

China's 'grey-zone' warfare tactics against Taiwan

What are the coercive measures China has imposed on Taiwan?

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The story so far:

Since the new Taiwanese president Lai Ching-te has assumed office, all eyes have been on the rocky start to his tenure. While China's belligerent response to Mr. Lai's "pro-independence" and "secessionist" statements was striking, it has now resorted to a sophisticated ploy to respond to Mr. Lai's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). This is often referred to as 'grey-zone' warfare, which comprises elements that frustrate Taiwan in a sustained manner.

What has China done?

China's preparedness to invade Taiwan and fight a high-intensity war over the island is a much debated subject. Training drills in the People's Liberation Army Eastern Theater Command (PLA ETC) are targeted precisely at demonstrating China's ability to fight and win. However, a more cognitive tool that Beijing is

deploying to demonstrate this ability is simulated audiovisuals. On May 24, for example, the PLA ETC Weibo account released a 3D animation video depicting how in an invasion scenario, land-and warship-based ballistic missile launchers would fire tens of missiles at one go, striking areas in Taipei and Kaohsiung.

Moreover, since 2020, the X account of the Taiwanese Ministry of National Defence has turned into a repository of reportage on daily sorties conducted by PLA fighter jets, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), strategic fighters and early warning aircraft. While such sorties do not engage the island's defence forces directly, they exert sustained pressure on them. Further, these UAVs also conduct intelligence work in the areas surrounding the island. The long term presence of such mobilisation induces wear-out within Taiwanese forces, even before there is kinetic combat.

What about ideology?

To build a favourable image for itself,

Beijing often deploys narratives within Taiwanese territory that thrust ideological choices upon its citizens. For example, sometime on May 25, just under a week after Mr. Lai assumed office, internet users in Taiwan observed a Youtube video of a Chinese citizen operating a drone to drop cardboard boxes on Kinmen island. When investigated by the Kinmen Defence Command on May 26, the boxes unveiled fliers written in simplified Chinese, stating "Both sides of the Taiwan Strait belong to one China, one Chinese nation. Taiwan independence is a dead end. Lai's Taiwan independence is a dead end." Some other fliers warned, "Don't sacrifice your life for Taiwan independence, do you understand?"

The Kinmen Command stated that this was "a typical cognitive warfare tactic" deployed by China, because it initiates public discussions on social media, and garners attention for the Chinese cause.

What are political tactics China uses?

In its 'carrots and sticks' approach

towards Taiwan, Beijing deploys sticks for the DPP and carrots for its primary opposition party, the Kuomintang (KMT). Well known for its relatively pro-mainland views, the KMT continues to engage with Communist Party (CPC) officials, even as any meaningful communication between the DPP and the CPC has stalled since Ms. Tsai became President of Taiwan in 2016. DPP legislators have often described these engagements as KMT's "collusion" with the CPC. In fact, KMT officials have, in the past, been investigated by the Tsai administration under the 'anti-infiltration law' after their visits to China.

China's 'sticks' against the DPP entail coercive economic measures, which leverage the cross-strait trade and business interdependence to seek concessions. One such example is China's unilateral suspension of preferential tax rates for chemical imports from Taiwan, granted under the only trade agreement to exist between the two sides – the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA). Beijing announced that such a suspension, applicable to 134 items imported from Taiwan, is retaliation against Mr. Lai's propagation of "separatist" sentiments in his inaugural speech, as well as Taipei's own restrictions against imports of over 2,000 goods made in China.

As 'grey-zone' warfare tactics become a subject of deliberation, Mr. Lai will have much to grapple with during his tenure.

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THE GIST

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China has unilateral suspended preferential tax rates for chemical imports from Taiwan, in retaliation against Mr. Lai's propagation of "separatist" sentiments in his inaugural speech.

Additionally, to build a favourable image for itself, Beijing often deploys narratives within Taiwanese territory that thrust ideological choices upon its citizens.