

# Episode\_90-Crisis\_in\_the\_Pacific- What\_Just\_Happened\_between\_...

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

taiwan, china, pla, aircraft carriers, exercises, happening, chinese, brian, actions, taiwan strait, capabilities, beijing, median line, military, island, push, zones, power, unprecedented, aircraft

## SPEAKERS

Brian Hart, Doug Birkey, Daniel Rice, Thomas Corbett

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### Doug Birkey 00:01

Welcome to the Aerospace Advantage Podcast. I'm Doug Birkey, your guest host for this week in the Executive Director here at Mitchell Institute. Here in the Aerospace Advantage, we speak with leaders in the DOD, industry and other subject matter experts to explore the intersection of strategy, operational concepts, technology and policy when it comes to air and space power. So if you like learning about aerospace power, you're in the right place, to regular listeners, welcome back. And if it's your first time here, thank you so much for joining us. And as a reminder, if you like what you're hearing today, do us a favor and follow us or subscribe, please give us a like and leave a comment so that we can keep charting the trajectories that matter most to you. Now, we say it all the time, China's our pacing threat. And if you doubted that I think the recent headlines helped explain our perspective. Things heated up a lot around Taiwan after Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi made a stop on the island to visit President Tsai and kicked off a major set of Chinese military drills. Tensions are obviously high with a lot of people wondering about what will come next. Our goal today is to help provide some insight and context regarding what's happening. We've gathered a group of China experts to dig into this. So with that, I've Brian Hart, a fellow with the CSIS China power project.

### Brian Hart 01:18

It's good to be here. Thank you for having me.

### Doug Birkey 01:20

Hey, you bet. Next, you got Thomas Corbett, a research analyst who focuses on the Chinese military technology and airpower at blue path labs.

### Thomas Corbett 01:20

 Thomas Corbett 01:29

Hello, good afternoon. Thanks for having me on today's episode.

 Doug Birkey 01:31

Hey, you bet. And finally, you might remember him from our previous episodes are very own Research Analyst Dan Rice.

 Daniel Rice 01:38

Hey, Doug. Thanks for having me on. It's always a pleasure.

 Doug Birkey 01:41

So Brian, your team over at CSIS has tracked recent events on this really closely? And can you just bring us up to date on what's been occurring in the Taiwan Strait? I mean, obviously, people have been reading headlines. But you've got a far more sophisticated knowledge than most of us here.

 Brian Hart 01:55

This all began when news leaked that Nancy Pelosi was going to make a trip to Taiwan, which would make her the first Speaker of the House to go since 1997. So this is a big deal. China obviously sees this as a challenge to its territorial claims over over Taiwan. And so immediately, you begin hearing rumors among Chinese netizens that that the PLA should shoot down, Secretary Pelosi planes and you know, hyperbolic things like that. We didn't see that happen. We didn't see an escort from the PLA of the plane. So Speaker Pelosi landed immediately after she landed, China announced that it would be engaging in large scale military exercises starting August 4 and lasting through August 7. So we saw that happen after Speaker Pelosi left on August 4, you see the PLA launch a large scale live firing ballistic missiles and other rockets into the area with some of those flying over Taiwan, which is unprecedented. And some of those also falling I think five of those fell into Japan's exclusive economic zone, which was also unprecedented and and a clear sign to Japan. And we can go into a little bit more details later about, you know, some of the specific steps that that Beijing was trying to take here. But anyway, after those ballistic missile firings, on the fourth, you see August 5, through the seventh, you see continued operations, joint operations around Taiwan in seven zones and continual steady presence of PLA assets in the area with Taiwan also sending sending its own assets to kind of track some of the PLA operations in the region. This continued for a few days. And in fact, the PLA extended some of those exercises beyond what they would the original date that they said they will. And that wasn't surprising. We'll talk a little bit later about why, you know, I think the PLA tries to use these exercises as chance to create uncertainty and ambiguity in the minds of Taiwan and the United States. But anyway, they continued some of these actions, things hit a little bit of a lull on the military side for a while. And then more recently, there was a trip another delegation, led by Senator Markey to Taiwan, which kicked

off another round of some exercises around the island. But I think to a lesser extent than the first series. So it's been a couple of weeks of a lot of activities by the PLA, it's been keeping our team busy tracking what they're doing and so a lot of a lot of things going on in the street.

D

Doug Birkey 04:17

Now, I appreciate you getting us up to speed with with all that and as good review. But I want to step back here. I mean, big picture, what are we looking at right here? What's in play between China and Taiwan? I mean, earlier, other podcasts we've discussed Chinese incursions in Taiwan's air defense identification zone. But what's really driving China here, what are their real goals in this sort of scenario?

B

Brian Hart 04:42

I think, really, the the PLA and Beijing more broadly have have a couple of goals that they're trying to make here. One is really to show how different things are from the 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait crisis, which is the last kind of crisis we had in in the air. So you see them trying to push further get closer to the island to kind of make a bit of a statement about where the PLA is compared to 25 years ago, different maneuvers, different unprecedented actions, really trying to make a bold statement to kind of punish Taiwan, you know, send a signal to the United States and its allies. I think one of the goals here was really also to drive up political dysfunction within Taiwan to put pressure on President Tsai Ing-wen and her Democratic Progressive Party. So a lot of efforts to kind of create divisiveness there that we saw some of those zones being targeted, specifically, near areas that are kind of support for the DPP. That was certainly...I think it's important to when you think about the military actions being taken here, to keep in mind that Beijing really intends for all these military actions to have equally important political statements.

D

Daniel Rice 05:53

Yeah, and if I had to add something on here, I think part of this whole series of events, too, comes down to the cross-strait relation between China and Taiwan, obviously, there's a ton of tension between that. And when Speaker Pelosi did decide to visit Taiwan, you know, China, I think China might have felt like it needed to react in a strong way, right to make those points and to actually demonstrate that it does not really approve of that kind of visit by a US representative. And I think there was also a little bit of internal confusion as to you know, whether or not this is an official delegation, you know, did President Biden actually say, go to Taiwan, etc. and that caused them to really have to make a statement and then on our part, right, there came to a point, and you might have seen this in the reporting, but it appeared that Beijing and Washington were almost forced to a stalemate that, you know, if Speaker Pelosi didn't show up on the island, that the US would lose some sort of diplomatic, they would lose some diplomatic face, so to speak, and that if China didn't react in a very strong way that they also would lose some diplomatic speak. And Brian, you kind of mentioned it on the fiery rhetoric, but I think those dramatic actions that we did see the PLA take, they might have actually been pushed even further by that response, and kind of by that anticipation, by the Chinese populace, of really showing, hey, look, China's on the main stage. Now we have more military power than we did before and we can react to this kind of contingency.

**B****Brian Hart 07:28**

Yeah, I want to add to that, I think I think you're right, Dan. And one of the things that I would say that that made this visit by Pelosi particularly an issue right now is all the political dynamics going on within within China. So her trip came a day after the the 95th anniversary of the PLA, which is obviously a big, big deal for, for the PLA and for propaganda purposes. It came among the timing of the CCPs annual bait, I have meetings, which are important kind of private political meetings that kind of set the agenda for the next couple of months or years. And of course, as I'm sure many of the listeners here know, we have the China has the 20th Party Congress coming up in just a few months. And so you put all that together, and you really have a situation where the timing of this couldn't have been couldn't have been that much worse in terms of creating the most kind of intense response from Beijing.

**T****Thomas Corbett 08:24**

Yeah, well. So I think you all made excellent points, and you were 100%. perfectly correct about all of that stuff. One thing I would like to add is that these these military exercises are exercises to not like, it's it's also important to consider the like the PLA has been facing recurring issues with its personnel quality and the training methods. There are constant internal reports about problems with realism and practical training. And they're constantly talking about how much they're improving their methods. And every week, it seems, their methods are getting better and better and better, and they're trying to be more and more realistic. Now, on one hand, that may be true. On the other hand, if they're constantly talking about reforms, that kind of implies the constant need to reform. And so if you look at some of these training exercises, they often have problems of fruitiness and lacking realism. So, you know, besides signaling to Taiwan, about China's feelings on independence and to the US about its ties with the island, I think it's also a pretty unique opportunity to test out some of this hardware, trends, personnel, how to use them in the location where they're most likely going to be seeing action. China hasn't seen a hot war in decades, these exercises are probably the closest thing they'll have to the real thing. Now, right now, they're really focused on jointness between the branches and the logistics capability for complex operations. The ability to move this many personnel and pieces of hardware around the island into practice live fire exercises, seems really valuable.

**D****Doug Birkey 09:52**

So you know, geography matters a lot and what we're talking about right now and you know, this podcast, it's tough to sketch things out, but could you give us an idea of where the exercises were happening? Just to help get us some bearings here. Was this happening in normal locations? Are we see pop ups per usual? Or was this somewhere different?

**B****Brian Hart 10:12**

I think these these exercises really were unprecedented. So this is this is the closest that the PLA has gotten to Taiwan, the the encircling of the of the island was really what caught my eye as soon as the the announcement was made of where these exercise zones would be placed. So if you look at and you compare to the 1995-1996, exercises, those were much closer to

mainland China, they were kind of lining the Taiwan Strait more than they were encircling the island. So, you know, the inclusion of the zones around the island made a huge kind of psychological difference, I think for Taiwan, and was meant to very clearly the suggestion that that the PLA has the capabilities to enforce a blockade. And it takes any other steps they need to they, you know, they might want to take. But I would also add one other thing that I think hasn't quite made it into some of the descriptions, yeah, is that one other difference was with the 1995-1996 exercises, those were stretched out over a series of months. So the fact that these initially six exercise zones, and actually a seven was added a day later, when you put all of that in it happening in the same week, it really creates a much more intense response from the PLA than we've seen in the past, really the opportunity for the PLA to flex its muscle and show you could conduct some of these operations that would protect amphibious forces, you know, that we're preparing for staging for an invasion. So it really was signaling in a kind of much bigger scale than we've seen in the past. And so yeah, I would say this is this is definitely different from what we've seen them do in the past. And I think that was very intentional by Beijing's part to really want to respond in their view in a proportional way.

D

Daniel Rice 11:55

Yeah, Brian, I mean, I think you hit the nail on the head. And actually, I was going to mention something about the timing, too, it is really shocking to see how condensed, this timeframe was for them conducting something on this scale. And one thing about the geography too, that really stands out is the locations, right, specifically, the center line, that historically has been kind of an unspoken unwritten deal where the Chinese military would not cross the center line, the Taiwanese military would not cross the centerline towards China. And it was it's used as a status quo in order to make sure that there's no conflict in the air, you know, in the strait itself. And so actually, with what we've seen with these exercises, and I know Brian, CSIS has tracked us is that there are a lot of fighters and electronic intelligence aircraft that have crossed the median line, repeatedly. And that's really a glaring difference from what we saw. I know, we don't have maps right here. But if anybody's interested in hearing more about the history of the median line, you can check out one of our earlier podcasts that we did maybe a month and a half ago. But the bottom line here is that that median line had created an artificial buffer in between the PLA and the Republic of China militaries. And now that they've continuously crossed that center line, it does cause questions as to whether or not that will become the status quo. And it really signals that they're being far more aggressive over the airspace around Taiwan.

B

Brian Hart 13:31

Yeah, 100%. I think, I think building off of that just a little bit, what specifically we saw some of these zones being geographically placed to completely straddle the median line, one of the zones did that and so on that, on that front, you're seeing some of those naval vessels cross the median line, regularly through that zone. But also, to Dan's point, the ADIZ incursions and the the median line crossings have really ramped up. So what we've seen in terms of the median line crossings right now are completely not comparable to what was happening before before median line crossings are pretty rare. And over the last more than two weeks, we've seen daily crossings with some sometimes, you know, I think the the highest we had was 30 aircraft crossing the median line. And even more pointedly, in the past, most of the crossings have taken place on the very ends of the median line. And we've actually seen PLA aircraft

crossing much closer to the center of that line, which is also pointed due west and close to Taiwan, to Taipei, the capital of Taiwan. So right shortly use that as an opportunity to, to, to push things as far as it can and to to kind of pinpoint how we get how much pressure it wants to put on on a daily basis.

**D** Daniel Rice 14:47

And Brian, I think also too, it was notable that some of the naval exercises were actually happening in the Taiwanese territorial waters is that correct?

**B** Brian Hart 14:58

Yeah, so that was that was the key thing that has emerged, I think three, if I'm not mistaken, three of the zones that mapped out clearly crossed into Taiwan's territorial waters. But I do want to emphasize one thing here, that's important. To my knowledge there was, there was, I think, some disinformation on this from the from the Chinese side. But to my knowledge, no vessels actually went into the nautical within Taiwan school boundaries. And that's, that's important, because again, this was a way for China to send a signal by mapping out these zones in a ways that cross over into Taiwan's territorial waters without actually sending sending vessels into the water there precisely. So again, that's a way for them to ratchet up the political pressure without necessarily escalating on the military front.

**D** Doug Birkey 15:47

So if you guys had just a few minutes with a member of Congress, and you have to explain the significance of this, I mean, I'm talking brass tacks, how would you sum it up?

**D** Daniel Rice 15:58

Sure, I can kick it off that, you know, one sentence takeaway is that China with these exercises, might be trying to break the status quo and assert dominance over the airspace and territorial waters around Taiwan.

**D** Doug Birkey 16:15

You guys agree with that? Any other thoughts?

**B** Brian Hart 16:17

Yeah, I mean, I think 100% I think that's, that's the main goal here is to try to upset the status quo and shift it permanently. I would just the only thing I would kind of add to that is, I think, and I think we can discuss this a little bit further at the end. But one of the big takeaways I have from this is, this is not I think the last large-scale exercise we'll see like this in the coming years. And I think one of the things I worry about and other PLA watchers, I think worry about is

the PLA can continue to ramp up these kinds of large-scale exercise to mobilize large amounts of troops. And it makes it much harder for them. In the future, for the United States or Taiwan to get a clearer sense of what they're going to do, will they start an exercise and end it like they have now or going forward? You know, if a couple of months or years from now, will they use these kind of large scale exercises, a repeat of this, to push further to take an outlying island, or to put in place a large scale blockade or to even carry on further to an invasion? Because broadly speaking, that's what worries me is that they may ramp up these kinds of exercises going forward.

D

Doug Birkey 17:22

Yeah, good deal. So obviously, this is a big move to hold these exercises. But anytime we see this sort of activity at the scale, you know, it helps folks learn a lot more about Chinese capabilities, you know, the concepts of operation and strategy. So what were some of the main observations each one of you took away from these recent events, I mean, was this more reinforcing what you knew, or whether fresh discoveries

D

Daniel Rice 17:44

I can kick us off. So I already mentioned the really big new development, which was just the sheer number of incursions over that center line, and that is very concerning. But something else that kind of caught my attention was the number of more modern aircraft that the PLAAF (People's Liberation Army Air Force) was flying, talking about, like Su-30s, J-11s, J-16s. And they also had some each 6s mixed in there. And while it's not necessarily like, groundbreaking, it does seem like the number of Su-30s, specifically that were flying in the sorties were much higher, and specifically across the centerline. And I mean, I've been tracking some of the PLAAF airfields that are right along the coastline. And there was one base that popped up is Szchwemen airfield, which could be the area that the Su-30s are operating out of. So I think the takeaway from that is that if they're using these more modern aircraft, they're sending them over the center line, it means that they have to be stationed closer to Taiwan, they have to be able to operate out of these airfields. And the you know, they're thought of as deployed airfields. But I think, you know, we might find out that they these airfields specifically might have more capacity for these kinds of longer term or more extended operations with some of these more modern aircraft.

B

Brian Hart 19:07

Yeah, building off that I think the PLA (People's Liberation Army) in China has really sought to play up the fact that it's flying modern aircraft, and they're including to the extent of disinformation. So very early in the in the start of this crisis, I think the PLA put out messages that they had sent Su-35 aircraft into the areas around Taiwan, which the Taiwan Ministry of Defense immediately responded back, "No, you didn't" and so there was a lot of contradictory language there with with the PLA trying to say that they have these but and I did see reports, specifically of them flying J-20 aircraft around the area, which they called unprecedented. I remember seeing that some reports and one of the interesting things too, we've seen a bit of action with some of the the Y-20 refueling variant the really large, new, indigenously-made,

minus the engines, I think, tanker aircraft did was involved in one of the ADIZ incursions that happened about two weeks ago. So they have been trying to dance point to pull out some of these more modern aircrafts. And to really flex the muscle in that respect.

**D** Daniel Rice 20:12

There was also one other thing that I wanted to mention that I don't know if it was necessarily unprecedented. But there were a lot of reports of cyber attacks occurring on Taiwan's government and different companies within Taiwan. And that in itself represents just a different set of capabilities that we're really seeing that China can actually start to use when they're considering some of the options that they might want to use in order to either suppress air activity in Taiwan, or maybe just confuse some of the processes that the government might have to take, right, so suppressing different capabilities through cyber is relatively newly demonstrated specifically over Taiwan.

**T** Thomas Corbett 20:59

Yeah, I think you guys made excellent points about all the hardware and the nitty gritty, I think, taking a step back, I kind of want to return to a point that Brian made before where my overall takeaway is that this is not going to stop. We're going to expect to see this kind of stuff more and more going into the future. I think what's really interesting is reading Chinese strategists leading up to this event, you can kind of see how all the pieces were already laid for this turning out the way it did. There's a concept which I'm sure you guys are familiar with called active defense, where essentially, China justifies anything it does, as being defensive that China feels that it needs to defend its territorial sovereignty, including its claims over Taiwan at all costs. And in order to do this, you know, justifies that using offensive tactics, it seizes the initiative wherever possible, to the point of even launching full-scale pre-emptive attacks, because China claims Taiwan as its territory, this is all considered to be defensive actions, justified and carried out in the name of peace. And also, Chinese strategists have this bizarre, haughty confidence in their own ability to completely control diplomatic crises, and de-escalate any situations they find themselves in. So when you combine this confidence in their abilities to walk back escalation, and their beliefs that all of their actions are justified in the name of self-defense, you get some pretty egregiously provocative actions, such as the stuff we've seen recently. As you said before, I would not expect this to end anytime soon.

**D** Doug Birkey 22:37

Now, we've seen a real surge in the Chinese military buildup. So why is that happening? And how does it affect their ability to project power in the Indo-Pacific, especially when you look at a situation like this?

**D** Daniel Rice 22:49

I think across the group today, we've mentioned several different reasons for why it's happening, right. And some of the longer term goals also play into this, you might have heard of 2035, China wants to have a modernized military. And by 2049, they want to have a world

class military. This is part of the pathway towards that, right, we have seen multiple different services within the PLA actually carrying out these exercises, the Rocket Force, probably the Strategic Support Force for some cyber, then you also have the PLAF, you've got the PLAN (People's Liberation Army Navy), you've got the PLA Army, all of those different services are actually exercising, demonstrating that they may have the capability to carry out joint operations. And I think Brian might have mentioned this a little bit earlier, but there is obviously some obfuscation to this from the PLA, maybe they're overblowing exactly what they're capable of doing. But the bottom line is that they are getting more advanced, they are getting faster, which is a really big deal for us, for the US as we're thinking about how we can respond to it. And they're doing it consistently, right, just kind of thinking on that longer timeline to people might have noticed that the China is trying to create one of its first indigenous, its first indigenous strategic stealth bomber, the H-20, as it's being called. And that actually adds to that list of capabilities or that it could employ when it comes to great power competition, and specifically having that dual-use kinetic or nuclear payload that it can potentially use to strike things like Guam and push the US out even farther. So I think there's that, you know, there's a little bit of the geopolitics and the regional balance of power in play here. There's certainly a large component of the PLAAF and the CCP is plan on modernizing its forces demonstrating that for deterrence effect, and it's all kind of coming to a head with these exercises.

B

Brian Hart 25:00

Yeah, I'll touch on one element here that I think's interesting, just because it's something I have kind of worked on a lot in the past, which is Chinese aircraft carriers. So one of the interesting dynamics here that that's a very, I think, poignant kind of portrayal of how things have flipped, since the last Taiwan crisis is the presence of aircraft carrier. So during the 1995-1996 crisis, you have the US sending in two aircraft carrier fleets into the waters, one, I believe, went into the Taiwan Strait and the other went into areas around Taiwan, it was the largest flexing of US military muscle in Asia since I think the Vietnam War. So that was a huge, huge, sign of American military power, and a sign at the time of the PLA's impotence and an inability to, to kind of counter that capability. And it really was part of the reason that China ultimately kind of back down and in that crisis, fast forward to now, you do not have US aircraft carriers entering the region, we had, I think there were reports of, I think, one carrier and supporting ships, and I think an amphibious ship of the US Navy kind of staying in the waters well east of Taiwan not entering into the strait, not coming close to Taiwan, which a PLA commentator, I think I remember seeing Colonel Joe Blow, like commenting on this...and saying, you know, this was a sign of America, staying cautiously away. And in, you know, in contrast to that you have for the first time, the the PLA's, is one of the PLA's aircraft carriers being involved. So, in the early days of I think even before Pelosi arrived in Taiwan, you have, you see signs that these aircraft carriers are starting to move, I think both of China's two existing carriers left their home ports, and I believe the second carrier, the Shandong was involved in some of the operations around the island, which again, was their sign of them flexing their muscle, but how just add one little note on that, which is, if you think about the role of aircraft carriers, they're really for farther power projection. So in a real Taiwan contingency, a PLA aircraft carrier may play a role, but it'll probably be a secondary role, because Taiwan is close enough to the mainland that the PLA can really project a lot of power from, from land for, you know, with aircraft taking off from land. So really the here the aircraft carriers are really powerful symbolic move to kind of show how things have shifted. And I will just note that I'm sure many of your listeners know that China launched a third aircraft carrier about two months ago, that is far more capable than its first two, it'll be a few years

before we see that entering service, I think, but that will undoubtedly be another tool in the PLA Navy's toolkit to try to push around Taiwan and to kind of challenge the US aircraft and naval assets in the region.

T

Thomas Corbett 27:59

Yeah, I think that's a great point, like China is at a massive advantage in a Taiwan Strait crisis. And just in general, because they they know what's going to happen. This is they've been gearing for this for 30 years, they know exactly where the conflict is going to happen and they're right there. And to go back to your point, I completely agree with that. I think the aircraft carriers aren't really for Taiwan. I think they're more for China's general Bluewater Navy, that, you know, they're trying to keep all of their sea lines open, especially around the Indian Ocean, especially around Southeast Asia, you know, China, I think 70% of their oil comes through those straits. And they need the capabilities to keep those open under all situations. And that's a massive, massive vulnerability, if there ever a conflict between China and the US. We know how vulnerable they are in the Straits of Malacca, and they know just how vulnerable they are in the Straits of Malacca. Right. And so these aircraft carriers are more likely for those kinds of situations where China needs to be able to project power outside of its immediate area. So yeah, great, great point, absolutely.

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Doug Birkey 29:12

So I get what you guys are saying on some of these points of modernization and increased capability. But I also want to push back and say, they just bought themselves a whole new set of challenges with each one of these investments and, you know, look great, they have aircraft carriers, but I don't think it's news to anyone that keeping those things off the ocean floor takes a lot of work. And it takes quite a bit of power just to keep that thing alive, you know, huge targets, looking at regional sway and and how they're, they're playing these elements with that. You also can get regional blowback. So what are your thoughts on this? Because just as much as they step forward, it brings on a whole new set of responsibilities and challenges that they have to they have to sustain and think about.

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Daniel Rice 29:54

You know, we just went down to the Naval Aviation Museum and Doug down there, he briefed us on the idea of the F-14s playing nothing but defense of the carriers when they were put out there. And I think, you know, that example can actually have some analogies or can be analogous to what China might face as it's trying to develop these things. And now they were trying to put J-16s, on the aircraft carriers. But that, you know, that requires a whole different set of capabilities, they need to train how to use that. And Brian did suggest that it'll be several years until these things are operational or actually filled in. So there will be a lot of learning that certainly requires a lot of investment and time and figuring out how to use them. And I think you do make a really good point, too, which is, you know, at the end of the day, aircraft carriers inherently are fairly vulnerable, especially when you're thinking about things like like an LRASM. Right, should should be able to do good effect against an aircraft carrier from a standoff platform. So I think, maybe part of this, and maybe what they were trying to get at by building these is just, honestly, they have the capability to they have the technological know

how to put a carrier together, which is no small feat, how they're actually going to employ it, and I do agree with both Tom and Brian, that it is probably in power projection. But I'm not entirely sure if they figured out exactly what that looks like, right, for all of the reasons that you mentioned, and that I brought up. So it is very difficult. And when it comes to the regional pushback there, there may be a bit of that, right? A lot of these countries in Southeast Asia, when it comes to geopolitics, they like to hedge really strongly. And, you know, there's a big difference between sailing an aircraft carrier or a SAG around and saying, "Hey, we're doing freedom of navigation, upholding international law", right? And then another player or actor sailing an aircraft carrier around saying, "We're protecting our internal waters", right, that sends a completely different signal. And I, I think are, you know, it's very possible that the countries in question in, in Southeast Asia, might react much more viscerally to that kind of pushing and bullying coming out of player.

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Doug Birkey 32:22

Yeah. And where I was going with that, in many ways, this look at what happened with Russia, you know, they do the powerplay in Ukraine, and they just sold a ton of F-35s throughout Europe, and unified NATO like nothing else. And so, you know, does this kind of play over Taiwan cause the Asian nations to tighten up and have stronger stance to guard against Chinese advances to tighten up with the United States or their allies, etcetera? That's just kind of where I was going on that.

D

Daniel Rice 32:52

Yeah. So, you know, I don't want to hog the whole floor here, but my gut feeling on it is that if you do get a much more aggressive, much more power projecting country, or China takes on that role, it is very possible that we will see countries uniting against that and pushing back, because it will interfere with their own sovereign interests in the area. I mean, I think, you know, the US has done a decent job of actually really recently ramping up our efforts in the region, and trying to create more diplomacy in those countries and trying to really shore up the relationships there on the diplomatic and more friendly level, right, and not necessarily through using hard power.

T

Thomas Corbett 33:37

So I made a grave mistake today, I read The Global Times... strongly don't recommend...but right, on its front page, it's really fascinating, because they have two big articles. One is them currently fuming at Japan, for having similar plans for a parliamentary group to visit Taiwan, and also threatening Europe against economic decoupling. I think the timing is pretty clear about why they're doing these kinds of things. You're talking about regional blowback, you know, not only even from the area, but also think about the blowback on Taiwan itself. Right, like I believe PRC spokesperson, like explicitly said that they're doing this to strengthen the confidence and courage of forces inside the island and abroad that oppose independence and promote reunification. The thing is, though, I think China kind of created its own blowback by not having these kinds of military exercises earlier. That like before, when we had these delegations, isn't the first time this has happened. They would usually grumble and saber rattle, but they would never have something this huge before. And so people kind of got used

to them not really being too serious about it. And so when you kind of take away that feeling of safety that they have people react a lot more stronger, whereas if they would have done things like this from the beginning, they probably got a lot less pushback. And so it's going to be really, really difficult for the KMT to try to smooth things over I believe, a KMT official has recently received a lot of criticism over a planned trip to China following the exercises, and kind of tellingly, they justified their visit by saying that they were going there to support Taiwanese citizens, not to deescalate the situation. It was Chinese reporting, of course, they're saying that the whole thing was to deescalate, and that, you know, it's really good that Taiwan is coming in and handling things responsibly. But yeah, I absolutely think we can expect some serious blowback in the coming weeks.

B

Brian Hart 35:38

I'll just add on one, one part here, which is that I, my sense, based on, you know, the broad set of actions that that Xi Jinping, under Xi Jinping, China has taken over the years is Beijing really doesn't actually care that much what other countries think about it in in the sense that China is going to do what it's going to do. And I think they're they really think about things in terms of hardball politics in if if not all of their, if all of their objectives from from these exercises weren't met. I think China just their leaders see this as they have no choice but to respond strongly for both internal and external audiences, to show, to show their resolve and they know that blowback is going to come with that. And we've seen that in their Wolf Warrior diplomacy, you know, that they're, they're really aggressive diplomats over the years. So I think China decided, we're going to do this, we're going to see what we can get out of it. But at the end of the day, it's all part of a process of Xi Jinping making China more assertive in the region and around the world. And on the issue of aircraft carriers, I think the same thing kind of plays, I think, you might see some, some regional players start to push back against that. But at the end of the day, China wants to be able to project power. And I think, years from now, decades from now, you are going to see a PLA Navy fielding aircraft carriers, probably nuclear power, you know, with, with escorts and with resupply ships that can let them move far beyond China's near waters. And I don't think the region is really prepared for what that looks like. I don't think the United States is prepared for what that looks like. Because for so long, the United States has largely been able to traverse the the waters pretty uncontested. And so this is this is part of a long-term process of China really asserting itself and doing so with every bit of military capabilities that it has and I think we're gonna see a lot more of that going forward.

D

Doug Birkey 37:45

All I can say is, I hope they do, because keeping an aircraft carrier alive and viable is one of the most resource intensive military exercises possible. We know better than anybody since we do it all the time. And I jokingly tell their staff, I think one of the best things we could do to impose costs on China is actually just give them all the carriers we're decommissioning and ratchet up those costs on them. So, have at it. I also thought we should have given all the decommissioned F-14s to Iran because it wouldn't have a military budget after they got done trying to sustain all those and keep them airworthy. So you know, I look at these things a little differently. But I would

B

Brian Hart 38:23

Just say one quick thing, sorry, but that's something I harp on a lot, too is this huge naval buildup is going to mean that a lot of these ships are going to require refitting and maintenance around the same time. So you can build 20 ships in a year, but that means you're going to have to repair 20 ships in a year, a decade from now. So I would hate to be the person tracking maintenance costs for the PLA Navy in a couple years.

D

Doug Birkey 38:46

That's a really good point. It's all about waiting to get out of that house that was newly built, and now it's coming up on the time...and the furnace and everything else is going to fail. Okay, So enough talking about what China's going to do to us. What are we going to do about it? I mean, have you guys seen any developments coming out of PACOM and our allies? And how we can respond to this sort of pop up crisis in the longer term...players that are going to be in the mix here? And you know, are there big lessons learned here that you'd recommend that they'd really dial in on?

D

Daniel Rice 39:15

So I really did not see too much that occurred, and maybe Brian, Tom, you guys might have picked up on something else. You know, F-35s became quote, unquote, "fully operational" out of Alaska. It's pretty far away, it's not really on Kadena, or too close in, though they could flex over there relatively easily. There was an Brian, you alluded to it earlier, I think it was the USS Reagan that was stationed somewhere off of Taiwan. But bottom line, we didn't really do very much because of this. What, you know, what could we potentially do about this is have a stronger response. You know, if China wants to, or is trying to break the status quo, we need to demonstrate, "Hey, you know, somebody here is to check, to check you", and to make sure that you will not be able to achieve what you want to around this area". That could come in the form of diplomacy, it could come in the form of shifting around military power, you know, one of the best things that we've discussed at the Mitchell Institute to do is roll out a B-2, somewhere around nearby, and that sends a really strong message. We could have done something like that, or I guess we could still do something like that, right, in the future. I think the main thing and again, Brian, you highlighted this in the beginning of the podcast, is that the this was a very clear example, the timeline, and the timeframe, to react to this kind of exercise, or this kind of occurrence is really, really short now. So we need to have really flexible options, right? Things that can respond on a dime. Or if that they get the call tonight that something is going down, they can be there within a few hours time, or as soon as possible. And, you know, from my perspective, that is not going to be large ships steaming away at 40 knots, that's going to be something much more flexible that we need to have in the inventory. And and of course, you know, at the Mitchell Institute, we always advocate for airpower, so, it is the most flexible response that we've got. So we need to be resourcing that and continuing on the path that we're on, which is buying things that are more flexible. The B 21 is a great example of a platform that has the kind of response, it has that kind of imaging power that the B-2 brings, but you know, it also can do different mission sets that we don't necessarily have full capability or the massive capability to do right now that could send a clear message when China does these kinds of activities.

B

Brian Hart 41:52

Two quick points to wrap up for me, I think, number one, there was chatter months ago within the Biden administration that China might use some development this year to provoke a Taiwan Strait crisis, and that's exactly what they've done. And if the Biden administration, you know, didn't roll out some response that it would want it to because it ended up being prepared, then that's a failure on the Biden administration's part. I don't know, you know, exactly what they still have planned for the future, but one of the things is, we know that China's going to continue to do things like this, and so we need to be prepared for that. Number two, is I think, if China does want to use an exercise like this as as training for something, we should take that seriously. And, and one of the things that I think we're not considering enough is the range of possibilities that China could pursue. So for me, a blockade of the island, a very kinetic and intense blockade is a very real possibility that we need to be prepared for, and that especially Taiwan needs to be prepared for. So, stockpiling resources, creating redundant communications backups, so that if China severs undersea cables, Taiwan can continue to have access to communications and internet, so many things that can be done to proactively prepare and make it harder for, for China to put in place, you know, costs imposed causal like that. Anything that Taiwan can do to increase its preparedness for that and anything that the United States within reason can do to support that, I think that's what we need to focus on going forward.

**T** Thomas Corbett 43:30

Yeah, since since you guys already hit on the hardware. I'll talk about the diplomatic and political side. Yeah, I completely agree talking about blockades. I absolutely think that's a possibility. I think ultimately, for the short term, a more realistic goal that China has for this is that they're, I think they're kind of looking to get people in Taiwan, especially, to self-censor, and consider China's wishes before they take action. That they want us to think like, "Oh, well, you know, maybe they'll react, maybe we'll do another huge exercise again, and so maybe we shouldn't...we should turn down these delegations that are coming." I think, ultimately, that's probably going to backfire, because the US has a very long, very strong, independent rebel streak that'll probably prompt more people to poke China in the eye, just purely because they're telling us not to. So I think we need to work well with our partners. And you know, I've I said it before, I think we've seen great action out of Japan and Australia. I would love to see more action out of Europe and South Korea. But again, I think in this kind of situation, China, they want to come off as defender of their sovereignty, but I think they're coming off as more like a capricious bully, just because of how completely out of the realm that this response was compared to how they handled things before. So yeah, I would, I would love to see more coordinated action as a global community, rather than just individual countries going at it and handling China alone.

**D** Doug Birkey 44:57

No, those are really good guys, and I appreciate those insights. One thing I would add is, and we talked about this a lot here at Mitchell, the need for more US and allied capacity. We fundamentally are sized to be a one war force and right now we've got crises underway both in the Pacific and Europe and we do not have the ability, from a capacity perspective, to deal with that concurrently, and that simply incentivizes aggression, that can escalate to zones that we really lack off ramps to deal with effectively. And so if you're talking about a handful of F-22s, handful of B-2s, handful F-35s, Navy assets, you know, down the line, we do need to be very,

very smart and prudent, in how we size those forces. And I think we're getting ourselves, in the way we talk about risk, and it is way easier to deter action than to actually have to deal with a hot conflict. We're getting really tight on time here and so I do want to throw one last question at you, though. If we were to see this sort of Chinese exercise in five years, what would you expect to see? And I want to break this down in terms of technologies, strategies and diplomatic games.

B

Brian Hart 46:11

I think one thing that you'll see is another effort by Beijing to push the envelope further, to make more moves that are unprecedented. So there were so many moves that that they did this week, that were very intentionally unprecedented, because it shifts the status quo more in their favor. But we've already talked about the median lines, and just the unprecedented scope of this military exercise. One thing we didn't touch on was flying of unmanned vehicles around Taiwan's outlying islands, which was unprecedented and, and a provocative move. And, and a, you know, a way of delegitimizing the concept of Taiwan having airspace. So there were so many moves that that China took and by and large, what I expect is whatever happens next with with the next Taiwan Strait crisis, or the next event like this, it will be even bigger, it'll be more provocative, and it'll really try to push the envelope even further for Beijing.

D

Daniel Rice 47:08

Yeah, another thing, Brian, like you mentioned, there were so many unprecedented things. Another one, there, too, was the DF-15 going over Taipei. I mean, that was a very clear statement, you know, if you look at some unclassified range rings of this DF-15, they pretty much shot it to what the extent of that unclassified level is. So that was a clear demonstration of technology. I think, five years from now, you know, having just recently participated in in that CSIS war game, actually, I think they're gonna make those magazines a lot deeper so they've got plenty of options to respond to either Taiwanese counter attacks, or any other actor joining in the fight, whether it be the US or Japan or, or another country in the region. So they're probably going to really, you know, double down on what they've already started to develop, make sure that they've got the ability to complete, like the targeting of actually these long range strikes, right, making sure they can hit the targets, they want to that would probably require more and more robust space-based systems, trying to actually, you know, build those out even farther. Making sure that there's a very little opportunity for any adversary to degrade those systems, shoring up the defense of these things, that kind of like covers it for technology, right. For strategies. I think I think you're right, Brian, I think it's all escalatory from here, and, you know, there's, at some point, you can't really make any more unprecedented moves, right? If you've done it all, you've done it all. And that's got to be the kind of the tipping point that we need to win in diplomacy. I think we have made it pretty clear across all of us today that, you know, one of China's primary goals, the CCP has primary goals, is to quote unquote, reunify Taiwan with mainland China. So until that is accomplished, I think the CCP is going to believe that they haven't completed their job and it is one of those checkboxes they've got to tick off in order to achieve the quote unquote, rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

T

Thomas Corbett 49:21

Yeah, I think five years is the perfect timeframe. Brian mentioned this before, and I think it's a

great point, that we really do need to consider China's domestic audience for these kinds of things. Right? Often in the West, we don't really think about that a whole lot. But a big reason why this is coming up is that right now Xi will be up for his third term, now this is going on, and then in five years, it'll be up for his fourth term, or his successor will be looking to consolidate their support. If something major were to happen, five years is exactly when it would probably go down. I mean, right now you do have to wonder how much of this is because of Chinese domestic concerns right now. We're in very interesting times... Xi's coming up for an unprecedented third term, the housing market is struggling, local banks are failing, zero COVID is facing massive social blowback, China's mobility...China's social mobility is stagnant, it's coming in just under Costa Rica's. Now, there's good scholarship out there that points to hardline sovereignty issues as being very important to Chinese populace. However, importantly, the actual timeline for resolving them isn't important to a lot of people. And what this means is that these kinds of situations tend to come up in a break glass in case of domestic unrest situation, where China can either choose to ignore them, or go full scorched earth, depending on how much they need to distract the populace. Five years is most likely when these kinds of things come up again. In terms of technology, I don't think it'll look so much different than today, I think we'll definitely see more use of drones and particularly drone swarms, that's definitely something China's interested in. But in general, I think we, we kind of "boogeyman" China and the PLA in terms of their technological capabilities and their ability to innovate in the short term scale. They tend to throw a lot of money at things but that doesn't really mean that they're going to see a lot of breakthroughs and see a lot of high tech, new things on the battlefield.

**D** Doug Birkey 51:16

Well guys, I really appreciate all this. We've come to the end of our time for this episode of the podcast. So again, thank you so much for taking the time to catch us up on this topic. It's so important and again, it took us past the headlines and that was really the objective. So big thanks to all of you.

**B** Brian Hart 51:33

Yeah, happy to be here. Thanks.

**T** Thomas Corbett 51:35

Yeah. Thanks for having us. Really appreciate it.

**D** Daniel Rice 51:38

Yeah, thanks, Tom, Brian, for joining us. It's a pleasure to be here with you guys.

**D** Doug Birkey 51:43

With that, I'd like to extend a big thank you to our guests for joining us in today's discussion. I'd

also like to extend a big thank you to our listeners for your continued support, and for tuning into today's show. And if you like what you've heard today, don't forget to hit the like button and follow or subscribe to the Aerospace Advantage. You can also leave a comment to let us know what you think about our show, or areas where you think we should explore further. And as always, you can join in the conversation by following the Mitchell Institute on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook or LinkedIn. You can always find us at [mitchellaerospacepower.org](http://mitchellaerospacepower.org) Thanks again for joining us and we'll see you next time.