

Incursions and Intentions: Understanding the PRC's Approach to Taiwan's Kinmen Islands

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According to research by the [Institute for the Study of War \(ISW\)](#), "The People's Republic of China (PRC) began aggressively challenging Taiwan's jurisdiction over its outlying islands, especially Kinmen, in February 2024. Repeated Chinese Coast Guard incursions in Taiwan-controlled waters around Kinmen aim to normalize the PRC's 'law enforcement' jurisdiction in the area."

ISW published its findings and analysis on August 21, 2024 in a report titled [Exploring a PRC Short-of-War Coercion Campaign to Seize Taiwan's Kinmen Islands and Possible Responses](#).

ISW aims to advance an informed understanding of military affairs through reliable research, trusted analysis, and innovative education. They are committed to improving the nation's ability to execute military operations and respond to emerging threats to achieve U.S. strategic objectives. ISW is a non-partisan, non-profit, public policy research organization.

ISW started using Babel Street Insights in early 2023 due to its ability to surface a wide range of unique, multilanguage insights drawn from billions of publicly available data sources worldwide. ISW used Babel Street Insights for the research needed to analyze China's incursions into the Taiwan-controlled waters around Kinmen Island.

The Challenge

The archipelagos of Kinmen and Matsu are just off the PRC's coast and belong to Taiwan, but the PRC claims them as its own. The PRC had largely respected Taiwan's de facto jurisdiction of the waters around Kinmen and Matsu before 2024 but began aggressively challenging Taiwan's jurisdiction in February 2024 after the election of William Lai Ching-te, whom the PRC views as a separatist, as the president of Taiwan.

The Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) began routine incursions into the waters around Kinmen Island in February. The CCG also began conducting occasional law enforcement activities against Taiwanese nationals in these waters, including boarding, inspecting, and detaining vessels.

The goal of an ISW special report in July 2024 was to detail the PRC's actions in the archipelagos and illustrate how the PRC could use such methods to advance its goals vis-à-vis Taiwan. The first half of the project laid out the developments that ISW had observed since January 2024. These included CCG incursions into Taiwan-controlled waters around Kinmen, CCG detentions of Taiwanese fishermen near Kinmen, and PRC civilian drone flights into Kinmen's airspace.

ISW hoped to discover patterns in the CCG incursions that would illuminate the extent to which the incursions were responses to political events in Taiwan or part of a long-term coercion campaign irrespective of specific "provocations."



The ideal outcome would illustrate the CCG incursions into the waters around the Kinmen Islands, the most common target of incursions. ISW sought to show the number of ships, their organizational affiliation (CCG, PLA Navy, etc.), and whether they entered Kinmen's prohibited and/or restricted waters. ISW intended to display this data alongside relevant political events, such as William Lai's inauguration as Taiwan's president on May 20.

The Approach

ISW sought a complete understanding of the changes in PRC behavior around Taiwan's outlying islands of Kinmen, Matsu, Wuqiu, Dongyin, and Penghu since the start of 2024. To begin the analysis, ISW created a spreadsheet of every notable PRC incursion, confrontation, arrest, boarding, overflight, and other actions targeting Taiwan-administered territory, airspace, waters, or Taiwanese personnel in the vicinity of Taiwan's outlying islands.

According to Daniel Shats, ISW China Researcher and one of the report authors, "We knew from Taiwan's Coast Guard that a particular incursion in July was the 34th of the year. We also knew some monthly numbers, such as PRC state media claiming there were five incursions in April. We put all these incidents in a spreadsheet for our data collection phase."

The spreadsheet also included PRC official statements about the incidents. The intent was to understand what China was doing around Taiwan's outlying islands and whether its efforts pointed to a cohesive campaign with a specific aim. Although ISW had a good start to the project from their own manual data collections, the data was incomplete, and the researchers needed to fill gaps in order to link related events.

Shats stated, "We specifically wanted to use Babel Street to track all the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) incursions into Kinmen's restricted and prohibited waters since the PRC began such incursions in February. We judged this to be the most quantifiable piece of the coercion campaign and therefore the part that needed the most comprehensive research."

The Solution

ISW used Babel Street Insights Document Search to perform keyword searches in Chinese and English. The results included many CCG incursions and other relevant incidents that were missing from their normal collection process and helped fill the gaps in the analysis spreadsheet.

Search result filters in Insights allowed ISW to confine results to date ranges to focus on specific incursions. In addition to finding incursions they had previously missed, ISW also found new details on the events they already knew about. The built-in, one-click translation features of Insights made it possible to easily read Chinese articles without further effort.

Babel Street Insights also provided access to document sources that were previously unknown to ISW, particularly social media accounts. Accessing Chinese social media can be cumbersome, but Babel Street made it easy, especially for older Weibo posts that would otherwise only have been accessible by logging into Weibo.

The Impact

With Babel Street, ISW was able to find information on 22 of the 34 known incursions. Shats stated, “Using Babel Street made us confident that the missing data was simply not available because the PRC and Taiwanese governments had not publicized every incursion.”

In the absence of Insights, ISW would have had to rely on standard search engines for broad results, and targeted searches of the websites for Taiwanese and Chinese coast guards. The team would have also needed to separately scour major news sites on both sides of the Taiwan Strait and possibly local sources from Kinmen, Matsu, and the PRC’s Fujian Province.

According to Shats, “Babel Street Insights saved days, and possibly weeks of research by allowing us to read all those sources in one place and even narrow down the search to the most relevant sources. This applies not only to the Kinmen incursion part of the project but also to other events such as PRC drone flights over Kinmen and Matsu.”



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