



**THINK CHINA CAN ALREADY TAKE
TAIWAN EASILY? THINK AGAIN**

BY BRIAN KERG

Lieutenant Colonel Brian Kerg (bkerg@umich.edu) is a nonresident fellow in the [Indo-Pacific Security Initiative](#) at the Atlantic Council's Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security. Kerg is an active-duty US Marine Corps operational planner and most recently served as the G-5 director of plans, III Marine Expeditionary Force. He was a Nonresident WSD-Handa Fellow at Pacific Forum in 2023.

“All forms of media is propaganda, we’re just more honest about it.” So declares the social media profile of [Zhao DaShuai](#), a member of the [People’s Armed Police](#) Propaganda Bureau. Chinese strategy is often characterized by its [reliance on deception](#), but like so many authoritarian regimes, the Chinese Communist Party often says exactly what it’s doing and why it’s doing it.

It is through this lens of [propaganda](#) and [political warfare](#) that China watchers should analyze the People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA’s) “[punishment exercises](#)” around Taiwan, collectively referred to as Joint Sword 2024A. Billed by Beijing as a response to the [inaugural address](#) of Taiwanese President Lai Ching-te on May 20, these exercises positioned Chinese air and naval assets in areas around Taiwan that would allow Beijing to isolate or impose a blockade on the island. These exercises were accompanied by a propaganda [video](#), produced by China’s Eastern Theater Command, that showed an overwhelming volley of rockets striking targets in Taiwan. Slogans pronounced during the video state the intention of these strikes: “Destroy the pillar of Taiwanese independence! Strike the base camp of Taiwanese independence! Cut off the blood flow of Taiwanese independence!”

When viewed in concert with China’s sustained [pressure campaign](#) against Taiwan, an acceleration of [Chinese shipbuilding](#) that increasingly dwarfs Western naval production, and a growing Chinese [missile inventory](#) with increasing threat ranges, one can easily see a bleak picture of Chinese invincibility. The message is clear: It is futile to resist a Chinese military seizure of Taiwan. US allies and partners who consider defending Taiwan may question the feasibility and value of intervening against such a powerful foe as China. And Taiwanese policymakers and voters may be intimidated by the giant whose fist overshadows their entire island nation. If resistance is futile, then reducing the pain of a future unification could be the smarter choice for Taiwan and the world.

This impression is exactly the effect that China seeks—a cognitive fait accompli. China wants the world to believe that it has already decisively won and that no one can do anything about it.

But looking past the propaganda, China’s real military strength, while dangerous, is less impressive and more brittle than Beijing would have the world believe. Nevertheless, China’s influence campaign could be effective if it reinforces what China watchers may already tend to believe. For example, the Associated Press has [accidentally used](#) a doctored photo from Chinese state media of PLA military exercises. The narrative filters out from there. Many newspapers, television, social media, and academia now all tell the same tale of Chinese overmatch. In short: It has all the [doctrinal hallmarks](#) of effective deception.

Russia ran a [similar playbook](#) prior to its 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, depicting its military as an overpowering force. And while Russia is and remains an existential threat to Ukrainian sovereignty, the Russian façade of invincibility was [quickly exposed](#) by fierce and sustained Ukrainian resistance against a foe with significant materiel and numerical advantages. It’s another riff on the story of David versus Goliath. What China and Russia fail to remember is that in that story, David wins.

Exposing this deception for what it is and revealing the Chinese vulnerabilities it seeks to cover requires a multipronged approach. First, policymakers and the analysts who inform them must understand the nature and depth of Beijing's influence operations. Second, they must appreciate the relative weaknesses of China and strengths of Taiwan in an invasion scenario. Finally, they must comprehensively counter the narrative of overwhelming Chinese strength and inoculate their populations against malign Chinese influence activities.

China's influence campaign

China's influence campaign in pursuit of this cognitive fait accompli is conducted across multiple lines of operation. The most obvious includes the overt demonstration of military strength in drills and exercises such as Joint Sword 2024A and accompanying propaganda videos.

China's campaign is amplified on social media. The Chinese Communist Party funds the [wumao](#), tens-to-hundreds of thousands of internet users paid by the Chinese government to repeat the regime's propaganda and swarm those who appear to offer views that are critical of it. In addition, the Chinese government annually produces hundreds of millions of internet posts to [distract users](#) from any critical discussion of the party.

Such influence operations don't just [occur on Weibo](#), the state-controlled Chinese social media platform, but also across X and other platforms to influence Western audiences. Many of these, despite their ham-fistedness, continue to generate significant followings and engagement.

The difficulty of a cross-strait attack

This aggressive push across all information fronts is meant not just to convey Chinese strength, but also to conceal its weaknesses relative to the realities of attempting to militarily seize Taiwan. Such an operation would require both the isolation and blockade of Taiwan, as well as an amphibious assault across the Taiwan Strait.

China certainly has the air and maritime strength to [establish a blockade](#) around Taiwan, but maintaining one could become [strategically tenuous](#) for Beijing if it upends China's economy, especially its international trade. It is also operationally tenuous due to factors such as logistical sustainment, maintenance, and airspace control and coordination. Blockade demonstrations such as Joint Sword 2024A are incredibly costly and fully stress Chinese capabilities, despite their temporary nature. A full, protracted blockade over time will stress the Chinese military system at a higher order of magnitude, making sustainment suspect and vulnerable to disruption. Should the United States and its allies intervene militarily, the "patrol boxes" vaunted on [Chinese diagrams](#) of their latest drill could just as easily become "[kill boxes](#)" for Taiwanese and US forces to target Chinese ships, especially those off of the Island's eastern coast.

Chinese power projection from its west coast to Taiwan's east coast is relatively straightforward, and China is likely to maintain superiority along such lines of operation. But Taiwan's east coast is more easily supported by allies and partners, who could intervene from the territory of Japan and the Philippines or via air and naval power from the Pacific. While China would likely maintain military dominance in the Taiwan Strait, maintaining its east of Taiwan is a fool's errand.

Policymakers should also highlight the sheer [difficulty](#) of a cross-strait attack. An amphibious assault from China into Taiwan would be larger and more complex than the Allied [invasion of Normandy](#) in World War II, requiring joint planning and coordination that the bifurcated and politically divided services of the PLA [lack](#). A more apt analogy might be the failed Allied [Gallipoli campaign](#) of World War I, because China would likely lack the ability to achieve operational surprise and would be sailing into [deadly waters](#) filled with [mines](#) and [munitions](#). And while Chinese troops may eventually make it to Taiwan's shores, they would likely find themselves stranded and [contained](#). Establishing a lodgment is one thing; securing and expanding it is another. A 2023 [report](#) by Mark F. Cancian, Matthew Cancian, and Eric Heginbotham

identifies the many difficulties China would face in establishing a lodgment and other approaches that the United States and Taiwan could pursue to contain such a lodgment or prevent its establishment. The [weaknesses](#) inherent within an authoritarian, communist system only exacerbate these operational factors.

Countering China's false narrative

Countering China's malign narrative requires proactive and preemptive action. First, policymakers must highlight and communicate to their publics China's weaknesses and Taiwan's strengths in an invasion scenario to the greatest degree that classification and prudence allow. They should reinforce, as often as possible, the [will of many Taiwanese](#) to fight for their autonomy and the strength and willingness of the United States, along with its allies and partners, to [support Taiwan](#) in such a fight. Moreover, they must demonstrate the tightening [shield of alliances and partnerships](#) that [continue](#) to push back against Chinese aggression, and the net effect for the overall defense of Taiwan. Policymakers should highlight the example of Russia as an overconfident "emperor with no clothes" and note the parallels between Moscow and Beijing.

Finally, a host of other efforts aimed at inoculating society against disinformation should be pursued in Taiwan and elsewhere. Greater efforts at developing and cultivating [media literacy](#), from grade school through college, will help develop more critical consumers of information who will not be so easily duped by disinformation in general and Chinese disinformation in particular. Deliberately resourced offices tasked with identifying and countering Chinese disinformation could coordinate with and be amplified by public affairs and information offices across agencies within pro-Taiwan countries.

By broadcasting the truth of Chinese vulnerabilities and Taiwanese strengths across multiple channels, Taiwan's allies and partners can blunt the potency of Chinese propaganda and pave the way for a more informed and resilient approach to supporting

Taiwan's security, as well as stability across the Indo-Pacific.

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