

GEOPOLITICAL ANALYSIS

# Taiwan Strait Strategic Outlook 2026–2028

*Beyond the Invasion Conception: Rethinking China's Strategy in the Taiwan Strait*

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*Note on provenance: The analytical framework for this paper was developed as a capstone research project at Harvard Extension School (December 2025) and has been substantially revised, expanded, and updated to reflect developments through March 2026. The views expressed are the author's own.*

*All source-based judgments reflect open-source information as of March 2026*



**Fity.club (2025).** *Formosa Strait Map* [Online]. Available at: <https://fity.club/lists/2025/Formosa-Strait-Map/>

## Executive Summary

As of March 2026, Russia’s war in Ukraine has fundamentally reshaped how Beijing calculates risk in the Taiwan Strait. The lessons of Moscow’s strategic failure have accelerated a Chinese pivot toward managed coercion: a strategy that applies sustained pressure below the threshold of open warfare while avoiding the logistical catastrophe that consumed Russian forces in 2022.

This analysis assesses the most likely escalation pathways in the Taiwan Strait through 2028. The central argument is that the primary near-term risk is not a blitzkrieg amphibious assault but a “quarantine”: a legally ambiguous partial blockade enforced through China Coast Guard (CCG) operations, maritime law-enforcement framing, and coordinated cyber and infrastructure pressure. This scenario is already being rehearsed in operational detail and, critically, is already being executed in embryonic form.

## Key Judgments

1. Coercion over capture (high confidence). The demise of Russia’s rapid-victory doctrine has led PRC strategists to prioritize gray-zone pressure and managed escalation over any near-term amphibious assault, which they now assess as logistically catastrophic and strategically counterproductive.

2. Gray-zone normalization is advancing faster than anticipated (high confidence). Since December 2025, the PLA has crossed successive thresholds: the first confirmed PLA airspace violation over Taiwanese territory in decades (Pratas Island, January 17, 2026); two Chinese shadow-fleet vessels severing subsea cables (January and February 2025); and Justice Mission 2025, the largest blockade-simulation exercise ever conducted around Taiwan (December 29–30, 2025).
3. The quarantine scenario is the primary risk (moderate-high confidence). The most likely serious escalation in 2026–2028 is a partial maritime quarantine framed as law-enforcement — not invasion. It would be executed predominantly by CCG assets with PLA Navy backing, deliberately designed to deny the United States a clean legal basis for military response.
4. The delivery gap remains a strategic signal (moderate confidence). The U.S. arms backlog to Taiwan stands at an estimated \$21.54 billion in notional value (September 2025 data). F-16V deliveries, originally scheduled for 2026, have been officially confirmed as delayed to 2027–2028. The 155mm production target of 100,000 rounds per month, already missed once, is now expected by mid-2026. Chinese analysts are likely reading these gaps as a temporary window of coercive opportunity.
5. Coalition cohesion faces a structural test (moderate confidence). A quarantine, unlike an invasion, is deliberately designed to split allied coalitions by creating threshold ambiguity. Japan–Australia defense integration is deepening, but Japanese Prime Minister Takaichi’s public linkage of Taiwan’s security to Japan’s own drew an unusually sharp Chinese response, and U.S. senior-level backing for Tokyo’s position was notably muted.
6. The strategic balance is eroding incrementally (high confidence). The principal threat by 2026–2028 is not a war — it is a slow-motion dissolution of Taiwan’s de facto sovereignty achieved through normalization of control measures that the United States and its allies have not yet articulated a coherent collective response to.

*Overall Assessment. The Taiwan Strait is entering a phase of deliberate threshold-testing. Each incident — a drone in Pratas airspace, a cable cut near Penghu, a live-fire zone over shipping lanes — is individually deniable and collectively constitutive of a new normal. The most dangerous near-term scenario is not one that begins with a military order, but one that begins with the West’s failure to agree on what constitutes an unacceptable change to the status quo.*

## Scope Note and Methodology

This analysis examines how Russia’s ongoing war in Ukraine has altered the strategic calculus of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) regarding Taiwan, and how those changes intersect with constraints in the United States defense industrial base and the evolving dynamics of regional coalition politics. The assessment covers the 2026–2028 timeframe and is structured around three analytical questions:

- How have the military, economic, and political lessons of the Ukraine conflict reshaped PLA doctrine and operational planning toward Taiwan?
- How are limitations in the U.S. defense industrial base — combined with the strategic demands of supporting Ukraine — influencing Chinese perceptions of American resolve and capacity?
- Which escalatory scenarios in the Taiwan Strait are most probable within the specified timeframe, and what conditions might accelerate or constrain them?

This paper does not assess the legal or normative legitimacy of the positions of any party, nor does it prescribe specific policy courses of action. All judgments are analytic in nature and are intended to evaluate risk, escalation dynamics, and implications for regional stability.

The analysis is based entirely on open-source materials including official government publications, reports from leading policy and defense research institutions, peer-reviewed academic literature, and credible investigative journalism. Source data reflects the information environment as of March 2026, with key empirical developments updated from the initial analytical framework completed in December 2025.

## **Analysis I: Ukraine as a Strategic Mirror for the PLA**

### **The Empirical Baseline**

The war in Ukraine has provided the PRC with something it has never had before: real-time empirical data on large-scale conventional warfare against a politically resilient, externally supported adversary. Chinese military and political analysts have studied the conflict intensively since February 2022, and the accumulated body of PLA-adjacent academic and strategic writing from 2022–2025 reflects a systematic effort to translate Ukrainian battlefield lessons into doctrinal revision (Fravel, 2023; RAND Corporation, 2025).

The lessons are unambiguous and they are unflattering to offensive planning. Russia’s early failures in suppressing Ukrainian air defenses, sustaining forward logistics, and decapitating the political will to resist have each found direct analogues in PLA planning for Taiwan. Unlike Ukraine, Taiwan is a densely urbanized island economy with a technologically sophisticated population, 14 international and 10 domestic subsea cables forming the backbone of its digital infrastructure, and a defense relationship with the world’s leading military power. The operational conditions for a rapid seizure are, by most serious estimates, significantly harder than the conditions Russia failed to manage on the European steppe.

### **The Logistics Problem**

The single most consequential lesson for PLA planners is logistics. Russia’s inability to sustain operational tempo on a land-based theater — with existing road and rail infrastructure, no maritime crossing, and a relatively short supply chain — has thrown into stark relief the far greater challenge China would face crossing approximately 100 miles of contested open water (DoD, 2024).

Sustaining amphibious forces at scale would require continuous air and sea control, protected port infrastructure on both sides of the strait, and reliable maritime lines of communication under active threat. The PLA’s response between 2022 and 2025 has been to accelerate civil-military logistics integration and to expand the mobilization role of civilian shipping. But this adaptation introduces new vulnerabilities: dual-use civilian vessels are precisely the assets most susceptible to asymmetric interdiction and international legal challenge (CSIS, 2023; RAND Corporation, 2025).

### **The Asymmetric Defense Signal**

Ukraine’s effective use of man-portable anti-armor and air-defense systems, distributed command architectures, and unmanned aerial platforms against a numerically superior adversary has amplified a specific concern in Chinese planning: the “first hours” problem. If Taiwan can organize meaningful resistance and signal external support in the opening hours of a conflict, the political calculus of rapid victory collapses entirely (Fravel, 2023).

This recognition has elevated cyber operations, electronic warfare, and pre-kinetic infrastructure disruption to the top tier of PLA contingency planning. The logic is to disorganize the defender’s command-and-control before any large-scale kinetic action. The problem, as Ukraine illustrated, is that a resilient, well-prepared population does not disorganize easily — and every failed attempt at early disruption forfeits the element of surprise.

## **From Blitzkrieg to Managed Pressure**

The cumulative effect of these lessons has been a documented shift in PLA strategic orientation. While an invasion remains an ultimate option in Chinese contingency planning, the operational emphasis has moved toward what analysts describe as “managed escalation”: the application of sustained pressure through instruments that allow Beijing to control the pace and scope of coercion without triggering the full costs and risks of open war (Fravel, 2023; CSIS, 2024).

The Ukraine war has not extinguished Chinese ambition regarding Taiwan. What it has done is change the apparent calculus of “when and how” force can be productively employed. A brief and decisive military operation now looks considerably less feasible to Beijing. A long-term pressure campaign designed to erode political will, disrupt economic function, and fracture allied resolve looks considerably more promising.

## **Analysis II: Sanctions, Economic Vulnerability, and Strategic Caution**

### **The Sanctions Precedent**

The Western sanctions response to Russia’s invasion constituted something qualitatively new in the history of economic statecraft: the rapid, coordinated application of comprehensive financial pressure against a major nuclear power, including the freezing of approximately \$300 billion in Russian central bank reserves held through European custodians (European Parliament, 2025; Financial Times, 2025). For Beijing, this was not an abstract policy discussion — it was a live demonstration of the vulnerability of sovereign financial assets to geopolitical weaponization.

The implications for China are structurally more severe than for Russia. China’s economy is deeply embedded in global supply chains, export markets, and financial infrastructure in ways that Russia’s commodity-export economy never was. The BIS has estimated that in a Taiwan contingency, the immediate economic shock to China from coordinated Western sanctions could be systemic rather than merely damaging (BIS, 2025). Beijing has understood this.

### **The Resilience-Building Response and Its Limits**

Since 2022, the PRC has substantially accelerated its “sanctions resilience” program: diversifying foreign reserves toward gold and non-dollar assets, expanding the Cross-Border Interbank Payment System (CIPS) as an alternative to SWIFT-dependent infrastructure, and advancing the “dual circulation” economic framework designed to reduce export dependency (World Gold Council, 2025; Reuters, 2025; CIPS, 2025).

These are meaningful structural adaptations. They are not, however, sufficient to neutralize the fundamental exposure. Gold purchases and bilateral settlement mechanisms do not replace the deep integration of Chinese manufacturing with Western technology supply chains, the dependence of Chinese financial institutions on international capital markets, or the systemic confidence effects of a major international crisis on Chinese domestic economic stability (BIS, 2025; IMF, 2025).

The net effect of this vulnerability is not to deter Chinese action entirely, but to strongly favor escalation pathways that preserve room for de-escalation and political leverage — exactly the properties that distinguish a “quarantine” from an invasion. Coercion below the threshold of direct conflict avoids the automatic triggering of a coordinated Western economic response. An invasion does not.

### **Nuclear Modernization as Economic Deterrence Complement**

China’s ongoing nuclear force expansion — now assessed by the DoD as on track toward approximately 1,500 warheads by 2035 — should be understood partly in the context of economic vulnerability (Kristensen & Korda, 2024; DoD, 2024). A credible second-strike capability functions not only as military deterrence but as a hedge against the most extreme economic pressure scenarios. It raises the cost to the West of applying maximum sanctions by introducing nuclear escalation risk into the equation. This is not a new dynamic in Chinese strategy, but the explicit linkage between nuclear modernization and economic resilience has become more prominent in Chinese strategic writing since 2022.

## **Analysis III: The U.S. Defense Industrial Base and Beijing’s Window Calculus**

### **Industrial Inertia as a Strategic Variable**

The war in Ukraine has done something analytically valuable: it has made the material constraints of the U.S. defense industrial base (DIB) visible, measurable, and internationally legible. Production slippages, component bottlenecks, and delivery backlogs that were previously internal administrative matters have become public strategic signals — read by allies and adversaries alike as indicators of American staying power.

The most concrete example is 155mm artillery ammunition. From a production base of approximately 14,000 rounds per month in 2022, the United States set a target of reaching 100,000 rounds per month. That target has been missed once already — originally scheduled for October 2025, it has been reset for mid-2026 (Defense News, 2024). Current output is approximately 40,000 rounds per month. The gap between stated intent and delivered capability is precisely the kind of signal that Chinese analysts use to assess Washington’s bandwidth for simultaneous crises (GAO, 2024).

The more strategically critical systems for a Taiwan contingency — long-range precision munitions, anti-ship missiles, and deep-strike platforms — are in an equally constrained production environment. The U.S. Air Force completed major multiyear JASSM and LRASM procurement contracts in 2025, acknowledging an existing shortfall while signaling a long-term investment trajectory. But procurement contracts and delivered munitions are different things, and the timeline for meaningful production expansion remains measured in years, not months (Defense News, 2024; RAND Corporation, 2024).

### **The Arms Backlog to Taiwan: A Measurable Signal**

The most politically salient indicator of DIB constraint is the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) backlog to Taiwan. As of September 2025, the notional value of approved but undelivered U.S. arms to Taiwan stands at \$21.54 billion — a figure that has remained essentially static despite partial deliveries in progress on systems including Abrams tanks and Harpoon Coastal Defense Systems (Taiwan Security Monitor, 2025).

A significant new development since the initial framework for this analysis was completed: the delivery of 66 F-16V Block 70 fighter jets, originally scheduled for 2026, has been officially confirmed as delayed to 2027 or 2028. This is not a projected risk — it is a confirmed delivery failure on a high-profile, high-visibility platform. Beijing’s analysts are watching this closely (Taiwan Security Monitor, 2025).

The FMS backlog should be read neither as evidence of American abandonment of Taiwan nor as a simple administrative failure. It reflects genuine structural limits in a defense industrial base designed for a post-Cold War world and now being asked to simultaneously support a major European land war, rebuild depleted stockpiles, and accelerate Taiwan-relevant capabilities. But the effect on Chinese calculations — regardless of American intent — is to suggest a temporary period in which the full weight of U.S. deterrence capability has not yet materialized.

### **The Window Hypothesis: 2026–2028**

The analytical question for Beijing is not whether the United States is strong in absolute terms. It is whether Beijing perceives a temporary “window” during 2026–2028 in which coercive action is relatively more attractive because its costs and risks are relatively more manageable. Three converging factors support this hypothesis:

- DIB industrial inertia: U.S. production ramp-up is real but delayed. The period before new production capacity fully materializes represents a gap in deterrence credibility.
- Taiwan delivery delays: The F-16V delay is the most visible indicator, but the broader FMS backlog suggests Taiwan’s defensive modernization is running behind schedule.
- Dual-theater demand: U.S. commitment to Ukraine, however uncertain under the current administration’s posture, has consumed stockpiles and production capacity that would otherwise contribute to Indo-Pacific deterrence.

Whether Beijing chooses to act on this perceived window — and how — depends on factors that remain genuinely uncertain, including internal PRC political dynamics, the pace of Taiwan’s own defensive adaptation, and the degree of coalition signaling from U.S. allies in the region.

## Analysis IV: Gray-Zone Normalization and the Quarantine Doctrine

### The Logic of Normalization

The PRC's gray-zone strategy in the Taiwan Strait is best understood not as a series of discrete provocations but as a continuous normalization campaign: the deliberate, incremental expansion of what constitutes “normal” Chinese military and law-enforcement activity around Taiwan (CSIS, 2025; Jamestown Foundation, 2024). Each threshold, once crossed repeatedly without consequence, ceases to function as a threshold. The median line in the Taiwan Strait is the most visible example: the product of years of PLA crossings, it now provides effectively no de-escalatory function.

The strategic logic is not primarily about military preparation — though it serves that purpose — but about political and psychological erosion. A Taiwan that can no longer define a clear line between peace and a state of pressure is a Taiwan whose government faces increasing difficulty justifying a posture of resistance to its own population, and whose international supporters face increasing difficulty justifying military assistance as a response to “normal” Chinese activity.

### What Has Already Happened: The Operational Record Since 2025

The gray-zone campaign has crossed several significant thresholds since this analysis was first structured in December 2025, and these developments directly validate the quarantine framework:

**Pratas Island airspace violation, January 17, 2026.** A PLA WZ-7 “Soaring Dragon” surveillance drone entered Taiwanese territorial airspace over Pratas (Dongsha) Island for approximately four minutes — the first confirmed PLA violation of Taiwan’s territorial airspace in decades (AEI/ISW, January 2026; Reuters, 2026). The drone flew at an altitude beyond the effective range of the island’s air defense systems. Taiwan broadcast warnings on international radio channels; the drone departed without incident. The PLA Southern Theater Command described the flight as “legitimate and lawful.” Analysts characterized it as a deliberate probe of rules of engagement and a “lawfare” operation designed to establish a precedent for repeat incursions (Taipei Times, February 2026; USCC, March 2026).

**Subsea cable operations, January–February 2025.** Two separate Chinese shadow-fleet vessels severed subsea cables connecting Taiwan to its outlying islands. In January 2025, the Tanzania-flagged Xingshun 39, controlled by a Chinese entity, severed cables near Keelung, disrupting external communications. In February 2025, the Togo-flagged Hong Tai 58, crewed by Chinese nationals, severed the TPKM-3 cable connecting Penghu to Taiwan’s main island, causing communications blackouts. The ship’s captain was subsequently sentenced to three years in prison by a Taiwanese court. Since 2023, there have been at least eleven documented cases of subsea cable damage around Taiwan (CNN, 2025; Al Jazeera, 2025; Global Taiwan Institute, 2025).

**Justice Mission 2025, December 29–30, 2025.** The largest PLA exercise ever conducted around Taiwan involved 130 aircraft sorties, 14 warships, and at least 15 CCG and official vessels. The exercise explicitly rehearsed “blockade of key ports and territory,” simulated strikes on maritime targets, and fired live rockets into waters within 24 nautical miles of Taiwan’s coast — the first such live-fire inside the Taiwan Strait since 2022. Seven designated operation zones covered “almost every sea route” between Taiwan and its outlying islands. Fourteen CCG vessels participated, demonstrating the intended role of law-

enforcement framing in a real blockade scenario. The exercise was the eighth major PLA exercise around Taiwan since 2022 and the first to explicitly state deterrence of “external intervention” as an objective (USNI News, December 2025; The Diplomat, January 2026; Wikipedia, Justice Mission 2025).

### **The Quarantine Scenario: Architecture and Logic**

Academic and policy literature converges on the “quarantine” as the most analytically coherent coercive scenario for 2026–2028 (RAND Corporation, 2024; CSIS, 2024). The core logic is the maximization of pressure while minimizing the legal and political clarity that would trigger a unified Western military response.

In operational terms, a quarantine would involve CCG vessels enforcing cargo inspections and access restrictions on ships entering or leaving Taiwan’s major ports — framed as anti-smuggling, safety, or sovereignty-assertion measures under PRC domestic law. PLA naval and air assets would provide deterrent backing without crossing into direct kinetic engagement. Cyber operations and continued cable disruption would degrade Taiwan’s digital communications. Energy imports — Taiwan is heavily import-dependent — would be the primary economic pressure point.

PRC objectives in this scenario would not be immediate occupation. They would be: forcing political concessions from Taipei under economic duress; establishing administrative sovereignty over the strait through de facto control; testing and fracturing coalition cohesion among U.S. partners; and demonstrating a capability to impose sustained costs that the United States cannot costlessly reverse.

The scenario is attractive precisely because it places the escalation burden on Washington. Physically breaking a Chinese maritime blockade would require the U.S. to take an active coercive action that could, in a legally ambiguous environment, be characterized as American-initiated escalation. That is a very different political problem from responding to an amphibious invasion.

### **Indicators and Early Warning**

Preparation for a quarantine scenario would be signaled by shifts in observable CCG and PLA activity patterns. Key indicators to monitor include:

- An increase in CCG operations framed explicitly as “inspections” or “cargo controls” rather than standard patrols — the shift from presence operations to enforcement operations.
- Exercises that rehearse port access interdiction, maritime checkpoint procedures, and coordinated CCG–PLAN enforcement operations (already evident in Justice Mission 2025).
- Continued subsea cable disruption, particularly targeting Taiwan’s international cables, which carry the bulk of its trade and communications data.
- Drone operations designed to test Taiwanese rules of engagement and establish precedents for repeated airspace entry over outlying islands (already commenced, January 2026).
- Significant PLAN amphibious assault ship deployments to eastern Taiwan waters, practiced during Justice Mission 2025 with the Type 075 LHA Hubei.

## **Analysis V: Alliance Dynamics and the Test of U.S. Leadership**

### **Why Quarantine Tests the Alliance More Severely Than Invasion**

A full-scale amphibious invasion generates a clear legal and political threshold: it constitutes an internationally recognized act of aggression, it produces an immediate and visible humanitarian crisis, and it tends to compress the timeline for coalition formation in ways that favor a rapid and unified response. A quarantine does none of these things by design (RAND Corporation, 2024; CSIS, 2024).

Gray-zone coercion is constructed precisely to generate interpretive disagreement among allied states about what is happening, whether it constitutes an actionable threshold, and what a proportionate response would look like. In this environment, U.S. leadership is tested not through a single decisive moment but through its capacity to sustain coalition coherence across weeks or months of escalating ambiguity — while managing domestic political pressures, partner divergences on economic exposure, and the ever-present risk that a military response will be characterized as American escalation rather than American deterrence.

### **Regional Alliance Dynamics: The Current Picture**

Japan and Australia have deepened defense integration at a pace that has clearly exceeded Beijing's tolerance. The December 2025 Japan–Australia Framework for Strategic Defence Coordination formalized structures that explicitly link their strategic planning to the Taiwan threat environment. Japan's AUKUS Pillar II participation — demonstrated through Exercise TALISMAN SABRE 2025 — has moved from theoretical to operational (Australian Department of Defence, 2025).

Japanese Prime Minister Takaichi's public statement linking Taiwan's security to Japan's own has been met with unusually aggressive diplomatic pressure from Beijing, including Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's characterization of Japan as “threatening China militarily” to the German foreign minister — a revealing escalation in rhetoric directed at a G7 ally (Reuters, December 2025). The political significance of this exchange is that Beijing has effectively declared that Tokyo's public security posture has crossed a line.

Crucially, however, U.S. senior-level backing for Japan's public Taiwan-security linkage has been notably muted — a gap between stated alliance solidarity and visible support that allies in Tokyo and Manila have been watching carefully. The risk here is not American abandonment but American ambiguity: a posture that provides enough deterrence to prevent Chinese confidence in easy success, but not enough clarity to provide allied capitals with confidence in U.S. escalation management.

### **European Coherence: A Structural Constraint**

Europe's role in a Taiwan contingency will be fundamentally different from its role in Ukraine. European economies are heavily exposed to Chinese trade and investment in ways that create powerful domestic political incentives against sanctions that would trigger a Chinese counter-response. The ECFR has documented the “Taiwan test” in granular terms: European capitals can be expected to support Taiwan in principle while resisting the economic costs of doing so in practice (ECFR, 2025).

This is not a failure of European principle but a structural feature of European politics that Beijing has studied carefully. A quarantine scenario designed to generate weeks of interpretive ambiguity is the optimal tool for exploiting this structure: it gives European governments political cover to call for “restraint” rather than taking sides, fracturing the coalition unity that proved essential in the Ukraine response.

### **Industrial Credibility as Alliance Currency**

The DIB constraints analyzed in Section III have a specific alliance dimension that is often underweighted in strategic analysis. When U.S. arms deliveries to Taiwan are visibly delayed and production targets are publicly missed, the effect is not only on Beijing’s calculations — it is on the calculations of every ally that has staked its security architecture on American industrial and logistical capacity.

The question for allied capitals is not whether the United States would eventually prevail in a Taiwan contingency. It is whether the United States can sustain the initial deterrence signal credibly enough to prevent the contingency from occurring — and whether, if coercion begins, Washington can maintain the escalation dominance necessary to impose costs on Beijing faster than Beijing can impose them on Taipei. These are questions that the current production trajectory creates reasonable uncertainty about.

### **Alternative Hypotheses**

Analytical rigor requires taking seriously the scenarios that would falsify the quarantine-centered forecast:

- Internal Chinese political instability or elite legitimacy crisis could incentivize more dramatic external action than strategic calculation would otherwise recommend. Historical precedents for externally-directed nationalism as a domestic pressure valve exist in Chinese political history.
- Coalition over-performance. Rapid and unambiguous declaration by key partners that a quarantine constitutes an unacceptable change to the status quo — combined with pre-positioned U.S. naval assets and credible escalation signaling — could raise the cost of quarantine initiation to a prohibitive level.
- Accelerated Taiwanese resilience. If Taiwan substantially closes its asymmetric defense gaps, accelerates cable redundancy and hardening, and receives key FMS deliveries ahead of revised schedules, the strategic weight of a quarantine diminishes. HIMARS deliveries, notably, are currently ahead of schedule — a partial counterpoint to the F-16V delay.
- U.S. political consolidation around Taiwan. A clear, bipartisan articulation of the conditions under which the United States would treat Chinese quarantine actions as triggering a military response would significantly complicate Beijing’s window calculations.

## Strategic Update: March 2026

Since the initial analytical framework was completed in December 2025, the following developments have materially confirmed or refined the key judgments in this analysis:

**Pratas airspace violation confirmed (January 17, 2026).** The first PLA violation of Taiwanese territorial airspace in decades directly validates the gray-zone escalation model. The PLA’s framing of the drone flight as “legitimate and lawful” is a textbook lawfare operation: it establishes a precedent, asserts a sovereignty claim, and tests rules of engagement — all without a single shot. Analysts at the Atlantic Council have noted that Beijing can now repeat such flights to routinize the precedent (USCC, March 2026).

**Cable-cutting is now an established operational pattern, not a hypothesis.** At least eleven subsea cable incidents around Taiwan since 2023, including two confirmed Chinese shadow-fleet operations in early 2025, have moved this threat from theoretical to documented. The captain of the Hong Tai 58 has been sentenced. Chinese-designed cable-cutting equipment has been documented by researchers. This is an active, operational component of the gray-zone pressure campaign.

**Justice Mission 2025 is the most consequential PLA exercise since 2022.** The explicit rehearsal of port blockade, the live-fire inside Taiwan’s contiguous zone, the first deployment of the Type 075 amphibious assault ship to the exercise, and the stated counter-intervention objective all represent genuine operational advances. The Diplomat’s assessment that the exercise “crosses a new line” by targeting Taiwan’s contiguous zone is analytically sound. This is not routine signaling. It is operational preparation.

**F-16V delays confirmed through 2027–2028.** The official confirmation of F-16V delivery delays beyond 2026 closes the door on the possibility that this backlog would be resolved within the analysis period. It is now a confirmed variable in Beijing’s window calculations.

**155mm production target missed once; mid-2026 reset under watch.** The 100,000 rounds/month target, missed in October 2025, has been reset to mid-2026. Current output remains at approximately 40,000/month. This represents a concrete, quantifiable measure of DIB recovery pace that both Beijing and allied capitals are tracking.

**Japan–Beijing friction confirms red line dynamics.** Beijing’s aggressive diplomatic response to Prime Minister Takaichi’s Taiwan-security statement confirms the political architecture described in this analysis: any formal institutional linkage between Taiwan’s security and U.S. alliance structures is a declared Chinese red line. The muted U.S. senior-level response to Tokyo’s position is a variable warranting continued monitoring.

*Key indicator to watch in Q2 2026: Whether U.S. 155mm production reaches 100,000 rounds per month by mid-year will be the most visible single data point indicating the pace of DIB*

*recovery. Failure to meet this revised target would extend the window hypothesis through 2027.*

## Overall Assessment

The strategic balance around Taiwan as of March 2026 is not characterized by an elevated probability of open war. It is characterized by an elevated probability of a managed crisis designed to alter the political status quo without formally crossing the threshold of armed conflict. The distinction matters enormously — both for how Western governments should prepare to respond and for how quickly they are likely to recognize that a response is required.

Russia's war in Ukraine has served as a simultaneously cautionary and instructive case study for Beijing. It demonstrated the catastrophic cost of misjudging an adversary's political resilience and the West's capacity for rapid coalition formation. It also revealed structural cracks in the Western system under sustained crisis: production limits, coalition fatigue, and the difficulty of maintaining political coherence across divergent threat perceptions and economic interests over a multi-year engagement.

The central risk in the Taiwan Strait through 2028 is a slow erosion of Taiwan's de facto sovereignty accomplished through the normalization of control measures — maritime inspections that shade into blockade, drone flights that establish airspace precedents, cable disruptions that degrade digital resilience — each individually deniable, collectively constitutive of a new strategic reality. The United States and its partners have not yet articulated, publicly or in aligned internal planning, the specific thresholds at which this erosion would trigger a coordinated and military-backed response.

That gap is Beijing's primary strategic asset. Until it is closed, the quarantine scenario remains not only possible but, under current trajectory, probable.

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This paper draws on open-source materials only. All sources were verified as of March 2026.

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