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As Pelosi Leaves Taiwan, China's Military Looms Larger

Drills spurred by visit could intrude into island's claimed territorial waters, signal Beijing's ability to blockade

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U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi departed Taiwan after a whirlwind trip that raised military tensions over the island to their highest level in more than two decades, an escalation that is set to persist long after she returns home.

By the time Mrs. Pelosi (D., Calif.) wrapped up a day of meetings with Taiwan's president, senior lawmakers, executives and human-rights activists and left Taiwan on Wednesday, China's navy had already maneuvered into position for large live-fire drills that will encircle the island beginning Thursday.

Mrs. Pelosi's visit sought to reinforce what she said was America's ironclad commitment to preserving Taiwan's democracy. Yet the trip also brings Beijing's military activity into what Taipei claims as its territorial waters, according to Taipei's Defense Ministry, raising the prospect of greater pressure on an island that is the most sensitive flashpoint in U.S.-China relations.

"The proximity of the exercises to Taiwan could become the new norm," said J. Michael Cole, a Taipei-based senior adviser with the International Republican Institute, a nonprofit whose board includes Republican Party heavyweights. He described it as "salami-slicing" that aims to constrain the spaces where Taiwan can operate.

Mrs. Pelosi, the most senior U.S. official to visit Taiwan in a quarter-century, framed her visit as part of a broader struggle over the future of democracy.





“Today the world faces a choice between democracy and autocracy,” Mrs. Pelosi said in a meeting with Taiwan’s President Tsai Ing-wen. “America’s determination to preserve democracy here in Taiwan and around the world remains ironclad.”

Beijing worries the U.S. is backing away from longstanding agreements over the status of Taiwan, which could unsettle the balance of cross-strait relations and make military conflict more likely.

China’s Foreign Ministry warned of countermeasures to come against the U.S. and Taiwan in response to the visit.

“The relevant measures will be firm, powerful and effective,” Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said Wednesday at a daily press briefing. “The United States and Taiwan’s independence forces will continue to feel it.”

On Wednesday, China announced new bans on imports of Taiwanese citrus and other food, saying it detected pests, excessive pesticide residue and Covid-19 in recent shipments.

The most serious risks could stem from maneuvers being carried out by China’s People’s Liberation Army. The PLA said naval, aerial, strategic-missile and other forces conducted joint training on Wednesday to the north, southwest and southeast of Taiwan prior to the live-fire drills that are slated to begin Thursday. Those drills will involve the use of long-range weapons and conventional missiles.

Analysts said the coordinates of the areas affected by the drills show they could intrude into Taiwan’s claimed territorial waters in the north near the capital, Taipei, and the port of Keelung, as well as in the south near the key port city of Kaohsiung.

One of the areas is to the east of the island, where the PLA said the drills would involve the

use of conventional missiles. Depending on the launch sites and missile types, experts say, the PLA projectiles could fly over Taiwan—a gesture that would be seen as a major escalation.

Western defense analysts said China's show of force appears far more extensive than what it deployed in the 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait crisis, the tensest standoff between Chinese and American forces in recent decades. That showdown was set off, in part, by Taiwan's then-president traveling to the U.S.

“These announced exercises are not only unprecedented in scope but also likely in scale,” said M. Taylor Fravel, a professor and director of the MIT Security Studies Program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Whereas the 1995-1996 drills focused on amphibious assaults, this week's exercises seem aimed at showcasing the PLA's ability to blockade Taiwan and conduct joint operations with air, sea and land-based forces.



On Wednesday, Taiwan's defense ministry said China sent 27 warplanes near its airspace, the highest daily tally since June 21. It said 22 of the planes crossed the median line in the Taiwan Strait—a notional boundary widely seen as dividing mainland and Taiwanese areas of control—a provocative gesture that Beijing rarely makes.

China's forceful response is partly due to the timing of Mrs. Pelosi's visit, coming just before the Communist Party's twice-a-decade congress this fall, where leader Xi Jinping is expected to break with recent precedent to secure a third term in power. Meanwhile, the country's economy has buckled under the pressure of widespread Covid-19 lockdowns and a sharp downturn in sentiment in the housing sector. The country's top governing body last week

effectively set aside China's 5.5% growth target for the year in light of the weakness.

"Whether it's certain insecurities on the part of the president of China as to his own political situation, that he's rattling his saber, I don't know," Mrs. Pelosi said, without naming Mr. Xi. "But it doesn't really matter. What matters to us is that we salute the successes of Taiwan."

Ms. Hua, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, said Mrs. Pelosi's visit was a provocative violation of China's sovereignty and an attempt by the House speaker to score political points.

While the U.S. says there has been no change in its Taiwan policy, U.S. lawmakers have made high-profile visits in recent months, and President Biden has repeatedly suggested the U.S. would intervene if China were to attack Taiwan, comments the White House has subsequently walked back. Some Western analysts warn that such moves could embolden advocates of Taiwan independence and push the region closer to conflict.

China claims Taiwan as part of its sovereign territory. The island functions separately from the mainland, with a robust economy, competitive elections and a lively independent media. While the U.S. and most other countries don't recognize Taiwan as a sovereign state, the U.S. is required by law to provide Taiwan with the means to defend itself and opposes any attempt by the mainland to take it over by force.

Under Mr. Xi's rule, U.S. officials say China has become more aggressive toward Taiwan, flexing its growing military power with greater frequency, including sending repeated sorties of warplanes toward the island. Ms. Tsai likened the situation in Taiwan to that between Ukraine and Russia.

"Russia's invasion of Ukraine earlier this year has made security over the Taiwan Strait another focus of worldwide attention," she said Wednesday. "We will do whatever it takes to strengthen Taiwan's self-defense capability."





On the military front, Beijing has in recent years ramped up what experts call “gray-zone warfare” against Taiwan—a series of operations aimed at intimidating the island and wearing down its defenses without resorting to open conflict. It comprises amphibious-assault drills, naval patrols and warplane sorties alongside nonmilitary methods such as cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns and diplomatic pressure.

The near-constant stream of PLA aircraft and warships operating near Taiwan has forced the island’s military to intercept them at a taxing pace, raising fuel and maintenance costs and wearing out personnel and equipment.

Even so, some Chinese scholars cautioned against overblowing the risk of war over Taiwan, saying there is still ample room for diplomacy.

“It’s not like a military conflict is imminent,” said Dingding Chen, a professor of international relations at China’s Jinan University. “It’s far from that.”

Mrs. Pelosi received a hearty welcome throughout her visit to Taiwan. Her arrival was met with rapturous applause by hundreds of onlookers, while Taiwan’s tallest building beamed a welcome message in lights. Her arrival, however, also drew demonstrations by a few dozen pro-Beijing supporters, who gathered outside a Taipei hotel to protest. And Taiwan’s government said a computer hack caused some screens at convenience stores and a railway station to display anti-Pelosi messages.

One reason many people in Taiwan object to coming under Beijing’s rule is China’s record on human rights. Such concerns have been reinforced by the recent deterioration of rights in Hong Kong under a security crackdown driven by Beijing.

On Wednesday afternoon, Mrs. Pelosi met with several pro-democracy activists with ties to Hong Kong, Tibet and mainland China at Taiwan’s National Human Rights Museum. Among them was Wu’er Kaixi, who co-led the 1989 student protests in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square. Mrs. Pelosi visited the Chinese capital two years later and unfurled a banner commemorating those who died there, angering Beijing.

Outside the museum, which was surrounded by a heavy police presence, supporters of Mrs.

Pelosi faced off against several dozen pro-Beijing protesters upset by her presence in Taiwan.

Mrs. Pelosi also met with the vice president of Taiwan's legislature, where she emphasized the trip's peaceful motives and highlighted opportunities for cooperation on areas including security, economics and governance.



At one point in that meeting, Mrs. Pelosi appeared to refer to Taiwan as a country, a reference that could further agitate Beijing. Mrs. Pelosi said the U.S. could learn from Taiwan—“how you address the Covid crisis, how we advance respect for all of the people in our countries as we go forward.”

The U.S. adheres to a “One China” policy that acknowledges—but doesn’t endorse—the claims by Beijing over Taiwan. Mrs. Pelosi’s office said Tuesday that her trip didn’t contradict longstanding U.S. policy regarding Taiwan.

Asked about these comments, Ms. Hua, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, said: “Taiwan has never been a country. Historically and legally speaking, it’s always been a province of the People’s Republic of China.”

Mrs. Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan has dominated social media in China. While many users voiced support for the coming military drills, others urged caution. As Mrs. Pelosi arrived late Tuesday, the volume of discussion on Weibo, one of China’s most popular social-media platforms, was so large at one point that many users reported trouble loading the website and opening the mobile app.

A robust police presence was stationed outside the U.S. Embassy in Beijing on Wednesday

morning. Dozens of uniformed and plainclothes police lined the fortified street in the capital's embassy district. The heavier-than-usual level of security appeared determined to ensure that online discontent over the visit wouldn't spill into the sort of violent street protests that have targeted other embassies previously.

Beijing was otherwise calm. Many people have been more concerned about often draconian Covid-19 restrictions that have left the economy sputtering. Despite the tensions over Taiwan, U.S. brands and pop culture remain widely popular.

Just up the road from the U.S. Embassy, Li Yuelong, a 38-year-old engineer, said the U.S. had been a great help to China in its development in recent decades, from both an economic as well as technological perspective.

The U.S. should be more tolerant of China, Mr. Li said. He feared fighting over Taiwan would hurt ordinary people the most.

"I don't want a war between the two sides," Mr. Li said.

—*Qianwei Zhang and Yoko Kubota in Beijing contributed to this article.*

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Corrections & Amplifications

Taiwan's defense ministry said 22 Chinese warplanes crossed the median line in the Taiwan Strait. An earlier version of this article incorrectly said 11 warplanes cross the line. (Corrected on Aug. 3.)