

Defence Strategic Review Submission **Australian Defence Representation in Taiwan**

Dr Benjamin Herscovitch
Research Fellow
School of Regulation and Global Governance
The Australian National University
benjamin.herscovitch@anu.edu.au

Dr Mark Harrison
Senior Lecturer
School of Social Sciences
University of Tasmania
mark.harrison@utas.edu.au

Executive summary

Australia should establish defence representation in Taiwan. Such defence representation would be consistent with Australia's one-China policy and would entail minimal risk. It could be incorporated into the functions of the Australian Office, which represents Australian interests in Taiwan in the absence of formal diplomatic relations.¹ Australian defence representation in Taiwan would benefit Australia and the region. Specifically, it would:

- counteract China's isolation and intimidation efforts against Taiwan;
- deliver an incremental deterrent effect against a possible full-scale People's Liberation Army (PLA) invasion across the Taiwan Strait;
- augment efforts from Australia's key Indo-Pacific allies and partners, including fellow Quad countries, to build unofficial ties with Taiwan;
- provide Australia with an extra conduit to share intelligence on critical cross-Strait developments;
- add more substance to Australia's plans to deepen its unofficial ties with Taiwan; and
- facilitate additional mutually beneficial cooperation between Taiwan and Australia in the context of a deteriorating regional security environment.

Benefits

Counteracting China's isolation and intimidation efforts

Australian defence representation in Taiwan would counteract Beijing's escalatory grey zone efforts to isolate and intimidate Taipei. China is increasing the tempo of its PLA Air Force

¹ Australian Office, "About Australian Office Taipei", <https://australia.org.tw/tpei/aboutus.html>.

flights in and around the Taiwan Strait to test the Republic of China Armed Forces (ROCAF) and intimidate the Taiwanese government and population.² China continues to economically coerce Taiwan with trade restrictions, while also seeking to isolate Taiwan by excluding it from international bodies and agreements and convincing countries to break diplomatic ties with Taipei.³ Establishing Australian defence representation in Taiwan would materially assist Taipei with its efforts to avoid international isolation and would be a proportional response to China's escalatory grey zone tactics.

Delivering a deterrent effect

Establishing Australian defence representation in Taiwan would deliver an incremental deterrent effect against a possible full-scale PLA invasion across the Taiwan Strait. Beyond US and allied high-end military platforms and weapons systems in Northeast Asia and the Western Pacific, additional foreign government presence in Taiwan is likely to further complicate PLA invasion plans. Such presence would sow more doubts in the minds of China's policy planners about the international implications of attempting to seize Taiwan by force and may also throw up more challenges for PLA targeting and tactics. Australian defence representation in Taiwan would thereby incrementally increase the risks of invasion for China.

Augmenting the efforts of Australia's allies and partners

Establishing Australian defence representation in Taiwan is also likely to be supported by Canberra's key Indo-Pacific allies and partners, including fellow Quad members. The United States would welcome such a move given Washington's intensifying support for Taipei and its long-standing deep military engagement with Taiwan.⁴ Japan is also reportedly considering upgrading its defence representation and is strongly invested in Taiwan's security.⁵ Meanwhile, regional partners such as Singapore and India are also likely to privately welcome the establishment of such Australian defence representation in Taiwan.⁶ Singapore

² "Record number of China planes enter Taiwan air defence zone", *BBC*, 5 October 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58794094>.

³ Benjamin Herscovitch, "Taiwan and the War of Wills" in *China Story Yearbook: Contradiction*, Linda Jaivin, Esther Sunkyung Klein, and Sharon Strange (eds), Canberra: ANU Press, 2022, pp. 203-207.

⁴ Patricia Zengerle and Michael Martina, "U.S. Senate panel advances bill to boost support for Taiwan", *Reuters*, 15 September 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/us-senate-panel-advances-sweeping-taiwan-security-bill-2022-09-14/>; Vincent Ni, "Joe Biden again says US forces would defend Taiwan from Chinese attack", *The Guardian*, 19 September 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/19/joe-biden-repeats-claim-that-us-forces-would-defend-taiwan-if-china-attacked>; Keoni Everington, "Pentagon doubles number of US troops in Taiwan under Biden", *Taiwan News*, 24 November 2021, <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/4355230>.

⁵ Yang Ming-chu, Matt Yu, and Shih Hsiu-chuan, "Japan to send active-duty defense attache to Taipei: report", *Focus Taiwan*, 4 June 2022, <https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202206040006>; Masaya Inoue, "Japan's stance on the Taiwan Strait", *East Asia Forum*, 9 September 2022, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2022/09/09/japans-stance-on-the-taiwan-strait/>.

⁶ Kelvin Chen, "Taiwan resumes military cooperation with Singapore", *Taiwan News*, 17 December 2021, <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/4379714>; Greg Torode and Jess Macy Yu, "Taiwan courts security ties with bigger friends as Beijing snatches allies", *Reuters*, 14 September 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-taiwan-diplomacy-analysis-idUSKCN1LU00G>.

maintains close military ties with Taiwan, including training and exercises.⁷ At the same time, Indian military officers regularly visit Taiwan and the intelligence relationship between Taipei and New Delhi is growing.⁸

Intelligence sharing

China's military intimidation and grey zone tactics against Taiwan are among the most acute threats to international security. As well as potentially precipitating future cross-Strait crises, such actions risk escalating into a global military conflict involving close Australian allies and partners, including the United States and Japan.⁹ Any such scenario would profoundly and adversely impact Australia's security and interests.¹⁰ With the risks of conflict increasing, cross-Strait security dynamics are critical intelligence priorities for Canberra. Australian defence representation in Taiwan could serve as an additional conduit for intelligence sharing between Taipei and Canberra. This would increase Australia's situational awareness and reduce Canberra's reliance on intelligence sourced from allies and partners.

Australia-Taiwan ties and regional security cooperation

Canberra has described Taipei as a "leading democracy and a critical partner" and the Australian government says that "Australia and Taiwan are Indo-Pacific partners."¹¹ Australian defence representation would add policy substance to Australia's rhetorical emphasis on the importance of the unofficial bilateral relationship. As well as being a tangible and positive response to requests from Taipei for more defence engagement with key regional partners, such representation could facilitate cooperation between the Australian Defence Force (ADF) and ROCAF on shared Australian and Taiwanese priorities.¹² Australian defence representation in Taiwan could, for example, be used to facilitate and sustain mutually beneficial ADF-ROCAF cooperation on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief in South-East Asia and the Pacific. Australia and Taiwan already cooperate on security issues, such as transnational law enforcement and cybersecurity, while energy security is a key dimension of the bilateral economic relationship. Australian defence representation in Taiwan is a natural extension of existing security cooperation.

⁷ Kelvin Chen, "Taiwan resumes military cooperation with Singapore", *Taiwan News*, 17 December 2021, <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/4379714>.

⁸ Greg Torode and Jess Macy Yu, "Taiwan courts security ties with bigger friends as Beijing snatches allies", *Reuters*, 14 September 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-taiwan-diplomacy-analysis-idUSKCN1LU00G>.

⁹ David Lague and Maryanne Murray, "T-DAY: The Battle for Taiwan", *Reuters*, 5 November 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/taiwan-china-wargames/>.

¹⁰ William Langley, Chan Ho-him, and Thomas Hale, "How rising tensions across the Taiwan Strait could threaten global trade", *Financial Times*, 5 August 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/68871ec9-6741-4e0a-8542-940152df4e36>.

¹¹ "Joint Statement Australia-U.S. Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN) 2021", <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/united-states-of-america/ausmin/joint-statement-australia-us-ministerial-consultations-ausmin-2021>; Representative Jenny Bloomfield, "Australia-Taiwan English Language Learning Partnership Action Plan", 17 August 2022, https://australia.org.tw/tpei/ELLP_action_plan.html.

¹² Greg Torode and Jess Macy Yu, "Taiwan courts security ties with bigger friends as Beijing snatches allies", *Reuters*, 14 September 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-taiwan-diplomacy-analysis-idUSKCN1LU00G>.

Risks

China would almost certainly view such a development negatively and Australian defence representation in Taiwan would likely add an additional point of strain to the Australia-China relationship. Moreover, if such defence representation is established with fanfare, then the Chinese government is likely to harshly criticise the Australian government via both diplomatic channels and the state-controlled press. However, the establishment of such Australian defence representation in Taiwan would only be one extra irritant amid fractious disagreements across a wide spectrum of issues in the Australia-China relationship.¹³ China's frustration with such representation is also likely to be moderated by the generally circumspect diplomatic positions Australia has taken on a range of Taiwan-related questions. In instances where Australia has addressed China's military intimidation of Taiwan and supported "Taiwan's meaningful participation in international organisations," it has acted with allies and partners.¹⁴ Given these precedents and the broad range of disputes already weighing the Australia-China relationship down, the establishment of Australian defence representation in Taiwan is only likely to incrementally add to Beijing's disappointment with Canberra.

Consistency with Australia's one-China policy

Per the December 1972 Joint Communiqué that established diplomatic relations between Australia and the People's Republic of China: "The Australian Government recognises the Government of the People's Republic of China as the sole legal Government of China, [and] acknowledges the position of the Chinese Government that Taiwan is a province of the People's Republic of China."¹⁵ Although Australia does not recognise Taiwan as a sovereign state, Canberra is not committed to Beijing's view that Taiwan is a province of China. The 1972 Joint Communiqué only "acknowledges" China's view to that effect. As such, a wide range of unofficial contact between Australia and Taiwan is consistent with the built-in flexibility of Canberra's one-China policy. For example, officials from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and other departments and agencies represent Australian interests in Taiwan on a variety of economic, trade, cultural, people-to-people, and educational issues, as well as transnational law enforcement cooperation and cybersecurity.¹⁶ Australia's one-China policy equally does not preclude ADF and Department

¹³ "Key bilateral disputes", Beijing to Canberra and Back, <http://beijing2canberra.org/key-bilateral-disputes/>.

¹⁴ "U.S.-Australia-Japan trilateral strategic dialogue", 5 August 2022, <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/media-release/us-australia-japan-trilateral-strategic-dialogue>; "Australia's evolving language on Taiwan", Beijing to Canberra and Back, <https://beijing2canberra.org/australias-evolving-language-on-taiwan/>.

¹⁵ "Joint Communiqué of the Australian Government and the Government of the People's Republic of China Concerning the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations Between Australia and China", 21 December 1972, <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/original/00003119.pdf>.

¹⁶ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "China country brief", <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/china/china-country-brief#:~:text=Australia%20adheres%20to%20its%20one,economic%2C%20trade%20and%20cultural%20interests>.

of Defence civilians similarly representing Australian interests in Taiwan on intelligence and security matters.

Low-profile but suboptimal options

To reduce the likelihood of eliciting a negative response from China, Australian defence representation in Taiwan could be established discreetly without a public announcement and could be staffed with non-uniformed or retired ADF personnel and/or Department of Defence civilians. Such configurations are, however, likely to be suboptimal. Key elements of the value of establishing Australian defence representation include the incremental deterrent effect it delivers against a possible PLA invasion of Taiwan and the signal it sends internationally about Canberra's willingness to engage with Taipei and counteract Beijing's isolation efforts. Although establishing Australian defence representation in Taiwan would still be on balance positive if done so discreetly, the deterrence and signalling benefits would be reduced. Finally, establishing such defence representation without active duty ADF personnel may limit access in the Taiwanese system and, as a result, reduce the intelligence sharing benefit of such an initiative for Australia.