The Hague Centre
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Guest Paper

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China coast guard operational pattern analysis and strategic lessons for small and middle powers

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Takeaways

- **China Coast Guard's recent grey zone operations surrounding Taiwan since 2024 could be categorised into three patterns, aiming at eroding Taiwan's sovereignty:** joint exercises with the PLA, "normalised law enforcement patrols" in the Xiamen-Kinmen waters, and the escorting operations for scientific research and fishing vessels in Taiwan's eastern waters.

- **Taiwan's experience is increasingly relevant to Europe.** China–Russia coast guard cooperation creates opportunities for operational learning and coordination, making maritime coercion in the Indo-Pacific relevant to European security planning.

- **Transparency should become a routine operational capability.** Taiwan's engagement with international journalists offers a starting point for regular media access, supported by timely evidence releases and safeguards for editorial independence.

- **One-on-one monitoring creates a persistent burden on resources.** Dutch authorities should test their capacity against prolonged, simultaneous incidents and assess how additional security demands affect other coast guard missions.

- **Uncrewed systems could extend surveillance and preserve crewed vessels for intervention.** Taiwan and European partners can exchange experience in testing, training, maintenance, and data integration, with clear operating authorities and use-of-force rules.

- **Coast guards need support before incidents escalate.** Taiwan's experience highlights the importance of advance arrangements with defence authorities and international partners for information sharing, operational support, and coordinated responses.

- **A vessel's departure should not end the response.** European partners could combine evidence sharing and flag-state cooperation with legally grounded registration, port-access, or service restrictions to reduce opportunities for repeat harmful activity.

Introduction

In June 2026, the China Coast Guard (CCG) and the China Maritime Safety Administration launched 'law enforcement patrols' and 'special maritime traffic law enforcement' operations in the waters east of Taiwan to an unprecedented 110 vessel trips per month, up from only 19 in January.[1] Such operations have been described as the PRC's broader "Salami Slicing" strategy to advance its jurisdiction claims over Taiwan.[2]

Three features make the CCG the primary tool for grey-zone coercion against Taiwan. First, no rigid institutional barrier exists between law enforcement and military operations; the same force can shift from "law enforcement" to "defence operations" on orders from the Central Military Commission (CMC), forming the legal basis for "peace-to-war transition." Second, the *Coast Guard Law* defines its scope of operations as "jurisdictional waters," allowing Beijing to translate the political premise that "Taiwan belongs to China" into law enforcement authority for the CCG across any sea area around Taiwan. Third, authorisations such as boarding, inspection, and establishing security zones let Beijing manage commercial shipping under the rhetoric of "administrative law enforcement" rather than "military blockade," and thus stay below the threshold for kinetic operations against Taiwan.

Given this continued importance of the freedom of navigation vis-à-vis economic security, this paper explores the PRC's expanding maritime coercion through the CGG in recent years. Through this lens, this analysis seeks to offer lessons for other small and middle powers (SMPs) to watch for the pretext of a "peace-to-war" transition and to consider solutions to increase asymmetric and legal counter capacity and collaborative efforts to build maritime domain awareness, helping deter similar grey-zone operations and tactics.

The build-up of PRC's grey-zone capability at sea

The goal of the PRC's recent maritime coercion is to erode Taiwan's sovereignty by creating an alternative reality through regular patrols and law enforcement while keeping it below the threshold for further escalation. Any delayed response or hesitation from Taiwan or other countries could be seen as part of the PRC's strategic goal.

Overall, the PRC has utilised various domestic political and legal documents to frame Taiwan's status as a special state of "undivided sovereignty and incomplete reunification." An early legislative effort began with the 2005 *Anti-Secession Law*, whose Article 2 established that "both the mainland and Taiwan belong to one China."[3] In August 2022, the white paper titled

1 "灰帶脅迫大幅升級 中國公務船擾台6月首次破百" [Gray-Zone Coercion Escalates Dramatically; Chinese Government Vessels Harass Taiwan More Than 100 Times in June for the First Time], Newtalk (Newtalk新聞), July 1, 2026, https://newtalk.tw/news/view/2026-07-01/1044592; "連三個月破百！三個月超過一年！中國企圖「新現狀」封控台灣東部海域" [Over 100 for three straight months! More in three months than in a whole year! China Attempts to Establish a "New Status Quo" by Imposing Restrictions on Taiwan's Eastern Waters], Newtalk (Newtalk新聞), September 1, 2026, https://newtalk.tw/news/view/2026-09-01/1057080. Both articles aggregate data from the ROC Ministry of National Defense's daily updates on "PLA Sea and Air Dynamics Around the Taiwan Strait."

2 Brad Lendon, "'Salami Slicing': How China Is Trying to Increase Control in the Pacific," *CNN*, June 25, 2026. https://edition.cnn.com/2026/06/25/china/salami-slicing-china-control-pacific-intl-hnk-ml

3 Fan fenlie guojia fa (反分裂國家法) [Anti-Secession Law], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (中華人民共和國外交部), March 14, 2005, arts. 2, 3, 8,

The Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era further characterised the events of 1949 as a change of regime within China rather than a division of the state, asserting that "China's sovereignty and territory have never been divided."[4] In September 2025, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued the *Position Paper of the People's Republic of China on UN General Assembly Resolution 2758*, claiming that the resolution had solved "politically, legally and procedurally" the issue of representation for the whole of China, including Taiwan.[5] Through these official documents, China aims to translate its political claims into domestic jurisdictional bases, asserting that "law enforcement" anywhere in the Taiwan Strait constitutes an internal affair.

At sea, China relies on its 1992 *Law on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone* and the 1998 *Law on the Exclusive Economic Zone and the Continental Shelf* to assert that the Taiwan Strait consists sequentially, moving from both coasts toward the centre of internal waters, territorial seas, contiguous zones, and an exclusive economic zone, over which China "enjoys sovereignty, sovereign rights, and jurisdiction." The CCG is the main actor enforcing this legal claim and preparing a potential "peace-to-war" transition against Taiwan.

Since 2018, Beijing has strengthened the Coast Guard's authority and capability by expanding its legal basis. In March 2018, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China's *Plan for Deepening Reform of Party and State Institutions* transferred the CCG to the People's Armed Police Force. In June of the same year, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress issued the *Decision on the China Coast Guard Exercising Maritime Rights Protection and Law Enforcement Duties*, authorising the CCG Bureau to unifiedly perform maritime rights protection and law enforcement responsibilities.[6] Since then, the Central Military Commission (CMC) has led the CCG organizationally, while it operates externally as an administrative law enforcement agency.

Passed on January 22, 2021, and implemented on February 1, 2021, the *Coast Guard Law* institutionalised this dual identity. The law stipulates that the CCG carries out rights protection and law enforcement in "sea areas under the jurisdiction of the People's Republic of China" and the airspace above them. This includes authorised boarding, inspection, interception, pursuit, ordering vessels to stop or alter course, establishing temporary maritime security zones, and using weapons under specific circumstances; Article 83 explicitly provides that CCG agencies shall execute defence operation tasks in accordance with military laws such as the *National Defense Law* and the *People's Armed Police Law*, as well as orders from the CMC. The *Regulations on Administrative Law Enforcement Procedures of Coast Guard Agencies*, implemented on June 15, 2024, further standardised site inspections, administrative compulsions, and evidentiary procedures for foreign-related administrative cases.[7]

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4 Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council and the State Council Information Office (國務院台灣事務辦公室、國務院新聞辦公室), "Taiwan wenti yu xinshidai Zhongguo tongyi shiye (台灣問題與新時代中國統一事業)" [The Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era], white paper, August 10, 2022, https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2022-08/10/content_5704839.htm. Since 2018, Beijing has strengthened the Coast Guard's authority and capability by expanding its legal basis.

5 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (中華人民共和國外交部), "中方關於聯大第2758號決議的立場文件" [Position Paper of China on UN General Assembly Resolution 2758], September 30, 2025, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/zyxw/202509/t20250930_11721834.shtml.

6 Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (全國人民代表大會常務委員會), "關於中國海警局行使海上維權執法職權的決定" [Decision on the Exercise of Maritime Rights Protection and Law Enforcement Powers by the China Coast Guard], June 22, 2018, http://www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw/npc/xinwen/2018-06/22/content_2056585.htm; "Shenhua dang he guojia jigou gaige fang'an (深化黨和國家機構改革方案)" [Plan on Deepening Reform of Party and State Institutions], Xinhua News Agency (新華社), March 21, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-03/21/c_1122570517.htm (both accessed September 10, 2026).

7 "中國海警局制定出台《海警機構行政執法程序規定》" [China Coast Guard Formulates and Promulgates "Provisions on Administrative Law Enforcement Procedures for Coast Guard Agencies"], CCTV Military (央視軍事), May 15, 2024, https://military.cctv.com/2024/05/15/ARTIzfJnuyydAxV8waCvH4PM240515.shtml. This regulation took effect on June 15, 2024.

Alongside its expanded legal basis, the CCG's operational capacity has also grown. According to the U.S. Department of Defense's 2024 *China Military Power Report*, the CCG possesses over 150 regional and ocean-going patrol vessels of over 1,000 tons, over 50 regional patrol ships of over 500 tons, and approximately 300 coastal patrol craft, including more than 20 frigates transferred and converted from the PLA Navy, with 7 additional ocean-going patrol vessels launched between 2023 and early 2024.[8] Compared to estimates of roughly 60 vessels in 2010 and 130 in 2016, the fleet of 1,000-ton-plus ships has more than doubled in a little over a decade, reaching more than twice the size of the Japan Coast Guard's equivalent-class fleet (approximately 70 vessels).[9]

CCG's incorporation into military exercises, regular patrols of Taiwan's outlying islands, and the escorting operations in Taiwan's eastern waters

As Beijing expands its legal framework and operational capacity, it has intensified pressure on the Taiwan Strait, mainly through the East China Sea Branch, also known as the East Sea Area Command. The East China Sea Branch serves as the highest regional coordination level for operations against Taiwan, especially in drills. It oversees the Jiangsu, Shanghai, Zhejiang, and Fujian provincial detachments, as well as the directly subordinate First Bureau, Second Bureau, and First Aviation Brigade, while the Fujian Maritime Safety Administration regularly patrols outlying islands such as Kinmen and Matsu. Accordingly, this article categorises CCG operations over the years into the following three types.

First is the PLA's normalisation of "joint combat readiness patrols" around Taiwan's main island since 2022, accompanied by the CCG's first official incorporation into PLA exercises in 2024. Together, these joint operations simulate a dual-layer framework of "CCG containment and PLA denial," directly reflecting the concept of a joint blockade within the PLA's operational doctrine against Taiwan.

While the PLA Eastern Theatre Command focuses on external warfighting, aiming to secure sea/air control and deter foreign military intervention through tasks like "gaining comprehensive control," "sea/land strikes," and "outer-line deterrence," the CCG handles internal administrative control, conducting "boarding, inspection, interception, and seizure" under the banner of "lawful control over the island of Taiwan based on the one-China principle."[10] This operational division is mirrored in their force laydown: during *Joint Sword-2024B*, four CCG formations encircled Taiwan's main island while Fujian CCG units pressed against outlying islands, leaving PLA naval vessels to operate in the outer perimeter. As noted in Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense *2026 CCP Military Power Report*, recent exercises focus on

8 U.S. Department of Defense, Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2024, Annual Report to Congress (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, December 2024), 76–77, https://media.defense.gov/2024/Dec/18/2003615520/-1/-1/0/MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA-2024.PDF.

9 "Are Maritime Law Enforcement Forces Destabilizing Asia?" ChinaPower, Center for Strategic and International Studies, https://chinapower.csis.org/maritime-forces-destabilizing-asia/; Alex Wilson, "China Adds 22 Ships to World's Largest Coast Guard Fleet, Japanese News Agency Says," Stars and Stripes, February 2, 2023, https://www.stripes.com/theaters/asia_pacific/2023-02-02/china-coast-guard-rapid-expansion-9015285.html . The latter cites December 2021 Japan Coast Guard data (around 132 ships over 1,000 tons) and Kyodo News estimates.

10 Quoted from the Eastern Theater Command in "軍演之際 福建海警在東引烏坵海域綜合執法巡查" [Amid Military Exercises, Fujian Coast Guard Conducts Comprehensive Law Enforcement Patrols in the Waters off Dongyin and Wuchou] Central News Agency (中央社), April 1, 2025, https://www.cna.com.tw/news/acn/202504010294.aspx (accessed September 13, 2026). Duringto validate the transition "from exercise to war. During progressively.

"joint containment of Taiwan's external sea lanes" by integrating PLA aircraft, warships, CCG vessels, and maritime militia to progressively validate the transition "from exercise to war."[11]

Second are law enforcement operations by CCG vessels around Taiwan's outlying islands. Following the Kinmen maritime incident on February 14, 2024, the Taiwan Affairs Office under the State Council of the PRC denied the legality of Taiwan's designated prohibited and restricted waters, and the CCG announced on February 18 the initiation of "normalised law enforcement patrols" in the Xiamen-Kinmen waters.[12] According to statistics from Taiwan's Coast Guard Administration (CGA), from that day through May 28, 2026, CCG vessels entered Kinmen's prohibited and restricted waters a cumulative 117 times, including 52 times in 2024, 46 times in 2025, and 19 times through late May 2026, averaging roughly four times per month, typically in four-vessel formations.[13] Through repeated entries, China aims to blur Taiwan's existing jurisdictional boundaries, extending these actions beyond Taiwan's offshore islands near mainland China to the Dongsha (Pratas) Islands and Taiping Island.

Beijing's pressure on Taiwan has shifted from a former emphasis on military posture to a normalised pattern in which military patrols, CCG law enforcement, and official vessel operations run in parallel.

Third is the geographic and numerical expansion of Chinese official vessel (公务船) operations in 2026. According to compilations from Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense's daily real-time military activities, Chinese official vessel operations (including CCG and Maritime Safety Administration ships) around Taiwan rose from roughly 19 vessel-trips in January 2026 to 110 in June, 116 in July, and 160 in August, exceeding 386 vessel-trips for three consecutive months, compared to a total of only about 294 vessel-trips for the entire year of 2025.[14] Geographically, pressure shifted simultaneously toward eastern Taiwan: on June 1, the CCG announced that a vessel formation led by the *Daishan* carried out law enforcement patrols in the sea area east of Taiwan;[15] On June 10, the Maritime Safety Administration announced the completion of special maritime traffic law enforcement operations east of Taiwan.

Overall, Beijing's pressure on Taiwan has shifted from a former emphasis on military posture to a normalised pattern in which military patrols, CCG law enforcement, and official vessel operations run in parallel. Its goal is not merely to increase pressure, but to incrementally blur existing jurisdictional boundaries through continuous, low-intensity actions, thereby translating its political and legal claims over the Taiwan Strait into a physical presence.

The next section explains the evolution of CCG activities since 2024 and the Taiwanese government's coping strategies. This article applies Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT)

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11 Ministry of National Defense (中華民國國防部), "115年中共軍力報告書" [2026 Report on the Military Power of the People's Republic of China], submitted to the Legislative Yuan on August 31, 2026; cited from Chang Yao-lin (張曜麟), "最新中共軍力報告曝光！共軍借鏡美伊、俄烏實戰經驗　國防部曝2大威脅" [Latest Report on Chinese Military Strength Revealed! PLA Draws Lessons from U.S.-Iran and Russia-Ukraine Combat Experiences; Ministry of National Defense Identifies Two Major Threats], The Storm Media (風傳媒), August 31, 2026, https://www.storm.mg/article/11160510 (accessed September 14, 2026).

12 "國台辦：堅決支持大陸海警部門在廈金海域開展常態化執法巡查行動" [Taiwan Affairs Office: Firmly Supports Mainland Coast Guard's Regular Law Enforcement Patrols in Xiamen-Kinmen Waters], China News Service (中國新聞網), February 18, 2024, https://www.chinanews.com.cn/gn/2024/02-18/10165012.shtml.

13 Chiu Chun-fu (邱俊福), "中國海警擾東沙2-2》騷擾金門2年餘達117航次 營造海域『管轄假象』" [China Coast Guard Harassment of Pratas 2-2: Over 117 Voyages Harassing Kinmen in More Than Two Years to Create an 'Illusion of Jurisdiction'], Liberty Times (自由時報), May 31, 2026, https://news.ltn.com.tw/news/politics/breakingnews/5455449.

14 "MND Releases PLA Sea and Air Dynamics" (July 1, 2026); "MND Releases PLA Sea and Air Dynamics" (September 1, 2026).

15 "中國海警宣稱於台島以東海域常態化執法" [China Coast Guard Claims Regular Law Enforcement East of Taiwan Island], Central News Agency (中央社), June 1, 2026, https://www.cna.com.tw/news/acn/202606010047.aspx; "中國海警宣稱於台島以東海域常態化執法 海巡署：嚴密監控強勢驅離" [China Coast Guard Claims Regular Law Enforcement East of Taiwan Island; CGA: Closely Monitored and Firmly Expelled], Liberty Times (自由時報), June 1, 2026, https://news.ltn.com.tw/news/politics/breakingnews/5456636. The Coast Guard Administration identified the formation on-site as China Coast Guard vessel 2502 *Daishan* and 2304 *Baita*.

methods to examine CCG law-enforcement activity in and around the Taiwan Strait. The analysis relies primarily on spatial statistical modelling of Automatic Identification System (AIS) data obtained from the MarineTraffic Platform. AIS data, however, have inherent limitations: not all CCG vessels carry AIS transponders, and transponders may be deliberately switched off. The analysis therefore supplements AIS records with PRC press releases and government documents, Taiwanese defence reports and CGA announcements, and reputable news reporting.

The Operational Patterns of CCG's Patrol Around Taiwan

Since 2024, CCG's operations around Taiwan have shifted structurally, evolving from secondary maritime support into a core component of Beijing's military exercises.

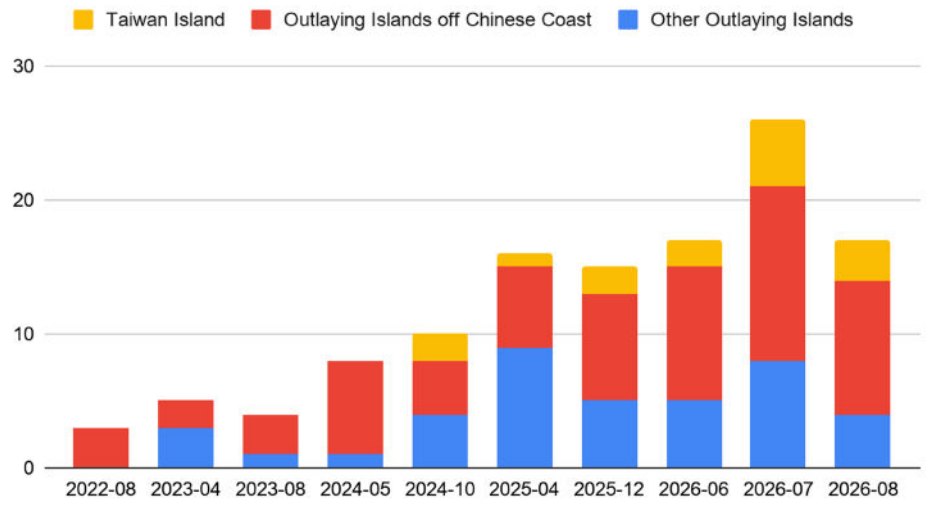
Since 2024, CCG's operations around Taiwan have shifted structurally, evolving from secondary maritime support into a core component of Beijing's military exercises. In the large-scale island-encirclement drills of August 2022 and 2023, the PLA Eastern Theatre Command reported deployments consisting exclusively of naval and air assets, with no CCG participation.[16] This dynamic changed during *Joint Sword-2024A* in May 2024, when CCG forces were formally incorporated into PLA manoeuvres for the first time. Their increasing operational presence is reflected in the following trends: (1) increasing frequency of violations against Taiwan's restricted waters, (2) approaches closer to Taiwan's shore, (3) longer periods of station-keeping, (4) deployments across several maritime axes, and ultimately (5) normalising operations around Taiwan's eastern waters.

The frequency and scale of CCG's activity around Taiwan increased markedly from 2024. During *Joint Sword-2024A* in May 2024, CCG vessels approached Taiwan's contiguous zone and one vessel remained within it for approximately 43 hours. By the October 2024 *Joint Sword-2024B* exercise, at least ten CCG vessels were operating within or near the 24NM zone around Taiwan's main island, alongside PLA naval forces and other official vessels. In April 2025, during *Strait Thunder–2025A*, at least 13 CCG vessels operated in waters around the main island and the outlying islands, including seven that entered restricted waters near Kinmen and Matsu. The December 2025 *Justice Mission* exercise further extended this pattern, with CCG vessels operating near the restricted waters around Taiwan's outlying islands off the Chinese Coast while others maintained pressure around the main island.[17]

16 The Eastern Theater Command's exercise notices in August 2022 and on August 19, 2023, listed naval and air forces only. See reports on those days by the ROC Ministry of National Defensshifted structurally and the Central News Agency (CNA): Sean Lin, "Taiwan Tracking Chinese Military Exercises Around Taiwan," Focus Taiwan (Central News Agency), August 19, 2023, GlobalSecurity.org mirror, https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202308190005 (accessed September 13, 2026). CGA Deputy Director-General Hsieh Ching-chin also stated that "Joint Sword-2024A" marked the first time the PRC deployed coast guard vessels in military exercises; see Cheng Chia-wen (程嘉文), "中共軍演「出動14艘海警船」 海巡署說明：闖入我領海鄰接區" [CCP Military Drills "Deploy 14 Coast Guard Vessels"; CGA Clarifies: Violating Taiwan's Contiguous Zone], United Daily News (聯合報), December 29, 2025, https://udn.com/news/story/10930/9233058 (accessed September 13, 2026).

17 關鍵評論網引中央社報導國防部統計，2025年12月30日，https://www.thenewslens.com/article/263001；許詩愷、張鎮宏，報導者，2025年12月29日，https://www.twreporter.org/a/china-military-exercises-2025-12（均檢索於2026年9月13日）。"軍演首日偵獲共機89架、共艦海警船28艘，5演訓區侵入台領海，國防部：授權第一線依交戰規則應處" [First Day of Exercise: 89 CCP military aircraft and 28 Naval and CCG vesseitsls were detected; five of them entered Taiwan's territorial waters. The Ministry of National Defense stated that frontline units have been authorised to respond in accordance with the rules of engagement.], The News Lens (關鍵評論網), December 30, 2025, https://www.thenewslens.com/article/263001; Hsu Shih-kai (許詩愷) and Chang Chen-hung (張鎮宏), "3年半第7次圍台軍演：歷來最嚴重海空交通干擾，反映中國哪些武嚇目的？" [The 7th Military Exercise Surrounding Taiwan in 3.5 Years: The Most Severe Disruption to Maritime and Air Traffic on Record—What Are China's Military Intimidation Objectives?], The Reporter (報導者), December 29, 2025, https://www.twreporter.org/a/china-military-exercises-2025-12 (both accessed September 13, 2026).

Figure 1. The Number of Vessels Breaching into Taiwan's Restricted Waters



This narrowing distance reflects a move from symbolic approaches towards more deliberate operations in Taiwan's nearshore environment.

These operations also brought CCG vessels progressively closer to Taiwan's shore. In October 2024, several vessels approached within approximately 14-15 NMs of the 12NM territorial-sea baseline. By April 2025, some vessels had advanced to within 4-8 NMs of the 24NM contiguous-zone boundary. This narrowing distance reflects a move from symbolic approaches towards more deliberate operations in Taiwan's nearshore environment. It also enables the CCG to demonstrate the practical capacity to identify, track, warn, and potentially inspect vessels near commercially important sea lanes, while generally remaining outside the territorial sea.

Whereas most observed nearshore operations in 2024 lasted no more than several dozen hours, multiple CCG vessels remained within Taiwan's contiguous zone for more than 100 hours during the December 2025 exercises; the longest recorded deployment approached 179 hours. Such endurance is consistent with rotational operations by large, 3,000- to 5,000-ton cutters and could support a limited, short-duration restriction on traffic to particular ports or routes. It does not, however, demonstrate an ability to sustain island-wide maritime control indefinitely. Moreover, the same vessels appear to rotate through regular patrols near the Diaoyutai Islands, suggesting that the pool of large cutters available for continuous operations in several theatres remains finite.

Normalisation of Law Enforcement in Taiwan's Eastern Waters with Hybrid Operation

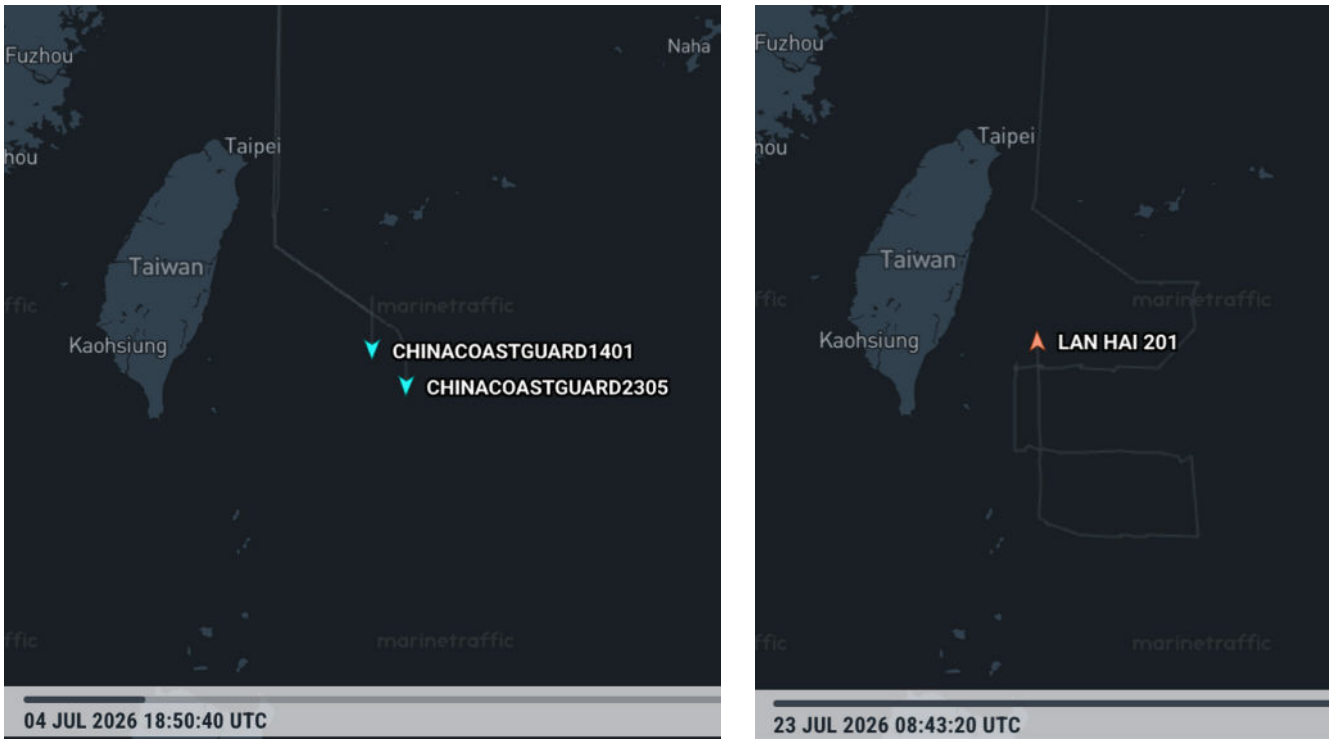
In June 2026, China's Maritime Safety Administration announced a "special maritime traffic law-enforcement operation" in waters east of Taiwan.[18] By the end of June, AIS records showed several CCG vessels operating in the area for extended periods, with two vessels accumulating more than 600 hours of recorded activity and another remaining for over 100 hours. Their scale and persistence of these records indicate that eastern waters were becoming part of the CCG's routine operating area rather than an occasional extension of Taiwan Strait patrols.

[18] Lu Chia-jung (呂佳蓉), "中國宣稱東部海域執法 陸委會：絕不接受" [China Claims Law Enforcement in Eastern Waters; MAC Responds: Absolutely Unacceptable], Central News Agency (中央社), June 7, 2026, https://www.cna.com.tw/news/acn/202606070089.aspx (accessed September 16, 2026).

The operational significance of this shift lies in extending maritime pressure from the Taiwan Strait to Taiwan's Pacific approaches. Waters east of the island connect the ports of Hualien and Taitung with southern ports and external shipping routes. They may become particularly important in a contingency for commercial diversion, energy and material resupply, international assistance, and military or civilian movement. A regular CCG presence in this area could therefore raise uncertainty for shipping operators, insurers, and voyage planners without the political costs associated with a formally declared blockade. It could also facilitate later, more selective measures, such as route controls, inspections, or temporary navigation restrictions.

In the meantime, China also announced the deployment of the research vessel Lanhai 201 for a "fishery resource survey" in the same area.[19] During its mission, the research vessel was reportedly escorted by CCG 2305 and CCG 1401.[20] Their coordinated operation points to a hybrid operating model that combines coast guard, maritime-safety, and scientific activities. Such coordination blurs the distinction between civilian, economic, and law-enforcement missions while enabling China to contest Taiwan's maritime space through ostensibly non-military means.

Figure 2. Suspected CCG vessels escorting a research vessel in Taiwan's eastern waters in July 2026



19 Liu Chien-pang (劉建邦), "中國藉漁業調查再擾東部海域 海巡署：惡意政治操作" [China Intrusions in Eastern Waters Under Guise of Fisheries Survey; CGA Denounces Malicious Political Manipulation], Central News Agency (中央社), July 23, 2026, https://www.cna.com.tw/news/acn/202607230254.aspx (accessed September 16, 2026).

20 Hu Yuwei (胡雨薇), Fan Wei (樊巍), and Meng Xu (孟旭), "日本巡视船试图逼近在台东海域作业的我科考船，中国海警船拦截" [Japanese Patrol Vessel Attempts to Approach Chinese Research Vessel Operating in Waters East of Taiwan, Intercepted by China Coast Guard Ship], Global Times (环球时Fremainuture报), reprinted on Beijing Daily (北京日报), July 25, 2026, https://xinwen.bjd.com.cn/content/s6a64b6a7e4b0e45f-3fd531ceremaininthe , other words,.html (accessed September 16, 2026).

Its increased incursions into restricted waters, closer operations near Taiwan's main island, and longer station-keeping periods improve its ability to impose selective pressure on shipping.

The recorded figures may also offer a rough indication of a single deployment's practical limit. The longest continuous operation east of Taiwan lasted 600 hours – almost one month. It potentially indicates the maximum duty period one large cutter can sustain before returning for replenishment. In fact, CCG has announced a series of successive formations, which indicates that sustained presence depends on a rotational system capable of maintaining pressure across Taiwan's eastern maritime approaches.[21][22]

In sum, the above patterns show that the CCG is evolving from a supplementary presence in PLA exercises into a more capable instrument of sustained maritime coercion. Its increased incursions into restricted waters, closer operations near Taiwan's main island, and longer station-keeping periods improve its ability to impose selective pressure on shipping while remaining below the threshold of a conventional naval blockade. Extending operations to Taiwan's eastern waters further blurs the distinction between pressure in the Taiwan Strait and activity along the island's Pacific approaches. By combining coast-guard patrols with maritime-safety and scientific missions, Beijing can complicate Taiwan's legal, operational, and commercial response without formally initiating hostilities. These developments do not demonstrate the capacity for an indefinite island-wide blockade, but they do indicate an increasingly credible ability to disrupt specific routes, ports, or areas of maritime activity for limited periods.

Lessons from Taiwan's strategic responses

Taiwan's CGA countermeasures and efforts to increase transparency and maritime domain awareness

Taiwan's experience is increasingly relevant for Europe as China and Russia deepen cooperation between their maritime law enforcement agencies. In April 2023, the CCG and Russia's Federal Security Service signed a memorandum on maritime law enforcement cooperation. In September 2024, the U.S. Coast Guard observed their vessels conducting a joint patrol in the Bering Sea.[23] These developments create opportunities for operational learning and coordination. Although they do not establish that China and Russia jointly direct gray-zone operations against Taiwan or Europe, they give European authorities reason to examine how maritime coercion practised in one region could inform activity in another, as well as the strategic responses.

First, Taiwan's CGA adopts scenario-based response measures. In the waters around Kinmen and Matsu, the CGA primarily relies on one-on-one parallel monitoring, gathering evidence throughout encounters with CCG vessels entering prohibited and restricted waters while broadcasting warnings in Chinese and English demanding their departure. Around the

21 "中国海警位中国台湾岛以东海域开展常态化执法巡查" [China Coast Guard Conducts Routine Law-enforcement Patrols in the Waters East of Taiwan Island in Accordance with the Law], China News Service (中國新聞網), July 4, 2026, https://www.chinanews.com.cn/gn/2026/07-04/10652580.shtml (accessed Oct. 15, 2026).

22 "中国海警位中国台湾岛以东海域依法开展常态化执法巡查" [China Coast Guard Conducts Routine Law-enforcement Patrols in the Waters East of Taiwan Island in Accordance with the Law], China News Service (中國新聞網), Sep. 3, 2026, https://www.chinanews.com.cn/gn/2026/09-03/10689303.shtml (accessed Oct. 15, 2026).

23 United States Coast Guard, *U.S. Coast Guard Encounters Joint Chinese Coast Guard, Russian Border Guard Patrol in Bering Sea*, Press Release (2024), https://www.news.uscg.mil/Press-Releases/Article/3922625/us-coast-guard-encounters-joint-chinese-coast-guard-russian-border-guard-patrol/ ; "China, Russia Sign Memorandum of Understanding on Maritime Law Enforcement," World, Reuters, April 26, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/china-russia-sign-memorandum-understanding-maritime-law-enforcement-2023-04-26/.https://www.news.uscg.mil/Press-Releases/Article/3922625/us-coast-guard-encounters-joint-chinese-coast-guard-russian-border-guard-patrol/ (both accessed September 14).

Dongsha Islands, large patrol vessels such as Yunlin and Tainan conduct close-range monitoring and, when necessary, use parallel sailing to pressure CCG ships to leave restricted waters.[24] During PLA military exercises around Taiwan's main island, the CGA also deploys corresponding assets. For instance, it deployed 14 vessels against 14 CCG ships during Justice Mission-2025 and assigned 11 ships and 11 patrol boats to counter nine CCG vessels during Strait Thunder-2025A. For Chinese oceanographic research vessels conducting what Taiwan identifies as unauthorised research or deploying instruments within Taiwan's eastern exclusive economic zone, the CGA uses parallel monitoring, radio warnings, and measures to interrupt those activities and secure the vessels' departure.[25]

When Chinese forces broadcast claims that "the Republic of China does not exist," the CGA responds in Chinese and English that the two sides "are not subordinate to each other.

Beyond on-scene law enforcement, the CGA has progressively strengthened its information and legal responses. Authorities publish the hull numbers, entry and departure times, and locations of Chinese vessels on a case-by-case basis. When Chinese forces broadcast claims that "the Republic of China does not exist," the CGA responds in Chinese and English that the two sides "are not subordinate to each other." The CGA applies the same approach to merchant shipping. In June 2026, Chinese government vessels operating east of Taiwan broadcast inquiries to Singapore-, Liberia- and Benin-flagged merchant ships, requesting port-call and crew information. The CGA responded by broadcasting, in Chinese and English, that merchant vessels "need not heed the broadcasts of Chinese government ships." The CGA later confirmed that some ships had answered the Chinese side and others the Taiwanese side, indicating that foreign masters on the scene were unsure whom to follow.

Taiwan's answer is to deliver the information to ships in advance: the Maritime and Port Bureau issues explanations through navigational warnings and coast radio stations; the CGA uses VHF on the scene to inform ships that Chinese government vessels have no jurisdiction in the waters around Taiwan and that merchant ships are not required to stop or provide information; and the time, location, and hull numbers of the Chinese vessels involved in each incident are published so that shipping companies and flag states have a record to verify. Taiwan also invokes Article 56 of the *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)* in explaining its rights in the exclusive economic zone. The Ocean Affairs Council, CGA's parent ministry and the central authority for Taiwan's national ocean policies, has emphasised that maritime rights must derive from the claimant's territory.[26]

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24 Chiu Chun-fu (邱俊福), "'中國海警擾東沙2-2》騷擾金門2年餘達117航次 營造海域『管轄假象』' [China Coast Guard Harassment of Pratas 2-2: Over 117 Voyages Harassing Kinmen in More Than Two Years to Create an 'Illusion of Jurisdiction']," Liberty Times (自由時報), May 31, 2026, https://news.ltn.com.tw/news/politics/breakingnews/5455449; Chiu Chun-fu (邱俊福), "'中國海警襲擾東沙海域 年逾30艘次 海巡示警已形成灰帶襲擾' [China Coast Guard Harasses Pratas Waters Over 30 Ship-Times a Year; CGA Warns Gray-Zone Harassment Has Formed]," Liberty Times (自由時報), June 1, 2026, https://news.ltn.com.tw/news/politics/paper/1757032 (both accessed September 14).

25 Yao Yueh-hung (姚岳宏), "'中國海警又擾東部海域 海巡署調度宜蘭艦一對一驅離' [China Coast Guard Harasses Eastern Waters Again; CGA Dispatches Yilan to Expel Vessel in One-on-One Operation]," Liberty Times (自由時報), December 30, 2025, https://news.ltn.com.tw/news/politics/breakingnews/5293532; Abby Huang, "'中國軍演常態化：國防部公布中共海警船環台動態，海巡署強勢驅離' [Normalization of Chinese Military Drills: MND Releases CCG Vessel Movements Around Taiwan; CGA Vigorously Expels Intruders]," The News Lens (關鍵評論網), April 2, 2025, https://www.thenewslens.com/article/251081; Liu Chien-pang (劉建邦), "'海巡署：中國科研船非法調查 全程監控強勢驅離' [CGA: Chinese Research Vessels Conduct Illegal Surveys; Closely Monitored and Firmly Expelled]," Central News Agency (中央社), May 22, 2026, https://www.cna.com.tw/news/asoc/202605220340.aspx (all accessed September 14).

26 Hu, Yu-Shin (胡郁欣), "'中共海警船侵擾東部海域 海巡署派艦艇全程一對一監控驅離' [PRC Coast Guard Vessels Harass Eastern Waters; CGA Deploys Ships for One-on-One Monitoring and Expulsion]," NOWnews今日新聞, June 15, 2026, https://www.nownews.com/news/6846850; Coast Guard Administration (海巡署), "中共海警船7艘對台進行灰帶襲擾 海巡艦艇以1對1方式嚴密掌握應處" [Seven PRC Coast Guard Ships Conduct Gray-Zone Harassment Against Taiwan; CGA Vessels Monitor and Respond Strictly on a One-on-One Basis], press release, November 9, 2025, https://www.cga.gov.tw/GipOpen/wSite/ct?xItem=166313&ctNode=13390&mp=999; Ocean Affairs Council (海洋委員會), "中國海警聲稱巡查 海委會：台灣東部海域並非中國海警執法區域，片面宣稱不能取得任何權利" [China Coast Guard Claims Patrols; OAC: Waters East of Taiwan Are Not CCG Law Enforcement Areas, Unilateral Claims Grant No Rights], press release, June 1, 2026, https://www.oac.gov.tw/ch/home.jsp?id=661&parentpath=0,660&mcustomize=news_view.jsp&dataserno=202606010003 (all accessed September 14).

Independent reporting can extend these transparency efforts beyond official disclosures. In April 2025, a senior CGA official said the agency would evaluate the Philippines' transparency policy, known as the "West Philippine Sea Transparency Group."[27] Reuters joined a Taiwanese cable-protection patrol in August 2025, and the Wall Street Journal published reporting from a Taiwan coast guard mission in May 2026.[28] These examples demonstrate that Taiwan has both expressed interest in the Philippine approach and provided international journalists with access to maritime operations. A regular media-access mechanism would make this approach more sustainable. SMPs could adapt these arrangements to help journalists examine maritime incidents and official responses, making transparency a routine capability rather than an improvised response to a crisis.

On the legal front, Taiwan's "Seven Subsea Cable Acts" reform package strengthened provisions concerning offending vessels, identification requirements, and port safety.[29] The amendments included confiscation provisions and requirements for covered vessels to operate their automatic identification systems (AIS) and transmit accurate identifying information, subject to statutory exceptions. They also strengthened authorities' powers to order the removal of vessels that endanger port safety and, under specified conditions, confiscate them.[30] [27][J]

The CGA and the Maritime and Port Bureau also track at least 52 flag-of-convenience vessels under tiered management based on assessed threat levels. In 2025, the captain in the Hong Tai 58 case received a three-year prison sentence under the Telecommunications Management Act.[31]

27 "West Philippine Sea Transparency Group," https://wpstransparency.ph/ (accessed October 14).

28 Yimou Lee et al., "Facing New China 'grey-Zone' Threat, Taiwan Steps up Sea Cable Patrols," China, *Reuters*, September 11, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/china/facing-new-china-grey-zone-threat-taiwan-steps-up-sea-cable-patrols-2025-09-11/; Yimou Lee and Ben Blanchard, "Taiwan Coast Guard Warns of China Using 'pretext' to Launch War Games This Year," Asia Pacific, *Reuters*, April 1, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taiwan-coast-guard-warns-china-using-pretext-launch-war-games-this-year-2025-04-01/; Todd Johnson and Joyu Wang, "We Joined a Taiwan Coast Guard Mission on the Front Line Against China," World, *Wall Street Journal*, May 13, 2026, https://www.wsj.com/world/asia/inside-taiwans-coast-guard-mission-to-thwart-a-chinese-blockade-136cabcc (all accessed September 14).

29 Executive Yuan, Republic of China (Taiwan), "Cabinet approves draft amendments to seven laws to protect undersea cables," Executive Yuan, Republic of China (Taiwan), September 18, 2025, https://english.ey.gov.tw/Page/61BF20C3E89B856/aa4a36e2-f63b-47f7-a267-b78658ac8ded (accessed September 14).

30 Lin Ching-yin (林敬殷), "立院三讀電信管理法 非法危害海纜設備可逕行沒收｜政治 [The Legislative Yuan passed the Telecommunications Management Act on its third reading, stipulating that equipment illegally endangering submarine cables can be confiscated directly.]," China News Service (中國新聞網), December 16, 2025, https://www.cna.com.tw/news/aipl/202512160043.aspx ; Ministry of Transportation and Communications（交通部）, "商港法 [The Commercial Port Law]," Laws & Regulations Database of The Republic of China (Taiwan), February 4, 2026, https://law.moj.gov.tw/ENG/LawClass/LawAll.aspx?pcode=K0080001 ; Ministry of Transportation and Communications（交通部）, "船舶法 [The Law of Ships]," Laws & Regulations Database of The Republic of China (Taiwan), January 5, 2026, https://law.moj.gov.tw/ENG/LawClass/LawAll.aspx?pcode=K0070004 (all accessed September 14).

31 "Taiwan Jails Chinese Ship Captain for Damaging Undersea Cables," Media & Telecom, *Reuters*, June 12, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/taiwan-jails-chinese-ship-captain-damaging-undersea-cables-2025-06-12/; Chang Jung-Hsiang (張榮祥), "'台馬海纜遭勾斷案 檢方起訴涉案船長船員' [Taiwan-Matsu Submarine Cable Severance Case: Prosecutors Indict Involved Captain and Crew]," Central News Agency (中央社), August 29, 2025, https://www.cna.com.tw/news/asoc/202508290209.aspx (both accessed October 14).

Externally, the CGA expresses the sovereignty and jurisdictional significance of its actions through the motto "Where the Coast Guard is, sovereignty resides," while advancing coast guard cooperation with the United States, Japan, and the Philippines.[32]

However, this response model faces structural limitations. First, one-on-one responses require Taiwan to commit a corresponding vessel to each close-range contact it monitors. Given that the CCG has over 1,000 vessels, frequent and sustained large-scale Chinese patrols coordinated with military exercises can place substantial pressure on the CGA's available patrol capacity. Furthermore, CCG incursions around Kinmen occur about four times per month, while CCG activities around Dongsha account for one to two vessel-trips per month. These activities, eastern research vessel operations, and the Daishan formation operating east of Taiwan since June 2026 may occur simultaneously.[33] Whenever Beijing adds an operational axis, Taiwan must allocate additional monitoring and response forces, further straining CGA capacity.

These limitations reveal the resource asymmetry within grey-zone coercion and strengthen the case for persistent monitoring that does not always require a one-on-one vessel deployment.

Second, with maritime law enforcement and ocean governance as its core missions, the CGA operates vessels that generally lag behind large CCG ships in tonnage, endurance, and armament. Although close-range monitoring, parallel sailing, and efforts to push vessels out maintain an on-scene presence, their effectiveness depends heavily on whether the adversary wishes to avoid escalation. If the CCG chooses to linger or act more forcefully, the CGA's options would quickly narrow.

Third, public disclosures and legal enhancements help establish facts, explain legal positions, and clarify responsibility, but they cannot eliminate the gap in vessel numbers and sustained deployment capacity. If the CCG escalates from patrols to forced interceptions or boardings of commercial ships, the situation could undermine shipping companies' confidence and result in a de facto blockade without further kinetic efforts.

These limitations reveal the resource asymmetry within grey-zone coercion and strengthen the case for persistent monitoring that does not always require a one-on-one vessel deployment. Taiwan's uncrewed systems procurement plans, promulgated in September 2026, establish a six-year framework for annual appropriations totalling NT$240 billion.[34] The CGA is also building specific capabilities. In October 2026, Shield AI announced initial V-BAT deliveries under a 12-aircraft program with AIDC, including local training and maintenance support.[35]

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32 Aaron-Matthew Lariosa, "U.S. Reveals Coast Guard Cooperation with Taiwan," *USNI News*, July 29, 2026, https://news.usni.org/2026/07/29/u-s-reveals-coast-guard-cooperation-with-taiwan; "'台美海巡聯合搜救演練 低調落幕' [Taiwan-U.S. Coast Guard Joint Search and Rescue Exercise Concludes Quietly]," PTS News (公視新聞網), August 14, 2026, https://news.pts.org.tw/article/822515Lariosa, "U.S. Reveals Coast Guard Cooperation with Taiwan"; PTS News (公視新聞網), "'台美海巡聯合搜救演練 低調落幕' [Taiwan-U.S. Coast Guard Joint Search and Rescue Exercise Concludes Quietly]"; Hung Che-cheng (洪哲政), "'台美海事安全合作再推進 雙方海巡人員定期交流' [Taiwan-U.S. Maritime Security Cooperation Advances: Regular Exchanges Between Coast Guard Personnel]."https://udn.com/news/story/10930/9742051 (all accessed September 14).

33 Yao Yueh-hung (姚岳宏), "'中國海警宣稱於台島以東海域常態化執法 海巡署：嚴密監控強勢驅離' [China Coast Guard Claims Regular Law Enforcement East of Taiwan Island; CGA: Closely Monitored and Firmly Expelled]," Liberty Times (自由時報), June 1, 2026, https://news.ltn.com.tw/news/politics/breaking-news/5456636 (accessed September 14).

34 Ministry of Economic Affairs, "強化國防自主暨無人載具產業發展條例 [Regulations on Strengthening National Defense Autonomy and Promoting the Development of the Unmanned Vehicle Industry]," Laws & Regulations Database of The Republic of China (Taiwan), September 11, 2026, https://law.moj.gov.tw/LawClass/LawAll.aspx?pcode=J0030160 (both accessed October 13).

35 "Shield AI Delivers First V-BATs to Taiwan, Deepening Its Partnership with Taiwan Coast Guard Administration," Shield AI, October 12, 2026, https://shield.ai/shield-ai-delivers-first-v-bats-to-taiwan-deepening-its-partnership-with-taiwan-coast-guard-administration/ (accessed October 14).

The CGA also received 45 multirotor training drone sets in July 2026, while the MARTAC T-24 uncrewed surface vessel underwent sea testing in October.[36]

Moreover, these initiatives offer practical opportunities for Taiwan–Europe cooperation, particularly with European partners that have advanced experience in uncrewed surface vessels (USVs) and uncrewed underwater vehicles (UUVs). Joint development and co-production in Taiwan, supported by training and technical cooperation, could strengthen Taiwan's domestic capacity to manufacture, integrate, and maintain these systems, supporting greater self-reliance in defence. Operational cooperation could integrate aerial, surface, and underwater surveillance to extend coverage and direct crewed vessels toward incidents requiring physical intervention. Exchanges and joint testing could assess performance at sea, staffing and maintenance needs, and whether these systems reduce patrol demands.

For the Netherlands, scenarios involving several weeks of activity at multiple locations would help assess whether these systems improve coverage without creating unsustainable demands elsewhere.

European initiatives provide a basis for reciprocal learning. In March 2026, the Royal Navy announced the purchase of 20 uncrewed surface vessels for operations, training, and development.[37] Its Hydrographic Exploitation Group also uses autonomous underwater vehicles for seabed surveys.[38] The Netherlands has worked with Fugro through SeaSEC to test uncrewed and underwater inspection technology for North Sea infrastructure monitoring.[39]

Taiwan and European partners could compare performance under demanding weather and communications conditions, operator workload, maintenance needs, and the integration of sensor data into operational decisions. For the Netherlands, scenarios involving several weeks of activity at multiple locations would help assess whether these systems improve coverage without creating unsustainable demands elsewhere. Clear operating authorities, use-of-force rules, and, where applicable, rules of engagement should accompany their introduction.

Consequently, Taiwan's countermeasures against Chinese grey-zone tactics cannot rely on CGA capacity alone. The most concrete step so far is the first joint Navy–CGA escort drill. On 13 August 2026, the Han Kuang 42 exercise included, for the first time, a live "counter-blockade escort" drill conducted jointly by the Navy and the CGA. The naval vessel Yushan simulated a merchant ship carrying strategic supplies and was escorted into port from waters off eastern Taiwan by Tuo Chiang-class corvettes, along with the CGA cutters Taichung and Bali, while a Yung Feng-class minesweeper cleared a safe channel ahead; the drill also rehearsed transferring supplies in the Western Pacific. It was the first occasion in

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36 Coast Guard Administration (海巡署), "有關媒體報導海巡署無人機採購案「狠甩國產化一記耳光」、「宜通盤考量擇優選用」一事，內容與事實不符，海巡署特澄清說明" [Regarding media reports claiming that the Coast Guard Administration's drone procurement 'deals a blow to domestic production' and calling for 'a thorough review to choose the best option,' the Coast Guard Administration clarifies that the reports are factually incorrect], press release, January 12, 2026, https://www.cga.gov.tw/GipOpen/wSite/ct?ctNode=650&mp=999&xItem=166737; Coast Guard Administration (海巡署), "艦隊分署45組無人機訓練機到位" [Fleet Branch Receives Delivery of 45 Sets of Drone Trainers], press release, July 1, 2026, https://www.cga.gov.tw/GipOpen/wSite/fp?ctNode=650&mp=9996&xItem=168275; Hung Ting-Hung (洪定宏), "海巡首架V-BAT垂直起降無人機曝光 管碧玲揭三大計畫 [Taiwan Coast Guard's First V-BAT VTOL Drone Revealed; Kuan Bi-Ling Unveils Three Major Initiatives]," Liberty Times (自由時報), October 8, 2026, https://def.ltn.com.tw/article/breakingnews/5599032 (all accessed October 14).

37 "Navy to Buy 20 Uncrewed Boats as Testbeds for Future Operations," Royal Navy News, October 8, 2026, https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news/2026/march/11/20260311-kraken-usv-procurement-announcement (accessed October 18).

38 "New Hydrographic Unit Harnesses Tech to Revolutionise Surveying and Data Gathering," Royal Navy News, October 17, 2026, https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news/2025/june/04/20250604-new-hydrographic-unit (accessed October 18).

39 "Defense Deploys Civilian Technology to Improve Monitoring of Subsea Infrastructure," *SeaSEC*, January 28, 2025, https://seasec.org/news/defense-deploys-civilian-technology-to-improve-monitoring-of-subsea-infrastructure/ (accessed October 18).

which the CGA's peacetime monitoring role and the Navy's escort role in an escalated situation were linked under a single scenario, allowing practice to test the timing of the handover, communications and shared situational awareness, and channel-control procedures.

Such exercises are a starting point, not a solution. Facing continuous, multi-axis, and incrementally escalating CCG operations, Taiwan needs effective support arrangements between the CGA and its defence authorities, along with substantive cooperation with partners such as the United States, Japan, and the Philippines on maritime domain awareness, information sharing, and coordinated responses. Cooperation with European partners could add practical exchanges on media access and persistent surveillance, as well as joint testing and co-production of uncrewed systems to strengthen Taiwan's domestic capabilities.

For SMPs, Taiwan's experience shows the need to build a basis for combining early recognition, credible public evidence, sustainable surveillance, and coordinated legal action before repeated pressure narrows the options available to governments and maritime users.



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