FDD Media Call: Findings of Taiwan-China War Game

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Featuring RADM (Ret.) Mark Montgomery and Craig Singleton
Moderated by Joe Dougherty

DOUGHERTY: Good afternoon, and thank you for joining us for today's media call as FDD experts provide key findings from a recent tabletop exercise simulating how China might stress Taiwan's communication sector to coerce the island. The results of this tabletop exercise were briefed to the president of Taiwan and his national security team. My name is Joe Dougherty, senior director of comms at FDD. We've got a lot to go over, so we're going to get right to it.

Our two experts today, first up is Rear Admiral (retired) Mark Montgomery, Senior Fellow focusing on China's regional military expansion. Mark served as policy director for the Senate Armed Services Committee, and his flag officer assignments included director of operations at U.S. Pacific Command and commander of the George Washington Carrier Strike Group. Craig Singleton is a Senior Fellow at FDD and Senior Director of FDD's China Program, a former US diplomat who focused on China and East Asia issues. Craig is also a professor at Stanford University.

This conversation is on the record. We will have time for a Q&A, and we will provide a transcript and a link to the video after the call. Well, let's get started right away. Mark, over to you.

MONTGOMERY: Hey, thank you very much, and thank you for the members who've joined. And I'm real honored for me to be here with Craig Singleton, head of our China Program. He and I just got back from our third annual high-level tabletop exercise with Taiwan. We do these with a mix... As you're probably aware, the United States and Taiwan do not have traditional government-to-government relationships. So Craig and I going over there, other people on our team included Matt Pottinger, other China and cyber economic warfare experts from the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, some of our board members and adjuncts, people who are experienced, former government or foreign policy officials, go over to help make up the Team America. You'll hear from Craig in a minute. He's a one-man Team China, but the rest of us play either White Cell or Team America. We think these exercises are effective because they help examine how Taiwan can prepare for, resist, and recover from Chinese Communist Party (CCP) cyber-enabled economic warfare campaign.

It's our belief here at FDD that a cyber-enabled economic warfare campaign, the most likely scenario, is much more likely than the most dangerous scenario of a cross-state invasion and one which we choose to put a lot of our effort into preparing for. As I said, it was our third year of doing one. In 2024, we did one on financial services, looked at the financial systems. In 2025, we did one on energy, really looking hard at LNG, nuclear power and the resilience of the Taiwan grid. And then, this year, we looked at the communication sector. Look, the communication sector are focused because we think that China can gain a lot of effort, that it can gain a lot of opportunity there. I don't know that it's as vulnerable as energy with LNG. It's a tight race between the two, but between energy and communications and interoperability between the two, China has a significant opportunity to bring, for lack of a better word, break Taiwan's societal resilience to Chinese economic coercion.

We'll do another exercise in 2027. Craig and I are kind of working our way through what that would be right now, but I think both of us are considering the option of what's it like when all three of these are executed with real simultaneity. And the answer is not good because when they're exercised singularly with the other things in the background, things are tough. I think with simultaneity, it'd be very tough. And I don't know that China is stretched to do things with simultaneity in the way that Taiwan will be to defend things with simultaneity. The other big effort we do in these is try to understand what key allies and partners can do. And there, we're talking about, really, the United States and then Japan and then maybe Australia and a few others. But there's no doubt that the US and Japan are critical to Taiwan's resilience.

And it's also highly likely, and Craig will talk through how he plays China, that a subtle, wise China player, like Craig has played it the last three years, can make it so that Japan and the United States are slow to move. And what I've learned is we've got to operate ahead of time on this. I used to think this was only a Japan problem. I thought in Japan, their ability to respond to an event that they have not properly prepared for or done the paperwork on ahead of time, gotten agreements and contracts in place that when a crisis unrolls itself, they'll be watching the train pass through the station.

But conversely, if Japan has thought through a process, has agreements and contracts in place and that situation executes, Japan, assuming the United States is involved, will execute the agreements they've made. And then, therefore, the most important thing you can draw from our games are: what would you wish had existed before the tabletop exercise, before the exercise scenario played out, to allow yourselves to better defend yourself? And we've thought about in this communications one, these are things like: cable repair, satellite support, particularly from close proximity in ground station support from Japan or the Philippines, microwave distribution from Japan or the Philippines, and then finally, cloud hosting. Is there value as we saw in Ukraine of cloud hosting off premises, off the island? So these are all things you kind of identified.

So Craig and I are pulling together lots of ideas and solution sets, but not just for Taiwan. An equal number will be written for the United States, Japan, Australia, the Philippines, probably in that order. So overall, we thought this was a very good exercise. Most of the vulnerabilities we thought we'd see, we saw, and some vulnerabilities we did not expect, we saw, but we also saw a lot of opportunity, and we saw a Taiwan team that was aggressive in working the situation. So with that, Joe, I'll pass it over to Craig.

SINGLETON: Hey, everyone. Yeah, thanks Joe and Mark and for everyone dialing in today. The way I approached China and the exercise started with a pretty simple question, what's China trying to achieve? I don't think China would take on the risk and the cost of a campaign like this simply to knock out some cell service or to cut a cable. Those are tactics sort of like terrorism. The political objective is to change Taiwan's behavior, to convince Taipei that the course Beijing opposes carries mounting costs, that outside support cannot make those costs disappear indefinitely and that Beijing retains some ability to raise or lower the pressure. And that's what made communications really interesting to me and Mark.

Communications can serve three different functions in a coercive Chinese campaign.

The first is it's a standalone pressure tool, right? You don't need a blockade or a quarantine to start imposing meaningful costs. If cellular service becomes intermittent, if international bandwidth tightens, mobile payments stop working, businesses have trouble communicating, and citizens feel less certain which information channels they can trust, then normal economic and social activity gets a lot harder. That alone can create significant pressure.

Second is that communications can be an amplifier. An electricity problem or a grid problem becomes harder to manage when communications are degraded. A maritime incident becomes a lot more dangerous when information is really incomplete, and problems that would normally be manageable begin interacting with one another in a crisis.

And third, communications can be an enabler of a more serious campaign. In a larger crisis, degrading connectivity can complicate government decision-making, outside assistance, logistics, military coordination, and Taiwan's ability to communicate with the rest of the world. And those are our analytic categories, and I think they really line up closely with what the People's Liberation Army calls information deterrence.

And that emphasizes two key characteristics that I think matter a lot here. The first is called permeability, and the second is called ambiguity. Permeability for the Chinese means the effects can spread well beyond the communication system into electricity and finance and transportation, commerce and public confidence. And ambiguity means attribution, intent, and even the scope of the disruption can remain uncertain enough to slow decision-making and complicate a response. That was kind of the basic logic behind how I get to play Xi Jinping. My 11-year-old son says I was born for this role. I think that's a compliment, somewhere in there. But on the first day of the game, I deliberately stayed below the most destructive options. The scenario had already given us pretty significant pressure. The PLA and the Coast Guard, we're seeing increased activity around Taiwan. We're seeing some missile closure areas, some low-level cellular disruptions, and some suspected cyber access involving cable infrastructure and disinformation and some unexplained satellite latency.

And so, I didn't see much value in producing some sort of spectacular blackout. I really wanted in the first day's exercise controlled degradation. I paired localized cellular problems with information manipulation. I increased ambiguity and maritime activity over submarine cable routes. I applied just some limited pressure to the satellite layer. And the point was partly coercive and partly informational. I wanted Taiwanese citizens asking, "Why is this happening? How long is it going to last? Will the backup plan work? Should I believe what the government's telling me?" And at the same time, I wanted Beijing learning from Taiwan's response, "Who takes charge? Where does all this traffic get rerouted? When does Taiwan move traffic onto satellite systems? When does the US and Japan get involved?"

So day one was really about probing, conditioning, and mapping Taiwan's resilience architecture. And I would agree with Mark that Taiwan handled a fair amount of that pressure rather well. Different operators in the room said they could reroute traffic. They could explain their reasoning. The Ministry of Digital Affairs would coordinate a lot of the activities. They had backup systems. They had domestic roaming agreements in place. And from Red's perspective, that response gave me a lot of information. I knew that Taiwan intended to rely on certain individuals or companies.

The second day of our exercise though really ramps it up, and the problem changes. The scenario gets more intense, and we saw multiple substations supporting telecommunications were disabled. Several international subsea cables were damaged or cut. The remaining cable capacity was at its limit. The microwave backup system was under extraordinary demand. Government websites were compromised. We saw satellite alternatives under strain. And at that point, I was no longer asking whether Taiwan had redundancy. I was asking whether all those redundancies could function simultaneously, like Mark mentioned, at scale for weeks against an adversary that was adapting to the conditions.

And I think that is a much harder resilience problem, and the one that the current Lai administration appears to be addressing. And that's also where my political objective became more explicit. Once Beijing has generated that level of pressure, continuing to break things for activities' sake makes little strategic sense. The goal becomes converting disruption into political leverage. And in my red team logic, I wanted Taipei to start concluding that it could not simply engineer its way out of this problem forever. I could push into communications. I could let those effects migrate to the electrical grid daily economic activity. I could make restoration a lot harder, but I could also reduce the pressure. And that ability to calibrate really matters because the political message becomes: there's a pathway back to normal. Beijing wants a change in behavior in return. I was also, to Mark's point, very disciplined about avoiding a direct confrontation with the United States. I had very little incentive to attack American forces or make Washington the target. That would risk turning a coercive campaign against Taiwan into a US-China confrontation and could potentially solve Taiwan's coalition problem for it.

So I didn't want to do those things. I think one of the most useful findings came from the responses on the second day. Taiwan and the US teams began talking about American cable repair vessels and insurance guarantees and satellite capacity and US and Japanese cyber teams. And I think that those efforts, those discussions made my job a lot harder. And there's a real paradox here for Beijing, right? If coercive campaigns like this cause Taiwan, the US, Japan, commercial providers to build standing resilience architecture that's already in place, it's already contracted and authorized, and it's been rehearsed. I think Mark and I would say that China can gain maybe some leverage in the short term, while the same coercive strategy is less useful the next time, and it builds resiliency into the system. So I think those are some of my biggest takeaways. I think the strategic question for Taiwan is bigger than whether it has enough backup systems.

It's whether those systems and the international relationships behind them can keep functioning under weeks of adaptive pressure without giving Beijing the political leverage it's seeking. And I think the way that Mark was able to help run, as we run this game and sort of manage the different constituencies, we were really testing and probing on that front. But looking forward to questions from you all. Thanks so much for dialing in today.

DOUGHERTY: Thank you, Craig. Thank you, Mark. And speaking of questions, you can submit your questions using the chat feature or the raised hand feature. We'll get to those questions in a moment. Mark, I will have a cyber question for you in just a second, but my first one is actually for Craig, and I think the timing of this question is good. Why should journalists, particularly those on the call, care about this now? Isn't this still a hypothetical scenario?

SINGLETON: Yeah, I mean, last year FDD gamed out an energy quarantine. We were the first ever to conduct an LNG energy quarantine game for the Taiwanese because we were trying to peek around the corner. And since then, Taiwan has had to confront real LNG supply and price shocks, Chinese disinformation about looming energy shortages and blackouts, and cyber activity across Taiwan's energy companies. And Taiwan is now spending heavily to strengthen its energy resilience to diversify supply, including recommendations that we put forth about increasing purchases of US LNG. And that's exactly why we moved to communications this year. The point of these exercises is to identify the next coercive vulnerability before it becomes a crisis everyone is scrambling to understand.

Cable disruptions and satellite dependence, and cyber and maritime activity around critical infrastructure are already appearing in pieces around Taiwan today. And our game asks: what happens when Beijing starts combining them deliberately? So I don't have a crystal ball; otherwise, I would have next week's Powerball number in front of me, but we do have a decent track record about looking around the corner and predicting what we think the Chinese are going to be doing in a year or so.

MONTGOMERY: Yeah. If I could pick up on that, Joe, and I'm stealing from Craig's thoughts partially when I say this. We think this is really timely. We think the LNG one was timely last year, and this one is this year because the most dangerous scenario -- neither Craig nor I agree with 2027, I think even the US government's moving off that now, that was based on conditions that existed in 2021; conditions have changed, the likely intercept points of our ability and our allies' ability to stop a cross-strait invasion, and Chinese ability to do one is in the early 2030s, in the future. This most likely scenario that Craig and I have concentrated on, cyber-enabled economic coercion, has got a pretty good target date right now to be ready if I was the Taiwan government, and that's the spring of 2028. I think there's going to be an election. Well, I know there's going to be an election in Taiwan in January of 2028. And if the DPP wins a fourth consecutive election, I think Leader Xi is going to say something along the lines of, "That charm offensive of mine with the KMT didn't work."

Now, very few of us would actually say this was a charm offensive, but to Xi, it might've been. He keeps the pressure down at a three on a scale of one to 10. He could take a few pages out of Craig's playbook from the last couple weeks and take it up to five, six, seven, eight, really put the pressure on Taiwan and test their societal resilience at a time that the United States is preparing for the Olympics. We have an election going. We're in the middle of primaries then. This is not the best time for the United States to respond. And so I'm very concerned about the beginning of 2028, not for a cross-strait invasion, but for some sort of coercion campaign.

DOUGHERTY: Thank you, Mark. Thank you, Craig. Bill, I see that you've got something in the chat. We'll get to you in just a moment. First, we're going to go to Didi at AP. Didi, over to you, please.

DIDI TANG: Thank you so much for doing this. I see that the delegation was in Taiwan September the 24th. So I wonder if you can talk about the mood in the president's office about Xi-Trump meeting in Washington, D.C., and what has been discussed about the possible -- the arm sales to Taiwan. And from your tabletop exercise, do you see the urgency, how urgent it is, for the US to sell the arms to the island, to Taiwan? Thank you.

SINGLETON: Yeah, I'm happy to chime in on some of it. I'm sure Mark has thoughts too. I mean, I thought the mood was watchful rather than panicked. Taiwanese officials, I think, are used to US-China leader-level diplomacy, but there was real sensitivity to whether Xi could use this summit to establish a new linkage, I think, between stable US-China relations and reduced support for Taiwan. People were watching the language very closely, especially on arms sales and whether Washington would edge toward Beijing's preferred formulation on Taiwanese independence. I think the concern was less one summit than the precedent it might set, but I think US officials did their best after the summit to make clear that US policy towards Taiwan remains unchanged, and remains to be seen what we'll see next on US arm sales to the island. I think my top line on the arms sale question is that there's a real risk that both leaders are viewing this current pause very, very differently.

I think President Trump used it as a temporary negotiating tactic, a point of leverage with the Chinese to secure a better trade deal and to hold this in reserve. And he believes he has a lot of flexibility and optionality there. I think every month that we see a delay, the Chinese perceive this pause as a new precedent. And my concern is that sooner or later, President Trump or another US leader will approve another arms package for Taiwan. And in that moment, the Chinese may believe that that is a betrayal and a betrayal of an agreement reached at the leader level. And I suspect that if we allow this sentiment to harden much further, that in just a few months we'll see some sort of explosive reaction to the next arms sale or show of support for Taiwan. And so I think this current moment is quite fraught and that the two leaders are viewing the current pause very, very differently, but I'm sure Mark has thoughts as well. Happy to answer any follow-ups on that one.

MONTGOMERY: So I defer to Craig on the China aspect. On the Taiwan aspect, I'd say very specifically, I think I agree with Craig's description that they weren't overreacting; they were dispassionate about it, but they are frustrated. This lack of government-to-government relations really becomes clarified when you're trying to find out what President Trump means, the opaqueness of a discussion about the Foreign Military Sales, and you can't really talk to people. I think that there's a level of frustration there, and no matter how good your AIT director is, and we have a superb AIT director in Taipei, American Institute of Taiwan director in Taipei, it's challenging to communicate, to get that kind of proper communication so there's not misunderstandings.

This is amplified by the kind of disconnect in how the Department of Defense talks about defense spending in Taiwan. They simultaneously want 5% defense spending, but don't have Foreign Military Sales teed up to meet that. Taiwan probably needs 12 to 15 billion dollars a year in defense spending... Excuse me, 12 to 15 billion dollars a year in Foreign Military Sales from any country, but we all know that really means the United States only, in order to get to 5%. And the Trump administration says things like, "Well, we've already given 11 billion. That's more than President Biden sold, but you're demanding 5%, which means you have to do more than 11 billion every year for four years." So there's this disconnect there. And then I'm not even mentioning the frustration there is over $30 billion in FMS delivery backup. And it's not all backed up, about half of it's backed up, and half of it is yet to be declared backed up.

DOUGHERTY: Thanks, Mark. David and Warren, I see you in the queue. We're going to start off, though, with Bill Gertz. Bill, over to you. Actually, I see you've got it in the chat. My apologies. I will read it aloud. "President Lai mentioned that low-orbit satellites were used. Assume this is Starlink. How did this work, and was it vulnerable to disruption?"

MONTGOMERY: So what we're talking about here is that Taiwan has existing access to some low Earth orbit satellites, and they are thinking about where to go in the future. There's lots of options here. Starlink is an option. Amazon LEO, which formerly Amazon Kuiper, is another option. There's a third option besides that. So these are kind of the choices you would allow that a country needs to make on its own. Clearly, Starlink is the most mature, robust, low Earth orbit communications network running right now, but it's also got risk for Taiwan because we've seen its founder, owner, Elon Musk, on occasion put his finger on the scale of where and when it can be used in the Ukraine-Russia conflict. And it's reasonable for Taiwan to wonder: "Would someone with that much business in China have the same inclination during a China-Taiwan campaign of some pressure campaign or actual conflict?" So they may have to look at other options.

Within the Starlink option, there's something called Starshield that's a reach because of all the security issues involved, but it's a potentiality with Starshield being the system that the Department of Defense runs with Starlink. So a lot of options in here. I don't want to speak for President Lai, but I suspect he wasn't referring to any specific option.

SINGLETON: Yeah, no, that's a great question, Bill, and thanks for calling in. I think in our game, satellite connectivity was one of Taiwan's important fallbacks when terrestrial and undersea networks came under pressure, but we deliberately stressed to that layer too, especially in the second day. And so satellites are redundancy. They're not immunity. Terminals can be disrupted, ground stations can be attacked and lose contact, software can be compromised, and the system still depends on power and commercial providers. And Starlink itself is not something Taiwan can simply assume will be available or dependable in a crisis. So I think the real lesson for me is to have multiple independent satellite and terrestrial pathways rather than treating any one constellation as the answer.

DOUGHERTY: David DiMofetta over at Government Executive asks, first he says, thanks you two both for holding this. Curious how much Salt Typhoon came up in the discussions and how FDD plans to relay those lessons learned to USG operators trying to jettison Salt from US telecom networks, assuming that they still have footholds inside.

MONTGOMERY: So advanced persistent threat teams came up and Craig is trying to use them in both moves, but particularly in move two, but they're a nice plausibly deniable thing early in the conflict as well. In our opening discussions, we discussed the specifics of Volt Typhoon and Salt Typhoon, but for the purposes of the game, you don't assign which specific advanced persistent threat team was conducting them. But because these attacks were on the communications network, it's reasonable to expect that Salt Typhoon was part of it. But again, that was more of a discussion point at the beginning when we discussed about the types of threats when, because of a lack of attribution at the moment, we were literally in a, you're responding in the next 10 minutes to something that happened, you're responding to the effect introduced likely by Salt Typhoon without having the ability to attribute it to that specific advanced persistent threat team.

And as you know, David, while we treat them as cute nicknames for an attack campaign, they in fact are references to specific advanced persistent threat teams. Thanks for the question.

SINGLETON: Yeah, no, that's a great one. We didn't actually use Salt and Volt Typhoon by name in the packets, but it absolutely informed how we thought about the scenario. The lesson from both is that Beijing increasingly values persistent access and pre-positioning, getting inside critical systems before a crisis and learning how they work rather than waiting until the crisis begins. And in our energy game last year, we explicitly used that logic to think about access to the grid and grid-facing systems and the psychological effect of making operators wonder what China could reach or disrupt next. I think the communications version of that problem is extremely similar. If an adversary already understands the network, its dependencies and its fallback pathways, then disruption can become much more targeted and adaptive. I think one thing that one takeaway I had was that AI could eventually help defenders detect anomalies. It could help correlate incidents across networks. It could help triage cyber events and spot coordinated information operations faster, but it's still a relatively new tool in this context.

And the harder question is whether those AI systems remain useful when the data is incomplete or manipulated or the communication systems become degraded themselves. So I think there's probably a lot of opportunity for Taiwan to partner with US AI companies on this. I think it's going to be one of our big due-outs from the report.

MONTGOMERY: And I'll come back on one thing there that in general, when we play these games in the United States, in Europe, in Japan, in Taiwan, almost all policy decision makers have a false sense of speed of recovery from cyber-enabled disruptions. They're speaking in minutes and hours, and my experience is days or weeks. Now, that doesn't mean that every attack takes weeks, but it does mean that it's important. And so in any kind of war game, I'm not saying in these Taiwan ones uniquely, you have to have some truth telling about how hard cyber recovery is, especially on complex systems that require you go, before you go, before you go, before I go to bring them back. Now, as Craig was mentioning AI earlier, there's a world in the not too distant future where those recovery tools get a lot more proficient, but right now those are slow recoveries.

And in a country like Taiwan where they're growing so fast at 8 to 12% GDP growth year after year for over a decade, a lot of your infrastructure can't keep up with that pace of growth and you see that in energy, you can see it in communications, you can see it in financial services.

DOUGHERTY: Warren, over to you for your question. And in the meantime, also wanted to mention that Bill Gertz is requesting that if you could sum up the bottom line results of the exercise. I know the report is not due out immediately, but perhaps there are some key points that you can share now for this group.

SINGLETON: Sure. Do we want to do that after Warren?

DOUGHERTY: Warren, over to you. Cannot hear it, unfortunately, Warren, if you are speaking. If you could drop it in the chat, that would cover it I think pretty well. But in terms of the key findings, is that something you can address now?

SINGLETON: Sure. I have a few that I wrote down, and I'm sure Mark has maybe some of the same and maybe probably some new ones. I had four big takeaways from me, Bill. One is China does not need a blockade or a quarantine or an invasion to create strategic pressure on Taiwan. Communications disruption can impose costs on its own, amplify problems in sectors like energy and transportation, and enable broader, coercive or military operations.

The second takeaway from me was the real vulnerability is cumulative here. Taiwan can reroute traffic and it can roam across networks and they can use satellites and they can activate backup power. But the harder question is whether all of these systems can keep working simultaneously for weeks while Beijing adapts. The third objective or takeaway for me was that Beijing's objective is political. It is not technical. Cutting a cable or disrupting cell service only matters if it changes Taipei's calculation by making normal life harder and creating pressure to deal with Beijing on Beijing's terms.

And then the fourth takeaway for me was that the strongest defense is prearranged international resilience. Repair access and cyber support and satellite capacity and allied decision making, having those things already in place before a crisis begins. Every decision settled in advance is one less decision Beijing can slow, confuse, or exploit. Those are more my big top line takeaways, but Mark, over to you.

MONTGOMERY: So look, my top line takeaway was the same. It was similar to the energy one in the sense that if there are things we... This is a challenge of trying to prevent, trying to mitigate while it's going on and then trying to recover from. And that key to the number one thing you can do is try to prevent, which contributes to deterrence, which might even prevent China from attempting if they saw enough prevention coming up front. And that means getting US efforts ahead of time and getting Japanese efforts ahead of time in this communication when it really is the US and Japan. There's some minor other things that the country can do, but this is the US and Japan supporting Taiwan. And so one of the things we want to do, Craig and I, is come back and run this war game with US congressional staffs and with federal agencies.

Because while I think the United States government does a successful job of running the most dangerous scenario inside the Department of Defense at think tanks, at RAND, heavily classified, down to unclassified, hundreds of games a year that Craig and I are asked to play in, they don't run this most likely scenario near as well. The Department of Defense sees it as a problem for the other federal agencies and the other federal agencies don't have a budget or a systematic process for running these kind of tabletops. So we want to go there and get that to get the United States motivated on it. And we're also going to go to Japan to run this, a similar tabletop, not the one we ran two weeks ago, but a similar one in the next few months. So to me, that's the biggest takeaway is: Taiwan is working resilience hard. The president's focused, President Lai is laser focused on societal resilience. His cabinet are laser focused on societal resilience, and their National Security Council literally has about a third of the staff dealing with this issue. I think the value added of work like FDDs is to get the United States government, industry, and Japan's government and industry, as laser focused on this challenge.

DOUGHERTY: If we can open the aperture just a bit. Question for you, Craig. Are you seeing any evidence that Beijing is showing restraint around Taiwan as Washington tries to stabilize relations with China?

SINGLETON: Very little. That asymmetry I think is part of the reason this all matters right now. Washington has delayed, of course, approval of the roughly $14 billion arms package while the president tries to manage a relationship with Xi Jinping, but Beijing has not answered Trump's restraint with any comparable operational restraint around Taiwan. We have a new FDD tracker on our website that tracks air incursions every day since the first day of the Trump administration. And what you are seeing is near daily PLA activity, air and naval, across the median line in Taiwan's air defense zone. In mid-September, it recorded, I think like 28 PLA aircraft in a single 24-hour period. The broader lesson to me is that Beijing can bank restraint on our side while continuing to normalize pressure on its side. And that's exactly why we need to think beyond dramatic invasion scenarios like Mark mentioned and pay more attention to the coercive tools China is already exercising.

DOUGHERTY: Thanks Craig. Mark, I know that you have talked several times about the lack of US Taiwan military to military training opportunities. Still a concern?

MONTGOMERY: Yeah. So I just recently published a piece on 10 things I do for security to improve the US-Taiwan relationship and readiness for any kind of crisis. To me, top of mind is we self-impose a no senior officer and no senior political leader engagement plan. This doesn't apply to Congress, but to the executive branch. So assistant secretaries and above don't come to Taiwan. General officers mostly don't. Very few visit Taiwan and certainly not above one or two star. So we don't develop those relationships that are necessary for solving hard problems like the ones we face with Taiwan. So number one, I'd fix that. Number two, Congress passed the Taiwan Enhanced Resilience Act or TERA, and the fiscal year '23 National Defense Authorization Act. It's clear to me that it is not being carried out with the alacrity and scale that Congress anticipated. That doesn't mean there are no naval exercises going on, but they're limited. There are very, very few Air Force exercises going on, bilateral Air Force exercises, if any. And then the ground exercise, the ground capability development could be done much better if we put a combat training team into Taiwan and did training locally for the Taiwan Army battalions.

All this personnel readiness should be matched by an aggressive attempt to pull any interoperability FMS packages that are in that $30 billion delay. Once they're approved but being delayed like Link 16 for the Navy ships, pull it forward. I'm hard-pressed to think what key ally is ahead of Taiwan in line for interoperability gear. To me, these are the steps and changes that send strong deterrent signals because they both improve capability and demonstrate a likely US credible willingness to do something in a crisis or contingency between China and Taiwan. So I'd love to see that stuff pulled forward, but that's generally what I comment in there. There's a lot more details than that in the paper though, which is on our website.

DOUGHERTY: Craig, based on the results of the reporting... Actually, let's go to Warren. I do see that he does have his hand up, so we'll go over to you for your question. Warren Strobel.

WARREN STROBEL: Thanks. Can you hear me this time?

DOUGHERTY: We can.

WARREN STROBEL: Awesome. I just wanted to ask a general question, Mark and Craig, about your sense of the threat perception in Taiwan, whether they see this political coercion campaign already underway. Do they think it's going to accelerate in the coming months and years? And I ask because in past years there's been some criticism that Taiwan has not taken the threat seriously enough and not taking it as seriously as some administrations have in the past.

SINGLETON: Mark, do you want to go first?

MONTGOMERY: Sure. I'll go and quickly answer that and interested in Craig's opinion. First what I'd say is I do think the government takes it very seriously. Craig and I have talked with President Lai five or six times over two years. He's never not mentioned societal resilience as a key objective of his administration. The National Security Advisor, same comments. The Minister of Defense, the Minister of Digital Affairs, the Vice President, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, they are very consistent. They're working hard on it. So I think they're there.

I think the question you might be getting at too, in addition, is the population. And I do think the population understands the threat. I think the population though is more concerned... The Taiwan political elite understand American politics and understand what's going on now and don't overreact. But the Taiwan population watches the United States where our president says Taiwan's 9,800 miles or 8,900 miles away and doesn't acknowledge the incredible economic partnership that exists between the United States and Taiwan where Taiwan's now our third-largest trading partner. And I think the population is probably more concerned about the credibility of US security response in the event of a crisis than the political elite is. And that's a problem that can be addressed by political leadership from the United States communicating the right narrative to our partner in Taiwan. Craig?

SINGLETON: Warren, I would flag, I think it was DIA just in the last week or two published online their analytic framework for will to fight because it's something they're grappling with. It's like how do they think partners are going to respond to these sorts of crises? And I've only gotten halfway through it, but it's interesting to at least see how DIA is trying to come up with a means to measure will to fight. I think Mark's right. My sense is that the Taiwanese government is taking this threat very seriously, especially inside government and among critical infrastructure operators. But there's a paradox here. As Chinese pressure becomes more frequent, it becomes more normalized, and another PLA exercise or another cable-cutting incident or another cyber intrusion can start to feel like background noise. And that's why I think the exercises that we do can be really helpful.

The danger is less that Taiwan suddenly wakes up one morning and discovers a crisis. It's that pressure accumulates gradually until several systems are already under stress at once. And I think the trajectory is getting worse and that it's pushing Taiwan towards more serious resilience planning. And so the challenge is moving fast enough before the coercion becomes more coordinated and adaptive.

MONTGOMERY: I'll add one other thing. And I was there in August as well at the end of the Han Kuang, their annual exercise, which by the way included civil-military exercising at the same time, including military assets at the airports. But the coolest thing, especially from the perspective of our tabletop exercise, was that they did cellular network reductions in service down to an absolute just 911 capability for a half hour or slightly longer in two or three urban areas. And I can only tell you that if this happened in the United States, a governor or mayor would be impeached for agreeing to what the federal government asked for. But in Taiwan, it was seen as a great test. And in doing these reduction in services, they got a massive insight into the interoperability of communications networks with other networks.

One other thing I'll mention is I spent a lot of time in Ukraine and a little bit in Israel. And look, Taiwan's societal resilience is not Ukraine or Israel's yet, but they're a lot closer to Ukraine and Israel than they are to the United States, where I would gently say our societal resilience I think is at an extremely low level in terms of our readiness for these kind of economic and cyber-enabled economic coercions.

DOUGHERTY: And that right there opens up a whole new series of questions that we could probably have a separate call on, but we won't go through all of that today. Some excellent questions. Thank you all for participating in the call today. Mark and Craig, I'm going to ask each of you to provide a one-minute summary of your thoughts and key takeaways, perhaps a story idea that the reporters on the call here could follow up on. In the meantime, just a quick reminder that the FDD is a nonpartisan research institute focused on national security and foreign policy. If you'd like to reach out to Craig or Mark and talk with them individually, please shoot me an email at press@fdd.org and we will get that organized. You can also find all of the information and research that they've provided at fdd.org. Gentlemen, let us do our wrap-up. Mark, we'll start with you. Conclude with Craig.

MONTGOMERY: Okay. Well, thanks for you guys being here because part of my concern as I do these series of tabletops is that while the Taiwan public, we have to assess, as Warren asked and Craig had answered, we have to figure out what's their resilience and willingness to fight. The United States suffers from a serious misunderstanding, that the United States public does, of the importance of Taiwan to the United States and why it's going to be a crisis worth engaging on and fighting for. It's not that Taiwan is a vibrant, beautiful democracy in the middle of Northeast Asia, which it is, with unbelievable First Amendment rights, elections that are free, fair, and contested, and free press that could be highly critical of the leadership. That's all fantastic. But the real value is what they mean to United States economically as our third-largest importer in the United States.

They import, it's $175-plus billion worth of compute, that compute semiconductor chips, logic chips that power our F-35s, our F-150 trucks, our phones, our Frigidaires, our TVs, contribute significantly to our GDP. We cannot get these anywhere else. That reliance/value to the United States is only going to increase as we do more AI servers, more data centers, which will be built at least initially 100% on logic chips coming from Taiwan. So absolutely the American public understanding how important this is a key element of success in dealing with the scenarios that Craig confronts us with as China and these cyber-enabled warfare coercion exercises.

SINGLETON: Yeah, I think the takeaway for me is the story is that China's gray-zone pressure around Taiwan is changing in character. For years, we tended to think of it as episodic, an exercise here, a cyber intrusion there, a cable incident, some disinformation, and what worries me now is the possibility that Beijing is moving towards something more persistent, sustained pressure across civilian systems designed to make normal life gradually less reliable without ever giving Taiwan or the United States a clean trigger for escalation. That's why communications matters. A cable break by itself is manageable. A cellular outage, temporary, is manageable. A cyber intrusion is manageable. The problem emerges when those pressures start interacting with one another, and when China watches how Taiwan adapts, it learns where the fallback is and then it pressures that too. And so the story I think I would watch and document is the shift from episodic gray-zone coercion to persistent adaptive pressure, and that is where we are today. That's a very different Taiwan problem, and I think we are only beginning to understand what it looks like.

DOUGHERTY: Craig and Mark, thank you for your terrific analysis. To the reporters on the call, thank you for joining us. This does conclude today's call.