

# The Heritage Foundation **Backgrounder**

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## CHINA'S MISSILE DIPLOMACY: A TEST OF AMERICAN RESOLVE IN ASIA

(Updating Asian Studies Center *Backgrounder* No. 139, "China's Threats to Taiwan Challenge U.S. Leadership in Asia," March 6, 1996)

Early in the morning of March 8, China fired three nuclear-capable missiles into two areas close to the Republic of China on Taiwan as part of missile "tests" that will last until March 15. Moreover, from March 12 to March 20, China will hold large-scale naval military exercises that use live ammunition, also in an area close to Taiwan. These military actions are targeted at the ROC's March 23 presidential election and mark an escalation in Beijing's campaign to intimidate the citizens and leadership of democratic Taiwan. Beijing has designed the missile tests to emphasize China's ability to blockade Taiwan. The three missiles fired on March 8 fell into two zones astride Taiwan's two largest ports, and Beijing has warned commercial air and sea traffic to steer clear. The tests threaten both Taiwan's economic well-being and the safety of its citizens. They also stand as test of Washington's leadership and resolve, and challenge America's historic interest in maintaining freedom of the seas.

The Clinton Administration's March 10 decision to dispatch U.S. Navy aircraft carrier groups to waters near Taiwan to deter possible Chinese escalation was correct. Congress's response to these latest threats against Taiwan also has been strong. Speaker Newt Gingrich, for example, said they amounted to "an act of terror." But while State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns called the missile tests "reckless and potentially dangerous," another State Department official told *The New York Times* the tests did not amount to an act of terror. Washington should protest China's missile intimidation in the strongest terms, reaffirm America's commitment to defending freedom of the seas, review U.S. commitments to Taiwan as stipulated in the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, and accelerate the introduction of U.S. missile defense systems into Asia.

### CHINA'S MISSILE CAMPAIGN TO THREATEN TAIWAN

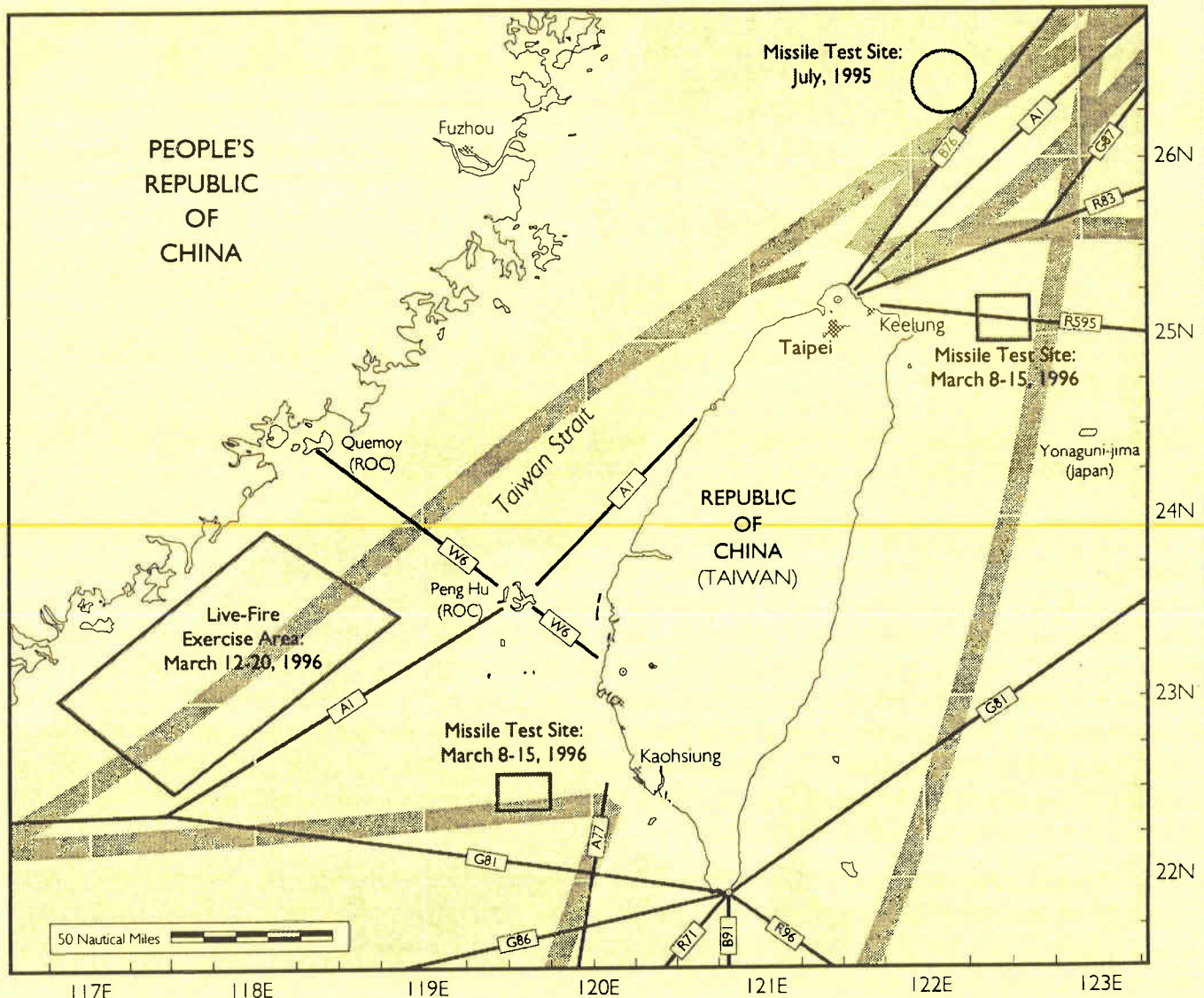
China is the only Asian country using nuclear-capable missiles to intimidate its neighbors. The tests which will last from March 8 to March 15 mark the second time China has employed missiles to threaten the people of Taiwan. Last July 21 to 26, China launched four 1,125-mile-range DF-21 missiles and two 375-mile-range M-9 missiles into an area roughly 90 miles north of Taiwan. Both the DF-21 and the M-9 are designed to carry conventional, chemical, or nuclear warheads. So far, the M-9 has been used in the latest tests, which target two areas of roughly 500 square miles each. One target area is located about 30 miles off the northern coast of Taiwan, east of the port of Keelung. The second is 47 miles directly west of the southern port of Kaohsiung.

**Clear Escalation of Tension.** The new missile tests mark a clear escalation in China's pressure against Taiwan. The location of the northern target area raises the possibility that Chinese missiles may fly over Taiwanese territory, possibly even the capital city of Taipei. The failure of one M-9 missile in last July's exer-

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Graphic by Thomas J. Timmons



**PRC Missile Tests, Naval Exercises Will Come Close to International Sea, Air Lanes**

— AI — Air Routes      Sea Lanes

**Note:** Air route information may not be current. Shipping routes are approximate.  
**Sources:** Defense Mapping Agency, *Jet Navigation Chart 38*; Foreign Broadcast Information Service, *FBIS-CHI-95-140*; news reports.

cise also raises the danger of an accidental strike on Taiwan. Moreover, the March tests follow months of threats. For example, during an early 1996 trip to China, former Clinton Administration Pentagon official Charles Freeman reportedly was told that China “has prepared plans for a missile attack against Taiwan consisting of one conventional missile strike a day for 30 days.”

As also occurred in July, the current tests are taking place alongside large-scale Chinese ground and naval exercises in areas near Taiwan. The latest exercises have featured practicing the largest airborne assault ever conducted by China, as well as a huge amphibious exercise aimed at Taiwan. And from March 12 to 20, naval exercises using live munitions will take place close to major air and sea routes in the Taiwan Strait.



**Virtual Blockade.** These new missile tests and naval exercises amount to a blockade of major air and sea lanes critical to Taiwan's survival. The southern port of Kaohsiung and the northern port of Keelung account for about 70 percent of Taiwan's trade, and exports account for about 40 percent of Taiwan's gross domestic product. Because of these tests, some shipping will have to be diverted. Moreover, about 30 flights a day that use routes near the northern test site will have to be re-routed. China's missile intimidation has damaged Taiwan's economy and threatens the economic confidence of the people of Taiwan. The March 4 announcement of the missile tests caused the Taiwan stock market to drop by 62 points the next day; the stock market has fallen 625 points since July 1995. The missile tests also have caused panic buying of gold, and the Taiwan government has had to reassure people that food and fuel have been stockpiled in the event of a blockade. Missile strikes or damage to shipping will further depress investor confidence and cause shipping insurance rates to skyrocket.

## **TIME FOR WASHINGTON TO SHOW RESOLVE**

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China's latest missile tests challenge America's interests in Asia. For over two centuries, the United States has defended freedom of the seas and stood for freedom of commerce. Indeed, these principles have been at the heart of America's open door approach to Asia and China. By using its military to create a virtual blockade near Taiwan's two major ports, and forcing a diversion of international air and sea traffic, China is challenging an enduring and vital American interest.

Beijing's actions also stand as a challenge to the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act (TRA). Section 2 of the TRA states that "It is the policy of the United States to consider any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means, including boycotts or embargoes, a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific and of grave concern to the United States." Section 3 directs the President "to inform Congress promptly of any threat to the security or economic system of the people of Taiwan...." The tests also call into question the very basis on which the U.S. established relations with China: the assumption that Taiwan's status would be resolved peacefully by the Chinese themselves.

Above all, these tests are a challenge to American leadership and resolve in Asia. For over half a century, the United States has stood as the ultimate guarantor of stability and security in Asia. Given the stakes involved, the Clinton Administration's initial response to China's missile diplomacy was tragically weak. The Administration offered only a mild rebuke to China's missile tests in July 1995. Responding to the announcement of the current round of missile tests, State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns argues that it is not "credible" to describe the missile tests as a blockade of Taiwan's ports. The Administration has yet to be as critical as former Clinton Administration CIA Director James Woolsey, who said the tests amount to a "de facto temporary and partial blockade [which is] aggressive, indefensible, dangerous...." The Clinton Administration should undertake a stronger response to China's missiles. The U.S. should:

- ① **Strongly reject Beijing's use of military force.** Since the U.S. is the only power able to deter China's threat to peace, the Administration should make clear to China that military action against Taiwan may undermine the basis for continued peaceful U.S.-PRC relations. The Administration should remind Chinese leaders that normalization of relations was premised on the peaceful resolution of Taiwan's status. The U.S. should tell China that its use of force against Taiwan threatens peace in Asia.
- ② **Reaffirm America's vital interest in the freedom of the seas.** The Administration should inform China that its missile tests near Taiwan pose an unacceptable threat to internationally recognized freedom of the high seas and airways. Ships from the Japan-based 7th Fleet, now dispatched to international waters near Taiwan, should remain in this region after the March 23 election, both to deter China and to underscore U.S. commitment to freedom of the seas. The U.S. also should consult with Asian allies and friends regarding possible sanctions against Chinese sea and air carriers in the event the missile tests harm ships or aircraft.

- ③ **Report to Congress that China is posing a danger to Taiwan's economic system.** These missile tests constitute an attempt to blockade Taiwan's ports and airports. They could presage a more deliberate attempt to blockade Taiwan. In accordance with the TRA, the Clinton Administration must report to Congress that these actions pose a threat to Taiwan's economy.
- ④ **Sell Taiwan defensive arms consistent with the TRA.** China's missile threats against Taiwan point to an urgent need for missile defense in the ROC. Thus, to enable Taiwan to defend itself against any possible missile attack, the U.S. should offer to sell the ROC the *Patriot* PAC-2 GEM missile defense system. This is the most modern operable missile defense system in America's arsenal. If China persists with its missile threats, the U.S. should sell Taiwan more advanced missile defense systems as they enter U.S. service.

## CONCLUSION

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Beijing's latest missile tests near Taiwan's two major ports are, for Washington, an unacceptable escalation in China's attempt to undermine the free and democratic spirit of the people of Taiwan. These threatening tests, combined with large Chinese naval exercises, also constitute a direct challenge to key U.S. interests, including the peaceful resolution of Taiwan's future and maintaining the freedom of navigation in Asia. As the only nation capable of deterring China, the U.S. should strongly protest China's missile threats, reaffirm the freedom of the seas by deploying the 7th Fleet, and sell missile defense systems to Taiwan.

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