Taiwan's Porcupine Strategy

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Introduction

The recent visit by Taiwanese opposition leader Cheng Li-wun, chairwoman of the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT), the political party that retreated to Taiwan after the Chinese Civil War and previously governed China, to mainland China marked the first official trip to China by a Taiwanese politician in nearly a decade (Ewe, 2026). This event underscores the significance of cross-strait relations at a time of heightened tensions between Taipei and Beijing. It also highlights a clear contrast in foreign policy with the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) under Lai Ching-

te, whose administration has taken a markedly different approach toward engagement with the mainland.

Amid growing pressure from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) through frequent military exercises and assertive rhetoric, the DPP and KMT are putting forward sharply different approaches to managing cross-strait tensions. The DPP has emphasised strengthening Taiwan's defence and international partnerships, while the KMT has called for renewed dialogue and engagement with Beijing. Additionally, the tensions between the two parties have increased due to the stall of the bill aimed at increasing the military budget, which the KMT has delayed until the meeting between Cheng Li-wun and Xi Jinping, sparking heated debate in Taiwan's legislature (Khan, 2026; Jerzewski, 2026).

Furthermore, the recent US war in Iran worsened the situation, as Washington's deployment of THAAD launchers to the MENA region left Taiwan more vulnerable to a potential Chinese attack than ever before (Gale et al., 2026). In this regard, it is crucial to understand the effectiveness of Taiwan's domestic defence production capabilities, as well as the various partnerships it maintains with international allies and private industry, which are essential to successfully implementing the Porcupine defence strategy, an asymmetric approach using small, mobile weapons to make an invasion too costly to sustain. These efforts are vital to ensuring Taiwan can maintain a credible deterrence posture amid external pressures and shifting geopolitical dynamics.

PLA Pressure and Military Asymmetry

The People's Republic of China has repeatedly advocated reunification with the Republic of China (Taiwan) as part of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (Power, 2026). In this context, Beijing has used assertive rhetoric of reunification, criticising external powers for involvement and accusing several parties, including the ruling DPP and individuals, of separatism to promote the One China policy.

The modernisation of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of Beijing aims to achieve a "world-class" military capable of winning modern, joint-service wars by 2049, which will mark the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China (October 1, 1949). In this regard, taking control over Taiwan can be seen as a vital move for Beijing. China often conducts military exercises near Taiwan and in the South China Sea in response to political events. These actions aim to put pressure on the island and regional states. This reflects China's increasingly assertive foreign policy in the region.

For example, the visit of then US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan in August 2022 prompted China to respond with complex combined manoeuvres by the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and Air Force (PLAAF) in the airspace and waters surrounding Taiwan, as well as multi-

ple ballistic missile launches by the PLA Rocket Forces (Klare, 2022). Similarly, in that case, China recently conducted military drills near Taiwan in response to the US$ 11.1 billion arms sale to Taiwan and warned countries against external interference in the Taiwan question (Burga, 2025). It becomes clear that military exercises and drills are used not only to improve coordination among different parts of the Chinese army but also to convey specific messages.

From a military perspective, the PLA has organised numerous exercises and drills in recent years. It has also been heavily invested in since 2012, during the Xi Jinping era, specifically through the Shandong and Fujian aircraft carriers, Type 055 destroyers, J-20 stealth fighters, DF-41 ICBMs, and DF-17 hypersonic missiles. Following the Democratic Progressive Party's rise to power in Taiwan under Tsai Ing-wen in 2016, China has increasingly combined assertive rhetoric with intensified military exercises in the Taiwan Strait. Chinese vessels now operate in closer proximity to the island. These exercises include live-fire drills, air sorties, naval deployments, and ballistic missile launches. China's military activities display a consistent pattern of being "frequent, intense, large-scale, and multi-domain," with the dual objectives of demonstrating the capability to blockade and isolate Taiwan and signalling Beijing's opposition to any perceived moves toward Taiwanese independence (Jash, 2024).

Building on this pattern, the recent "Justice Mission 2025" exercise simulated a blockade of Taiwan's major port cities and the interdiction of energy imports. The PRC's deployment of 14 China Coast Guard (CCG) vessels highlighted the CCG's key role in a potential blockade under the guise of "law enforcement." The drill also demonstrated close cooperation between the CCG and the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), and included activities relevant to a possible invasion, such as air and amphibious assaults and long-range rocket fire. Assets with advanced strike, anti-submarine, and anti-surface capabilities were featured, while counter-intervention operations supported the broader PLA goal of isolating Taiwan. PRC messaging cast these manoeuvres as a response to foreign encroachment, while aiming to intimidate "Taiwan independence" advocates and delegitimise Taiwan's government (Sperzel et al., 2025).

China has overwhelming advantages in manpower, air power, land forces, and naval strength. The Chinese military comprises 2,035,000 active personnel, over 3,500 aircraft, 5,870 tanks, 841 naval vessels, including three aircraft carriers, and a defence budget of $251.3 billion. In contrast, Taiwan relies on a large reserve force and modernised equipment, sustaining a smaller but capable military with 230,000 active troops, 720 aircraft, 1,090 tanks, 91 naval vessels, and a $19.1 billion defence budget, with a particular emphasis on coastal and island defence (Global Firepower, 2026). Given these disparities, a direct military confrontation would place Taiwan at a significant disadvantage. This reality underscores the need for Taiwan to

focus on alternative strategies, such as its Porcupine Strategy, to compensate for these vulnerabilities and ensure its continued deterrence.

The Case for Asymmetric Defence

Taiwan's Porcupine Strategy is its approach to national defence based on asymmetric deterrence: using unconventional tactics to make any invasion so costly it becomes unthinkable, rather than trying to match China's military strength directly (Murray, 2008). The concept was first outlined by William Murray in a 2008 Naval War College Review paper, where he argued that Taiwan's conventional forces could not realistically withstand a Chinese assault. Murray's solution was to deprioritise Taiwan's air force and navy, both highly exposed to long-range Chinese missile strikes, in favour of a professional ground army equipped with short-range, mobile weapons capable of using Taiwan's terrain to slow an invading force and buy time for US support to arrive. This framework was later formalised as Taiwan's Overall Defence Concept (ODC) by Admiral Lee Hsi-min and has been actively encouraged by successive presidential administrations. This report assesses how effectively Taiwan has put the doctrine into practice through two approaches: building its own defence industry and deepening external security partnerships.

A conventional military competition with China would be strategically futile, as China's resources and military spending far outstrips Taiwan's, and Taiwan is geographically exposed. These realities underpin the three core principles of the ODC. The first is survivability: ensuring Taiwan's population and military can endure a prolonged blockade through stockpiling and hardening critical infrastructure. The second is dispersal: spreading military assets widely to reduce vulnerability to pre-emptive strikes. The third is a denial-based posture: concentrating Taiwan's strategic effort not on threatening China, but on ensuring any invasion attempt fails. This aligns with what scholar Michael Hunzeker calls "deterrence by denial," where the goal is not to punish an attacker after the fact, but to make success impossible from the outset.

Indigenous Defence Production

Following concerns about delays in US arms deliveries, Taiwan launched a $7.4 billion special defence budget in 2021, directing 64% towards domestic missile production through the National Chung Shan Institute of Science and Technology (NCSIST). The programme finished two years ahead of schedule, with NCSIST producing over 1,000 missiles annually by 2024. Key systems include the Hsiung Sheng cruise missile, capable of striking PLA command centres up to 1,200 kilometres away in eastern and southern China (Kajal, 2024). Taiwan's drone programme draws directly on lessons from Ukraine, targeting an annual production capacity of 180,000 UAVs by 2030 (Brar, 2025). Systems under development include the Teng Yun II sur-

veillance drone and the Chien Hsiang loitering munition, a kamikaze-style drone designed to destroy enemy radar. The National Drone Team, established in 2022, brings together government agencies and private companies to accelerate production and reduce reliance on Chinese-manufactured components. These achievements are significant, but the Hague Centre for Strategic Studies has criticised Taiwan's domestic defence effort for chronic underinvestment, low conscript quality, and resistance within the Ministry of National Defence to fully embracing the asymmetric model, creating meaningful gaps between stated doctrine and actual capability (Girardi et al, 2025).

External Security Partnerships

Taiwan's indigenous efforts are reinforced by external security relationships, of which the US partnership is by far the most important. The legal foundation is the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) of 1979, which committed the United States to providing Taiwan with arms of a defensive character (Chen, 2025). In practice, this has underpinned a growing flow of military hardware: in December 2025, the Trump administration notified Congress of a record $11 billion arms package for Taiwan (Forum on the Arms Trade, 2025). Crucially, these transfers are weighted towards asymmetric, denial-oriented systems consistent with the porcupine doctrine, rather than the conventional platforms Taiwan has historically preferred.

It remains uncertain whether the US would come to Taiwan's aid if a Chinese invasion were to happen. While there are strong, tangible institutional ties between the United States and Taiwan based on the TRA 1979, political commitment is arguably more uncertain, as President Trump has chosen to stay silent on the topic. This is in contrast with his predecessors, who gave their strong support for Taiwan's independence during their time in office (Ali, 2026). Japan represents the second significant external pillar (The Government of Japan, 2022). Its 2022 National Security Strategy marked a clear shift, with Tokyo explicitly affirming support for Taiwan and committing to what CSIS describes as a full contribution to Taiwan's defence in the event of a cross-strait conflict (Narushige, 2023). The war in Ukraine has also shaped the broader environment. It validated the asymmetric model Taiwan is pursuing, demonstrating that a smaller force with mobile, precision weapons can impose severe costs on a larger invader, while simultaneously creating delivery pressures as shared production lines now face competing demand. There are, however, structural limits (Lawrence, 2026). Beijing's diplomatic pressure has reduced Taiwan's formal diplomatic partners to just twelve states as of 2024, effectively excluding it from multilateral security institutions. Security cooperation, therefore, remains largely bilateral and deliberately ambiguous, workable but far short of the formal alliances available to comparable US partners in the region.

Conclusion

Taiwan's Porcupine Strategy depends on the interplay between indigenous defence production and external security partnerships. Progress has been real: the missile programme has exceeded its targets, and external partnerships continue to deepen. Yet submarine delays, institutional resistance, and Beijing's diplomatic isolation campaign mean the strategy remains a work in progress. Whether the porcupine doctrine is sufficient to deter a Chinese invasion will ultimately depend on Taiwan's ability to close these implementation gaps and develop both pillars equally.

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