



People's Republic of China Used Lai's US Transit to Advance Unification Campaigns

Nils Peterson

August 31, 2023

Key Takeaway: The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) conducted a multifaceted informational, military, and economic pressure campaign in response to the transit of the Republic of China (ROC) Vice President Lai Ching-te through the United States in August. This indicates that the CCP aims to use ROC leadership transits as part of a larger coercive campaign to gain political control of Taiwan. The CCP's threatening messaging, economic coercion, and military coercion in response to Lai's transit will advance the party's coercion and compellence campaigns to secure political control of Taiwan.

Republic of China (Taiwan) Vice President Lai Ching-te transited through the United States on his way to and from representing the ROC at the August 15 inauguration of Paraguayan President Santiago Peña Palacios.^[1] The transits occurred on August 12 and 16. Lai's transits through the United States were well-precedented. Ten ROC vice presidents have transited through the United States during the last several decades, for example.^[2]

The CCP responded to the transits by messaging threats that inaccurately characterized Taiwan's independence as well as with ambiguous threats about whether the People's Republic of China (PRC) would respond militarily. The CCP launched military exercises on August 19 and initiated a trade dispute with Taiwan. This multifaceted response indicates that the CCP aims to use ROC leadership transits as part of a larger coercive campaign to gain political control of Taiwan.

CCP Messaging Threat of Taiwan Independence

The CCP messaged its opposition to the transits on July 17 by alleging that the ROC delegation was comprised of "Taiwan independence separatists."^[3] This framing highlighted that the party perceives ROC transits as a direct threat to its claimed sovereignty over Taiwan. This statement also conveyed the CCP's view that the ROC is not a legitimate polity and that Taiwan is part of the PRC.

The party amplified third-party protest narratives opposing Lai as an "independence worker" as part of an effort to depict domestic Taiwanese disunity amid the transit in English-language publications. The party's purpose was to delegitimize the ROC as an effective governing polity among external English-speaking audiences. The CCP-controlled English-language *Global Times*, for example, claimed that over 600 people protested in Taipei on August 11, the day before Lai transited through New York.^[4] The CCP-controlled *China Daily* also claimed that 200 people protested against Lai's visit that occurred in San Francisco on August 16.^[5] The CCP's propaganda and intelligence apparatus, known as the United Front, previously used a similar tactic to co-opt the voice of the Taiwanese diaspora by criticizing Lai's July 4 *Wall Street Journal* op-ed entitled "My Plan to Preserve Peace in the Taiwan Strait."^[6]

The messaging inaccurately portrayed the status of the ROC and the purpose of the transits, however. Lai's travel was not an effort to subvert the existing status quo. Lai emphasized this position in a July 27 interview that *Bloomberg* released on August 14. He stated the reality that "Taiwan is already a sovereign, independent country called the Republic of China. It is not part of the People's Republic of China. The ROC and PRC are not subordinate to one another. It is not necessary to declare independence."^[7] The transits also were not provocative moves to exacerbate cross-strait tensions.^[8] Lai's transits through the United States were well-precedented. Ten ROC vice presidents have transited through the United States during the last several decades, for example.^[9] The CCP's framing of the transits as provocative omits that the PRC has driven cross strait tensions by broadening the scope and scale of its military activities around Taiwan during the last three years.^[10]

CCP Military Response

The CCP issued ambiguous threats about a military response to the transits starting in mid-July. Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Mao Ning responded to a question on July 19 about the potential for military exercises in response to the transit with the vague statement that the PRC would protect its "national sovereignty and territorial integrity."^[11] The CCP elaborated on this in English and Chinese-language propaganda before and during Lai's transit. The party claimed that the transit would "force" a People's Liberation Army response to defend the PRC's "national sovereignty and territorial integrity."^[12] The CCP intended for these threats to force the ROC Ministry of National Defense to monitor and prepare for People's Liberation Army (PLA) military action before, during, and after the transit with the aim of fatiguing the ROC

military. This line of effort is consistent with the broader steps the PLA is taking to normalize military activity around Taiwan.

The PLA conducted military exercises to the north and southwest of Taiwan on August 19, the day after Lai returned to Taiwan from his transit.^[13] Part of this exercise involved 45 PLA aircraft violating Taiwan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ) as well as nine PLAN vessels operating around Taiwan.^[14] The PLA Eastern Theater Command Spokesperson Shi Yi stated that the exercise would "serve as a stern warning to 'Taiwan independence' separatists."^[15] This aligns with the CCP's pre-transit messaging that targeted Lai as an "independence worker."

The exercises are part of a trend in which the PLA has normalized an increasing number of daily intrusions into Taiwan's ADIZ over the last three years.^[16] This trend of heightened military activity around Taiwan supports the CCP's efforts to erode the confidence of the Taiwanese population in its government's capacity to defend against the PRC.^[17] It also raises the costs of operational readiness for the ROC. The volume of aircraft incursions recently led to the ROC Ministry of National Defense increasing its annual military fuel budget by 55 percent to 344 million USD, for example.^[18] The normalization of greater PLA military activity around Taiwan in response to ROC leadership transits through the United States supports a CCP coercion campaign short of invasion to induce unification on the PRC's terms, as ISW previously assessed.^[19]

The recent military exercises around Taiwan also contribute to CCP efforts to influence the 2024 ROC presidential election. ROC Foreign Minister Joseph Wu stated that the PRC aimed to influence the upcoming ROC presidential election in January via these exercises.^[20] Lai specifically stated that the PRC aimed to use the fear of war in the Taiwanese populace to manipulate the election.^[21] The framing of the election as a choice between peace and war has been ongoing in CCP and Taiwanese media since at least January 2023.^[22] This framing creates opportunities for the CCP to plant information narratives both domestically in Taiwan and internationally that falsely exculpate the party from blame for cross-strait tension and lay that responsibility at the feet of the governing Democratic Progressive Party (DPP).

CCP Economic Coercion

The PRC initiated a trade dispute with the ROC between Lai's transits. On August 14, the Chinese Ministry of Commerce announced anti-dumping tariffs on polycarbonate imports from Taiwan that took effect on August 15.^[23] Polycarbonates are a diverse material used in products ranging from medical devices to electronic components. The General Administration of Customs also banned the import of Taiwanese mangoes on August 21, three days after Lai returned to Taiwan.^[24] The timing of these trade disputes indicates that they were an attempt to punish the DPP and Lai in response to his transit.

The CCP has used similar methods to respond to previous senior ROC leadership transits through the United States. ROC President Tsai Ing-wen met with US Speaker of the House of Representatives Kevin McCarthy during her transit through the United States in April. Five days after her transit concluded, the PRC Ministry of Commerce began an ongoing trade investigation targeting Taiwan on April 12.^[25] The investigation is scheduled to conclude on October 12, but the Ministry of Commerce could extend it to immediately before Taiwan's presidential election on January 13.^[26]

The CCP also announced on August 18, the day Lai returned to Taiwan, that it is considering terminating the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA). The ECFA is a deal that Beijing and Taipei signed in 2010 that led to the reduction of tariffs and signaled closer economic ties between the PRC and ROC.^[27] This threat demonstrates that the CCP aims to inflict economic damage on the Taiwanese economy. It also supports CCP efforts to buttress the opposition party Kuomintang's attacks on the governing DPP as ineffective in domestic governance.

Releasing ECFA information at the end of Lai's transit also indicates that the party aims to use the dominant but contested war versus peace election narrative to put the onus for cross-strait tension on the DPP. The framing of the election as a choice between peace and war has been ongoing since at least January 2023 and continues to be a salient point within both Taiwanese and Chinese media outlets.^[28] The peace versus war framing allows the party to build on the fear of war prevalent amongst the Taiwanese electorate in order to falsely frame the DPP as leading Taiwan to war with the PRC.

Implications for CCP Coercion and Compellence Campaigns

The CCP is carrying out an ongoing coercion campaign to secure political control of Taiwan.^[29] The threatening messaging, military actions, and economic disputes that the CCP employed in response to Lai's transit will advance the party's coercion and compellence campaigns to secure political control of Taiwan.

- The normalization of PLA military activity around Taiwan advances the CCP's coercion campaign by giving credence to the party's inaccurate threatening messaging regarding Taiwan's independence. This military activity aims to wear down Taiwanese military readiness, force difficult decisions regarding the ROC's resource allocation, and create a sense of impenetrable siege among the Taiwanese population. These effects advance CCP efforts to degrade the Taiwanese populace's confidence in its government's capacity to defend the country, a key part of the longer-term CCP coercion campaign to induce unification under the PRC.

- The normalization of PLA military activity around Taiwan also sets conditions for an act of compellence such as a blockade or invasion. The PLA operating an increasing number of naval and air assets near Taiwan provides operational opportunities to wear down the ROC military defenses and initiate combat operations as CCP leadership orders. ISW does not assess that an invasion or other act of war by the PRC against the ROC is the most likely course of action in the immediate future.
- The economic coercion measures in response to Lai's transit advance the CCP's coercion campaign by putting the onus for cross-strait tension on the DPP. The CCP justifies these measures by falsely accusing the ROC of violating a standard or agreement, exculpating the party from rightful blame for instigating the dispute and increasing cross-strait tension. These measures create more opportunities for the CCP to manipulate the Taiwanese electorate in the future by targeting industries important to selected constituents. They also align with CCP messaging that plays on the deep partisanship of the Taiwanese electorate over cross-strait policy.

[1] <https://english.dot.president.gov.tw/News/6547>

<https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202307170009>

[2] <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-remarks-to-the-press-9/>

[3] https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/fyrbt_673021/202307/t20230717_11114255.shtml

[4] <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202308/1296120.shtml>

[5] https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202308/17/WS64ddd057a31035260b81cbb3_1.html

<https://www.cna.com.tw/news/aip/202308170011.aspx>

https://udn.com/news/story/11597/7374886?from=udn-catelistnews_ch2

[6] http://www.tailian.org.cn/jj/202302/t20230217_12511151.htm

http://www.tailian.org.cn/yw/202307/t20230717_12551339.htm;

http://www.tailian.org.cn/yw/202307/t20230717_12551337.htm;

http://www.tailian.org.cn/yw/202307/t20230717_12551329.htm;

http://www.tailian.org.cn/yw/202307/t20230717_12551333.htm;

http://www.tailian.org.cn/yw/202307/t20230717_12551331.htm

<https://www.chinanews.com.cn/gn/2023/07-11/10040697.shtml>

<http://www.chinanews.com.cn/gn/2023/07-11/10040963.shtml>

<http://www.chinanews.com.cn/gn/2023/07-11/10040964.shtml>

https://news.youth.cn/gj/202307/t20230712_14642249.htm

https://news.youth.cn/gj/202307/t20230712_14642248.htm

[7] <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-08-14/transcript-taiwan-presidential-candidate-lai-ching-te-on-chips-china-us#xj4y7vzkg>

[8] <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-remarks-to-the-press-9/>

[9] <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-remarks-to-the-press-9/>

[10] <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1qbfYFoVgDBJoFZN5elpZwNTiKZ4nvCUcs5a7oYwm52g/edit?pli=1#gid=0>

[11] https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/fyrbt_673021/202307/t20230719_11115197.shtml

[12] <https://mil.huanqiu.com/article/4Dx3fFrAYDV>

<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202308/1295529.shtml>

http://www.gwytb.gov.cn/xwdt/xwfb/wyly/202308/t20230803_12556277.htm

http://www.news.cn/tw/2023-08/03/c_1129785242.htm

<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202308/1295629.shtml>

https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/fyrbt_673021/202308/t20230803_11122062.shtml

<https://tv.cctv.com/2023/08/03/VIDEtqnwBUkSK23BRSGUEfqs230803.shtml?spm=C28340.PdNvWY0LYxCP.EoHBORsCWsEV.5>

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3230014/mainland-china-airs-documentary-signalling-military-preparation-taiwan-attack-and-willingness>

<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202308/1295529.shtml>

<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202308/1296041.shtml>

<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202308/1296083.shtml>

https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/fyrbt_673021/dhdw_673027/202308/t20230813_11126183.shtml

https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/fyrbt_673021/202308/t20230815_11127065.shtml

[13] http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/ARMEDFORCES/EasternTheaterCommand/News_209147/16246249.html
[14] https://twitter.com/MoNDefense/status/1693066050219467193?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Etweet
[15] <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-66553225>
<https://www.globaltimes.com.cn/page/202308/1296578.shtml>
[16] <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1qbfYFoVgDBJoFZN5elpZwNTiKZ4nvCUcs5a7oYwm52g/edit?pli=1#gid=0>
[17] http://www.gwytb.gov.cn/xwdt/xwfb/wyly/202307/t20230729_12554947.htm
<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1qbfYFoVgDBJoFZN5elpZwNTiKZ4nvCUcs5a7oYwm52g/edit?pli=1#gid=0>

<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/china-taiwan-weekly-update-june-30-2023>

[18] <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3231172/mainland-chinas-sorties-around-taiwan-force-island-push-military-fuel-budget-55-cent-us344-million>
[19] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/people%E2%80%99s-republic-china-framing-lai%E2%80%99s-us-transit-crisis>
[20] <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/4975429>
[21] <https://www.cna.com.tw/news/aip/202308200166.aspx>
[22] http://www.news.com.tw/2023-06/14/c_1129694340.htm

<https://focustaiwan.com.tw/politics/202301010007>

[23] <https://www.reuters.com/article/china-taiwan/china-to-levy-anti-dumping-tariff-on-polycarbonate-imported-from-taiwan-idINB9N39Q00J>
<https://www.scmp.com/economy/global-economy/article/3231048/mainland-china-hit-taiwans-polycarbonate-imports-anti-dumping-measures-claims-concrete-damage>
http://www.news.com.cn/fortune/2023-08/17/c_1129808404.htm
[24] http://www.news.com.cn/tw/2023-08/21/c_1129815157.htm

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-08-21/china-halts-buying-taiwan-mangoes-amid-tensions-blaming-pests#xj4y7vzkg>

[25] http://www.news.com.cn/fortune/2023-08/17/c_1129808404.htm

<http://trb.mofcom.gov.cn/article/cs/202304/20230403403369.shtml>

[26] <http://trb.mofcom.gov.cn/article/cs/202304/20230403403369.shtml>
[27] <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3231593/beijing-hints-changing-trade-pact-taiwan-amid-probe-tariffs>
[28] http://www.news.com.cn/tw/2023-06/14/c_1129694340.htm

<https://focustaiwan.com.tw/politics/202301010007>

<https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/china-taiwan-weekly-update-may-26-2023>
[29] Dan Blumenthal and Frederick W. Kagan, “China’s Three Roads to Controlling Taiwan,” American Enterprise Institute, March 2023, 6-12, <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Chinas-Three-Roads-to-Controlling-Taiwan.pdf?x91208>