FOREIGN POLICY
16 September 2019

Beijing's South China Sea Aggression Is a Warning to Taiwan

China's salami-slicing tactics can be countered—if Taipei stays smart.

By David Santoro

China's increasingly assertive actions in the South China Sea have drawn plenty of attention. But its moves are important not just for Beijing's ambitions there, but for its wider playbook for wielding power and influence in the Indo-Pacific—and what it might have in store for Taiwan.

Beijing has set out expansive territorial claims in its "nine-dash line," which lays claim to virtually all the South China Sea, and advanced them through an integrated, whole-of-government approach, including the use of aggressive diplomacy and quasimilitary as well as military forces. China has also gradually militarized several islands it has occupied (despite an earlier promise to never do so), denounced the July 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling dismissing the validity of many of its claims, and demonstrated a willingness and ability to continue pressing these claims over the long term, regardless of any damage to its reputation. Significantly, it has also taken similar assertive actions to pursue other claims in the East China Sea, over the Senkaku Islands.

Observers typically characterize China's approach to the South China Sea (and the East China Sea) as a "salami-slicing" or "gray-zone" strategy. By employing a series of incremental actions, none of which by itself justifies war, this strategy seeks to gradually change the status quo in China's favor. Maj. Gen. Zhang Zhaozhong of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) once named it a "cabbage strategy" because it wraps the islands, like the concentric leaves of a cabbage, in successive layers of occupation formed by Chinese fishing boats, Chinese Coast Guard ships, and Chinese naval ships.

Beijing's goal, therefore, is to establish a fait accompli: Chinese military and economic primacy in, and operational control over, the South China Sea. If successful, Beijing will be in a much better position not only to threaten and defeat its neighbors militarily, including Taiwan, but also to cast a shadow over, or even block, the enormous amount of commercial traffic that passes through this area.

Of course, the United States and other regional states have not remained passive in the face of Chinese actions. Washington has responded by conducting several freedom-of-navigation operations and by ramping up U.S. presence in the South China Sea, while also adapting and strengthening its long-standing alliances in the Indo-Pacific and forging new security partnerships, formerly through the "Asia Rebalance" strategy and today through the "U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy."

So far, however, U.S. counteractions have only had limited success. Significantly, at an April 2018 congressional hearing to consider his nomination (later approved) to become commander of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, U.S. Navy Adm. Philip Davidson stated that

"China is now capable of controlling the South China Sea in all scenarios short of war with the United States." This suggests that Beijing seems to have already achieved many of its goals on the ground.

Beijing's recent actions toward Taiwan are not dissimilar to those it has taken in the South China Sea. Beijing seems to have once believed it could persuade Taiwan toward a version of "one country, two systems" peacefully. But its stance toward Taiwan changed as soon as Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen took office in May 2016 and refused to endorse the 1992 Consensus, a tacit understanding reached between representatives of Taiwan and China at a meeting held in November 1992 that there is only "one China," but which allowed each side to maintain its own interpretation of the meaning of "one China."

Beijing has worked hard to shrink Taiwan's domestic and international space, especially since the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in October 2017. It has used a "united front" strategy to win allies in Taiwan and isolate Tsai and her Democratic Progressive Party—a tactic derived from Mao Zedong's belief that it's best to isolate an enemy before striking him. Beijing has pressured various states and businesses to stop recognizing Taiwan. Since Tsai took office, for instance, São Tomé and Príncipe, Panama, the Dominican Republic, Burkina Faso, and El Salvador have all switched allegiance from Taiwan to China, leaving only 16 countries and the Holy See to recognize Taiwan under its formal name: the Republic of China (ROC). Similarly, because of Chinese pressure, British Airways, Austrian Airlines, Singapore Airlines, and many others now list Taipei with various forms of connection to China, as opposed to "Taipei, Taiwan." Finally, and significantly, in recent years Beijing has sought to influence the Taiwanese economy in ways that benefit China, and it has ratcheted up military exercises near the island.

Each of these actions clearly mimic Chinese salami-slicing or gray-zone operations in the South China Sea. Collectively, they seek to destabilize Taiwan, while remaining individually under the threshold that would trigger a response from the United States and others. Here too, as in the South China Sea, Beijing's goal seems to be the establishment of a fait accompli, i.e., gaining control of the island politically and economically.

Yet in this case Beijing is unlikely to be content with de facto control. After all, Taiwan has been¾and to this day remains¾the PLA's main "strategic direction." Beijing has repeatedly made clear that it wants to reunify the island with mainland China and, significantly, it never renounced the use of force to do so, especially if Taiwan declared independence. At the 19th National Congress of the CCP, for instance, Chinese President Xi Jinping stressed that "we have the resolve, the confidence, and the ability to defeat separatist attempts for 'Taiwan independence' in any form." During a January 2019 speech marking the 40th anniversary of the mainland's 1979 "Message to Compatriots in Taiwan," Xi also stated that unification with Taiwan was "a must for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation in the new era."

There are important differences between Taiwan and the South China Sea, however. First, despite Taiwan's growing economic dependence on China, Beijing probably cannot gain effective control of the island without resorting to outright military aggression. Unlike the South China Sea, Taiwan is a much more clearly defined territorial space, and it has its own population and governing authority—a population, what's more, that's increasingly hostile to any thought of rule from Beijing, or even being identified as "Chinese" at all. This means

that gaining full control of the island would, in effect, require Beijing to conduct an operation analogous to Russia's grabbing of Crimea in 2014¾on far more hostile terrain, and without a friendly local population. Second, and relatedly, Taiwan has direct agency in this game, whereas it is much less clear who does in the South China Sea. That suggests that Taipei can formulate responses to defend against, and even counter, Chinese actions, especially to deal with the threat of Beijing invading its territory and establishing a fait accompli.