



TAIWAN'S COAST GUARD: COUNTERING CHINA'S GRAY-ZONE ACTIONS

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*Photo: The Yunlin, a new Coast Guard Administration patrol vessel, is docked in Kaohsiung.
Credit: Lee Hui-chou, Taipei Times*

Taiwan's [Coast Guard](#), a nonmilitary agency in charge of "coastal and maritime patrol and law enforcement," has become a pioneering force in safeguarding the island's maritime rights and interests through modernization efforts, robust maritime law enforcement, and collaboration with like-minded partners.

Since the former Tsai Ing-wen government, Taiwan's Coast Guard Administration (CGA) has undergone a thorough renovation plan. In 2018, Taiwan's Ocean Affairs Council set a goal of constructing and commissioning [141](#) new coast

guard vessels by 2027. These assets serve a two-pronged purpose: patrolling the seas during peacetime and, if necessary, taking the lead as a defensive force armed with [missiles](#) in times of conflict. This flexible approach demonstrates Taiwan's strategy of accommodating [dual-use vessels](#) that remain legally within the bounds of civilian law enforcement but can be converted into military vessels in a crisis.

In response to repeated Chinese incursions into what Taiwan designated as "restricted" waters south of Kinmen County, Taipei has ramped up efforts to enhance maritime situational awareness. Since June 2023, Taiwan has utilized the U.S.-supplied [Jump 20 unmanned aerial vehicle](#) (UAV) to bolster the island's ability to combat maritime crime and crack down on illicit activities, such as illicit fishing, cross-border smuggling, and [sand dredging](#).

In early May, the CGA announced plans to procure the second generation of drones to enhance special surveillance operations, improve search and rescue operations, and intensify the fight against smuggling and sand dredging. The new drones, [capable](#) of remaining airborne for up to two hours and operating on a hybrid of fuel-electric power system, mark a step forward in Taiwan's maritime enforcement capabilities through technological upgrades.

Following a surge of illegal entries by mainland Chinese landings on Taiwan's sensitive shores, the CGA has [called for](#) increased funding to bolster coastal surveillance, thus improving the island's maritime security. Patrol capabilities with enhanced technological support and infrared thermal imaging cameras are important since motorized inflatable boats "are not easily detected by radar," [noted](#) CGA Deputy Director-General Hsieh Ching-chin. Additionally, [limited manpower](#) has further muddled surveillance efforts. Thermal cameras, high-frequency radars, and automatic identification system (AIS) upgrades are essential as these tools improve response time, document encounters for legal procedures, reduce miscalculations, and address shortage of manpower.

As intrusions by Chinese coast guard vessels in the waters near the Taiwan-held Kinmen islands have

intensified, the CGA has adopted a transparency strategy by publicizing these illegal operations carried out under the [guise](#) of law enforcement activities. Such incursions are in nature “gray zone” activities intended to [undermine](#) Taiwan’s jurisdiction and sovereignty over the islands, while also sowing unease among the Taiwanese public.

To counter this, the CGA [urged](#) the public to report “any illegal or suspicious maritime activities” through its “118” hotline. In an effort to harness “people power,” Taiwan’s coast guard has also [offered](#) financial rewards for reporting abnormal Chinese activities at sea, including piracy, murder, arson, hostage taking, illegal entry, and sightings of warships or submarines. Instead of matching China’s provocations with military force, Taiwan leans on its coast guard to conduct law enforcement transparently, under public scrutiny, and with evidence that can be presented in international forums if needed.

Taiwan’s diplomatic isolation has not prevented it from forging functional security partnerships with democratic partners, particularly the United States and Japan. While Washington has maintained a posture of “strategic ambiguity” towards Taiwan, it has supported the East Asian partner through cooperation and capacity-building initiatives. In March 2021, the two sides [inked](#) a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to establish a Coast Guard Working Group (CGWG) to enable stronger partnership on maritime affairs, especially maritime law enforcement information exchanges and maritime search and rescue missions. The first CGWG meeting was [held](#) in August 2021, and Taiwan’s CGA has since joint [multilateral coast guard training](#) with the United States Coast Guard (USCG) and other friendly partners to better law enforcement capabilities.

In recent years, Taiwanese and Japanese coast guards have become proactive in conducting joint search and rescue drills to expand maritime cooperation and enhance mutual trust. In July 2024, the two coast guards conducted joint operations off Japan’s eastern coast. These joint exercises, which [included](#) “the sharing of information” and “assigning searches and coordination,” were the first of their kind to be conducted by the two middle powers since Japan severed diplomatic ties with

Taiwan in September 1972 under the one-China policy. Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshimasa Hayashi notably [referred](#) to Taiwan as Japan’s “extremely important partner and a precious friend,” demonstrating Tokyo’s recognition of its “[shared security interests](#)” with Taipei amid concerns about Beijing’s maritime coercion in the East and South China Seas.

Given that Taipei, Washington, and Tokyo all [have stakes](#) in maintaining security and stability across the Taiwan Strait, the time is ripe to form a trilateral coast guard partnership. Under the new maritime framework, joint exercises, institutionalized dialogues, and enhanced information-sharing mechanisms, they could further maritime ties and improve readiness for potential contingencies in regional waters. For the time being, the absence of such trilateral exercise likely reflects lingering political sensitivities, particularly fears of China’s opposition and retaliation to activities that could be seen as supporting Taiwan’s independence. Nevertheless, as China’s gray zone operations have become “[highly provocative](#),” both diplomatic support and strong measures from democracies are crucial in sending a deterrent message against China’s assertive exercises while developing habits of maritime cooperation among like-minded partners.

Eventually, China’s gray-zone tactics aim at wearing down Taiwan’s vigilance and resolve through incremental pressure. Yet, Taiwan’s persistent investment in its coast guards indicates a measured yet dogged assertion of its maritime jurisdiction and sovereignty. In the Taiwan Strait—where risk remains unceasing—Taiwan’s white-hulled vessels become an anchor of democratic resilience. The growing activism of Taiwan’s coast guard indicates an unwavering resolve by a middle-sized but capable democracy to safeguard its maritime interests, uphold a rules-based order, and contribute meaningfully to regional security and stability.