

FEATURE



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The Start of a Crisis?

China Ends ‘Median Line’ in the Taiwan Strait

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Without a doubt, we have entered the most dangerous phase in cross-Strait relations since 2003-2004, if not the Taiwan Strait Missile Crisis of 1995-1996.

It was a line at sea, separating two sides locked in a decades-long conflict. A gentleman’s agreement rather than an official demarcation governed by legal instruments, the median line (also known as the center line) was a tacit code of conduct of sorts that, for decades, reduced the risk of accidents in the Taiwan Strait, one of the world’s major hot spots. Over the years the two sides—the People’s Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF), and the Republic of China Air Force

(ROCAF)—stuck to their half of the Strait, veering off at the last moment before crossing into the other side and potentially sparking a crisis.

With the exception of a brief incident in 1999, the tacit agreement held until March 2019, when two PLAAF J-11 fighters [crossed the median line](#) in the Taiwan Strait, flying 43 nautical miles into Taiwan’s side, forcing the ROCAF to scramble interceptors.

The “deliberate” act, as Taipei described it, occurred as Beijing was gradually increasing its military activity near and around Taiwan, which continued until the re-election, in January 2020, of President Tsai Ing-wen in Taiwan against China’s favorite, Han Kuo-yu. Following Tsai’s re-election, PLA naval and aerial activity [increased markedly](#), with several crossings into Taiwan’s Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) and occasional “violations” of a median line that was evidently becoming more porous.

While some analysts attributed the uptick in military activity to an attempt by Beijing to exploit the distraction caused by the [COVID-19 pandemic](#), there was reason to believe that the intensification of military activity was simply a natural evolution in its posture toward Taiwan.

The more belligerent behavior reflected frustration in Beijing and a realization that, propaganda notwithstanding, the 23.5 million Taiwanese will not be fooled by Chinese promises of “peaceful unification” under the “one country, two systems” formula.

More and more, Chinese hawks have expressed the view that only force can “resolve” the Taiwan “issue” once and for all. Such views have also been expressed in party-controlled media in China, where threats to attack Taiwan and to decapitate its leadership have become almost daily offerings.

Although there is ongoing debate on whether Beijing is ready to initiate a major military campaign to seize Taiwan, displays of force meant to intimidate Taiwan (and possibly to collect intelligence on Taiwan’s response mechanisms) have become more prevalent.

Increased PLAAF activity has also become part of a kinetic dialogue between the PLAAF and the U.S. Air Force in the

region, where the latter, in response to Chinese behavior, has also increased its presence with passages by reconnaissance aircraft.

More recently, PLAAF intrusions in Taiwan’s ADIZ and across the median line have been used to signal Beijing’s displeasure over high-level visits by U.S. officials to Taiwan—Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar in early August and Under Secretary of State Keith Krach in mid-September—and major arms sales announcements by the U.S. During Krach’s visit, the PLAAF conducted unprecedented intrusions in the Taiwan Strait, with [18 aircraft on Sept. 18](#) (two H-6 bombers, eight J-16s, four J-11s and four J-10s) and 19—in “pincer formation”—[the following day](#) (12 J-16, 2 J-10s, 2 J-11s, 2 H-6s and one Y-8 anti-submarine warfare aircraft from the PLA Navy).

During the altercation on Sept. 18, a PLAAF pilot was [overheard on the radio](#) telling the pilot in a ROCAF interceptor that “there is no median line in the Taiwan Strait.” During the same incident, a PLAAF pilot also shouted that Taiwan was a “pawn” of “foreign forces.” It was rather unusual for a PLA pilot to make what amounted to a policy statement, and at this point it is difficult to determine whether he had permission to do so or was simply expressing his ultra-nationalistic passions.

Nevertheless, the remark sparked widespread speculation during that weekend suggesting that Beijing had decided to no longer recognize, and abide by, the median line.

That speculation ended on Sept. 21 when Wang Wenbin, a spokesman at China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, told a press conference that [“there is no so-called center line in the Taiwan Strait”](#) (不存在所谓“海峡中线”).

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