



People's Republic of China Framing Lai's US Transit as a Crisis

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Key Takeaway: Republic of China (Taiwan) Vice President and presidential candidate Lai Ching-te will transit through the United States on August 12 and 16. The People's Republic of China (PRC) is framing Lai's transit as a provocative crisis, which is messaging intended to justify greater People's Liberation Army (PLA) naval and aerial activity around Taiwan. The normalization of such military activity around Taiwan in response to ROC leadership transits through the United States would support a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) coercion campaign to induce unification on the PRC's terms.

Republic of China (ROC) Vice President and Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) presidential candidate Lai Ching-te will transit through the United States in mid-August. He will arrive in New York on August 12 on his way to Paraguay to attend the inauguration of Paraguayan President Santiago Palacios on August 15. He will arrive in San Francisco on August 16 as part of his return trip to Taiwan.¹ Lai's transit through the United States is well-precedented. ROC leadership, including ten vice presidents, have transited through the United States during the last several decades.² US Secretary of State Antony Blinken noted on July 17 that Lai's transit is in line with this precedent and that "there is no reason for the PRC to use this transit as a pretext for provocative action."³

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is messaging the opposite, however. The PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO), and state media outlets have inaccurately framed Lai's planned transit as a reckless move contributing to Taiwan's independence.⁴ The MFA stated that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) will take "firm measures to safeguard the nation's sovereignty and territorial integrity."⁵ The TAO further claimed that the transit would endanger peace in the Taiwan Strait.⁶ The CCP-controlled *Global Times* compared the transit of ROC officials through the United States, including Lai's upcoming trip, to a criminal not being punished for a crime.⁷ This narrative aims to counter valid and accurate statements that such transits are normal and unprovocative, such as Blinken's comments last month.⁸ The *Global Times* also falsely framed the transit as a way for the United States to manipulate public opinion in Taiwan to push for Taiwanese independence.⁹

The PRC framing Lai's transit through the United States as a provocative crisis is part of a trend of CCP messaging intended to justify enhanced People's Liberation Army (PLA) naval and aerial activity around Taiwan. The *Global Times* stated on July 18 that there is a new normal in the Taiwan Strait where the PRC "has increased its ability to control air and sea space across the Straits in order to deter interference."¹⁰ The PLA has played a central role in establishing the "new normal." Normalizing greater PLA activity around Taiwan confers operational advantages to the PLA by presenting the ROC military with the threat of a potential military crisis short of invasion that it must perpetually be prepared to respond to.

- The PLA Air Force has normalized violations of Taiwan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ) during the past three years.¹¹ Then-speaker US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan in August 2022. ROC President Tsai Ing-wen transited through the United States in April 2023 and met with US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy. That the PLA

launched military exercises around Taiwan in the aftermath of these two events demonstrates the CCP is actively changing cross-strait norms in line with the goals articulated by the *Global Times*.

- The PLA Navy (PLAN) deployed three to four ships daily around Taiwan in the week preceding the start of Tsai's April 2023 transit.¹² The PLAN from July 30 to August 7 has deployed between six and eleven ships daily around Taiwan, with three instances of ten or eleven ships.¹³ This increase in naval activity around Taiwan indicates that the PLA is again preparing to use naval assets during a transit of a high-ranking ROC official through the United States conjoined with potential meetings with US officials.

The normalization of heightened military activity around Taiwan in response to ROC leadership transits through the United States would support a CCP coercion campaign to initiate unification on the PRC's terms. ISW previously assessed that the ADIZ violation flights aim to wear down Taiwanese military readiness, force difficult decisions regarding ROC resources allocation, as well as create a sense of impenetrable siege among the Taiwanese leadership and population.¹⁴ The ongoing increased tempo of naval operations aid in creating this sense of siege by showing that the PLA can operate at will in waters around Taiwan.

Normalization of heightened PLA military activity around Taiwan over the past three years could also support the CCP's efforts to erode the confidence of the Taiwanese population in its government's capacity to defend against the PRC.¹⁵ The PLA is advancing this objective already by intermittently operating closer to the ROC contiguous zone and increasing the number of military vessels routinely operating in the vicinity of Taiwan.¹⁶ The persistent presence of PLA forces enables the CCP to calibrate its responses to events that occur during the transit of a ROC official through the United States. The PLA demonstrated this in April when it conducted the *Joint Sword* exercise in response to ROC President Tsai Ing-wen's transit of the United States, during which she met with US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy.¹⁷ This reflected a change from Tsai's six previous transits through the United States since 2016 when the PLA did not conduct large scale exercises.¹⁸

Endnotes

- ¹ https://www.wsj.com/articles/taiwan-unveils-dates-for-u-s-stops-by-vice-president-despite-chinas-protests-17106008?mod=world_major_1_pos4
- ² <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-remarks-to-the-press-9/>
- ³ <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-remarks-to-the-press-9/>
- ⁴ https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/fyrbt_673021/202307/t20230717_11114255.shtml
http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrhwb/html/2023-07/21/content_26006894.htm
<https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202307/27/WS64c21e4ba31035260b818dd4.html>
<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202308/1295529.shtml>
http://www.gwytb.gov.cn/xwdt/xwfb/wyly/202307/t20230729_12554947.htm
- ⁵ https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/fyrbt_673021/202308/t20230803_11122062.shtml
- ⁶ http://www.gwytb.gov.cn/xwdt/xwfb/wyly/202308/t20230803_12556277.htm
- ⁷ <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202307/1294623.shtml>
- ⁸ <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-remarks-to-the-press-9/>
- ⁹ <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202308/1295529.shtml>
- ¹⁰ <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202307/1294623.shtml>
- ¹¹ <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1qbfYF0VgDBJoFZN5elpZwNTiKZ4nvCUcs5a7oYwm52g/edit#gid=0>
- ¹² <https://twitter.com/MoNDefense/status/1638708249401888768?ctx=HHwWgMDQgY-e7r0tAAAA>
<https://twitter.com/MoNDefense/status/1639091035916865537>
<https://twitter.com/MoNDefense/status/1639433705742811136?ctx=HHwWgIDS-Z2RuMAtAAAA>
<https://twitter.com/MoNDefense/status/1639795974825734145?ctx=HHwWgsDT-Yjw3MEtAAAA>
<https://twitter.com/MoNDefense/status/1640158308454768640?ctx=HHwWgIDR7dTSgcMtAAAA>
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<https://twitter.com/MoNDefense/status/1641607540038582273>
<https://twitter.com/MoNDefense/status/1641970544563355648?ctx=HHwWgIDUhdjgucktAAAA>
- ¹³ <https://twitter.com/MoNDefense/status/1685456525878497280>
<https://twitter.com/MoNDefense/status/1685818076472975360>
<https://twitter.com/MoNDefense/status/1686181319162871808>
<https://twitter.com/MoNDefense/status/1686543297601552384>
<https://twitter.com/MoNDefense/status/1686905074625511427>
<https://twitter.com/MoNDefense/status/1687269970420654080>
<https://twitter.com/MoNDefense/status/1687630654484398082>
<https://twitter.com/MoNDefense/status/1687993547696541696>
<https://twitter.com/MoNDefense/status/1688357040970944512>
- ¹⁴ <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/china-taiwan-weekly-update-june-30-2023>
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-taiwan-security/taiwan-says-has-spent-almost-900-million-scrambling-against-china-this-year-idUSKBN26S0K6>
<https://web.archive.org/web/20210309012005/https://www.ocac.gov.tw/OCAC/Eng/Pages/Detail.aspx?nodeid=329&pid=19758963>
- ¹⁵ <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/china-taiwan-weekly-update-june-30-2023>
<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1qbfYF0VgDBJoFZN5elpZwNTiKZ4nvCUcs5a7oYwm52g/edit?pli=1#gid=0>
<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202308/1295537.shtml>
http://www.gwytb.gov.cn/xwdt/xwfb/wyly/202307/t20230729_12554947.htm
- ¹⁶ <https://focustaiwan.tw/cross-strait/202306240005>
For the data demonstrating an increase in the number of PLAN vessels operating near Taiwan over the last three years, see the "ADIZ data" portion of the following spreadsheet:
<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1qbfYF0VgDBJoFZN5elpZwNTiKZ4nvCUcs5a7oYwm52g/edit?pli=1#gid=0>. Each of the ROC MND announcements also include the number of PLAN vessels operating around Taiwan. There has been an increase over the last three years from the norm of zero reported PLAN vessels to the present norm of mid-single digit to the occasional ten or eleven PLAN vessels per day.
- ¹⁷ <https://twitter.com/monddefense/status/1644689059854577665>
<https://twitter.com/MoNDefense/status/1644870818814652416>
<https://twitter.com/MoNDefense/status/1645429756161298433>
<https://news.usni.org/2023/04/10/u-s-chinese-aircraft-carriers-operating-near-taiwan-chinese-carrier-shandong-launched-80-fighter-missions-in-weekend-drills>
https://www.mod.go.jp/js/pdf/2023/p20230410_01.pdf
- ¹⁸ <https://www.state.gov/briefings-foreign-press-centers/transit-of-taiwan-president-through-us>