



**PLA NAVY ADJUSTS OPERATIONS TO FURTHER UNDERMINE TAIWAN'S DEFENSIVE CAPABILITIES**

BY CHENG-KUN MA AND K. TRISTAN TANG

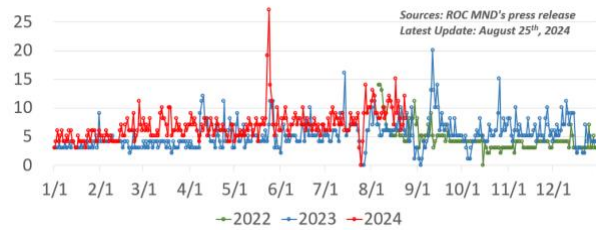
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Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense (MND) has consistently published records of Chinese naval and air force activities for several years, enabling the world to realize the military situation on the Taiwan Strait. However, since the MND provides illustrative diagrams of the People's Liberation Army air activities and aircraft types, most observers have focused primarily on the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) maneuvers around Taiwan. Consequently, the maneuvers of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) have been relatively underexplored and, in some cases, even overlooked.

A comprehensive scrutiny of PLAN activities around Taiwan reveals significant adjustments in China's naval operations this year, aimed at further undermining Taiwan's maritime defense capabilities. Key observations include the daily deployment of PLAN vessels, the activity of PLAN shipborne anti-submarine helicopters, and the expansion of PLAN operations in the Yonaguni Channel (the waters between Su'ao, Yilan, and Yonaguni Island).

First, the daily number of PLAN vessels has increased, significantly depleting the combat readiness of Taiwan's navy. This surge has forced Taiwan to delay its fleet's maintenance schedule, inevitably shortening the lifespan of these aging combat ships. The following figure, derived from press releases by MND, shows the trend in the number of PLAN vessels operating around Taiwan.



Source: Compiled by RCDA based on ROC MND's press release. Latest Update: Aug. 25, 2024.

To specifically analyze the extent of pressure exerted by PLAN on Taiwan, this study establishes two comparative categories: the deployment of 5-9 vessels and the deployment of 10 or more vessels. Reviewing the daily number of PLAN vessels around Taiwan, in 2023, out of 365 days with available data, there were 168 days (46%) with 5-9 vessels deployed and 24 days (6.6%) with 10 or more vessels.

Comparison	2022	2023	2024
<b>Total Days</b>	147	365	237
<b>More than 10 vessels (day)</b>	6	24	26
	4.1%	6.6%	11.0%
<b>5-9 vessels (day)</b>	39	168	177
	26.5%	46.0%	74.7%

Source: Compiled by RCDA based on ROC MND's press release. Latest Update: Aug. 25, 2024.

In 2024, out of 237 days with available data (as of Aug. 25), there were 177 days (74.7%) with 5-9 vessels deployed and 26 days (11%) with 10 or more vessels. The following table provides a comparative overview of the daily vessel deployments by the PLAN around Taiwan.

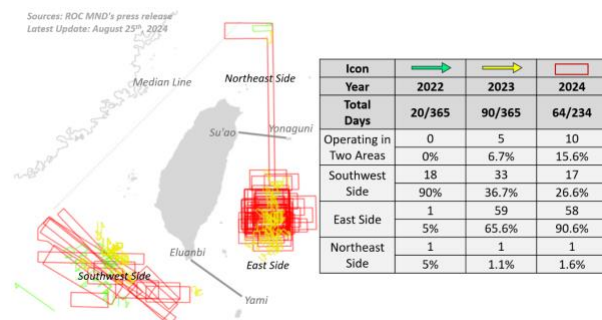
The Taiwan Navy currently has four destroyers and 22 frigates, totaling 26 major combat vessels. However, only about 20 of them, a conservative estimate, are

available for deployment at any given time due to maintenance and upgrades.

In recent years, the PLAN has increasingly approached Taiwan's adjacent waters. To prevent PLAN incursions in Taiwan's territorial waters, the number of Taiwanese naval vessels deployed almost corresponds to the number of PLAN vessels. When 5-9 PLAN vessels are present, Taiwan would deploy 25-50% of its major combat vessels in response. The frequency of such situations has risen from 46% of days last year to 74.7% this year. More critically, when over 10 PLAN vessels are active, Taiwan would deploy over half of its major combat vessels, with such occurrences nearly doubling from 6.6% of days last year to 11% this year.

The situation has disrupted the regular maintenance schedule and shortens service life of the surface fleet. As of July 2023, 14 (53.85%) of Taiwan's combat vessels had [missed scheduled maintenance](#). With the increased frequency of PLAN activities this year, further disruptions to maintenance schedules appear likely.

Second, the PLAN and its anti-submarine helicopters have intensified operations in areas crucial for the force preservation of Taiwan Navy during wartime. MND has released a significant increase in PLAN anti-submarine helicopter activities in Taiwan's eastern waters this year. The following figure shows the trend in these PLAN activities.



Source: Compiled by RCDA based on ROC MND's press release. Latest Update: Aug. 25, 2024.

To compare differences in operational areas, the authors have drawn a grey line from Taiwan's

southernmost point at Eluanbi to Yami Island, the northernmost point of the Philippines. This line marks the boundary between Taiwan's southwestern and eastern waters. Additionally, the Yonaguni Channel divides the eastern waters of Taiwan from the northeastern waters.

The frequency of these helicopter activities in Taiwan's eastern waters has surged this year. In 2023, these helicopters operated on 90 days, with 33 days (36.7%) in the southwestern waters and 59 days (65.6%) in the eastern waters. In 2024, up until August 25, there were 64 days of activity, with 17 days (26.6%) in the southwestern waters and 58 days (90.6%) in the eastern waters of Taiwan.

The increased activity of these helicopters in Taiwan's eastern waters has several implications. First, their presence suggests that PLAN warships are nearby, as these helicopters take off from such vessels. Second, these operations likely involve practicing or executing anti-submarine warfare (ASW), targeting underwater activities by Taiwan, the United States, or Japan. Third, the helicopters may be coordinating with PLAN submarines for operational training, enhancing their ASW capabilities in these waters.

The impact of the helicopter activities in Taiwan's eastern waters is the significant threat they pose to Taiwan's naval force preservation zone during wartime. Taiwan's major naval bases are located at Zuoying in Kaohsiung, Magong in Penghu, and Su'ao in Yilan, with two of these bases directly in the path of a potential PLA assault. As a result, the Taiwan Navy would relocate its fleet to the eastern waters of Taiwan, rather than remaining in the Taiwan Strait, during wartime. PLAN anti-submarine helicopter operations in these waters appear to be aimed at the preparation of the battlefield within Taiwan's wartime preservation zone. By searching for and engaging submarines from Taiwan or other countries, or by coordinating with PLAN submarines to attack Taiwanese naval vessels, these activities seriously threaten Taiwan's ability to preserve its naval combat capacities.

Third, the frequency of PLAN vessels passing through the Yonaguni Channel has significantly increased,

likely due to Taiwan's potential new submarine base in Su'ao, Yilan. [Japan's Ministry of Defense](#) reports a noticeable rise in the number of PLAN destroyers and frigates transiting these waters this year (as of Aug. 25). The following table provides statistics on the activities of PLAN destroyers and frigates, as published by Japan's Ministry of Defense.

Year	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Yonaguni Channel	0	0	0	1	11	9	18
Yonaguni Eastern Waters	0	0	0	0	0	4	0
Miyako Strait	12	26	11	15	36	43	20
Amami Strait	0	0	0	0	4	8	11
Osumi Strait	4	5	0	8	4	7	10
Total	16	31	11	23	44	58	41

*Source: Compiled by RCDA based on Ministry of Defense, Japan. Latest Update: Aug. 25, 2024.*

Since 2021, PLAN warships have been transiting the Yonaguni Channel, with 18 recorded transits as of Aug. 25 this year—double the nine transits recorded for all of 2023.

The increased activity of PLAN warships in the Yonaguni Channel this year likely stems from Taiwan's indigenous-built submarines to be in service and the potential establishment of a new submarine base at Su'ao, Yilan. Previously, Taiwan's only submarine base was at Zuoying in Kaohsiung, directly facing China. Given the need for a base on Taiwan's eastern coast for wartime force preservation, the timeline is significant: Taiwan began the construction of the new submarine in [November 2020](#), launched her in [September 2023](#), and reports from [March 2024](#) suggested plans for a new submarine base in Su'ao, Yilan.

As previously noted, Taiwan's eastern waters are crucial for preserving its naval forces during wartime, with submarine warfare underwater as a key area of engagement between the PLAN and Taiwan Navy. Therefore, the potential submarine base at Su'ao, Yilan, is strategically vital for Taiwan's defense. This strategic importance likely explains the PLAN's intensified activities in the Yonaguni Channel, aimed at increasing familiarity with the local environment and hydrography, laying the groundwork for future operations against Taiwan's submarines.

In conclusion, the PLAN's operational adjustments this year carry significant military implications. They indicate China's continued efforts to strengthen its preparations for military operations against Taiwan and suggest that the PLAN is strategically positioning itself in response to Taiwan's naval strategies and recent developments.

Based on the above trends, two suggestions are proposed. First, while emphasizing asymmetric warfare for decisive battles, Taiwan's conventional military assets should receive more attention. Given China's attrition strategy involving jurisdictional matters, a lack of major naval vessels could allow China to dominate the waters around Taiwan and disrupt maritime transport to its offshore islands. This could replicate China's blockade of Philippine resupply missions at the Second Thomas Shoal, which anti-ship missiles alone cannot effectively counter before a war begins.

Second, in response to China's ASW activities, Taiwan, Japan, the Philippines, and the United States should enhance their coordination in these critical waters. This coordination does not need to involve formal military alliances or sensitive information exchanges but could take the form of informal collaboration. For instance, multiple countries could conduct simultaneous naval training in different but adjacent designated waters or rotate training in the same area. Such measures would increase operational pressure on the PLA Navy and could even disrupt its ASW operations.

*The views expressed are solely those of the authors and do not represent the positions of the National Defense University, the Ministry of National Defense, or the government of ROC (Taiwan).*

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