

Your guide to a disrupted world

**Special offer for new subscribers only*

Save 33%

Taiwan

China seeks to display its growing military might in Taiwan drills

Deterrent exercises also reveal ability to mobilise more quickly, experts say



China launched unprecedented military drills around Taiwan in the past week and suggested that it used some of its most advanced weaponry © Lin Jian/AP

Kathrin Hille in Taipei YESTERDAY

After China declared its military exercises around Taiwan complete on Wednesday, defence experts took a step back to dissect the operation designed to punish Taipei for hosting US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. Their main conclusion: rather than a rehearsal for war, the week-long activity was a deterrence operation.

“There is a narrative out there that what they are doing is indicative of a forceful unification of [Taiwan](#) or a blockade. But almost all elements the People’s Liberation Army communicated during the operation perfectly line up with what they call deterrence activity,” said Roderick Lee, research director at the China Aerospace Studies Institute, a US Air Force think-tank.

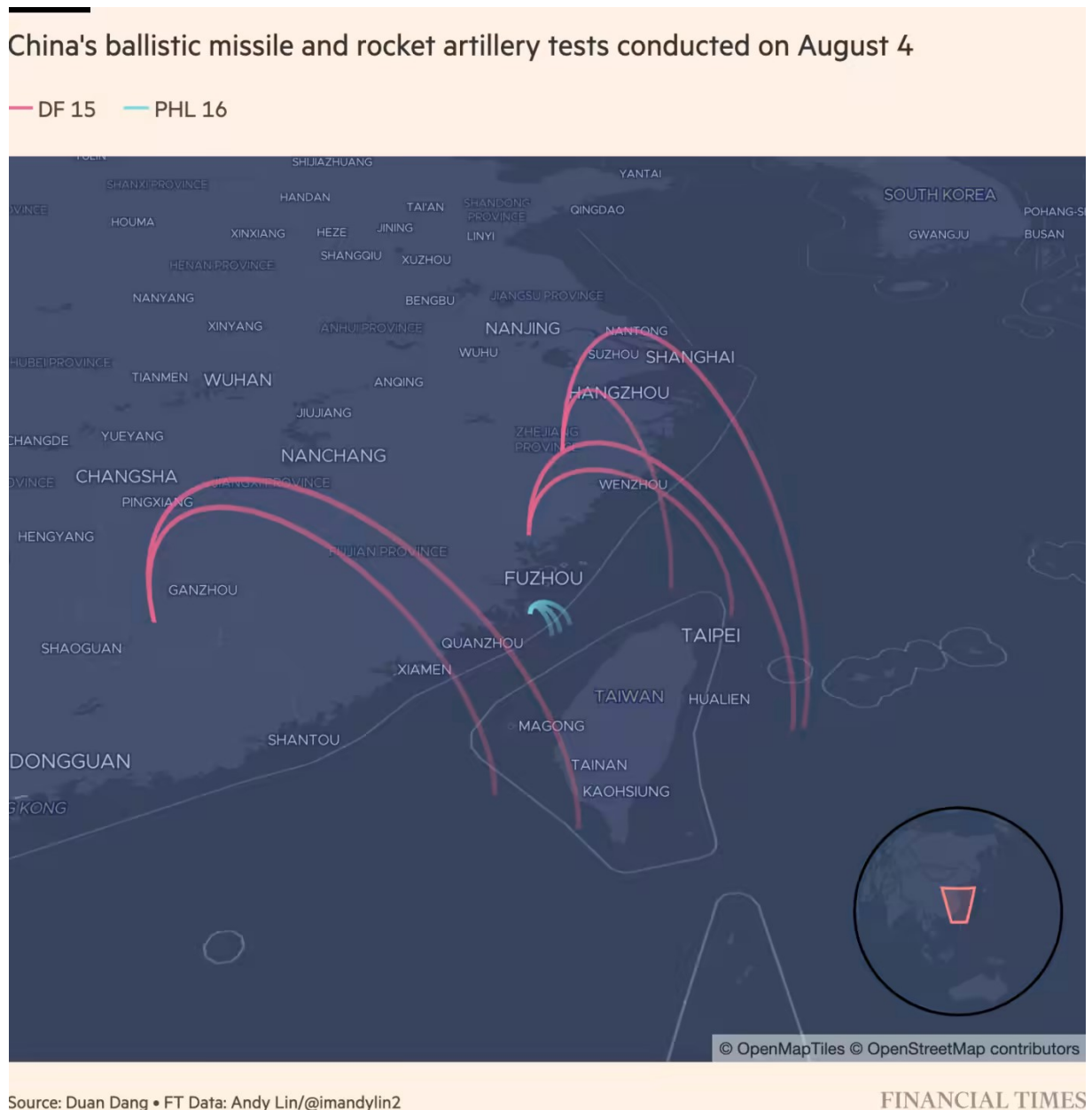
According to Beijing’s defence strategy, the PLA is ready to make some offensive moves to defend against perceived threats but seeks to control the risk of escalation. The PLA clearly distinguishes such operations from wartime activities.

Most of the PLA’s manoeuvres around Taiwan over the past week are listed as options for deterrence activity in a 2020 textbook from China’s National Defence University, including showing new weapons in action and changes in force distribution, as well as restricted military moves to constrain the adversary.

Taiwanese defence officials and US experts say Beijing deployed a number of actions that met these criteria, including the launch of the first of its new hypersonic missiles.

that met these criteria: seven areas were closed for live-fire drills, blocking some of the region's busiest flight routes and shipping lanes; the PLA transported military gear around China; it fired the PHL 16, a heavy rocket artillery system unveiled in a parade only five years ago; and it distributed pictures of China's newest stealth fighter taking off at night.

Above all, the PLA's deterrence playbook calls for forceful messaging to instil fear of war in their adversary, a tool that was used prominently during the recent exercises. Several times a day, the PLA's Eastern Theatre Command published videos and pictures of fighters, warships and missiles, and described their activity as practising for an attack on Taiwan or denying US forces access to the area.



The government, state media and leading commentators accompanied that effort with

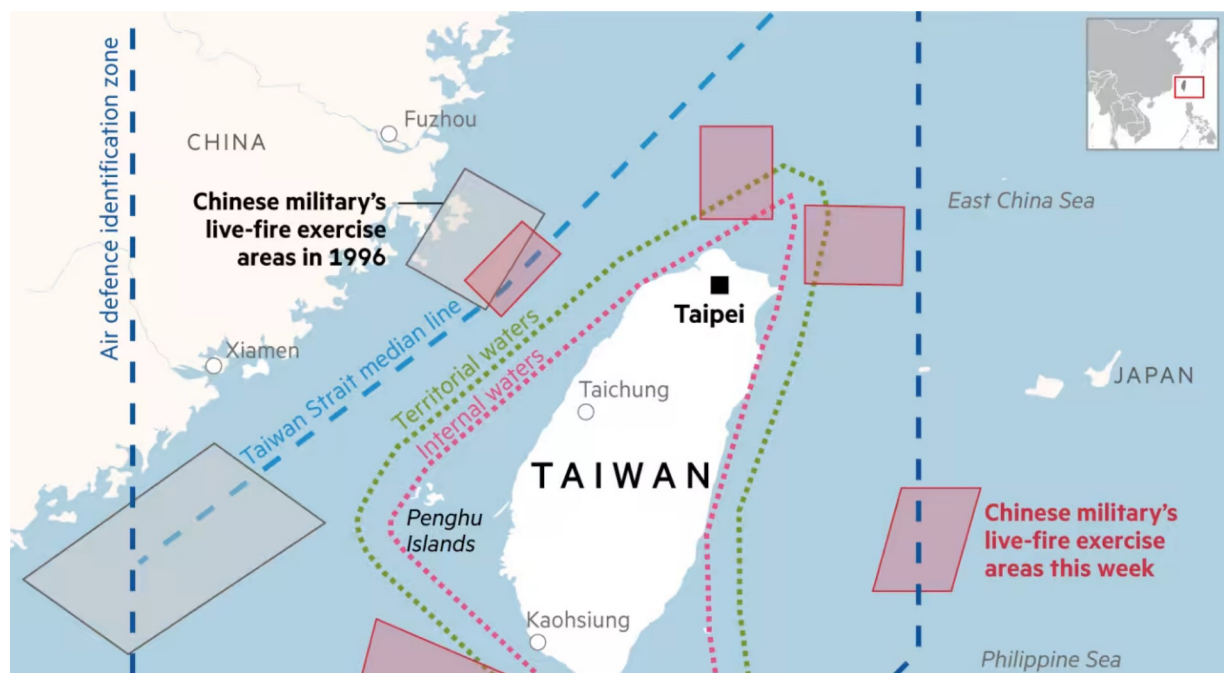
propaganda that justified China's actions, called for more and vilified Taiwan and the US.

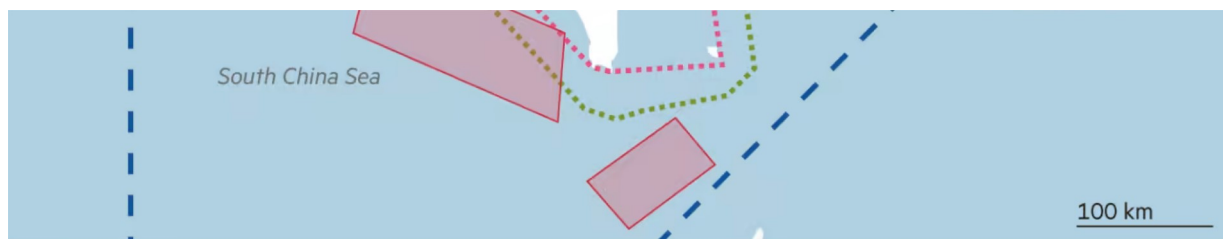
“Of course it is useful for them to put everything together, have pilots operate in the area relevant for an attack on Taiwan, at a high operational tempo and in an environment that provides a little more stress on command and control than usual,” Lee said. “But the large-scale exercises the PLA conducts every summer do much more to prepare them for a Taiwan conflict,” he added, pointing to regular unit-level drills focused on amphibious landing.

Still, Taipei is drawing lessons from the episode. One move which has caught close attention among defence officials was China's firing of PHL 16 rockets from Pingtan island, just off the mainland, into the narrowest section of the Taiwan Strait. “They are hinting they can directly hit Taiwan from the shore. We knew that before but now they have taken the weapons out,” said a person who advises the Taiwanese defence ministry.

“That means our shore defence strategy may not be viable. Using this [multiple launch rocket system] would be a much cheaper and more effective way for them than missiles to hit dispersed ground forces units we position to defend against landing forces,” he said.

Others challenge that conclusion, saying that to demonstrate the threat from China's newest multiple launch rocket systems, the PLA would have had to fire into one of the closure zones off Taiwan's north coast to prove the missiles had a range of more than 200km and were capable of covering most of the island.





Taipei and Washington are also focused on the missile tests with which the PLA opened the exercise. Some missiles flew over Taipei and dropped into the sea east of the island. “It is a hint to the US that this is how we will sink your carriers,” said Shu Hsiao-huang, a research fellow at the Institute for National Defence and Security Research, a think-tank backed by Taiwan’s defence ministry.

Shu said it was notable that none of the materials published by the PLA about the drills mentioned the use of the Dongfeng 26, an intermediate-range missile nicknamed “Guam express” because it is designed to hit the US Pacific territory that is home to various forces under the Indo-Pacific Command, or of the Dongfeng 17, a medium-range ballistic missile that can carry a hypersonic missile. Both are seen as essential for the PLA to cripple the US’s ability to come to Taiwan’s help in case of a Chinese invasion.

Compared with the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1995-96, when China retaliated against closer public engagement between top US and Taiwanese officials with missile tests, military analysts see substantial progress in the PLA’s ability to ratchet up a complex campaign quickly.

“In 1996, the exercise had a preparation period of more than one week, but the preparation period for this exercise was shortened to 72 hours,” said Hsu Yen-chi, a researcher at the Council on Strategic and Wargaming Studies in Taipei. “This is the PLA’s countermeasure against the US’s declared goal of a one-week expedition to the Taiwan Strait. A quick surprise attack is still Beijing’s ideal plan to invade Taiwan.”

Officials and analysts believe Beijing started preparing months in advance because plans for [Pelosi’s Taiwan trip](#) first became public in April and China started making threats about a military response shortly afterwards. But they argued any plan for a PLA operation would have been “bare-bones” at that stage and the Chinese military’s moves after Pelosi’s departure showed its greatly enhanced ability to respond rapidly.

Some analysts see this as a sign that the new command structure established through wide-ranging reforms since 2015 is functioning smoothly. “It is a benchmark for the state of affairs in conducting joint operations,” Lee said.

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2022. All rights reserved.
