

A Chinese fighter jet, likely a J-16, is shown on the deck of an aircraft carrier. The jet is grey with red and yellow markings, including a red star on the tail fin. It is positioned on a dark grey deck with white markings. In the background, the ocean is visible, and some structures of the carrier are partially seen.

# Analyzing China's Escalation after Taiwan President Tsai's Transit through the United States

By Bonny Lin, Brian Hart, Samantha Lu, Hannah Price, and Matthew Slade

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## THE ISSUE

*As Taiwan president Tsai Ing-wen transited through the United States in March and April 2023, China embraced significant military and diplomatic measures to coerce and punish Taiwan and, to some extent, the United States. This is reminiscent of Chinese actions after then-speaker of the house Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan in August 2022, though there were differences between China's behavior. While some elements of China's actions in April 2023 appear less escalatory than those in August 2022, there was considerable continuity and even progression with respect to People's Liberation Army (PLA) operations, tactics, and reach vis-à-vis Taiwan. This brief analyzes Chinese activities in August 2022 and April 2023 and explores the factors impacting Beijing's decisionmaking.*

## INTRODUCTION

In March and April 2023, Taiwan president Tsai Ing-wen transited through the United States, during which she met with Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy.<sup>1</sup> This meeting was framed as an alternative to an immediate visit to Taiwan by Speaker McCarthy, and there were hopes that Beijing would not escalate as much as it did in August 2022 when Beijing provoked the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis after then-speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan.<sup>2</sup>

China nevertheless carried out significant diplomatic and military measures. Diplomatically, Beijing intensified some of its already-sharp measures aimed at punishing Taipei, while simultaneously softening its approach on other fronts. Militarily, China's activities were substantively different from those in August 2022, but no less significant. Overall, Beijing appears to have taken a less heavy-handed, more targeted approach this time, suggesting it learned from its experience in August and was better postured to take action.

## CHINA'S MORE SOPHISTICATED DIPLOMATIC APPROACH

China's diplomatic activities took a two-track approach, with some measures aimed at ramping up pressure on Taipei and others aimed at softening China's approach. This represents a considerable shift from August, when Beijing's activities were overwhelmingly punitive. It also shows a more sophisticated use of multiple efforts in tandem.

Two Chinese diplomatic activities stand out in comparison to August 2022. First, Beijing appears to have timed a 12-day visit to China by former Taiwan president Ma Ying-jeou to coincide with Tsai's transit and meeting with Speaker McCarthy. This was the first time a former or sitting Taiwan president had traveled to mainland China. As president, Ma endorsed the "1992 consensus" and encouraged greater cross-strait engagement, and as a result, Chinese leaders have been far more willing to engage with Ma and the Kuomintang (KMT) party that he previously led.<sup>3</sup>

Ma's visit to China contrasted starkly with Tsai's transit through the United States. China likely encouraged Ma's visit to demonstrate that it is willing to engage with China-friendly parties such as the KMT—even as it engaged punitively with President Tsai and her ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP).

Beijing's second major diplomatic maneuver came a few days before the start of Tsai's U.S. transit, when China poached one of Taiwan's few remaining diplomatic partners, Honduras. China reportedly offered Honduras up to \$2.95 billion to establish diplomatic relations with China. This is the ninth time China has enticed a country to switch diplomatic ties from Taiwan to China during Tsai's presidency, and it marks the second time China has poached one of Taiwan's diplomatic partners around the time of a U.S. transit.<sup>4</sup> In 2018, China established ties with El Salvador a few days after Tsai returned to Taiwan after transiting through the United States. Beijing likely did

this again and timed its actions as a demonstration of its influence and power.<sup>5</sup>

On other fronts, China took measures in April that were similar to those taken in August 2022. China commonly uses disinformation to put pressure on Taiwan, so it is unsurprising that it did so in both August 2022 and April 2023. Ahead of Speaker Pelosi's trip to Taiwan, a Chinese group reportedly published articles condemning her visit and used fake Taiwan news sites to argue that the United States would not be a reliable partner in the event of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan.<sup>6</sup> Chinese actors also launched several cyberattacks in August, including changing signs and screens to display anti-U.S. messages.<sup>7</sup> In April, China again launched disinformation campaigns, with much of these efforts targeting President Tsai. During her transit of the United States, Chinese consulates in the United States reportedly organized and paid pro-China demonstrators to protest outside of Tsai's hotels and venues.<sup>8</sup> These protests

## Countries Switching Diplomatic Recognition from Taiwan to China (2000-2023)

*China poaches Taiwan's partners at much higher rates when Taiwan's president is a member of the Democratic Progressive Party (green) compared to when they are a member of the Kuomintang party (blue).*

Country	Year	Taiwan President
Honduras	2023	Tsai Ing-wen
Nicaragua	2021	Tsai Ing-wen
Kiribati	2019	Tsai Ing-wen
Solomon Islands	2019	Tsai Ing-wen
Burkina Faso	2018	Tsai Ing-wen
Dominican Republic	2018	Tsai Ing-wen
El Salvador	2018	Tsai Ing-wen
Panama	2017	Tsai Ing-wen
São Tomé and Príncipe	2016	Tsai Ing-wen
Gambia*	2013/2016	Ma Ying-jeou
Malawi	2008	Chen Shui-bian
Costa Rica	2007	Chen Shui-bian
Chad	2006	Chen Shui-bian
Grenada	2005	Chen Shui-bian
Senegal	2005	Chen Shui-bian
Vanuatu**	2004	Chen Shui-bian
Dominica	2004	Chen Shui-bian
Liberia	2003	Chen Shui-bian
North Macedonia	2001	Chen Shui-bian

Note: \*Gambia severed ties with Taiwan in 2013, but China did not establish ties with Gambia until March 2016, after Tsai was elected.

\*\*Vanuatu established diplomatic relations with Taiwan for a short period before switching back to diplomatic relations with China.

Source: CSIS China Power Project.

were in turn amplified by Chinese netizens who also falsely claimed that Tsai had paid the Hudson Institute to present her an award.<sup>9</sup>

Mirroring its actions in August, Beijing also punished multiple U.S. and Taiwan organizations and individuals this April. Both U.S. institutions that hosted Tsai—the Hudson Institute and the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library—were sanctioned.<sup>10</sup> For a second time, China also sanctioned Taiwan representative to the United States Hsiao Bi-khim, as well as her family and investors and firms tied to her.<sup>11</sup> After Tsai’s transit concluded, Chairman of the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee Michael McCaul met with Tsai in Taiwan, and shortly after that, China announced sanctions on McCaul as well.<sup>12</sup> Beijing used these sanctions to engage in targeted coercion. They allow Beijing to show domestic

and foreign audiences that it is enacting punishments, but they have little or no tangible effect on the wider public in Taiwan or the United States.

China likewise repeated its use of punitive arrests of Taiwan citizens as an additional show of power against Taiwan. Chinese authorities announced on April 25 the formal arrest of Taiwan pro-independence activist Yang Chih-yuan.<sup>13</sup> Yang was originally detained in August 2022 in the immediate aftermath of Speaker Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan. The formal confirmation of his arrest appears intentionally timed to coincide with the Tsai-McCarthy meeting. Adding to that, the Chinese government confirmed on April 26 the arrest of Li Yanhe, a Taiwan-based publisher.<sup>14</sup> Given that there were no other high-profile arrests of Taiwan citizens between August and April,

### Chinese Diplomatic Activities: August 2022 vs. April 2023

Activity	August 2022	April 2023
<b>Diplomatic "Countermeasures"</b>	China suspended eight key areas of U.S.-China dialogue.	N/A
<b>Poaching Diplomatic Partners</b>	N/A	Honduras switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China a few days before President Tsai Ing-wen's transit of the United States.
<b>Sanctions</b>	China sanctioned then-speaker Pelosi and her family, Taiwan representative to the United States Hsiao Bi-khim and her family, and leaders of Taiwan organizations.	China sanctioned the Hudson Institute, the Reagan Library, the Prospect Foundation, the Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats, and Hsiao Bi-khim and her family.
<b>Punitive Arrests</b>	China detained Taiwan pro-democracy campaigner Yang Chih-yuan on August 3, 2022.	Authorities formally arrested Yang Chih-yuan after detaining him since August 2022. Taiwan-based publisher Li Yanhe was also arrested on charges of "endangering national security."
<b>Export Curbs</b>	China suspended some fruit and fish imports from Taiwan and cut exports of sand to Taiwan.	China announced it would investigate Taiwan's trade barriers on mainland goods but did not impose new bans on goods from Taiwan.
<b>Cross-Strait Dialogue</b>	N/A	Wang Huning, head of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, met a delegation of Taiwan business executives and encouraged cross-strait economic exchanges.
<b>Disinformation</b>	Pro-China posts on social media spread false claims about then-speaker Pelosi and about Chinese military drills around Taiwan.	Pro-China demonstrators were reportedly paid to protest President Tsai's activities in the United States. Chinese netizens amplified the protests and also spread disinformation claiming that Taiwan paid the Hudson Institute for an award given to President Tsai.
<b>New White Paper</b>	China published a new government white paper about Taiwan.	N/A

Source: CSIS China Power Project.

this too should be seen as intended by Beijing to showcase its displeasure over the Tsai transit.

China's other major diplomatic steps varied from last year. Beijing did not announce major new diplomatic "countermeasures" against Washington, as it did in August when it canceled or suspended eight key areas of U.S.-China dialogue.<sup>15</sup> Whether this should be viewed as a sign of restraint on China's end is unclear. It could be that there were few remaining areas of U.S.-China engagement to target—seven of the eight key areas of U.S.-China dialogue that China canceled and suspended in August have yet to resume.<sup>16</sup> Instead, China has been reluctant to engage in dialogue with the United States at the highest levels. Beijing has yet to respond to the U.S. request to arrange a phone call between President Biden and President Xi. This request was made public in mid-March after newspapers revealed initial U.S. plans for the Tsai transit.

On the economic front, Beijing embraced additional measures. In August 2022, China suspended imports of Taiwan fish and fruits and cut exports of sand to the island, though these had limited economic impacts on Taiwan.<sup>17</sup> China stopped short of suspending imports or exports of specific goods in April 2023, but it did take some measures: on April 12, China's Ministry of Commerce announced it was launching an investigation into Taiwan's trade restrictions on certain Chinese goods.<sup>18</sup> Importantly, the ministry's notice stated that the investigation should conclude by October 12, 2023, but added that it could be extended until January 12, 2024—the day before Taiwan's presidential election.<sup>19</sup> Depending on how political dynamics evolve, experts are concerned that China may use the investigation to impose additional economic sanctions or change or cancel parts of the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement that China and Taiwan signed in 2010 to facilitate trade.<sup>20</sup>

At the same time, however, China continued to signal a desire to increase cross-strait linkages. On April 10—the last day of China's major military exercises—Wang Huning, the fourth-ranked member of the Chinese Communist Party's all-powerful Politburo Standing Committee, met with a delegation of Taiwan business executives in Beijing.<sup>21</sup> During the meeting, he called for improved economic and trade exchanges as a means of promoting peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.

## CHINA'S SIGNIFICANT MILITARY ESCALATION

On the surface, China's April 2023 military activities differed substantively compared to those in August 2022. Some of the more provocative activities from the 2022 exercise—such as launching missiles over Taiwan and establishing military exercise exclusion zones around the island—were not carried out again in 2023. However, the latest round of military activities also showed considerable continuity and even progression with respect to PLA operations, tactics, and reach. Overall, China's military activities were no less significant in April 2023 than in August 2022, with both exercises demonstrating the range of capabilities that the PLA is practicing against Taiwan.

### MILITARY SIGNALING PRIOR TO THE MAIN EXERCISES

The PLA's primary activities began on April 8, with the start of large-scale exercises around Taiwan, but Chinese military signaling began days before that while President Tsai was transiting the United States. On April 5, the Fujian Maritime Safety Administration (MSA) announced a joint patrol and inspection operation of the Taiwan Strait. As part of this operation, Chinese maritime law enforcement officials were tasked with conducting "on-site inspections" (现场检查) aboard vessels in the Taiwan Strait.

The operation is significant in multiple respects. First, although there is no evidence that the operation actually stopped any vessels, it laid out an example of what China could do if it wanted to escalate. The intended "targets" of this operation encompassed several commercial shipping routes, including the Pingtan-Taiwan direct container route, the "mini three links" (小三通), and areas with heavy commercial and fishing vessel traffic.<sup>22</sup> This, coupled with changes in Chinese maritime safety regulations, allows China to set conditions for an escalatory stance in the Taiwan Strait and around Taiwan.<sup>23</sup> It also reflects another effort to assert Beijing's claims (which contradict international law) that China has "sovereign rights and jurisdiction" over the "internal waters" of the Taiwan Strait.<sup>24</sup> Finally, the operation demonstrated China's civilian mobilization capabilities and its capacity for operational coordination of civilian maritime actors in support of a joint operation.

Next, Chinese authorities released several announcements of multiple smaller-scale live-fire military exercises.<sup>25</sup> On April 7, the Fujian MSA announced two series of live-fire drills north and south

of Taiwan’s outlying Matsu Islands. These were scheduled to occur during and after the main military exercises; however, both of these announcements were later removed from the MSA website, resulting in uncertainty about the extent to which these exercises took place. Around this same time, military drills were announced at other locations, including multiple exercises off the coast of Liaoning Province (well to the north of Taiwan).

While there are few details about these drills, the flurry of announcements in a short time frame and the variety of locations of the drills are likely all part of the PLA’s overall activities aimed at countering the Tsai transit and meeting with Speaker McCarthy. Together, they served as a show of force and emphasized not only China’s ability to carry

out several military activities at once, but also its ability to conduct operations in geographically dispersed areas farther from Taiwan.

### COMPARING CHINA’S APRIL 2023 AND AUGUST 2022 EXERCISES

Following these initial activities, the PLA Eastern Theater Command announced that from April 8 to 10, it would “organize combat readiness patrols around Taiwan Island and conduct ‘Joint Sword’ exercises in the Taiwan Strait, around the northern and southern parts of Taiwan Island, and in the sea and airspace to the east of Taiwan Island.”<sup>26</sup> These exercises were the centerpiece of China’s April 2023 military activities and were reminiscent of the large-scale August 2022 exercises.

## Chinese Military Activities: August 2022 vs. April 2023

Activity	August 2022	April 2023
<b>Large-Scale Exercises</b>	The PLA held four days of large-scale military exercises in seven zones surrounding Taiwan. These drills were then extended by three days.	The PLA held three days of “Joint Sword” military exercises in the Taiwan Strait and in the air and sea around Taiwan but did not announce specific zones.
<b>Ballistic Missile Firings</b>	The PLA launched ballistic missiles over and near Taiwan, five of which fell into Japan’s exclusive economic zone.	No ballistic missiles were fired over or near Taiwan, but the PLA simulated joint strikes on and near the island.
<b>Aircraft Carriers</b>	China’s two operational aircraft carriers deployed from their home ports as a show of force but were not integral to the military exercises.	China’s <i>Shandong</i> aircraft carrier group participated in exercises east of Taiwan. The carrier launched a total of 620 sorties, including J-15 fighter jets.
<b>Exercises near Outlying Islands</b>	N/A	Authorities announced two live-fire drills near Taiwan’s Matsu Islands. The announcements were later removed, but at least one of the exercises occurred.
<b>PLA Naval Activity</b>	The highest one-day total of PLA vessels operating near Taiwan reached 14.	The highest one-day total of PLA vessels operating near Taiwan reached 12.
<b>PLA Air Activity</b>	The highest one-day total of PLA aircraft operating near Taiwan reached 66.	The highest one-day total of PLA aircraft operating near Taiwan reached 91.
<b>Inspection Patrols</b>	The patrol vessel <i>Haixun 06</i> led a maritime patrol and law enforcement exercise along China’s coast in the Taiwan Strait.	The <i>Haixun 06</i> led a special joint patrol and inspection operation in the central and northern Taiwan Strait. There are no reports that it stopped and inspected vessels.
<b>Closure Zones</b>	The PLA established seven zones around Taiwan related to military exercises, but these were different from the April 2023 closure zone.	China closed air and maritime space north of Taiwan due to debris from a rocket launch. The airspace closure was originally for three days but was later reduced.

Source: CSIS China Power Project.

At first glance, some aspects of these exercises suggest an overall scaled-back military demonstration of force compared to August. The April Joint Sword exercises lasted three days, while the August exercises were scheduled for four days and later extended to seven. Perhaps most importantly, the April exercises lacked the highly provocative live-fire ballistic missile launches seen in August. On August 4, 2022, the PLA Rocket Force took the unprecedented step of firing multiple ballistic missiles over Taiwan and into the waters around the island. Five of these fell into Japan’s exclusive economic zone. In April 2023, the PLA primarily focused on simulating joint precision strikes on and around Taiwan, and the Rocket Force did not fire ballistic missiles near or over the island.

Another key difference was the amount of information released about the drills. Two days before the start of the August 2022 exercises, Chinese authorities released the coordinates for six distinct exercise exclusion zones encircling the island (and later announced a seventh zone). This allowed for a direct comparison to the exclusion zones that were mapped out during the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait

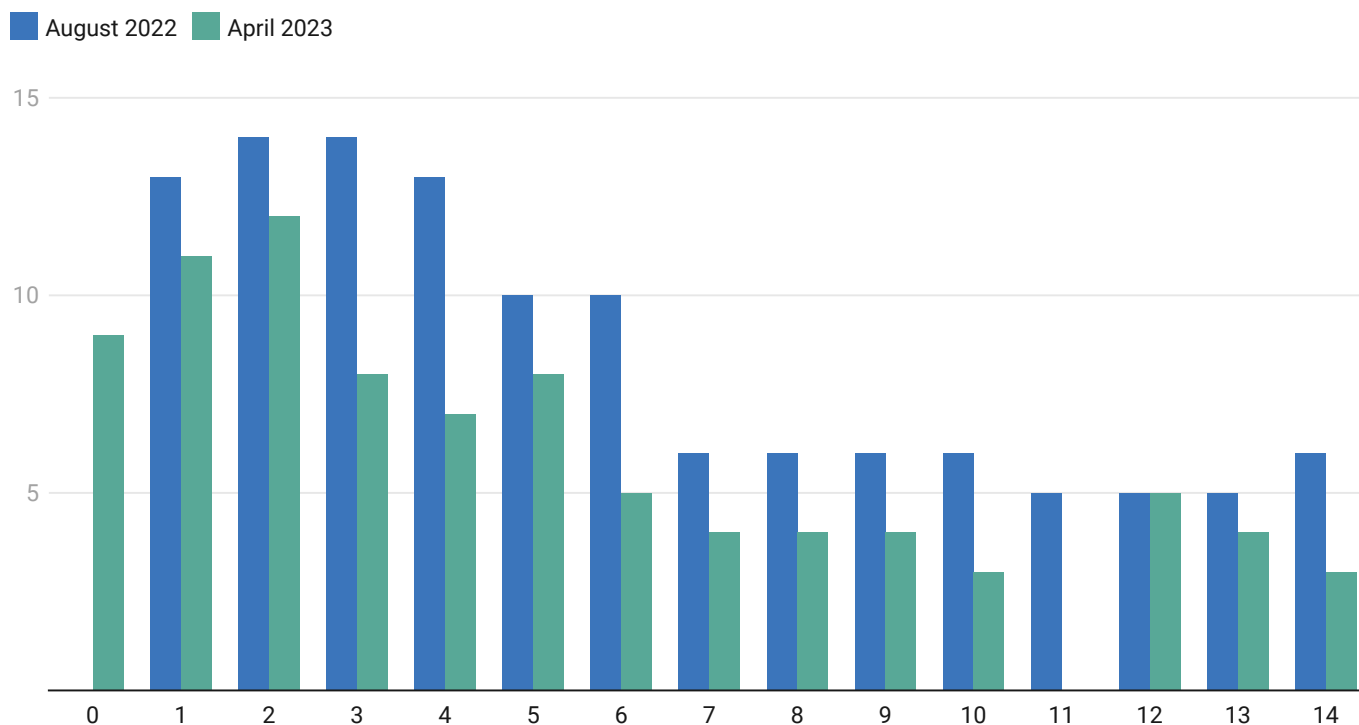
crisis. In April 2023, the PLA did not announce specific coordinates for its main exercises and commenced the exercises the same day they were announced, providing no advance warning.

The PLA’s decision to provide less information this time is significant for a few key reasons. First, it could be an indicator that Chinese leaders do not believe they need to pre-notify Taiwan or the international community regarding operations near or around Taiwan. Second, it likely reflects Beijing’s desire to prevent external interference by not showing where its forces could operate. Finally, it suggests more confidence in the PLA’s control of air and naval assets to operate around Taiwan without creating inadvertent hazards. It is likely that China will try to set a new norm of increased military operations around Taiwan without prior notification or announcement.

Despite these differences, the April exercises were no less significant than those in August. There were several areas of continuity between the two, as well as substantial new elements. Fundamentally, both the August and April

## PLA Vessels around Taiwan: August 2022 vs. April 2023 Exercises

*Values indicate the number of Chinese PLA vessels reported around Taiwan during major exercises, with day “0” marking the start of exercises.*



Source: CSIS China Power Project; “Military News Update,” Republic of China Ministry of National Defense, <https://www.mnd.gov.tw/english/PublishTable.aspx?types=Military%20News%20Update&Title=News%20Channel>; Gerald C. Brown and Ben Lewis, “Taiwan ADIZ Violations,” *ChinaPower*, CSIS, <https://chinapower.csis.org/data/taiwan-adiz-violations/>.

exercises were suggestive of an “encirclement” of Taiwan using PLA Navy forces, with the objective of rehearsing elements of a potential blockade and other kinetic military operations against Taiwan.

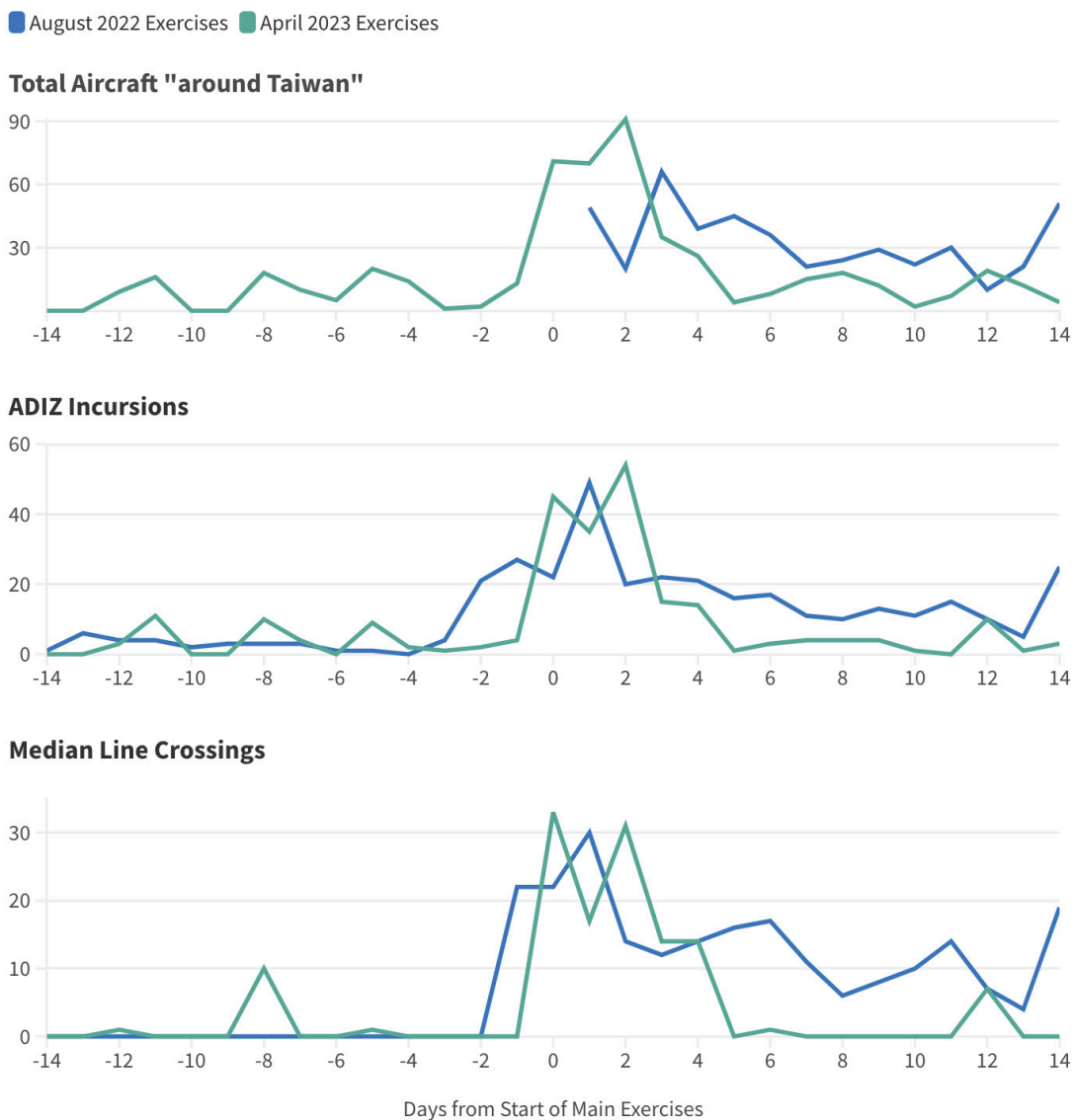
PLA forces were roughly as active around Taiwan this April as they were last August. Information released by Taiwan’s Ministry of National Defense (MND) shows that, like in August, PLA vessels surrounded the island. The MND reported a single-day maximum of 12 vessels on April 10, close to the one-day high of 14 seen in August. Crucially, Taiwan’s MND also released maps indicating that, during

the exercises, PLA vessels encircled the island in ways reminiscent of the August exercises.<sup>27</sup>

With respect to air activities, the April exercises surpassed the peak of activity during the August exercises. On the last day of the Joint Sword exercises (April 10), Taiwan’s MND reported that 91 PLA aircraft were operating around Taiwan. This marked an all-time high up to this point and was considerably higher than the highest one-day total during the August 2022 exercises (66 aircraft). During the April exercises, the PLA also averaged higher daily incursions into the air defense identification zone (ADIZ),

### PLA Air Activities: August 2022 vs. April 2023 Military Exercises

*Values indicate the level of various air activities before and after the start of major exercises, with day “0” pegged as the start date of the respective exercises.*



Source: CSIS China Power Project; “Military News Update,” Republic of China Ministry of National Defense, <https://www.mnd.gov.tw/english/PublishTable.aspx?types=Military%20News%20Update&Title=News%20Channel>; Gerald C. Brown and Ben Lewis, “Taiwan ADIZ Violations,” *ChinaPower*, CSIS, <https://chinapower.csis.org/data/taiwan-adiz-violations/>.

as well as incursions and crossings of the Taiwan Strait median line. However, it is worth noting that PLA air activity in April spiked higher and then subsided more quickly than in August.

PLA air and maritime activity around Taiwan is aimed at negating Taiwan’s ADIZ and the Taiwan Strait median line and is on track to increasingly challenge Taiwan’s contiguous zone. Incursions into Taiwan’s ADIZ ramped up in 2020 and have become a near daily occurrence. Prior to the August exercises, there were only a handful of reported instances of PLA aircraft crossing the Taiwan Strait median line, but China ramped up crossings in August, and this now occurs frequently.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, PLA Navy vessels rarely came close to Taiwan’s contiguous zone—a boundary extending 24 nautical miles beyond Taiwan’s territorial baseline—in August, but China reportedly sent multiple vessels right up to Taiwan’s contiguous zone during the April exercises.

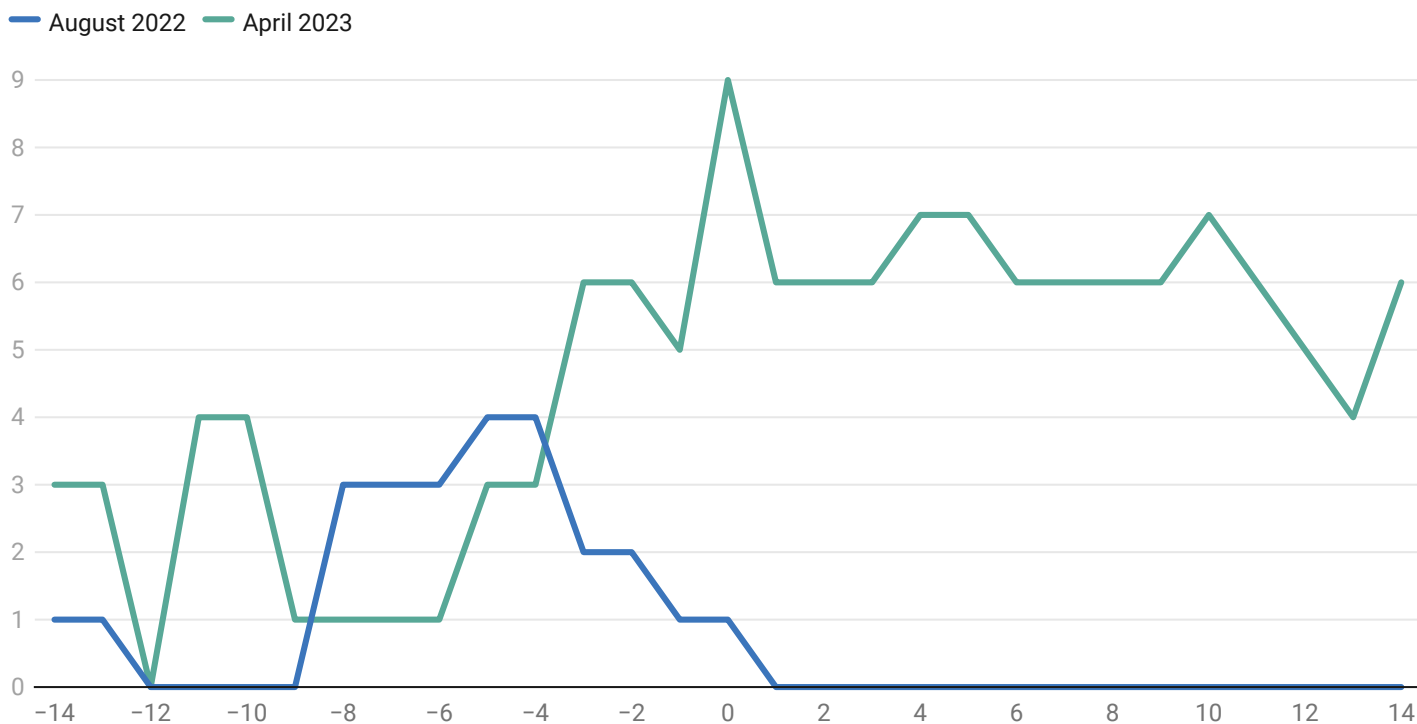
On top of that, the April 2023 exercises saw far more activity from one of China’s aircraft carriers. In the

days leading up to the August 2022 exercises, the PLA Navy’s two operational aircraft carriers, the *Liaoning* and *Shandong*, deployed from their respective home ports of Qingdao and Sanya and moved in the waters around China as a show of force, but they were not integral to the exercises taking place around Taiwan.<sup>29</sup>

By comparison, China’s *Shandong* aircraft carrier and its carrier group played a primary role in April 2023. The carrier stayed in the waters east of Taiwan for several days before, during, and after the Joint Sword exercises. The Japan Ministry of Defense (JMOD) reported that the *Shandong* launched a total of 620 sorties between April 7 and 24, including both fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters. During the exercises, a total of 19 carrier-based J-15 fighters entered Taiwan’s southeast ADIZ—the first time those aircraft have been reported in Taiwan’s ADIZ. Many more carrier-launched sorties occurred near Taiwan (outside of the ADIZ), but there is no data available on the specific amount. Although it is far from certain that China would risk deploying the *Shandong* or any of its aircraft

## Number of Chinese Navy Vessels Reported near Japan: August 2022 vs. April 2023 Military Exercises

Values indicate the number of vessels reported around Taiwan during major exercises, with day “0” marking the start of exercises.



Source: “報道発表資料” [Press release materials], Japan Ministry of Defense, <https://www.mod.go.jp/js/press/index.html>.



carriers to such a vulnerable location east of Taiwan in an actual conflict, the carrier operations signaled China's intent and its efforts to practice capabilities to operate near and attack Taiwan's east coast.

Access to Taiwan's east coast is critical to the island's defense. Military bases located on the island's east side are key to force preservation, and the island has long sought the option of moving military assets to the east for protection during the onset of a potential PLA attack or invasion.<sup>30</sup> Given the likely intense fighting in the Taiwan Strait in a cross-strait conflict, access to Taiwan's bases to the east could provide the easiest way for the United States and allies to flow forces or supplies to Taiwan. This is not lost on China. A researcher at China's Academy of Military Sciences, Zhao Xiaozhuo, emphasized that the carrier group "played a vital role" in showing the PLA's ability to project power on Taiwan's east, which would be crucial to deterring foreign intervention in a Taiwan Strait conflict.<sup>31</sup>

Along with significant naval activity around Taiwan, April also showed an uptick in PLA vessels operating near Japan, according to JMOD reports. Around the time

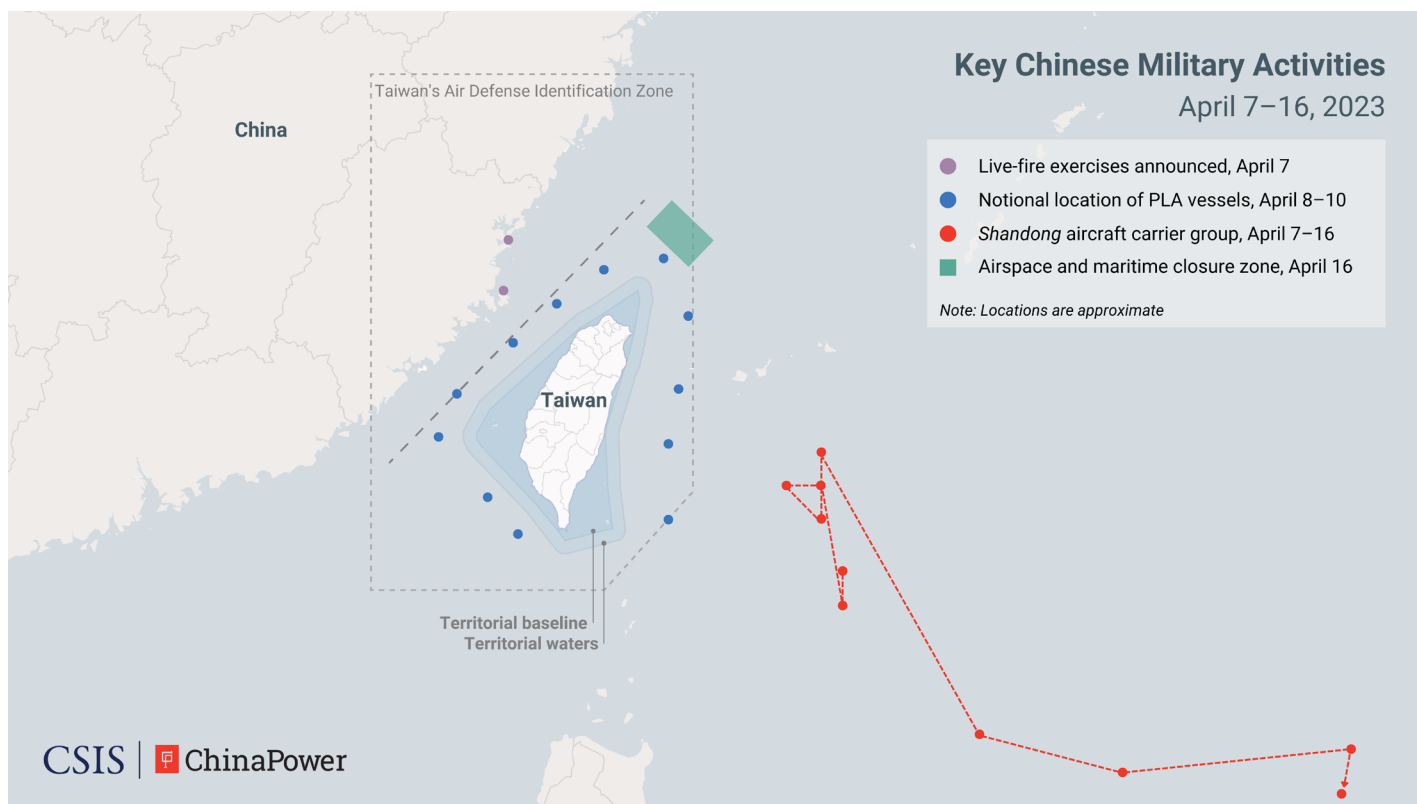
of the August exercises, the JMOD reported seven PLA vessels operating near Japan in the weeks before the exercises, but only one vessel—a Type 052D destroyer—during the period of the exercises.

By comparison, in the two weeks before and after the start of the April 2023 drills, the JMOD reported 19 distinct PLA vessels near Japan, five of which were tracked around Japan for more than 12 days and three of which were repeatedly tracked for 17 or more days. Some of these vessels included the *Shandong* and its carrier group, but there were also several other vessels operating separately in the waters on all sides of Japan. This increased PLA activity around Japan was likely intended as a warning and signal to Japan given Tokyo's heightened concerns that a conflict in Taiwan will negatively impact Japan's security, as well as its increased military investment and preparations to deal with such contingencies.

### CONTINUED SIGNALING AFTER THE MILITARY EXERCISES

China's military signaling continued after the end of the Joint Sword exercises. On April 12, Taiwan's Ministry of Transportation and Communication revealed that on

### Key Chinese Military Activities, April 7–16, 2023



Source: CSIS China Power Project.

the preceding day, China privately notified Taiwan that it would close an area of airspace north of Taiwan due to “aerospace activities” related to the launch of an orbital rocket into space.<sup>32</sup> This zone was situated just 85 nautical miles from Taiwan’s northern coast, extended into Taiwan’s ADIZ, and spanned a busy route for air traffic in the region.

China initially warned against aircraft entering the zone from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. on April 16–18. This lengthy period sparked anger, with officials in Taiwan calling it “unprecedented” and Chinese authorities later reducing the airspace closure window to only 27 minutes on April 16.<sup>33</sup> China further muddied the waters when the Fujian MSA announced the closure of the zone to maritime vessels from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. on April 16.<sup>34</sup> When April 16 finally came, China reported it had successfully launched a meteorological satellite on a Long March-4B rocket, and debris from the launch was later detected in the announced zone.<sup>35</sup>

This episode resulted in confusion and left many unanswered questions. It is not clear why China did not initially acknowledge the closure zone until it was reported by authorities in Taiwan. It is also unclear why the initial three-day window was later shortened to just 27 minutes on one day. This backtracking and lack of clarity may have been the result of poor internal coordination, but the episode was widely seen as part of China’s campaign to pressure and intimidate Taiwan. It is also worth noting that the original time frame overlapped with the G7 foreign ministers’ meeting that was taking place in Japan.<sup>36</sup>

On top of that, President Xi Jinping played a role in military messaging when he traveled to the PLA’s Southern Theater Command to inspect the readiness of its naval forces. During his inspection on April 11, Xi stated that the PLA should “analyze and address military issues from a political perspective” and called for the military to “resolutely defend China’s territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests and strive to maintain the overall stability of the country’s neighboring regions.”<sup>37</sup>

Xi also emphasized driving forward the modernization of PLA forces and doctrine, and in a nod to the recent military exercises, he called for the PLA to “intensify force-on-force training based on operational plans.” Xi’s visit and his statements showcase that he believes the PLA plays a crucial role in overall efforts to increasingly exert control over Taiwan through coercive and kinetic means.

Taken together, China’s military escalation in April should be seen as a continuation of efforts to intimidate Taiwan

and allow the PLA to practice a variety of operations around Taiwan. While its activities in April were different in important respects from those in August, they were no less significant.

## FACTORS SHAPING CHINA’S OVERALL ESCALATION

It is not exactly clear how and to what extent certain factors shaped the intensity and contours of China’s overall behavior, but a number of initial observations are possible.

While Chinese leaders likely felt domestic pressure to take action to oppose the transit, it is not clear they faced the same level of pressure as they did in August 2022. There was significantly less coverage of the Tsai transit on Chinese media and social media compared to then-speaker Pelosi’s August trip, when Weibo crashed around the time Pelosi was about to land in Taiwan and many netizens in China were tracking her flight to the island.<sup>38</sup> It is possible that the Chinese public was either generally less aware or less interested in the transit or that Beijing did a better job of controlling public expression of views. This could have created more space for Beijing to act as it sees fit.

After Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan in 2022, China engaged in significantly escalatory activities, but this resulted in substantial diplomatic backlash.<sup>39</sup> This likely influenced Beijing’s thinking this time, and it sought to achieve its objectives while reducing blowback. This aligns with Beijing’s use of more sophisticated diplomatic efforts—namely Ma Ying-jeou’s visit to China and the poaching of Honduras from Taiwan—which put pressure on Taipei and showcased Beijing’s willingness to work with China-friendly elements in Taiwan.

It is also possible that China acknowledged U.S. and Taiwan efforts to try to address some of Beijing’s concerns and aimed to craft a set of countermeasures to the Tsai transit visit that was proportional to what Beijing viewed as the level of Taiwan and U.S. “provocativeness.” Beijing closely monitored Tsai’s transit and likely recognized that certain elements were scaled down to reduce the profile and public nature of her engagements. Beijing might have also appreciated the attempt by Washington and Taipei to at least delay a Tsai-McCarthy meeting in Taiwan by offering McCarthy a chance to meet in the United States. If that is the case, it suggests that China will continue to escalate against future high-profile meetings between senior U.S. and

Taiwan officials but will adjust the level of its activities based on its perceptions of the meeting's dynamics.

Importantly, Chinese decisionmaking does not occur in a vacuum, so other geopolitical factors play a role. In recent months, Beijing has accelerated diplomatic efforts and sought to improve China's international image. China's continued support for Russia throughout the war in Ukraine has led to a considerable fraying of China-Europe relations. As part of Beijing's efforts to restore ties with the region, President Emmanuel Macron of France and President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen were in China from April 5 to 7 to meet with President Xi.

A significant Chinese escalation during their visit would have undercut Beijing's efforts to smooth over tensions with Europe. Beijing appears to have waited until the departure of Macron and von der Leyen (and Ma Ying-jeou) to announce some key parts of its activities, including small live-fire exercises near Taiwan's outlying Matsu Islands (which were announced the day that they left China), as well as the large-scale exercises around Taiwan (which were announced and started the following day).

Broader geopolitical trends may have also factored into Beijing's calculus in its actions toward the United States and its allies. Around the same time as the Tsai transit, China targeted several major U.S. companies amid mounting economic and technological competition. On March 31, Japan announced restrictions on exports of semiconductor manufacturing equipment to China in a crucial move to support sweeping export controls issued by the Biden administration in the fall of 2022.<sup>40</sup> On the same day as Japan's announcement, the Cyberspace Administration of China announced a "cybersecurity review" of U.S. chip manufacturer Micron Technologies in apparent retaliation.<sup>41</sup> Beijing has targeted other U.S. companies as well. On March 24, officials raided the Chinese offices of U.S. due diligence firm Mintz Group, and on April 28, officials questioned staff at the Shanghai office of U.S. consulting firm Bain & Company.<sup>42</sup> China also reportedly slowed its review process of proposed mergers and acquisitions of U.S. companies.<sup>43</sup>

These moves are not explicitly part of Beijing's countermeasures against the Tsai transit, but they likely factor into Beijing's thinking. Amid heated U.S.-China tensions, Beijing regularly employs measures against the United States in the context of overall tensions and

competition, and Chinese officials likely calibrated their actions against the Tsai transit to factor in action along other vectors. Thus, the absence of harsh diplomatic or economic retaliation against the United States after the transit may reflect the fact that China has already taken—or was planning to take—actions against the United States unrelated to the Tsai transit.

Finally, the approaching 2024 Taiwan presidential election also factors into Beijing's calculus. President Tsai and the DPP have successfully leveraged past Chinese aggression to their electoral benefit. Most notably, China's 2019 crackdown in Hong Kong severely worsened perceptions of Beijing among the Taiwan public, which aided the DPP in the 2020 presidential elections. This April, China avoided engaging in some of the activities that would affect Taiwan as a whole—such as suspending trade of certain goods and launching ballistic missiles over the island—but still demonstrated the range of military options China has against the island. At the same time, it embraced measures to directly pressure President Tsai and the DPP ahead of the elections.<sup>44</sup>

China's decision to invite Ma Ying-jeou to China at this time was a key part of this. Ma's trip to China, and his talking points after the trip, likely helped Beijing message to the Taiwan people that Beijing is open to working with leaders in Taipei. It was also meant to show that working with Beijing will bring Taiwan peace and prosperity, while pushing for Taiwan independence will create crises and conflict. Beijing's messaging sets the stage for how to interpret Chinese actions toward Taiwan and does not rule out the possibility of another major escalation between now and January 2024 if Beijing perceives Taipei is embracing more "pro-independence" actions.

Overall, Beijing's escalation against the Tsai transit showcases a China that is learning from its past actions and adapting its countermeasures based on how it assesses the level of "provocativeness" of Taiwan and U.S. activities. China also appears to be sensitive to the potential costs of its actions and is seeking to advance China's claims over Taiwan using more sophisticated means beyond just punitive measures. Beijing demonstrated its willingness to take firm and escalatory measures vis-à-vis Taiwan, and it is likely to continue to do so in the future. ■

**Bonny Lin** is director of the China Power Project and a senior fellow for Asian security at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C. **Brian Hart** is a fellow with the CSIS China Power Project. **Samantha Lu** is a research assistant with the CSIS China Power Project. **Hannah Price** is a program manager with the CSIS China Power Project. **Matthew Slade** is a former research intern with the CSIS China Power Project.

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