

The CCP 20th National Assembly and PLA Live-Fire Drills Around Taiwan: Lessons Learned

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Abstract

It is clear in the report of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) 20th National Congress that Secretary General Xi Jinping still insists on a “peaceful solution” as the first option for resolving the Taiwan “problem” and accomplishing the sacred goal of national reunification. Xi showed his insistence on a “peaceful” solution by reiterating the goal of “peaceful reunification” and the One Country, Two Systems appeal first introduced by Deng Xiaoping. Xi also drew a clear red line by warning “We will continue to strive for peaceful reunification with the greatest sincerity and the utmost effort, but we will never promise to renounce the use of force, and we reserve the option of taking all measures necessary. This is directed solely at interference by outside forces and the few separatists seeking Taiwan independence and their separatist activities; it is by no means targeted at our Taiwan compatriots.” The meaning of Xi’s report “achieving the goals for the centenary of the People’s Liberation Army in 2027 and more quickly elevating our people’s armed forces to world-class standards” is to ask the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) to put attention on the mission of military build-up instead of combat readiness for war in the next five years. Taiwan has learned from the CCP 20th National Congress and the recent series of PLA live-fire drills — not to mention the Russian-Ukrainian war — that it is necessary for Taiwan security to establish asymmetric warfare capabilities, to modernize symmetric warfare capabilities, and to reform the reserve forces.

Keywords: CCP 20th National Congress, Xi Jinping, Taiwan Issue, PLA Exercises around Taiwan, Russian-Ukrainian War

The CCP 20th National Congress political report presented by Xi Jinping on behalf of the 19th CCP Central Committee has concluded the implementation and achievements in cross-Strait relations in the past decade. It has also highlighted Xi's will and determination to solve the Taiwan "problem" on his terms in the next five years, his third term in power.

In this report, Xi explained the severe struggle against the challenges of Taiwan independence and "external interference" with the propagandistic statement "In response to separatist activities aimed at Taiwan independence and gross provocations of external interference in Taiwan affairs, we have resolutely fought against separatism and countered interference, demonstrating our resolve and ability to safeguard China's sovereignty and territorial integrity and to oppose Taiwan independence. We have strengthened our strategic initiative for China's complete reunification and consolidated commitment to the One-China principle within the international community."

At the end of this review, Xi described the achievements of the central party's Taiwan policy during his tenure by claiming "We have put forward an overall policy framework for resolving the Taiwan question in the new era and facilitated cross-Strait exchanges and cooperation. We have resolutely opposed separatist activities aimed at Taiwan independence and foreign interference. We have thus maintained the initiative and the ability to steer in cross-Strait relations."

In addition to reviewing his achievements over the past decade, Xi highlighted his views on the solution to the Taiwan "problem" by stating that "Resolving the Taiwan question and realizing China's complete reunification is, for the Party, a historic mission and an unshakable commitment. It is also a shared aspiration of all the sons and daughters of the Chinese nation and a natural requirement for realizing the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. We will implement our Party's overall policy for resolving the Taiwan question in the new era, maintain the initiative and the ability to steer in cross-Strait relations, and unswervingly advance the cause of national reunification."



Figure 1. CCP 20th National Congress

Source: 〈中國共產黨第二十次全國代表大會在京開幕習近平代表第十九屆中央委員會向大會作報告〉, October 16, 2022, 《中國政府網》, <http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-10/16/content_5718884.htm>.

On the pragmatic measures, Xi delivered his appeal for a “peaceful” solution with “The policies of peaceful reunification and One Country, Two Systems are the best way to realize reunification across the Taiwan Strait; this best serves the interests of Chinese people on both sides of the Strait and the entire Chinese nation. We will adhere to the One-China principle and the 1992 Consensus. On this basis, we will conduct extensive and in-depth consultations on cross-Strait relations and national reunification with people from all political parties, sectors, and social strata in Taiwan, and we will work with them to promote the peaceful development of cross-Strait relations and advance the process of China’s peaceful reunification.”

Xi also issued a clear warning: “Taiwan is China’s Taiwan. Resolving the Taiwan question is a matter for the Chinese, a matter that must be resolved by the Chinese. We will continue to strive for peaceful reunification with the greatest sincerity and the utmost effort, but we will never promise to renounce the use of force, and we reserve

the option of taking all measures necessary. This is directed solely at interference by outside forces and the few separatists seeking Taiwan independence and their separatist activities; it is by no means targeted at our Taiwan compatriots.”

At the end of his talk on Taiwan, Xi expressed his determination to accomplish the goal of national reunification by swearing “The wheels of history are rolling on toward China’s reunification and the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Complete reunification of our country must be realized, and it can, without doubt, be realized!”

Xi’s vision on military modernization was also of particular interest to Taiwan. Xi asked the military to “achiev[e] the goals for the centenary of the People’s Liberation Army in 2027 and more quickly elevat[e] our people’s armed forces to world-class standards are strategic tasks for building a modern socialist country in all respects.”

Xi was not only highlighting the direction of military build-up; he also interpreted in detail the specific items, including troop training and combat preparedness, informatized and intelligent warfare, strategic deterrence, new domain forces with new combat capabilities, unmanned and intelligent combat capabilities, joint operations, and military education.

Xi put the greatest emphasis on joint operations. He said the military must improve command systems for joint operations and enhance systems and capabilities for reconnaissance and early warning, joint strike, battlefield support, and integrated logistics support. Xi also asked the armed forces to intensify military training under combat conditions, with emphasis on joint training, force-on-force training, and high-tech training.

I. Xi Jinping Does Not Intend to Use Force against Taiwan

The report makes it clear that currently Xi still regards a “peaceful” solution as the first option to solve the Taiwan “problem” and accomplishing national reunification. Xi reiterate the vision of “peaceful reunification” and the One Country, Two Systems first established by Deng Xiaoping. This insistence has also been seen in

Xi's significant talks involving Taiwan during his former terms, such as the political report of the CCP 19th National Congress in 2017, his remarks on the 40th anniversary of the Letter to Taiwanese Compatriots in 2019, his talk on the Centennial of the CCP's founding and another talk on the 110th anniversary of the Xinhai Revolution in 2021. In each significant public talk, Xi reiterated his strategic guidance on Taiwan policy, which includes insisting on "peaceful reunification," One Country Two Systems, the so-called "1992 Consensus," advancing the peaceful development of the cross-Strait relations, and promoting cross-Strait integration.

On the other hand, Xi's mention of the military option emphasized that military force is not aimed at Taiwanese compatriots but rather at an allegedly small number of Taiwan separatists to coerce them and oppose "foreign interference."

Xi's public statement clearly expressed his intention to solve the Taiwan "problem" by "peaceful" means. The military, therefore, is mainly preparing for coercing Taiwan separatist activities and countering foreign interference. Although Xi says that our world, our times, and history are changing in ways like never before, "the hegemonic, high-handed, and bullying acts of using strength to intimidate the weak, taking from others by force and subterfuge, and playing zero-sum games are exerting grave harm." This foreign interference, therefore, becomes the main challenge to China's national reunification. Still, Xi insists on a "peaceful" solution as the first among a list of options to solve the Taiwan "problem." Xi's insistence doesn't mean that he is a pacifist, but rather signals his belief that a "peaceful" solution is the safest and least costly way to achieve national reunification.

The bitter lesson of Russian President Putin in the Russian-Ukrainian war also reminded Xi not to make a similar mistake. Putin underestimated Ukraine's capability and will to resist Russia's invasion. He also made wrong judgement calls on possible military support by NATO countries to Ukraine. Most importantly, Putin overestimated the operational and warfighting capabilities of the Russian military. These mistakes have pushed Putin into a dilemma with regards to the "special military operation" in Ukraine. He initiated this operation and appealed for the neutralization of this former vassal state from NATOization, although his neutralization of Ukraine means maintenance of the vassal status of Ukraine to Russia.

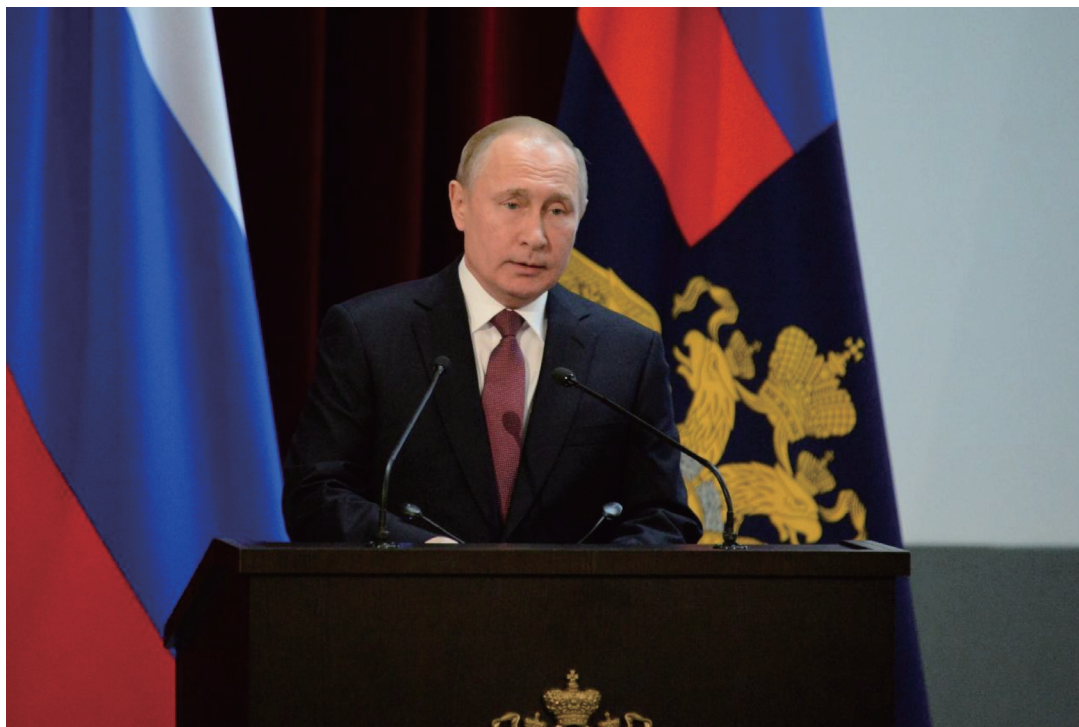


Figure 2. Russian President Vladimir Putin

Source: Depositphotos.

Putin’s miscalculation was caused by national-security-level officials, most of them high-ranking generals in the Russian military. These generals delivered unrealistic information to Putin. The performance of these generals reflected the cruel fact that the promotion of high-ranking generals, under Putin’s authoritarian power, was not mainly generated by performance in the military profession, but by consideration of personal loyalty to Putin. Although some of these generals have combat experience from military action against Georgia, the majority of these generals tended to offer politically correct instead of realistic analysis and estimation of the military situation to Putin. The information Putin needed to make decisions was therefore not realistic to the real situation; this “partial hearing” problem — created by Putin himself — has put him into an embarrassing position in Ukraine.

Xi must be aware of the mistakes that Putin has made. Putin's painful lessons in Ukraine remind Xi to be skeptical of new-generation generals whom he has promoted after he succeeded Hu Jintao and became the supreme commander of the armed forces. After coming to power, Xi initiated a reshuffle of high-ranking generals. Xi did not trust the old-generation generals who were promoted by Hu or by Jiang Zemin. These senior generals had expressed publicly more than once their loyalty to Jiang and despised the authority of Hu and Xi over the armed forces.

Xi's reshuffle took place under the guise of countering corruption and military reform, but the main purpose was to protect himself from a potential military coup by senior generals. To stabilize the military, Xi promoted junior generals quickly by appointing them to senior positions — positions that should have been filled by experienced senior generals. Since these new-generation generals lack necessary commanding and operational experience, the main criterion for promotion was their political loyalty to Xi.



Figure 3. Chinese Leader Xi Jinping at a Military Parade

Source: Minnie Chan, “What Xi Jinping’s show of military strength means for China’s neighbours,” *South China Morning Post*, August 1, 2017, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2104905/chinas-show-military-muscle-gives-neighbours-plenty?module=perpetual_scroll_0&pgtype=article&campaign=2104905>.

Thus, Xi knows well that these new-generation generals lack the experience to deal with a real war. They will probably underestimate the combat capabilities of enemy forces and overestimate their own forces, as Putin's generals did. The mistakes Putin has made were in large part the outcome of the unprofessional analysis of his generals. China will learn this painful lesson from Russia. This lesson will increase Xi's mistrust of the military and make Xi more hesitant to choose the military option to resolve the Taiwan issue.

II. Xi Urges the PLA to Have the Capabilities to Solve the Taiwan Problem from 2027

Although Xi has no intention of using force to unify Taiwan, he did state that the PLA must have the ability to solve Taiwan problem from 2027. In his speech at the opening of the CCP 20th national congress, Xi asked the military to “achiev[e] the goals for the centenary of the People's Liberation Army in 2027 and more quickly elevat[e] our people's armed forces to world-class standards.”

Xi has not explained the goals for the centenary of the PLA in 2027. According to CIA Deputy Director David Cohen, Xi has ordered the country's military to develop the ability to take control of Taiwan by 2027. This, however, does not mean that Xi has the intention to invade Taiwan militarily. “He has not made the decision to do that, but he has asked his military to put him in a position where if that's what he wanted to do, he would be able to.”¹

In addition to the CIA, the Pentagon's deputy secretary of policy, Colin Kahl, has also mentioned that China should learn Putin's lesson from the Russian-Ukrainian war and be more cautious on the estimates for launching a military invasion of Taiwan.

1. “China to develop ability to seize Taiwan by 2027: US Intel,” *The Defense Post*, September 21, 2022, <<https://www.thedefensepost.com/2022/09/21/china-seize-taiwan-us-intel/>>.

Although Xi asked the armed forces to accomplish preparations for military struggle against Taiwan, his intention is still not to use force to solve Taiwan problem.²

In fact, the main mission of the PLA in Xi's third term is to accelerate the progress of military build-up. In his report, Xi highlighted that the armed forces should "quickly elevate itself to world-class standards." In the CCP 19th national congress political report, Xi highlighted this strategic goal of PLA development for the first time. But he had only asked the armed forces to accomplish this ambiguous goal by the middle of this century, to coincide with the centenary of the PRC. Xi was patient since he knew well that the world's top military is the U.S. military. It will be difficult for the PLA to surpass the U.S. armed forces anytime soon. The PLA needs time to grow. But Xi changed his timeline and decided to accelerate the development of the PLA to become the world-class armed forces by 2027.

The reason Xi changed his mind is that the PLA has seen an opportunity window to shorten the gap in combat capabilities between the U.S. and the PLA. According to publicly available plan for the U.S. military, most of the new-generation main battle systems should enter service before 2030. But these plans have been seriously delayed by the fact that the Pentagon put much attention, including budget, equipment, and human resources, on counter-terrorism in Afghanistan and the Middle East during the last two decades. The most delayed service is Navy. The Pentagon has declared that the Navy will increase its fleet from currently 295 vessels to 512 by 2030, or 52 more than the PLA Navy. The PLA will have 460 vessels. But shipbuilding plans have been seriously delayed since the shipbuilding capacity of the U.S. is less than it was in the previous generation. Because of the impact of globalization and the trend of labor division under globalization, many shipbuilders has moved abroad to reduce production costs. The Pentagon, thus, faces an embarrassing situation whereby domestic shipbuilding yards are not sufficient to deliver the expected number of vessels on time. To make matters worse, U.S. military industry policy prohibits its own warships from being built in foreign countries. According to the original schedule, a

2. "China may draw lessons from Russian failure in Ukraine," *DOD News*, September 8, 2022, <<https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3153131/china-may-draw-lessons-from-russian-failures-in-ukraine/>>.

total of 11 Ticonderoga-class cruisers should be retired from service. The first Nimitz-class aircraft carrier *Nimitz* should also be retired from service before 2030. Most of these plans have been delayed and some of these ships will probably extend their service for another decade when their scheduled service life ends, but there are no new ships to replace them.

On the other end of the spectrum, the PLA has accelerated its military buildup and made great achievements over the past two decades. There are already more than 200 J-20s, China's 5th generation combat aircraft, in service. The PLA Air Force will probably purchase more than 700 J-20 in this generation. The most essential military building is not air force, however, but the navy. The PLA Navy already has three aircraft carriers, and the main deck of the third carrier, the *Fujian*, uses



Figure 4. USS Nimitz, The First Nimitz-Class Aircraft Carrier

Source: “Nimitz-class aircraft carrier,” November 11, 2022, Accessed, *Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nimitz-class_aircraft_carrier#/media/File:USS_Nimitz_in_Victoria_Canada_036.jpg>.

the electromagnetic aircraft launch system, the most advanced catapult device used on U.S. aircraft carriers. In addition, the PLA Navy has purchased more than 100 new and modernized ships and submarines over the past decade. During the same period, the PLA Army and the Rocket Force have also renewed their combat systems comprehensively and rapidly.

Xi understands the significance of this opportunity window for the PLA. Military weakness is regarded as the main reason for Western imperialist invasions of China since the 1840s. The Chinese had tried, with great difficulty, to modernize their military forces but Western imperialists always enjoyed the advantage of military power, including modern warfare experience and military technology. Xi initiated comprehensive military reform at the end of 2015 with the aim of modernizing the organization and command systems of armed forces. This reform can move the PLA closer to Western military forces and help it learn from the warfare experiences of Western armed forces. On the other hand, Xi has also urged the state-run military industries to accelerate R&D on new-generation weapon systems by all means, including the recruitment of scientists and experts on military technology, by means legal or illegal, from Western countries. In some cases, this has also involved stolen advanced technology from the West.

Therefore, the meaning of Xi's "achieving the goals for the centenary of the People's Liberation Army in 2027 and more quickly elevating our people's armed forces to world-class standards" is to request the PLA put attention on the mission of military build-up instead of combat readiness for war in the next five years.

III. China Will Enforce Military Coercion on Taiwan

Xi's statement was based on the recent achievements in establishing a "new normal status" in the Taiwan Strait. The PLA held a series of live-fire drills around Taiwan at the beginning of August, using the visit to Taiwan by U.S. House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi as an excuse. In these exercises, the PLA negated the tacitly recognized median line in Taiwan Strait by sending aircraft and warships crossing this line and creeping closer to Taiwan's air and maritime space.

The intensity of these drills exceeded that of the previous major PLA exercises for a Taiwan contingency in 1996, which had caused the third crisis in the Taiwan Strait since 1949. In the 1996 Taiwan Strait missile crisis, the only real threat to Taiwan was the PLA missile test launches and the areas where the missiles landed — at the northern and southern edges of Taiwan’s maritime space.

The PLA live-fire drills around Taiwan raise several strategic concerns:

1. Establishing a New Military Norm on Taiwan’s Periphery

The strategic intention of the PLA drills around Taiwan is to establish a new

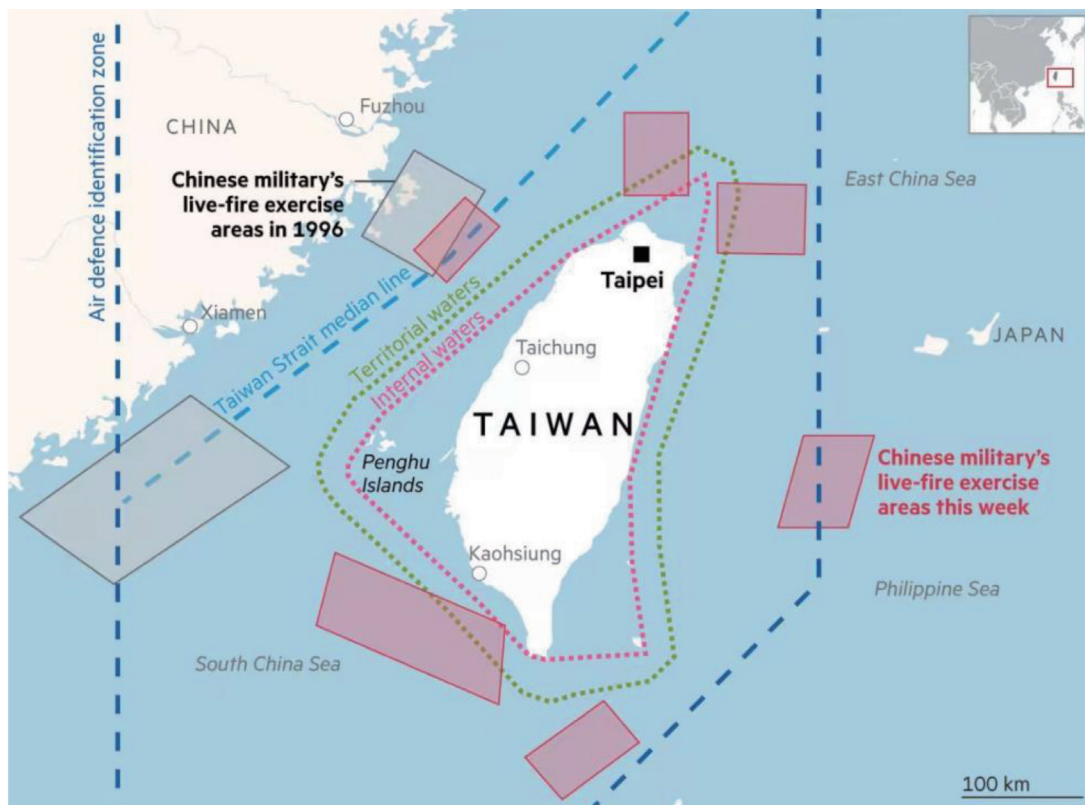


Figure 5. 2022 Chinese Military Exercises Around Taiwan

Source: Disruptor, “Snapshot of geopolitical tensions now vs 1996,” August 8, 2022, *Twitter*, <<https://twitter.com/DisruptorStocks/status/1556538996527865857/photo/1>>.

norm in the air and maritime periphery of Taiwan. The PLA has made use of military exercises around Taiwan to negate the median line in the Taiwan Strait and normalize the passage of naval ships in waters off Taiwan's coast, especially its east coast. The PLA will continue its air and maritime activities around Taiwan in order to maintain and consolidate this new norm on Taiwan's periphery.

The Taiwanese military will not recognize the legitimacy of this new norm and will take countermeasures to prevent its solidification and routinization.

2. New Navigation Rules in the Taiwan Strait

Following the implementation of a new norm, the PLA will try to implement new rules for navigation in the Taiwan Strait. The PLA will gradually change the international waterway of the Taiwan Strait from high seas to an inland sea of China. After the new norm is consolidated, the PLA will not permit transits by foreign naval ships through the Taiwan Strait unless it gives permission. The risk of collision will increase if foreign naval ships insist on their right to transit the Strait.

China's efforts to define the Taiwan Strait as an inland sea will become a source of instability in the region.

3. Compressing Strategic Depth and Reducing Taiwan's Early Warning Time

In conjunction with negating the median line in the Taiwan Strait, PLA air and naval forces will more frequently approach the edge of Taiwan's air and maritime space. Such aggressive forward activity will compress Taiwan's strategic depth and reduce its early warning time. By doing so, the PLA will enjoy the advantage of shortened distance to launch blitzkrieg-like pre-emptive precision strikes on specific targets inside Taiwan.

Therefore, the possibility of unintentional collision between the PLA and Taiwanese military has increased, as aircraft and warships from both sides come more frequently into contact, and do so more closely, than ever before.



Figure 6. F-16 V Fighter

Source: Taiwan (ROC) Air Force, “F-16V Fighter,” April 6, 2022, *Taiwan (ROC) Air Force*, <https://air.mnd.gov.tw/EN/Weapon/Weapon_Detail.aspx?CID=146&ID=124>.

4. Exhausting Taiwan’s Countermeasure Capabilities

The PLA will make use of air and maritime activity approaching Taiwan frequently to exhaust the defense capabilities of the Taiwanese military. Taiwan’s defense capabilities, including the service life of radar systems, missile systems, air and naval combat systems, will be exhausted faster than the Taiwanese military’s ability to acquire new platforms. The rapid exhaustion of Taiwan’s countermeasure capabilities will increase Taiwan’s financial burden and compel it to make unscheduled purchases.

The Taiwanese government has demonstrated its determination by increasing the annual defense budget. The defense budget for 2023 is 13.9% higher than in 2022, accounting for 2.4% of Taiwan's GDP.

5. Compounding Apprehensions in Taiwan

The PLA will intentionally engage in air and maritime activity near Taiwan's air and maritime space with the aim of exacerbating the sense of apprehension among the Taiwanese people. China will simultaneously engage in influence operations to influence the perceptions of the Taiwanese, and "boil the frog in warm water" to prevent solidarity and undermine the will to resist among the Taiwanese. This sense of paralysis will weaken Taiwan's public support for the military.

The Taiwanese military is aware of the PLA's influence operations, especially through the use of corporate media and disinformation, and has taken countermeasures to address the challenge.

IV. What Taiwan Has Learned and Needs

Taiwan has learned precious lessons from the PLA live-fire drills in August as well as from the Russian-Ukrainian war. Among other things, it has learned the following:

1. Asymmetric Warfare Is Effective in Within-Sight Counterattack

The war in Ukraine has prompted a paradigm shift. The existing war paradigm was built upon U.S. military operations as part of the Global War on Terror since the beginning of this century. For the past two decades, U.S. forces have repeatedly displayed the effectiveness of long-range precision missile strikes. Such over-the-horizon ways of waging war can reduce casualties among combatants and accomplish military objectives in a relatively short time. Long-range, precision, and firepower have become significant elements of military strength.

The Russian military launched more than 100 missiles within a few hours during the opening phase of its so-called “special military operation” to paralyze Ukrainian air defenses and C3ISR systems; it launched over 400 missiles in Ukraine during the first week of the war. Although this successfully destroyed Ukrainian radar stations and paralyzed air force bases, this effort has failed to negate the ground combat capabilities of the Ukrainian army and national guard. On the contrary, Ukrainian forces successfully counterattacked using within-sight precision-strike systems. These systems were delivered by NATO countries and are man-portable, small-sized, and highly mobile. Ukrainian forces used these within-sight precision-strike systems to engage in asymmetric warfare.

2. Urban Warfare Can Restrain an Enemy’s Superior Firepower and Weaken the Effectiveness of Out-of-Sight Precision Strikes

The performance of Ukrainian forces has demonstrated that urban warfare is a useful way to defend against a stronger enemy. Downtown buildings in particular can severely affect the utility of heavy weapons and force the enemy to disperse its troops into the spider-net of narrow streets. Urban terrain can also seriously increase the casualty rate of enemy soldiers and rapidly exhaust the strength of the invader.

3. Drones Have Become Indispensable Tactical and Combat Weapons in Modern Warfare

The Russian-Ukrainian war has highlighted the tactical value of drones on the battlefield. Both sides on that conflict have used drones to attack rival ground forces, especially main-battle tanks, armored vehicles, artillery units, an individual soldier. These targets seemed unaware of the imminent attack and did not have the means to prevent attacks by aerial drones.

The effectiveness of drone attacks had been proven earlier during the 2020 Armenian-Azerbaijan war. The Russian-Ukrainian war has confirmed the utility and value of drones on the battlefield. Drones are becoming regular and indispensable tactical and combat weapons in modern warfare.



**Figure 7. Medium-Altitude Long-Endurance Unmanned Aerial Vehicle:
The NCSIST's Teng Yun**

Source: Kenchen945, "A model of Teng Yun 2 in TADTE 2019," August 17, 2019, *Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/NCSIST_Teng_Yun#/media/File:NCSIST_ASRD_MALE_UAV.-2jpg.jpg>.

4. Main Battle Weapons Systems Are Essential to Counter Limited Operations and Grey-Zone Operations

The PLA live-fire drills around Taiwan in August have demonstrated the significance of main battle weapons systems to counterattack limited operations and grey-zone operation. During the exercises, the PLA Navy sent a total of 29 vessels close to the edge of Taiwan's maritime space. The number of PLA ships that have operated around Taiwan is approximately equal to the main battle fleet of the ROC Navy. Although a certain number of Taiwanese naval ships are undergoing annual repair and maintenance, all of them were deployed to counter further approaches by

PLA ships. The Taiwanese air force has more modern platforms than the Taiwanese navy. That is arguably one reason why the air force was able to deter PLA aircraft from intruding into Taiwan's airspace.

The PLA live-fire drills around Taiwan showed the utility of main battle weapons systems to Taiwan's defense. The military threat to Taiwan falls into three different scenarios: total war, limited and local conflict, and grey-zone operations. Taiwan must prepare for all three of these contingencies. To this end, Taiwan must therefore make use of asymmetric warfare capabilities as well as symmetric warfighting capabilities based on main battle weapons systems is also indispensable to Taiwan's defense.

5. The Abundance and Safety of Ammunition Storage Is Significant to Endurance and Counterattack

The Russian-Ukrainian war has shown that Western countries' firm support for Ukraine, with the delivery of weapons to Ukrainian forces, was essential to its ability to resist. For Western countries, such military support can be transported via land borders directly into Ukraine. The geographic conditions in the Taiwan Strait, however, are completely different. Taiwan is an island and the PLA live-fire drills have highlighted the difficulties that would be encountered if Taiwan were under blockade by the PLA. Taiwan should therefore maintain an abundance of ammunition and ensure the safe storage of arsenals, as the delivery of military support to Taiwan by allied countries would be difficult. Taiwan should prepare well for warfighting independently under protracted war conditions.