining the status quo

⁴¹ "If Anyone Dares to Separate Taiwan from China, Chinese Military Will Not Hesitate for a Second: Chinese Defense Minister," *Global Times*, 4 June 2023., <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202306/1291893.shtml>.

⁴² Christopher Bodeen And Simina Mistreanu, "The Ruling-party Candidate Strongly Opposed by China Wins Taiwan's Presidential Election," *The Associated Press*, 16 January 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/taiwan-china-election-cbf44565b771cddf60c2a26d2014b0c>.

⁴³ Rupert Wingfield-Hayes, "William Lai: Taiwan Just Chose a President China Loathes. What Now?," *BBC News*, 13 January 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-67920530>

⁴⁴ Simon Tisdall, "Little Blue Men: The Maritime Militias Pushing China's Claims," *The Guardian*, 28 November 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/16/little-blue-men-the-maritime-militias-pushing-chinas-claims-in-south-china-sea>.

⁴⁵ Liu Zhen, "'Taiwan Independence Means War': China's Defence Ministry Warns Joe Biden against Siding with Taipei," *South China Morning Post*, 28 January 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3119663/taiwan-independence-means-war-chinas-defence-ministry-warns>.

⁴⁶ Lily Kuo, "Tsai Ing-wen Says China Must 'Face Reality' of Taiwan's Independence," *The Guardian*, 15 January 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/15/tsai-ing-wen-says-china-must-face-reality-of-taiwans-independence>.

and has expressed willingness for dialogue with Beijing.⁴⁷ This indicates that the first factor that led the Chinese government to prefer the hybrid warfare approach – the lack of an explicit *casus belli* that a Taiwanese declaration would provide – is likely to persist.

The second factor that significantly influences China's hybrid warfare approach is Washington's strong support for Taiwan. The situation in Taiwan serves as a microcosm of broader geopolitical tensions. Washington has consistently stated its commitment to defending Taiwan in the event of a direct invasion by China.⁴⁸ As such, a Chinese invasion of Taiwan may potentially result in severe sanctions against China or even spark a full-scale conflict between the two superpowers. So far, China has prioritised hybrid warfare tactics against Taiwan in order to mitigate the risk of provoking US intervention. There is no indication that Washington will terminate its defence ties with Taiwan, especially given President Lai's inclination towards closer relations with the US.

The third aspect involves China's portrayal as a peaceful actor. Beijing introduced the notion of a "peaceful rise" in the early 2000s to alleviate suspicions and reassure the global community that its expanding economic and military capabilities would not threaten international peace and security.⁴⁹ This policy remains crucial for China to sustain economic growth and bolster diplomatic influence worldwide. Engaging in overt military action against Taiwan would undeniably tarnish China's international reputation. Maintaining China's economic progress still relies on its commitment to a peaceful rise to an important degree, and there is no immediate need for Beijing to deviate from this path in the short term.

The fourth important factor concerns the difficulty of occupying the island militarily. Even though Beijing has consistently upgraded and fortified its armed forces, commencing an invasion of Taiwan presents considerable obstacles for China's military. China has not engaged in conventional warfare since the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War, leaving its military without recent experience to test its doctrine and capabilities in such conflicts.⁵⁰ Furthermore, a potential Chinese invasion of Taiwan would necessitate extensive amphibious operations. Yet, at present, the PLA lacks the military capacity to execute such an amphibious assault on Taiwan.⁵¹

The last factor worth mentioning is the critical role of Taiwan's semiconductor industry, which largely dominates global semiconductor manufacturing. China's reliance on Taiwan's semiconductor manufacturing significantly increases the prospective costs and risks of waging a conventional war against Taiwan. The economic implications of such a war are substantial, further reinforcing China's preference for hybrid warfare tactics.⁵²

In conclusion, the hybrid form of warfare still aligns with Beijing's cost-benefit calculus. This suggests that the ongoing tension between the two nations is likely to persist within the grey zone between war and peace, at least for the foreseeable future. Consequently, the likelihood of a full-blown war remains

⁴⁷ Ben Blanchard, "Lai Ching-te, Taiwan's New President-elect, Will Face China's Ire," *Reuters*, 13 January 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/taiwan-president-elect-lai-face-chinas-ire-after-victory-2024-01-13/>.

⁴⁸ Kevin Liptak, "Biden's Past Promises for US to Defend Taiwan under Microscope in Meeting with China's Xi," *CNN*, 14 November 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/11/13/politics/joe-biden-taiwan/index.html>.

⁴⁹ Zheng Bijian. "China's 'Peaceful Rise' to Great-Power Status." *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 5 (2005): 18–24. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20031702>.

⁵⁰ Timothy R. Heath, "China's Military Has No Combat Experience: Does It Matter?" *RAND*, 27 November 2018, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2018/11/chinas-military-has-no-combat-experience-does-it-matter.html>.

⁵¹ Harlan Ullman, "Reality Check #10: China Will not Invade Taiwan," *Atlantic Council*, 18 February, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/reality-check/reality-check-10-china-will-not-invade-taiwan/>.

⁵² Ian Bremmer, "Why China Won't Invade Taiwan Anytime Soon," *TIME*, 12 April 2013, <https://time.com/6270599/china-invade-taiwan/>.

lower in the next few years than commonly perceived. Having said that, it is crucial not to underestimate the risk of a direct Chinese invasion of Taiwan as Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine has unmistakably proven that revisionist states utilise more than just hybrid warfare tactics; traditional warfare is still very much in use. Moreover, the potential consequences of a cross-strait war are significant.

The likelihood of such an event is not static but rather dependent on a complex interplay of circumstances mentioned above. These include Beijing's perception of the threat from Taiwan's ruling party, the DPP, Washington's commitment to protecting the island from a Chinese invasion, China's reliance on Taiwan's semiconductor industry, China's amphibious warfare capabilities, and China's commitment to the idea of "peaceful rise". The fluidity of these factors could undeniably increase the probability of a Chinese full-scale military operation against Taiwan.

Recommendations

As noted in the previous sections, China's threat perception concerning a more independence-leaning Taiwan has been increasing, and hence, one can expect that its hybrid warfare activities will continue to escalate. For this reason, Taiwan's strategic partnerships, particularly with its key ally, the United States, are crucial. Strengthening these alliances will not only enhance Taiwan's security but also address its vulnerabilities, enabling it to counter China's hybrid warfare operations effectively.

It is also paramount for Taiwan to exercise caution in its actions to avoid crossing Beijing's red lines. Beijing has consistently warned Taipei that any move towards *de jure* independence means war.⁵³ Hence, Taipei should maintain the status quo in its relations with China and refrain from making any moves towards formal independence. The most effective strategy for preventing a Chinese invasion of Taiwan is to maintain a stable and principled cross-strait relationship. Therefore, the Taiwanese government should avoid provocative rhetoric and instead focus on fostering bilateral trade while seeking opportunities to restore "diplomatic relations" with Beijing. By refraining from actions that might provoke the Chinese government and actively pursuing avenues for dialogue and cooperation, Taipei can foster stability and enhance bilateral relations.

Thirdly, as the evolution of Chinese hybrid warfare efforts is a clear indication that more severe measures, including repeated military incursions into Taiwan's airspace and large-scale military exercises, are becoming increasingly prominent, Taiwan's defence against hybrid warfare should be more strongly focused on countering Beijing's military activities in the coming years.

Beijing has been employing military instruments short of kinetic engagement, primarily aiming to intimidate and harass Taiwanese decision-makers and the population. In response, Taiwan can engage in public awareness campaigns to inform its citizens and the international community about the threats posed by Chinese intimidatory activities. This proactive approach can help rally domestic support and, importantly, garner international sympathy for Taiwan's security concerns. Similarly, the Philippines, which also faces Beijing's hybrid threats, has been exposing China's disruptive activities in

⁵³ "China Warns Taiwan Independence Would Trigger War," *BBC News*, 11 June 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-61768875>; Shi Jiangtao, "Taiwan's Presidential Election Risks War, ex-Beijing Official Says as Mainland Steps up Pressure over Island," *South China Morning Post*, 25 December 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3246206/taiwans-presidential-election-risks-war-says-ex-beijing-official-mainland-steps-pressure-over-island>.

the South China Sea since 2023 to impel Beijing to act more responsibly and abide by international law, as well as to garner support and solidarity from neighbouring countries in Southeast Asia.⁵⁴

It is crucial to underline the necessity for Taiwan to increase its deterrence capability. Since Tsai Ing-wen took office in 2016, the Taiwanese government has been resolute in its mission to bolster its defence in response to Beijing's disruptive actions around the Taiwan Strait. Over the past seven years, Taiwan has consistently raised its defence spending, growing from NT\$355.7 billion (2% of GDP) in 2017 to NT\$580.3 billion (2.5% of GDP) in 2023.⁵⁵ In August 2023, Taipei announced a further 3.5% increase in the defence budget to a record NT\$606.8 billion (US\$19 billion), or 2.6% of GDP for 2024.⁵⁶

Taiwan has also made progress in enhancing its missile production, upgrading unmanned aerial vehicles, and acquiring F-16 fighter jets and military aircraft tracking systems from the US.⁵⁷ Furthermore, Taiwan conducts regular military drills to counter China's hybrid warfare tactics and prepare for a potential full-scale invasion.⁵⁸ However, despite a significant increase in defence spending and preparedness over the past several years, Taipei needs to invest more to effectively deter China and prevent the military balance from tipping decisively in Beijing's favour.⁵⁹

Finally, Taiwan and its Western allies should not underestimate the risk of a large-scale Sino-Taiwanese War despite the low probability of such a catastrophic conflict. After the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, the West largely believed that hybrid warfare would be the predominant form of conflict in the 21st century. During this period, many defence analysts even declared the death of conventional warfare.⁶⁰ Indeed, in today's world, revisionist states primarily favour indirect methods of attack due to the high costs and potentially devastating impacts of large-scale armed conflicts.

However, Russia's military invasion of Ukraine, initiated in February 2022, undoubtedly demonstrated that hybrid warfare is not the sole component in revisionist states' security policy toolkit, and conventional warfare remains a significant threat. These modes of warfare are not mutually exclusive, and revisionist authoritarian states still pose the biggest conventional and hybrid threat to the West's and its allies' security. Hence, central actors in the Western security architecture, including Taiwan's Western allies, must be prepared to address both conventional and hybrid threats at the same time.

⁵⁴ Jay Tristan Tarriela, "Why the Philippines Is Exposing China's Aggressive Actions in the South China Sea," *The Diplomat*, 19 April 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/04/why-the-philippines-is-exposing-chinas-aggressive-actions-in-the-south-china-sea/>

⁵⁵ "The Ministry of National Defense Issues a Press Release Stating that the Budget of National Defense Has Grown Steadily Year by Year to Promote Military Build-up and War Preparations (August 17, 2023)," *Ministry of National Defense (Republic of China)*, 17 August 2023, <https://www.mnd.gov.tw/english/Publish.aspx?title=News%20Channel&SelectStyle=Defense%20News%20&p=82089>

⁵⁶ David Sacks, "Taiwan Announced a Record Defense Budget: But Is It Enough to Deter China?" *Council on Foreign Relations*, 30 August 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/taiwan-announced-record-defense-budget-it-enough-deter-china>.

⁵⁷ Yimou Lee, "Taiwan to More Than Double Annual Missile Production Capacity Amid China Tension," *Reuters*, 3 March 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taiwan-more-than-double-annual-missile-production-capacity-amid-china-tension-2022-03-03/>; "US approves possible sale of F-16 search and track systems to Taiwan," *Reuters*, 24 August 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/us-approves-possible-sale-f-16-search-track-systems-taiwan-2023-08-23/>;

⁵⁸ See, for example, William Yang, "Taiwan Drills Draw on Lessons From Ukraine, China Threats," *Voice of America*, 20 July 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/taiwan-drills-draw-on-lessons-from-ukraine-china-threats/7188525.html>; Christopher Bodeen, "Taiwan holds military drills to defend against the threat of a Chinese invasion," *The Associated Press*, 31 January 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/taiwan-military-drills-china-f0619b21f516a4e92be6588c4e954bf4>.

⁵⁹ David Sacks, "Taiwan Announced a Record Defense Budget."

⁶⁰ See, for example, Jahara Matisek and Ian Bertram, "The Death of American Conventional Warfare: It's the Political Willpower, Stupid," *The Strategy Bridge*, 5 November 2017, <https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2017/11/5/the-death-of-american-conventional-warfare-its-the-political-willpower-stupid>; Sean McFate, *The New Rules of War: Victory in the Age of Durable Disorder*, (New York, NY: William Morrow, 2019).

Conclusion

Beijing's adoption of hybrid warfare tactics, initially focusing on non-military measures and later incorporating substantive military elements, stresses its determination to influence Taiwan's political landscape and to remove the DPP from power. Despite Beijing's hybrid efforts, the victory of DPP candidate Lai Ching-te in Taiwan's 2024 presidential election indicates a continuation of Taiwanese people's resistance to Beijing's pressure and commitment to preserving Taiwan's de facto independence.

Taipei's avoidance of a formal declaration of independence, coupled with various strategic factors, presently diminishes the likelihood of a full-scale invasion of Taiwan by China in the near future. However, with Lai assuming office in May 2024, the trajectory of hybrid warfare attacks is expected to escalate. Past experiences in cross-strait relations suggest that China's hybrid operations typically adopt increasingly aggressive tactics when the DPP maintains power for prolonged durations.

Consequently, Taipei should prioritise maintaining the status quo and, ideally, seek to restore "diplomatic" and economic relations with Beijing. Secondly, Taiwan must remain vigilant against potential future hybrid threats from mainland China. Additionally, Taiwan's defence strategy should place greater emphasis on countering Beijing's military intimidation in the coming years. Finally, Taiwan and its Western allies should never underestimate the risk of a full-scale war and prepare to fight and win such a war, despite the low probability of such a confrontation, especially considering Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which demonstrated that hybrid conflict is not the sole component in revisionist states' foreign policy toolkit.