

Taiwan**China steps up 'grey zone' tactics to isolate Taiwan and punish its allies**

Beijing is blocking Taipei's diplomats abroad and exerting control over its maritime territory



Paraguay's President Santiago Peña attends a welcoming ceremony with Taiwan's President Lai Ching-te in Taipei in May © Ann Wang/Reuters

Joe Leahy in Beijing

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Beijing is increasing diplomatic pressure against Taiwan and expanding its maritime “grey zone” tactics in what analysts say is an effort to isolate Taipei and exert control over its territory.

China imposed sanctions on Paraguay's communications minister and Belize's foreign minister last week for visiting Taipei and meeting government officials, an unprecedented step against Taiwan's allies.

Taiwanese representatives have also faced new obstacles when travelling abroad. Three African countries — the Seychelles, Mauritius and Madagascar — blocked a flight carrying Taiwan's President Lai Ching-te from visiting the small southern African kingdom of Eswatini in April, causing Taipei's first cancellation of a foreign presidential trip due to lack of airspace access.

Lai was eventually able to visit Eswatini the following month, reportedly flying secretly on the king's own aircraft.

Meanwhile, in the waters east of Taiwan, China has increased maritime manoeuvres by coastguard and government vessels, part of its grey zone activity, a term analysts use to describe steps short of open war.

Together, analysts said these actions amounted to an intensifying campaign to sever Taiwan from its few remaining allies and demonstrate Chinese jurisdiction.

“These are all forms of Beijing’s intensified pressure campaign aimed at isolating Taiwan internationally and limiting middle powers’ and smaller countries’ engagement with Taipei,” said William Yang, senior analyst for north-east Asia at the Crisis Group.

He said Beijing wanted to “cultivate a sense of helplessness within Taiwan” while demonstrating to the Chinese public that it was making progress towards “unification”.



Taiwan's President Lai Ching-te delivers remarks to military officers and a delegation from Eswatini at an army aviation training centre this month © Cheng Chia Huang/Getty Images

China's Communist Party government claims sovereignty over Taiwan and has threatened to take it by force if Taipei resists. It also demands other countries not recognise Taiwan as a sovereign nation.

But China has escalated its diplomatic offensive and military exercises since Lai, whom Beijing views as a dangerous separatist, took over the presidency in 2024.

When it imposed the sanctions last week, China threatened the 12 countries that have official relations with Taiwan, warning them not to be “manipulated and used by separatist forces for ‘Taiwan independence’”. Taiwan's foreign ministry condemned the move, saying China had no right to interfere in its diplomatic relations.

In June, China's transport ministry announced a “special maritime law-enforcement and hydrographic-survey”, or ocean-mapping, operation that included the coastguard, maritime safety administration and the rescue and salvage bureau. For the first time, the coastguard “remotely inspected” ships in waters east of Taiwan.

State media said the operation was aimed at creating a “near-shore governance model” in the waters around Taiwan, which was meant to show foreign countries that China exercised jurisdiction over the area, Erik Green at the International Institute for Strategic Studies wrote in a research note.

“The proliferation of actors in waters east of Taiwan appears to be part of China adopting a more systematic approach towards challenging the island's sovereignty,” Green said. He noted that the patrols had continued until at least last month.



A Chinese coastguard ship, seen from a Philippine fisheries plane in the South China Sea in June © Ezra Acayan/Getty Images

China is “stepping up its efforts to suffocate Taiwan”, said Taiwan’s deputy foreign minister Chen Ming-chi. “It used to be just our west coast. Recently, there has been a new element to their exercises.”

He added that Chinese vessels were interfering with Taiwanese cargo ships. “It’s not conducive to maintaining peace and stability,” Chen said. “Their exercises are coming closer and closer. I think it’s dangerous.”

On the diplomatic front, Lai has been unable to visit Latin America and the Caribbean — where the largest number of Taiwan’s allies are — because the Trump administration has refused to allow him to transit through the region as it pursues trade and other deals with China.

Beijing has also pressured EU states individually not to issue visas to Taiwanese officials, according to one person familiar with the matter.

In June, Kenya refused to allow Taiwanese passport holders to attend an international ocean conference, a move that earned praise from Beijing and accusations from Taipei of bowing to Chinese pressure. The Kenyan government did not respond at the time.

Taiwan is also the centre of a year-long diplomatic falling-out between Beijing and Tokyo, after Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi suggested that a conflict over Taiwan could constitute an “existential” threat justifying Japan’s military involvement.

The comments infuriated Beijing, which has imposed severe export controls on critical inputs for Japanese manufacturing.

But analysts said that countries with an interest in maintaining the status quo in the Taiwan Strait should be more active in challenging China’s viewpoint.

“Japan set a good example by calling out the myth peddled by the PRC [People’s Republic of China] that the Taiwan question is purely an internal matter,” said Philip Shetler-Jones, senior research fellow for Indo-Pacific security at the Royal United Services Institute in London.

“We can see from the Hormuz crisis that conflict in the world’s busiest sea lanes is everyone’s concern,” he added.

Shetler-Jones noted that Taiwan’s most important partners were not deterred by China’s intimidation, with some “actually increasing the frequency and strategic quality of contacts”. He pointed to Japan and the Philippines, which have deepened co-operation with Taipei.

In response to questions from the FT, China’s foreign ministry said: “There is only one China in the world and Taiwan is an inseparable part of Chinese territory.”

It added: “Individual countries that maintain so-called ‘diplomatic relations’ with Taiwan should make the right political decision at an early date and not serve as pawns for the ‘Taiwan independence’ separatist forces.”

The ministry said the waters east of Taiwan were also part of its territory, with China holding “an exclusive economic zone and continental shelf east of Taiwan island”.

“China’s activities in this area are entirely within its sovereign rights,” it said.

Additional reporting by Mure Dickie in Taipei

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