



# Beyond Taiwan: China's Military Modernisation and Shifting Deterrence Narratives

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## **Beyond Taiwan: China's Military Modernisation and Shifting Deterrence Narratives**

*By Tang Meng Kit*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*China's Victory Day Parade on 3 September 2025, commemorating the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II, reignited global debates about Beijing's military ambitions. Much of the commentary focused on a scenario involving the invasion of Taiwan. This fixation, however, risks obscuring the broader strategic imperatives driving the modernisation of China's People's Liberation Army.*

### **COMMENTARY**

On 3 September 2025, Beijing staged its Victory Day Parade to mark the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II. The event was a spectacle of martial strength, with formations of hypersonic glide vehicles, stealth and "wingman" drones and sophisticated electronic warfare systems, among others. The symbolism was unmistakable: the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) presented the People's Liberation Army (PLA) not only as the architect of the nation's past victory but also as the vanguard of a rising power.

International media quickly zoomed in on the Taiwan Strait, with outlets like the [South China Morning Post](#) and [Reuters](#) framing China's military display as a warning to Taipei and a signal of Beijing's readiness to act. However, this narrow focus overlooks the broader implications. While Taiwan remains a flashpoint, the PLA's modernisation and the parade reflect a broader strategic agenda.

Beyond preparations for a potential Taiwan Strait crisis, China is signalling a deterrence strategy aimed at complicating and disrupting any US intervention, influencing regional security dynamics, and asserting its global military posture. Fixating solely on invasion risks underestimating the PLA's growing role in reshaping the Indo-Pacific order.

## **Military Hardware: Capabilities and Doctrinal Significance**

The Victory Day Parade revealed the extent of China's progress in [military technology](#). Hypersonic glide vehicles underscored their capacity to threaten high-value US platforms such as carrier strike groups, exploiting speed and manoeuvrability to bypass conventional missile defences. The integration of long-range reconnaissance drones and electronic warfare systems reflected an emphasis on unmanned and cyber-enabled operations. Laser-directed energy weapons hinted at an expanding counter-satellite and counter-missile capability, while the upgrading of nuclear armaments reinforced Beijing's commitment to ensuring a credible second-strike capability.

These advances were not presented in isolation. They were framed as part of the PLA's long-term shift toward integrated joint operations. Since the late 2010s, Chinese military doctrine has [moved steadily](#) toward multi-domain campaigns, in which air, maritime, space, cyber, and electronic warfare systems are fused to overwhelm adversaries. The equipment on display was thus evidence of doctrinal advancement, not just of technological development and hardware accumulation.

The implications extend well beyond Taiwan. China's hypersonics and anti-ship systems can deny access to the South China Sea and East China Sea, reinforcing its maritime claims. Electronic and cyber warfare capabilities enable coercion short of war against hostile Southeast Asian states. Naval aviation and submarine forces provide the foundation for power projection into the Indian Ocean, where China's economic lifelines run. In short, the PLA's transformation signals a systemic military shift with applications across multiple theatres, [not only in the Taiwan Strait](#).

## **The Taiwan Invasion Narrative: Strategic Red Herring?**

Despite China's extensive military advancements, analysis remains heavily focused on a potential invasion of Taiwan. This perception is reinforced by Beijing's encirclement drills, ADIZ incursions, and combative rhetoric. However, the practicality of an invasion of Taiwan is highly uncertain. Studies, including one from [Washington's Stimson Center](#), highlight [significant logistical challenges](#), such as China's limited amphibious capability, the difficulty of maintaining supply lines across the strait, and the likelihood of strong resistance. The human and economic costs would be heavy, particularly for an economy already facing structural pressures.

Here, history provides helpful context. China [has not engaged in a major war](#) since 1979 and has consistently relied on deterrence, coercive diplomacy, and grey-zone tactics over open conflict. This restraint suggests that a full-scale amphibious assault of Taiwan remains an unlikely course of action.

Why, then, does the invasion narrative persist? For Beijing, it frames its military buildup as defensive and [bolstering nationalism](#) without risking war. For the United States and its allies, it helps justify their deterrence spending and to rally public support. For the media, it offers a clear and dramatic storyline in an otherwise complex security landscape.

However, this narrow focus comes at a cost. It limits strategic thinking and obscures how the PLA's modernisation is being used to deter US intervention, pressure regional actors, and expand China's global influence. In this light, Taiwan is less an imminent target than a convenient tool to divert attention from broader shifts in China's strategy.

## **Under-Explored Strategic Drivers**

Several deeper imperatives underpin the PLA's transformation. China's military modernisation serves five strategic aims, extending far beyond the Taiwan scenario.

First, it [seeks to deter the United States](#). Beijing aims to raise the cost of US intervention in the Western Pacific through systems such as hypersonic missiles, advanced air defences, and counter-space capabilities. The goal is not necessarily war, but to ensure that any conflict would unfold on terms less favourable to Washington.

Second, [regional coercion](#). The parade was a message not just to Taipei, but also to Tokyo, Hanoi, Manila and New Delhi. China's advanced systems support grey-zone activities along contested borders, as well as in the East and South China Seas. In the East China Sea, China's coast guard patrols and aircraft incursions near the [Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands](#) challenge Japan's control, using [electronic warfare](#) to assert claims. In the South China Sea, Beijing's [maritime militia](#) disrupts [Vietnam's](#) oil exploration at Vanguard Bank, while water cannon attacks and vessel rammings at [Scarborough Shoal](#) and [Second Thomas Shoal](#) pressure the Philippines, escalating tensions in [September 2025](#).

Third, it reflects [growing maritime ambition](#). The PLA Navy's expanding blue-water capacity supports China's push to secure sea lanes and protect overseas interests across the Indian Ocean, Middle East, and Africa, reinforced by arms sales and port access deals.

Fourth, civil-military fusion. AI, quantum, and space systems are being [rapidly militarised](#), underscoring Beijing's effort to compete with the United States.

Finally, it [reinforces domestic legitimacy](#). The PLA's visibility in national events bolsters nationalist narratives, projecting strength and unity. Military power serves both as an external deterrent and a symbol of internal authority under President Xi Jinping.

Taken together, these drivers show that the PLA's modernisation is comprehensive and holistic: it is for deterrence, coercion, global ambition, and domestic stability. Taiwan is only one part of this larger mosaic.

## **Policy Implications**

Overemphasising Taiwan risks miscalculation. Viewing the PLA's parade solely as a means of gearing up for a cross-strait crisis encourages overly narrow policies on the part of the Taiwanese, focusing on amphibious defence, which leads to

misallocated resources and provocation. A more balanced approach requires several adjustments.

Firstly, deterrence frameworks [must broaden beyond](#) the US–China dyad. Regional actors such as Japan, ASEAN, and India are integral to any strategy that manages Chinese coercion without tipping into confrontation.

Secondly, doctrinal analysis should move [beyond hardware counts to focus on doctrine](#). Understanding how China intends to use its capabilities, including concepts like “systems confrontation” and “intelligentised warfare”, is critical to interpreting its strategic direction.

Thirdly, channels of communication must expand. Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogues on maritime rules of engagement remain limited but are essential to preventing miscalculation.

Finally, competition in emerging technologies requires collective management. China’s civil-military fusion strategy ensures that AI, quantum, and space technologies will blur commercial and defence boundaries. It augurs well for regional states to collaborate to shape norms and standards before coercion through technological dominance becomes entrenched.

## Conclusion

China’s 2025 Victory Day Parade should not be seen solely as a display of nationalism or as indication the PLA is gearing up for the Taiwan challenge. It also signalled China’s broader strategic intent, which is to deter major powers, pressure regional actors, expand its global influence, and reinforce its domestic legitimacy.

It is essential to understand this. The PLA’s transformation is a long-term shift to deal with the Indo-Pacific security landscape, not just prepare for a war over an island. Framing China solely through the lens of invasion risks oversimplifying its complex and evolving strategy.

Policymakers must move beyond narrow scenarios and adopt broader, forward-looking assessments. Only by recognising the full scope of China’s ambitions can the region navigate competition while reducing the risk of costly miscalculation.

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