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China Challenges Taiwan Strait Status Quo with New Air Corridor

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If recent events are a gauge, China–Taiwan relations in the coming year are likely to be rocky. At the beginning of the year, the Civil Aviation Administration of China (CAAC), the civilian aviation authority of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), opened a new set of air corridors. This included route M503, which would be in the Taiwan Strait, approaching within 4.8 miles/7.8 kilometers of the midline separating Taiwan from the PRC. The Chinese also simultaneously unveiled three feeder routes from other mainland Chinese airports to M503.

While China and Taiwan have been negotiating over these routes for some time, the announcement came without a final agreement between Taipei and Beijing. Moreover, the feeder routes would affect Taiwanese air routes to Quemoy and Matsu, Taiwan-held islands that were the focus of artillery barrages in the 1950s. Meanwhile, the main route would mean a significant increase in daily air traffic, as the Chinese have indicated that the new route is intended to ease the load of flights connecting Shanghai, Fuzhou, Xiamen, Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Guangzhou, and Hong Kong.¹

Deteriorating PRC–Taiwan Relations

Beijing has been unhappy with the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government in Taiwan since

the election of Madame Tsai Ing-wen in 2016. The PRC has sought to pressure the Tsai government to endorse the 1992 consensus on “one China” adopted by Tsai’s predecessor. That she has not done so reinforces Beijing’s concern about her party’s pro-independence leanings. Her constructive rhetoric and outreach have been met with suspicion and hostility.

Consequently, Beijing has suspended formal cross-Strait communications, leaving only working group–level interactions but no higher-level political dialogues. The PRC has also resumed “dollar diplomacy,” pushing the last states that still recognize Taiwan to switch to recognizing the PRC. Unlike the two Germanys or the two Koreas, the PRC refuses to accept dual recognition, so when a state recognizes the PRC, it perforce ceases to recognize the Republic of China (Taiwan). The goal is to further isolate Taiwan and teach it a lesson for electing Tsai’s party.

To this end, Beijing has also resumed its opposition to Taiwanese participation in most international organizations, including Interpol and the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). It is no accident that the PRC insists that its move on the air corridor does not involve any “third parties,” for it views Taiwan as a purely internal affair.

At the same time, Beijing has also been steadily increasing its military pressure on Taiwan. Beginning in 2016, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) began to dispatch bombers on flights around Taiwan. Two flights in that year were followed by a half-dozen more in 2017.² These have included not only H-6K bombers, which can be equipped with air-launched cruise missiles, but also Tu-154 surveillance aircraft and Y-8 military transports.³ Chinese flights have flown both clockwise and counterclockwise around

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the island, stressing the Republic of China Air Force (ROCAF) by compelling it to maintain watch both north and south.

In addition, the PLA Navy (PLAN) has begun to establish a regular presence east of Taiwan. Several Chinese naval task forces have sailed east of Taiwan. This has included dispatching China's first aircraft carrier, the *Liaoning*, east of the island.⁴ Taiwan's military must now prepare for potential intrusions and attacks from its Pacific side as well as from the mainland to the west. This will become even more difficult when China's second aircraft carrier, the *Shandong*, which is modeled after the *Liaoning*, enters service in 2020. Similarly, the announcement of a quadrupling of the PLAN's Naval Infantry force and the serial construction of new amphibious landing ships also implicitly increase pressure on Taiwan.

The opening of the new air corridor further complicates Taiwan's defense. The expanded traffic in the middle of the Taiwan Strait will make monitoring that airspace much more difficult. Insofar as the ROCAF may want to try to escort flights, or at least visually identify them to ensure that a given aircraft is not a disguised military flight, the increased number of aircraft transiting the area will rapidly exhaust Taiwan's pilots and airframes. The PLA has been engaging in similar activities near the Senkakus and the Japanese Home Islands, where Japan Air Self Defense Force fighters have been scrambled ever more frequently to counter Chinese flights.

Reducing Reaction Time

While the opening of the air corridor is mainly a political move, there are specifically military implications as well. An essential part of any Chinese military action (versus general political pressure) against Taiwan will require blinding Taiwan's ability to

monitor the air and sea space over the Taiwan Strait. Eliminating radars clears the way for air attack missions against a variety of targets and also makes air-borne assaults less costly.

As part of the broader modernization of the PLA, the Chinese have steadily incorporated systems designed to counter adversary electronic and network capabilities. This has included the development of dedicated systems intended to counter enemy air defenses. Aircraft such as the J-16 fighter have been modified to operate extensive arrays of jammers and anti-radiation missiles, which home on adversary radar signals, to suppress or destroy enemy air defense radars. The Tu-154 surveillance flight was likely mapping and recording the associated signals for future such missions.

By opening this new corridor, the Chinese will likely be able to fly surveillance and reconnaissance operations (SROs) closer to Taiwan on a regular basis, better monitoring communications, radars, and other electronic emissions. Ironically, this is precisely the sort of activities to which the Chinese object when they are carried out by the United States (such as the EP-3 mission that collided with a Chinese fighter in 2001). Such missions will allow the Chinese to pinpoint radars and associated air defense missile batteries more effectively.

More worrisome, the Chinese may surprise Taiwanese forces by flying air defense-suppression missions in the corridor in the opening phase of a conflict. The Taiwan Strait is 81–110 miles (130–180 km) wide. The CM-102 anti-radiation missile, designed to attack radars, has an official range of 100 km.⁵ Dropped from a Chinese air defense-suppression aircraft flying along the midline, a CM-102 missile could range large portions of Taiwan. This would be harder to defend against, as the launching aircraft might look on radar

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 2. Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Derek Grossman, and Logan Ma, "Chinese Bomber Flights Around Taiwan: For What Purpose," *War on the Rocks*, September 13, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/09/chinese-bomber-flights-around-taiwan-for-what-purpose/> (accessed January 25, 2018).
 3. Jason Pan, "Chinese Aircraft Fly Around Taiwan," *Taipei Times*, December 11, 2016, <http://www.taipetimes.com/News/front/archives/2016/12/11/2003660975> (accessed January 25, 2018).
 4. Lawrence Chung, "Mainland Carrier Liaoning and Battle Group Enters Taiwan Strait," *South China Morning Post*, July 2, 2017, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2100933/mainland-carrier-liaoning-and-battle-group-enters> (accessed January 25, 2018).
 5. Jeffrey Lin and P. W. Singer, "The Missiles of Zhuhai: China Displays New Strike Arsenal," *Popular Science*, November 17, 2014, <https://www.popsci.com/missiles-zhuhai-china-displays-new-strike-arsenal#page-4> (accessed January 25, 2018).
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and transponder like a civilian airliner; by contrast, a launching aircraft coming from a mainland PLAAF airbase would probably draw attention.

How Should America Respond?

For the United States, few direct responses to the Chinese action are available. Beijing was careful to allocate the M503 route only to domestic flights; had they argued that it was an international corridor, then the United States—including potentially American SROs—could operate in it. However, just as China's action has both political and military components, the American responses also should encompass both sets of considerations. Specifically, the United States should:

- **Support Taiwan's participation in the ICAO.** There is no reason why Taiwan, which operates or hosts several airlines, including EVA and China Airlines, should not be part of the international aviation community when Congo, Ecuador, and Uruguay are. Given the dense air traffic patterns across East Asia, safety of flight considerations alone justifies the inclusion of Taiwan.
- **Carefully vet the next head of the ICAO.** As important, as Dr. Fang Liu's term as head of the ICAO comes to an end in 2018, her successor should be asked specifically what position he or she takes on the issue of Taiwanese participation. Under Dr. Liu, not only was Taiwan's petition to be seated on the ICAO rejected, but Taiwanese journalists were refused accreditation even to cover ICAO meetings.⁶ This would seem to go well beyond the issue of Taiwan's role on the ICAO to deliberately obstructing public coverage of an international forum.
- **Make clear that America supports Taiwan in this dispute.** The United States should also make

clear that it does not welcome China's actions. This includes undertaking direct responses. The Congress, having already called for visits by U.S. Navy ships to Taiwan, should consider explicitly tying such visits to threatening Chinese actions. The more Beijing overtly threatens Taiwan, the more public an American reaction should be.

Along these lines, if China insists on unilaterally opening this new air corridor, then Congress could encourage U.S. government aircraft to land in Taiwan as a counterpart to ship visits. This has the added benefit that an aircraft visit can be better calibrated in terms of visibility. For example, such a visit need not be conducted by combat aircraft. A tanker, transport aircraft, or even U.S. Coast Guard aircraft would constitute a significant political message. Alternatively, the United States could fly electronic warfare aircraft, such as the RC-135 Rivet Joint, or even AWACS aircraft into Taiwan as part of a higher-profile visit while still avoiding flying combat aircraft such as fighters or bombers to the island.

Conclusion

In the long run, China's actions are eroding stability in the sensitive Taiwan Strait region. If the Chinese actions were isolated to cross-Strait concerns, they would be problematic, but taken in conjunction with increasing Chinese pressure on Japan, especially around the Senkakus, and renewed Chinese activity in the South China Sea, it is clear that the PRC is intent on altering the broader status quo across the East Asian littoral. Countering this effort will require a variety of measures in a range of forums, including the ICAO.

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6. Committee for the Protection of Journalists, "Taiwanese Journalists Barred from UN Aviation Agency," *CPJ Alert*, September 26, 2016, <https://cpj.org/2016/09/taiwanese-journalists-barred-from-un-aviation-agen.php> (accessed January 25, 2018).