

Will China Exploit the Temporary Absence of US Naval Power to Escalate Pressure on Taiwan?

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In mid-August 2026, the United States redeployed the USS George Washington from the Western Pacific to the Middle East, temporarily leaving the region without a forward-deployed U.S. aircraft carrier (Finley & Tang, 2026). The move was intended to relieve the USS Abraham Lincoln, whose deployment had been extended amid operational and logistical strain. The carrier's absence has raised questions about Washington's ability to maintain credible deterrence in the Indo-Pacific while responding to crises elsewhere. The concern is not merely symbolic, as the United States would face difficulties sustaining a prolonged conflict with China due to limitations in areas such as long-range munitions, air defence systems, and

unmanned capabilities; the challenge would become more dire if Washington were required to manage a two-front conflict in the Indo-Pacific and another theatre (Jones, 2026).

This concern is especially pressing given China's increasingly relied-upon persistent military pressure to challenge Taiwan without crossing the threshold of open conflict. The daily average of China Coast Guard (CCG) incursions into Taiwan waters has increased by more than 500% between 2020 and 2025, while penetrations into Taiwan's second maritime security ring have quadrupled (Macias & Jensen, 2026).

This brief examines whether the temporary absence of a U.S. aircraft carrier from the Western Pacific creates an opportunity for China to intensify pressure on Taiwan. This paper argues that the carrier gap is unlikely to alter the military balance across the Taiwan Strait, but it provides Beijing with a limited opportunity to increase coercive pressure and test perceptions of U.S. credibility in the region.

How Significant is the Carrier Gap?

The redeployment of the USS George Washington from the West Pacific to the Middle East has temporarily removed the only forward-deployed carrier from the region following the USS Abraham Lincoln's prolonged deployment of more than 200 days in support of the military operations in the Middle East. The resulting carrier gap is not a simple, routine force rotation but rather a symptom of the strain that multiple simultaneous theatre commitments place on Washington's naval resources (Finley & Toropin, 2026).

When addressing the carrier gap, the most direct significance lies in the loss of a prominent tool of U.S. power projection: an aircraft carrier provides sustained air power, maritime presence, and rapid force projection, and its forward deployment also signals Washington's willingness and capacity to respond to regional contingencies. However, the absence of such a platform could create a perception of reduced U.S. responsiveness, especially when China is expanding military pressure around Taiwan, as the Pentagon has reported that the PLA conducted 38 joint patrols around Taiwan during 2024, which demonstrates the increasingly routine nature of Chinese naval and air operations in the area (Office of the Secretary of Defence, 2025). Nevertheless, the carrier gap should not be interpreted as a withdrawal of U.S. military power from the region, as Washington retains substantial capabilities across the region, including land-based aircraft, submarines, surface combatants, and intelligence and surveillance assets, as well as forces stationed in Japan, Guam, and other locations. Furthermore, Goldfeld et al. (2024) emphasise that potential conflict between Washington and Beijing does not rely exclusively on carrier-based power but on a broader range of U.S. capabilities, such as long-range strike. Consequently, the absence of

one carrier does not fundamentally remove Washington's ability to respond to Beijing's aggression.

Therefore, the distinction between military capability and perceived deterrence matters, as China's growing naval and air capabilities mean that even without the carrier presence, Beijing has significant means to pressure Taiwan, as evidenced by a 300% rise in PLA operations near the island in 2024 that U.S. Indo-Pacific Command has characterised as rehearsals for coercion rather than routine exercises (Vergun, 2025). However, capability does not reveal all; Chinese perceptions of U.S. willingness to act – not military capability alone – ultimately determine deterrence credibility (Mazarr et al., 2021). Thus, the carrier gap is better understood as a temporary reduction in visible U.S. deterrence rather than a fundamental change in the military balance.

China's Opportunities

Given this reduced deterrent posture, the carrier gap matters less for whether Beijing can apply pressure than for the specific window of opportunity it creates for how Beijing might use that capability. Thus, there are three types of opportunities that are most plausible:

Exploit the carrier gap through intensified military signalling.

China's existing activities demonstrate that pressure on Taiwan does not require an invasion or blockade, as the 2025 Strait Thunder-2025A drills involved aircraft, naval vessels, and the Shandong carrier, while the later Justice Mission-2025 simulated the encirclement and blockade of Taiwan. As Lin et al. (2026) note, these drills increasingly demonstrated Beijing's ability to conduct joint operations to pressure Taiwan's maritime and airspace environment. Thus, the temporary absence of a U.S. carrier could enable Beijing to conduct larger or more geographically ambitious operations, demonstrating that Chinese forces can operate around Taiwan despite a reduced U.S. naval presence in the region.

China could intensify grey-zone coercion below the threshold of armed conflict.

The most realistic opportunity that the carrier gap creates is to encourage Beijing to increase Coast Guard operations, air incursions, maritime patrol, or other coercive activities while remaining below the threshold that would automatically trigger a major US military response. Between 2020 and 2025, the expansion of China Coast Guard activity demonstrates Beijing's growing capacity to sustain maritime pressure on Taiwan (Macias & Jensen, 2026). Additionally, China has been increasingly using civilian and dual-use vessels to conduct surveillance, harass foreign shipping, and assert maritime presence around Taiwan. By using AIS tracking data, Macias & Jensen (2025) identified 128 vessels out of a sample of 315 Chinese-flagged fishing

boats exhibiting behaviour consistent with state-directed grey-zone activity, including one vessel that changed its name over 1,300 times and went dark nearly 1,000 times while operating almost inside a PLA operational zone rather than a fishing area. Therefore, the temporary reduction in the carrier's presence could simply allow Beijing to scale up an already deniable form of pressure with a lower risk of a visible U.S. counterresponse.

The carrier gap could allow Beijing to test US political and military resolve.

The absence of the carrier provided China with an opportunity to observe how Washington would respond to increased pressure while its naval assets were committed elsewhere. These grey-zone activities not only test Taiwan's military and political leadership but also aim to assess Washington's willingness to intervene in a crisis (Froman, 2025). Given the current carrier gap, this framework suggests Beijing could use the period of reduced carrier presence to assess whether the United States responds with additional forces, diplomatic warnings, or limited military activities, while keeping its own action below the threshold of triggering a major confrontation. Thus, the gap is likely to allow Beijing to examine U.S. resolve through coercion by keeping the level of escalation below what could trigger direct Washington intervention.

Why China May Not Exploit the Gap

Although the carrier gap creates an opportunity for China to pressure Taiwan, it does not provide Beijing with a decisive military opening, for the reasons already outlined above. What that account does not capture, however, is the advantage conferred by alliance access, as American forces benefit from permanent or rotational deployment across Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and other regional partners that China cannot replicate (Johnstone, 2024). Beijing, therefore, cannot assume that the absence of a single carrier leaves Taiwan without a wider network of U.S. military support.

Additionally, the risk of escalation constrains Beijing's space for manoeuvre, as China's options against Taiwan range from grey-zone coercion and quarantine operations to a blockade and a full-scale invasion. However, each phase carries different levels of military and political risk, as a blockade could create significant military risk and potential to lead into a wider U.S. – China conflict (Center for Strategic and International Studies [CSIS], 2025). The temporary absence of the carrier therefore does not remove the fundamental risk associated with escalation, and if Beijing uses the window to launch a major military operation, Washington could respond through other forces and potentially reinforce the region, which transforms a temporary advantage into a broader confrontation. Thus, given these constraints, the limited duration of the carrier gap further limits its strategic

value, as Beijing would have to exploit the opportunity within a narrow window while avoiding actions that would trigger a strong U.S. or its allies' response.

Finally, Taiwan's growing defensive capabilities also hinder China's opportunities, as the Taiwan government has been increasingly investing in asymmetric capabilities such as missiles, drones, and indigenous defence systems. In 2026, the government proposed that next year's defence budget would increase military spending by 18% to NTD 1.12 trillion, exceeding 3% of GDP, with additional investment in drones and missiles intended to strengthen its ability to deter Beijing's coercion (Associated Press, 2026). Furthermore, the Legislative Yuan passed a six-year NTD 240 billion drone procurement act covering coastal reconnaissance drones, coastal attack drones, and uncrewed surface vessels (Central News Agency). Consequently, while these capabilities cannot substitute for U.S. military power, they strengthen Taiwan's ability to impose costs on Chinese forces independently.

Overall Assessment & Policy Implications

Therefore, by weighing these opportunities against the constraints outlined above, the analysis suggests that the carrier gap creates a narrow window rather than a decisive strategic opening for Beijing to pressure Taiwan. While the absence of a U.S. carrier reduces visible American forward presence, it does not alter the wider military balance in the region. Consequently, China is more likely to exploit the gap by intensifying the grey-zone coercion that has already been increasingly normalised, including increased Coast Guard activity, Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) incursions, or military-drill-scale activity, rather than a blockade or invasion that would trigger a greater risk of military escalation.

Strengthen distributed U.S. deterrence

U.S. deterrence should not depend exclusively on a single forward-deployed aircraft carrier, as consistent investment in submarines, land-based aircraft, long-range strike, and surveillance across Guam, Japan, and the Philippines would reduce the strategic impact of temporary carrier redeployments, enabling U.S. presence to become more structural instead of symbolic.

Deepen allied operational coordination

Washington should strengthen coordination with regional allies, especially Japan and the Philippines, to cover rotational deployment access, intelligence sharing, and contingency planning. Thus, formalising coordination mechanisms among states could enhance the visibility of the alliance's influence rather than leaving a single carrier to convey the deterrent signal.

Strengthen Taiwan's resilience

Taiwan should continue to prioritise asymmetric capabilities such as missiles, drones, and resilient command-and-control, and build on the NTD 240 billion defence procurement plan approved in August 2026 (Lin, 2026) to reduce Taiwan's vulnerability to coercion in the grey zone during temporary reductions in U.S. forward presence.

In conclusion, this brief argued that the temporary absence of a U.S. aircraft carrier from the West Pacific creates an opportunity for Beijing to intensify pressure on Taiwan. However, the gap does not alter the regional military balance, nor does it provide a low-risk path to major escalation. What the gap offers is instead a narrow window that enables Beijing to test U.S. resolve and normalise a higher baseline of coercion at limited cost. As U.S. naval assets remain across multiple theatres, similar gaps are likely to reappear, making distributed deterrence, allied coordination, and Taiwan's own defensive resilience more consequential to the credibility of U.S. commitments than the presence of any single carrier.

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