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Special Feature

How Vulnerable are Kinmen and Matsu Islands?

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Summary

A possible Chinese seizure of Taiwan's outlying islands—Kinmen and Matsu—prominently figures in security discussions on Taiwan. Much of the military value of these islands to Taiwan has been diluted due to the phenomenal rise of China's military capabilities. There seems to be widespread support for the One China principle in Kinmen and Matsu. The islands are also of little value to China in its larger strategic scheme for reunification.

Anxieties about the possibility of China’s invasion or coercive blockade of Taiwan have gradually increased since 2016, when the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), a party traditionally subject to China’s wrath for not upholding the One China principle, came to power under Tsai Ing-wen (it won again in 2020 under Tsai and 2024 under Lai Ching-te). Post Lai’s victory, these anxieties have deepened further, as China has not taken lightly his repeated insistence on Taiwan’s separateness and its equal political status with China. Through gray zone and cognitive warfare, as well as capability demonstration through frequent and complex military exercises, China has increasingly come to express its displeasure at the goings-on in Taipei.

A possible Chinese seizure of Taiwan’s outlying islands—Kinmen and Matsu—prominently figures in security discussions on Taiwan. Several analysts have noted that China may seize them as a form of ‘salami slicing’, punishing the DPP government for its “transgressions”, its demonstration of resolve and capabilities, or to test the US commitment towards Taiwan. This Brief seeks to determine whether they face greater security vulnerability than mainland Taiwan in the historical context of cross-Straits relations. It relies on published literature as well as insight gained from author’s interviews conducted in Taiwan.

Introducing Kinmen and Matsu

Kinmen—also spelt as Jinmen and previously known by its European name, Quemoy—literally means ‘golden gate’. Administratively, it is a county that includes about 12 small islands scattered around the Kinmen Island. The county is situated to Taiwan’s west at 24° 26’ 24” N, 118° 19’ 48” E. It has a total area of 151.7 square kilometres and a population of 67,173 persons. Kinmen Island is approximately 187 kilometres from the nearest Taiwanese coast. However, it is only six kilometres from China’s eastern coast in Fujian province at the farthest and around 3 kilometres at the closest. Xiamen, a major city in Fujian, is less than 30 kilometres from it.¹

The Matsu (or Mazu) archipelago is situated in Taiwan’s northwest at 26° 9’ 4” N, 119° 55’ 38” E. Its land area is 28.8 square kilometres and collective coastline is around 133 kilometres. Administratively, it forms Lienchiang County, covering four townships and 22 villages spread throughout three dozen islands and islets with a resident population of 11,813 persons. It is around 190 kilometres from Taiwan’s northern coast and about 9 to 15 kilometres from the Fujianese coast. The name of the archipelago comes from Nangan island, whose another name is Matsu

¹ [“Geographic Location”](#), Kinmen County Government; [“Table 1 Number of Resident Population and Population Density”](#), National Statistics, Republic of China (Taiwan). Geographical coordinates are taken from open sources.

because of a Matsu (sea goddess) temple on it. The county shares its name with a Fujianese county, Lienchiang, which administered these islands before 1949.²

The two archipelagos are not only well inside the Chinese side of the so-called median line (a tacit border between China and Taiwan) in the Taiwan Strait, but also within China’s territorial waters. Historically, they had no direct administrative links with Taiwan and had little political and social links. They were not ceded to Japan along with Taiwan and Penghu (Pescadores) under the Treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895. They were administered from Fujian. Their social and economic life was oriented towards the mainland. It was the outcome of the Chinese Civil War that saw them integrated into Taiwan after the defeated Kuomintang (KMT) relocated the Republic of China (ROC)³ to it in 1949.⁴

Continuation of ‘Civil War’ on Kinmen and Matsu

The vanquished KMT’s retreat from Mainland China stopped at Kinmen where it defeated the Communists in the battle of Guningtou on Kinmen Island in October 1949. Since then, the government in Taipei has governed the Kinmen and Matsu Island groups, which have acted as Taiwan’s military outposts. The two island groups saw frequent conflicts between the KMT and the communist forces between 1949 and 1958.⁵ The two groups, along with the Dachen Islands up the north off Zhejiang coast, were the site of the First Taiwan Strait Crisis (1954–1955). At that point in time, the KMT controlled the Dachen Islands as well. However, they were found indefensible during the crisis, especially after the fall of nearby Yijiangshan Island in January 1955. Hence, upon US insistence and in order to better defend Kinmen and Matsu, the KMT evacuated troops and civilians from the Dachen Islands in February

² “[Lienchiang County Council](#)”; “[Table 1 Number of Resident Population and Population Density](#)”. Geographical coordinates are taken from open sources.

³ Only a handful of countries recognise the Republic of China (ROC). From the perspective of broader international community, it is Taiwan, not the ROC that operates internationally in non-diplomatic and political fashion, broadly in economic, cultural and other relevant people-to-people domains. The usage of the word, ROC, is contextual in this write-up.

⁴ The ROC brought the Fujian Provincial Government with it to Kinmen in 1949. The provincial government was later relocated to Xindian, Taipei in 1956 after Kinmen was placed under martial law. It returned to Kinmen in 1996, after martial law was lifted in 1992. In 2018, the central government finally “defunded” it. It ceased functioning in 2018. It was always “incomplete” in its jurisdiction, having no administrative power. Its job was to “research” Fujian to “study the plans for the restoration of various regions in the province”. However, its nominal presence emphasised the distinctiveness of Kinmen and Matsu from Taiwan. Incidentally, both Taiwan and Fujian are still officially recognised as separate provinces, with Kinmen and Lienchiang counties belonging to Fujian. “[The Story of the Fujian Provincial Government](#)”; “[Introduction Taiwan / ROC](#)”; Han Cheung, “[Taiwan in Time: A Provincial Government that Ruled No Land](#)”, *Taipei Times*, 19 July 2020.

⁵ Chang Chin-ju, “[Kinmen Changes into its Civvies](#)”, *Taiwan Panorama*, September 1991.

1955. The threat posed by the US military and diplomatic pressure on China saved the day for the KMT.⁶

The crisis opened a round of US–China ambassadorial talks that on and off continued from 1955 to 1970.⁷ It occasioned the US-ROC mutual defence treaty in December 1954 and a Joint Resolution by the US Congress (Formosa Resolution) in January 1955. Both the treaty and the resolution recognised Taiwan and the Pescadores (Penghu Islands) as the ROC territory and pledged to come to their defence. The treaty asked the two parties “to settle any international dispute in which they may be involved by peaceful means in such a manner that international peace, security and justice are not endangered...”.⁸ Neither of the two explicitly mentioned Kinmen and Matsu, but the generic descriptions such as “territories of that area now in friendly hands...”⁹ and “such other territories as may be determined by mutual agreement”¹⁰ retained flexibility regarding the US commitment for their defence. Its intercessions helped “freeze the status quo surrounding the Taiwan Strait”.¹¹

Kinmen and Matsu saw even more ferocious conflict during the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1958 when Kinmen survived 474,000 artillery shells during 44 days of blockade.¹² China lost more than 22 torpedo boats and 32 MiG fighter planes. With the US’ support, KMT forces successfully defended the islands. Kinmen particularly earned a reputation as “an impregnable fortress”.¹³ Following the end of the second crisis, the US and Taiwan issued a joint statement on 23 October 1958 in which the KMT government renounced the use of force to recover the mainland as a principle.¹⁴ However, China massed forces on the Fujian coast in a veiled threat to Taiwan once again in June 1962.¹⁵

The two aforementioned crises should be seen as the continuation by other means of the Chinese Civil War. The Communists staked their claim over Taiwan. They opposed US support for the KMT government in Taiwan, terming it as interference in China’s internal matters. Conversely, in the 1950s, the KMT under Chiang Kai-shek

⁶ [“The Taiwan Strait Crises: 1954-55 and 1958”](#), Office of the Historian, Foreign Service Institute, United States Department of State; [“China’s Fight for Tiny Islands — The Taiwan Straits Crises, 1954-58”](#), Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, August 2016.

⁷ [“U.S.-China Ambassadorial Talks, 1955-1970”](#), Office of the Historian, Foreign Service Institute, United States Department of State.

⁸ [“China Mutual Defense \(1954\)”](#), American Institute in Taiwan, 2017.

⁹ [“56. Joint Resolution by the Congress”](#), Office of the Historian, Foreign Service Institute, United States Department of State, 29 January 1955.

¹⁰ [“China Mutual Defense \(1954\)”](#), American Institute in Taiwan, 2017.

¹¹ Haruka Matsumoto, [“The First Taiwan Strait Crisis and China’s ‘Border’ Dispute around Taiwan”](#), *Eurasia Border Review Special Issue on China’s Post-Revolutionary Borders, 1940s-1960s*, 2012, p. 91.

¹² Chang Chin-ju, [“Kinmen Changes into its Civvies”](#), *Taiwan Panorama*, September 1991.

¹³ Tsai Wen-ting, [“Taiwan’s Front Gate: Kinmen”](#), *Taiwan Panorama*, July 2002.

¹⁴ [“209. Joint Communiqué”](#), Office of the Historian, Foreign Service Institute, United States Department of State, 23 October 1958.

¹⁵ [“New Crisis in the Taiwan Straits”](#), *Taiwan Review: Taiwan Today*, 1 July 1962.

also pursued a military strategy to recover the mainland and engaged in ‘military’ harassment of the Communists around the Fujianese coast.¹⁶ The Second Strait Crisis was also a Communist response to American and British anti-communism in West Asia, particularly in Lebanon and Jordan.¹⁷ Mao Zedong tested the strength of the US commitment towards the KMT, particularly its attitude towards the defence of Kinmen and Matsu under the 1954 mutual defence treaty.¹⁸ It is also argued that by creating the crisis, Mao tested the Soviet commitment to China as well.¹⁹ It is believed that the Communist bombardments were a “show” as Communist forces did not attempt to land on Kinmen and Matsu and followed a policy of “shelling without landing, and cutting-off [rear support] without killing”.²⁰

By snatching the islands from the KMT and confining the latter to Taiwan and Penghu, Mao did not want to create any conditions which could in any way motivate Chiang Kai-shek and the KMT to begin seeing Taiwan as separate from China and assert its independence or promote the idea of Two Chinas, which the US was toying with then.²¹ He viewed the continuing presence of more than 100,000 KMT troops on these islands as a ‘Kinmen-Matsu rope’ around Chiang and the KMT’s neck that bound them with One China.²² Therefore, after the ceasefire was declared in the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis, the Communists continuously bombarded the islands on alternate days till 1979²³ when a policy of peaceful reunification based on the concept of One Country, Two Systems was adopted.²⁴ The bombardment was a political message that there would be no ceasefire with the KMT until the Civil War ended with the victory of the Communists. During this period, the area was also a site of an intense propaganda war, with 500,000 propaganda shells being dropped on Kinmen during this period.²⁵

¹⁶ Haruka Matsumoto, [“Chiang Kai-shek’s Vision for Returning to China in the 1950s”](#), IDE Discussion Paper No. 729, 9 November 2018; [“Memoir by Wu Lengxi, ‘Inside Story of the Decision Making during the Shelling of Jinmen’”](#), Wilson Center: Digital Archive, 23 August 1958.

¹⁷ [“Memoir by Wu Lengxi, ‘Inside Story of the Decision Making during the Shelling of Jinmen’”](#), Wilson Center: Digital Archive, 23 August 1958.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Huang Jui-ming, [“The Attack on Kinmen Still Carries a Message”](#), *Taipei Times*, 22 August 2008.

²⁰ [“Memoir by Wu Lengxi, ‘Inside Story of the Decision Making during the Shelling of Jinmen’”](#), Wilson Center: Digital Archive, 23 August 1958.

²¹ Fukuda Madoka, [“Legacy and Lessons of the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis”](#), *Nippon.com*, 23 August 2023; [“Memoir by Wu Lengxi, ‘Inside Story of the Decision Making during the Shelling of Jinmen’”](#), Wilson Center: Digital Archive, 23 August 1958.

²² Hsu Chung-mao, [“The Taiwan Strait Crises of the 1950s and the Evolution of Sino-US Relations”](#), Think China, 30 October 2020; [“Memoir by Wu Lengxi, ‘Inside Story of the Decision Making during the Shelling of Jinmen’”](#), Wilson Center: Digital Archive, 23 August 1958.

²³ [“Memoir by Wu Lengxi, ‘Inside Story of the Decision Making during the Shelling of Jinmen’”](#), Wilson Center: Digital Archive, 23 August 1958; Fukuda Madoka, [“Legacy and Lessons of the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis”](#), *Nippon.com*, 23 August 2023.

²⁴ [“A Policy of ‘One Country, Two Systems’ on Taiwan”](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China.

²⁵ Tsai Wen-ting, [“Taiwan’s Front Gate: Kinmen”](#), *Taiwan Panorama*, July 2002.

Value of Kinmen and Matsu for Taiwan

During the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, the KMT government attached significant military, political and ideological importance to Kinmen and Matsu. From a military point of view, they were viewed as providing “depth in the defence of Taiwan” and useful for “a close watch” early detection of any hostile concentration of forces or other military activities on the Chinese coast. This surveillance and reconnaissance from the island were seen as contributing to the increase in the US Seventh Fleet’s mobility by freeing it “from the necessity of constantly concentrating its craft in the vicinity of Taiwan”.²⁶ It was also considered that the surveillance and reconnaissance by ground troops on the islands were preferable to a “day-to-day air reconnaissance” and air patrols to avoid “accidental skirmishes”.

The Taiwanese possession of these islands denied China the use of the nearest islands in an invasion of Taiwan, compelling it to rely on other islands farther away, which in turn would require modern naval technology it did not possess. Besides, Kinmen and Matsu could also be used to “counter-attack” China.²⁷ From a political point of view, their defence was considered of the utmost importance to demonstrate the resolve and strength of the “free world”. The islands would make people on the mainland aware of the progress “free China” had made and antagonise them against the communists. Defending them was also necessary from the point of view of public morale and faith in the Taipei government’s capability to defend its territory.²⁸ Finally, they were needed for maintaining the One China conviction prized by Chiang’s KMT.

In the present-day context, much of this military value has been diluted in light of the phenomenal rise in China’s military capabilities and its enormous military advantage over Taiwan. They are no longer necessarily required as assembling bases to launch an amphibian attack on Taiwan, nor does Taiwan’s “symbolic” military presence there pose any discernible threat to the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). Long-range radar systems and other sophisticated technologies such as reconnaissance and monitoring drones have diminished their value for surveillance and reconnaissance as well. At present, they only retain significance as symbols of the ROC’s continuing existence, public morale and confidence, a commitment to defend them against Chinese communist authoritarianism being perceived as a test of Taiwanese political forces’ commitment for democracy.²⁹

²⁶ [“The Question of the Taiwan Straits”](#), *Taiwan Review: Taiwan Today*, 1 January 1961.

²⁷ Ibid.; [“The Month in Free China”](#), *Taiwan Today*, 1 November 1972.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ [“Why Does the Construction of the Kinmen-Xiamen Bridge Threaten Taiwan’s Security”](#), *Defense Security Brief*, 25 June 2024.

Even today, Taiwan observes 23 August as the date when it repulsed the Chinese attack in 1958.³⁰

Impact of Cross-Strait Rapprochement on Kinmen and Matsu

The Kinmen and Matsu islands remained under martial law and off-limits to outsiders till 1992. However, as Cross-strait relations witnessed gradual rapprochement the late 1980s and early 1990s onwards, the thaw changed the threat perception *vis-à-vis* China, which led to their opening and gradual demilitarisation. The Kinmen Agreement signed by Red Cross Society representatives of both sides in 1990 was the first bilateral measure to institutionalise “the management of cross-strait affairs”.³¹ Also, the three mini links that permitted limited postal, transportation (ferry/ships) and trade between the two sides were established in 2001 between Kinmen and Matsu on Taiwanese side and Xiamen, Quanzhou and Fuzhou in Fujian on the Chinese side.³² Hereafter, social, cultural and commercial interaction and mobility between these islands and Mainland China has increased phenomenally.³³

The water supply pipeline deal between Kinmen County Waterworks and China’s Fujian Water Supply Co., signed in 2015 and operationalised in 2018, to cure acute water shortage in the county under commercial arrangements, points to the county’s dependency on the mainland for as basic an amenity as drinking water.³⁴ Further, in 2019, China offered the “Four New Links” to create a “Xiamen-Kinmen Living Circle”, with “the provision of water, electricity, and natural gas from the mainland, along with a bridge to connect Kinmen with Xiamen.”³⁵ In line with this, China offered 21 measures in 2023 “to economically integrate” Fujian with Kinmen and Matsu counties.³⁶ The most notable of these was a bridge between Xiamen and

³⁰ Fabian Hamacher and Ann Wang, [“On Frontline Island, Taiwan President Rejects China’s Rule for Freedom”](#), *Reuters*, 23 August 2024.

³¹ [“20th Anniversary of Kinmen Agreement”](#), Kuomintang Official Website, 21 September 2010.

³² [“Report on the Preliminary Impact Study of the ‘Three Mini-links’ Between the Two Sides of the Taiwan Strait”](#), Mainland Affairs Council (MAC), 2 October 2000; [“Overview of the Provisional Implementation of ‘Mini-three-links’ between the Offshore Islands of Kinmen & Matsu and Mainland China”](#), MAC, 18 December 2000; [“Cabinet Expands Mini Links with Mainland”](#), *Taiwan Today*, 26 June 2008.

³³ [“Mini-Three Links: Number of Vessels Traveling Between Kinmen/Matsu and Mainland China”](#), Cross Strait Economic Statistics Monthly (CSESM), MAC; Hu Meidong and Zou Shuo, [“Mini Three Links Traffic Surges 50 Percent in First Quarter”](#), *China Daily*, 2 April 2025.

³⁴ [“MAC Gives Blessings on the Inauguration of Cross-Strait Water Service and Condemns the Taiwan Affairs Office Head for Distorting the Truth”](#), MAC, 5 August 2018.

³⁵ Ian Murphy and Eric Chan, [“Countering Cognitive Warfare: Taiwan’s Defense Against Party Influence in Kinmen”](#), Global Taiwan Institute, 24 July 2024.

³⁶ Sheng I-che, [“China’s Plot to Take over Taiwan’s Islands”](#), *Taipei Times*, 18 September 2023; Duncan DeAeth, [“China Targets Taiwan’s Matsu Islands for Economic Integration”](#), *Taiwan News*, 18 May 2024.

Kinmen. The Taiwanese government rejected the proposed bridge on national security grounds.³⁷ Many have viewed the existing physical infrastructure and the proposals as part of China’s infrastructure war to weaken the will of the people in the area and lure them towards reunification.³⁸ Incidentally, in 2017, Taiwan’s Mainland Affairs Council had to refute a media report that China carries out cross-sea coordination and performs “security work” in Kinmen.³⁹

Local Politics and Societal Attitude

There seems to be widespread support for the One China principle in Kinmen and Matsu. Since 1993, when direct elections were introduced for county magistrates, Lienchiang County (Matsu Islands) has elected all its magistrates from the KMT, which believes in “One China with respective interpretations”. Similarly, Kinmen County has elected most of its magistrates from the KMT. It even elected a magistrate twice from the New Party, which is a radical pro-reunification party. The present magistrate, Chen Fu-hai, is from the Taiwan People’s Party (TPP), who on an earlier occasion won the magistracy as an independent candidate. The DPP has never won magistracy in these two outlying counties.⁴⁰

Magistrates and other county officials from the two counties have been at the forefront in demanding deeper economic integration with Mainland China. They have regularly travelled to attend the Straits Forum, which was established by China in 2009 to promote cross-Straits people-to-people exchanges and is held annually in the country. The DPP government has been discouraging participation of local government officials in the forum as it views the forum as part of China’s United Front policy.⁴¹ However, it appears that it has generally not denied permission when the county officials from these two and other counties in Taiwan, have applied for attending it.⁴² The present Kinmen County magistrate has also attended.⁴³

³⁷ [“MAC Solemnly Rejects the Claim that a Kinmen-Xiamen Bridge is a Policy Continuation of the ‘Mini Three Links’ and Calls for National Security to Be Prioritized When Promoting Cross-Straits Affairs”](#), MAC, 21 June 2022.

³⁸ Sheng I-che, [“China’s Plot to Take over Taiwan’s Islands”](#), *Taipei Times*, 18 September 2023; Ian Murphy, [“China’s Infrastructure Warfare Against Kinmen”](#), Taiwan Research Hub, University of Nottingham, 7 June 2024.

³⁹ [“Border Safety Management is an Act of Sovereignty: The Government Solemnly Refutes Media Report ‘Mainland Performs Security Work in Kinmen’ for Deviating from the Facts”](#), MAC, 14 September 2017.

⁴⁰ Information gained from multiple open domain sources.

⁴¹ [“MAC Policy Position on the CCP’s Straits Forum”](#), MAC, 9 June 2023.

⁴² [“Two County Commissioners Apply to Attend the 16th Straits Forum in China”](#), *Taipei Times*, 8 June 2024.

⁴³ [“7th Straits Forum Kicks Off in China’s Xiamen \(3\)”](#), *Xinhua*, 15 June 2015.

There have been strongly divergent views on the closer economic integration of Kinmen and Matsu with China.⁴⁴ Recently, KMT Legislator Chen Yu-jen from Kinmen proposed an “offshore free-trade demonstration zone” to “enable the transshipment of goods by Chinese firms via the outlying island counties”.⁴⁵ The DPP countered that such a zone would help China circumvent US tariffs and undermine Taiwan’s security.⁴⁶ However, the late Shih Ming-teh, a former DPP Chairperson, did not see Kinmen and Matsu as “the umbilical cord between Taiwan and China”. He viewed the “Taiwan problem” and “Kinmen and Matsu problem” as two separate problems. He accepted that they are Chinese territory that Chiang Kai-shek lumped with Taiwan. For him, Taiwanese troops on the islands were like “a hooligan brandishing a katana [Japanese sword] before the mansion of a giant”. He proposed to convert them into special peace zones and “buffer areas between Taiwan and China”, permanently demilitarising them.⁴⁷

The islands’ political choices indicate their preference for closer economic cooperation with China. Younger generations have more ‘political’ affinity with Taiwan than the older generation. Yet, support for deeper economic integration with Mainland China remains widespread.⁴⁸ Besides, the local society is not shy or embarrassed of its Chinese cultural identity. Until recently, Chinese and Taiwanese flags flown together was a common sight in Kinmen’s Mofan Street.⁴⁹ Incidentally, around 2,600 persons from the mainland are reportedly living in Kinmen, mainly as spouses of locals.⁵⁰ The society is so geographically, socially and economically close to China that its desire for peace and opposition to provocation is natural.

A Case for a Limited Invasion Scenario

In recent years, China’s gray zone warfare activities around Kinmen and Matsu have progressively increased. These activities include, for example, the cutting of the internet cable linking Kinmen with Taiwan, Chinese sand dredgers surrounding the islands in 2021 and the sighting of Chinese drones over them. The islands appear to

⁴⁴ Sarah Wu, [“Bridge Dilemma Captures Divide over China in Taiwan elections”](#), *Reuters*, 10 January 2024.

⁴⁵ Chen Cheng-yu and Jason Pan, [“DPP Slams KMT’s ‘Offshore Trade Zone’ Plan”](#), *Taipei Times*, 12 April 2025.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Shih Ming-teh, [“Taiwan’s Kinmen and Matsu Should Not Be an Excuse for War”](#), *Taiwan News*, 5 August 2023.

⁴⁸ Kim Sengupta, [“Taiwan’s Matsu Islands prepare for a Possible China Invasion: ‘I don’t Want to Die, but We have to Fight’”](#), *Independent*, 5 January 2024.

⁴⁹ Keoni Everington, [“PRC Flags Taken Down from Kinmen Street after Taiwan Passes Anti-Infiltration Act”](#), *Taiwan News*, 3 January 2020.

⁵⁰ [“Life Across the Strait: Cross-strait Marriages Surge Thanks to the ‘Three Mini-Links’”](#), CGTN, 6 December 2023.

be at the centre of gray zone warfare.⁵¹ An increase in such activities was perceived after the victory of Lai in January 2024. Notably, China challenged “the validity of Taiwan’s prohibited and restricted” waters around Kinmen Island, after a Chinese boat capsized in the area due to an alleged ‘hot pursuit’ by the Taiwanese Coast Guard on 14 February 2024. Following the incident, four Chinese Coast Guard vessels entered the “prohibited” and “restricted” waters. Chinese coast guard personnel “briefly boarded a Taiwanese cruise ship for security checks”.⁵² In May 2024, the month Lai was sworn in, “at least five formations of official Chinese ships” violated Kinmen’s “restricted waters”.⁵³ The same month, the PLA exercise “for the first time targeted” Kinmen and Matsu along with other outlying islands.⁵⁴

Lately, several Western analysts have projected a “‘gray-zone’ seizure” of outlying islands, particularly Kinmen and Matsu, by China as “a much more likely cause of a crisis in the Taiwan Strait in the 2020s”⁵⁵... “than a full-scale war to subjugate Taiwan”.⁵⁶ They have concluded that “a highly kinetic joint blockade” was more probable than “an invasion in the next five years”⁵⁷ and that China could also “pair a blockade with other kinetic military operations”, which could mean blockading Taiwan and a seizure of its one or more outlying islands, “such as Kinmen or Matsu near China...”⁵⁸ Noting a short-of-war seizure of the islands as a most probable scenario, they visualise that escalation of law enforcement activities around Kinmen, testing of Taiwan’s military response and quarantining Kinmen by China will compel Taiwan to eventually abandon them.⁵⁹ Some analysts even predicted that considering that

Beijing probably has the capability to launch a Scarborough Shoal-type annexation of Kinmen and Matsu in the near term. And, given that control of those islands would be a prerequisite for a successful amphibious

⁵¹ Joshua Keating, [“How China Could Try to Strangle Taiwan without Firing a Shot”](#), Vox, 16 December 2024.

⁵² Kris Lih, [“China’s New Gray Zone Tactics Near Taiwan Raise Tensions”](#), Domino Theory, 21 February 2024.

⁵³ [“Taiwan Ramps up Security for New President’s Inauguration amid China Threat”](#), Al Jazeera, 19 May 2024.

⁵⁴ Kelly Ng and Rupert Wingfield-Hayes, [“China Holds Military Drills around Taiwan as ‘Strong Punishment’”](#), BBC, 23 May 2024.

⁵⁵ Andrew Chubb, [“Taiwan Strait Crises: Island Seizure Contingencies”](#), Asia Society Policy Institute, 22 February 2023.

⁵⁶ Ted Galen Carpenter, [“A Coming Test on Taiwan”](#), CATO Institute, 18 December 2021.

⁵⁷ Bonny Lin, Brian Hart and et al., [“Surveying the Experts: U.S. and Taiwan Views on China’s Approach to Taiwan in 2024 and Beyond”](#), China Power: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 22 January 2024.

⁵⁸ Bonny Lin, Brian Hart et al., [“How China Could Blockade Taiwan”](#), China Power: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 22 August 2024.

⁵⁹ Matthew Sperzel, Daniel Shats and Alexis Turek, [“Exploring a PRC Short-of-War Coercion Campaign to Seize Taiwan’s Kinmen Islands and Possible Responses”](#), Institute for the Study of War, 21 August 2024.

assault on Taiwan, it appears likely that Beijing may seek to seize control of them before 2025.⁶⁰

In these analyses, the assessment that the US is “unprepared or unwilling” to escalate a military conflict with China for the islands and that China’s “confidence in its ability to achieve ‘peaceful reunification’” has diminished increase “the likelihood of such a coercion campaign”.⁶¹ “Initial takeover” of the islands by the PLA and the inability of the US and Taiwan to dislodge it is a given in some of these analyses.⁶² In addition to expert writings, journalistic reportage has also noted the sense of immediate vulnerability for Kinmen and Matsu.⁶³

A Case against the Limited Invasion Scenario

At present, the officially confirmed number of Taiwanese troops on the Kinmen and Matsu archipelagos is unavailable. However, the information available in the public domain suggests that it may be between 4,000 and 10,000. Considering that they are ‘tasked’ to meet the challenge of 416,000 PLA soldiers in China’s eastern and southern military theatres, the military vulnerability of the islands is self-evident.⁶⁴ The troops basically perform the function of coast guard policing in the area. Their presence is symbolic, meant for asserting Taiwan’s ‘sovereignty’ on the islands and for boosting public morale. Stressing that they still carry military value as a deterrent to a Chinese amphibian operation from the rear or the flanks is wishful.⁶⁵

An unanimity of opinion about Taiwan’s military inability to defend them was quite discernible in the author’s conversations with several scholars and journalists in Taipei. Yet, none of them supported the view that the PLA may conduct a surgical strike to capture them. That these islands are practically available at a stone’s throw for China for taking over anytime it wants, but it does not show an inclination

⁶⁰ Charlie Lyons Jones, Elena Yi-Ching Ho and Malcolm Davi, [“China Military Watch”](#), Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 12 February 2021.

⁶¹ Matthew Sperzel, Daniel Shats and Alexis Turek, [“Exploring a PRC Short-of-War Coercion Campaign to Seize Taiwan’s Kinmen Islands and Possible Responses”](#), Institute for the Study of War, 21 August 2024.

⁶² Ted Galen Carpenter, [“China could Start a Mini ‘Island War’ with Taiwan”](#), CATO Institute, 8 August 2022.

⁶³ Kim Sengupta, [“Taiwan’s Matsu Islands prepare for a Possible China Invasion: ‘I don’t Want to Die, but We have to Fight’”](#), *Independent*, 5 January 2024; Benedict Brook, [“Islands just Kilometres from China that are ‘Vulnerable’ to Invasion”](#), *News.Com.Au*, 1 December 2020; Frederik Kelter, [“In Taiwan’s Kinmen, People Hope for Calm amid China Tensions”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 11 August 2022; Helen Davidson, [“Tension Haunts Tiny Taiwanese Isles that Live in Fear of War with China”](#), *The Guardian*, 21 February 2021.

⁶⁴ [“Taiwan’s Remote Islands are on the Frontline with China — Sometimes Only a Few Hundred Yards from Chinese Troops”](#), *Business Insider*, 29 December 2022.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

to forcibly acquire them and allows them to remain with Taiwan is probably only because of its One China ideology and belief in the inevitability of reunification, not on account of any military inability.

Kinmen and Matsu continue to provide a One China connection between China and Taiwan in the perceptions of both the CPC and those in Taiwan who believe in it. For them, they—a geographically and historically Fujianese territory—are an “umbilical cord”⁶⁶ between the two sides, which China would not like to break. Seizing only these islands without moving to reunify Taiwan would “weaken Beijing’s claim that Taiwan was ‘the unfinished business of the Chinese civil war’”.⁶⁷ Besides, such a course would cast doubt on its political will and military capabilities.

The testing of the US commitment to defend Taiwan by triggering a military crisis in the Kinmen-Matsu area was a good tactic by China in the 1950s when more than 100,000 KMT troops were entrenched there. This may not be needed now when Taiwan itself seems to have stopped attaching any meaningful military value to it. Penghu, covered under the 1954 treaty, the Formosa Resolution of 1955 and the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) of 1979, is a more likely candidate as a testing ground. It is around 50 kilometres from Taiwan. It will have more military value for the PLA as a site to establish air dominance and as a logistical hub to mount an amphibian invasion of Taiwan.

Even though the probability of US intervention against the PLA’s seizure operation to occupy Kinmen and Matsu is extremely low, it may not be entirely discounted. The seizure will certainly provide US forces better response times to plan a defence of Taiwan. Thus, the outlying islands may turn out to be “too small a gain for such a big gamble” by China.⁶⁸

Finally, as such, Kinmen and Matsu are of little value in its larger strategic scheme for reunification. Targeting the most amenable section of the Taiwanese population for forcible reunification will not only hurt sentiments, but also discredit China’s broad policy of peaceful reunification and the One Country, Two Systems promise, even though it may retain the fig leaf of One Country, Two Systems in the annexed area. Yet, it is true that China has never ruled out the use of force for reunification.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Benedict Brook, [“Islands just Kilometres from China that are ‘Vulnerable’ to Invasion”](#), *News.Com.Au*, 1 December 2020.

⁶⁷ Helen Davidson, [“Tension Haunts Tiny Taiwanese Isles that Live in Fear of War with China”](#), *The Guardian*, 21 February 2021.

⁶⁸ Benedict Brook, [“Islands just Kilometres from China that are ‘Vulnerable’ to Invasion”](#), *News.Com.Au*, 1 December 2020.

⁶⁹ [“Pernicious Collusion Seeks to Erase Beijing's Redline on Taiwan Question”](#), *China Daily*, 5 June 2024; Joe Cash and Ben Blanchard, [“China won't Renounce Use of Force over Taiwan; Xi Visits Frontline Island”](#), *Reuters*, 16 October 2024.

Conclusion

Thus, while Western analysts view probable Chinese military action against Kinmen and Matsu as a step in an escalatory ladder, Taiwanese interlocutors do not appear to share this view. Instead, they seem to believe that, if China were to initiate a war, it would not resort to a gradual escalation, but target the reunification of the whole of Taiwan at once. At least, their assessment of the threat to Kinmen and Matsu suggests as much.

Taking a historical view of the place of Kinmen and Matsu in cross-Strait relations and the ground situation into account, the probability of a standalone Chinese military action to seize them without a decision to make an immediate military move towards Taiwan proper is indeed very low. China's links with them best exemplify its policy of preparing a ground for peaceful reunification by promoting close and deep cross-Strait economic, social and cultural integration, keeping the use of force as a last option. Thus, the question of Kinmen and Matsu's vulnerability is primarily a political question and is linked with the Taiwan question, not a military one.

Logically, a scenario that the Kinmen and Matsu islands may be subject to a mopping-up operation after sorting out Taiwan cannot be ruled out. Another angle to probe could also be whether under unbearable strategic pressure, a future government in Taipei could decide to show less attachment for these 'Chinese territories' and let them slip out silently in order to focus more on Taiwan's security. Their experience with Chinese power can be studied to gain insight into the morale and resolve of mainland Taiwanese society when faced with a similar situation of close exposure to China's military might and economic promises if it accepts Chinese terms.

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