

## Your guide to a disrupted world

*Only available to new subscribers*

**Save 33%**

### Taiwan

## China's military response to Pelosi visit raises escalation fears

PLA's 'targeted military operation' threatens to choke off export powerhouse



China's aircraft carrier the Liaoning. Observers believe Beijing could field its two aircraft carriers in the Taiwan Strait for the first time in response to Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taipei © Reuters

**Kathrin Hille** in Taipei 8 HOURS AGO

Taiwan welcomed Nancy Pelosi with elation on Tuesday night. “Thank you, Speaker Pelosi,” said a light display on the iconic Taipei 101 skyscraper.

But within half an hour of the arrival of the Speaker of the US House of Representatives arrival, China's armed forces sent a sobering response: the People's Liberation Army would start a “targeted military operation” north, south-west and south-east of the island.

The message added that from Thursday, China would conduct long-range, live-fire shooting drills in six spots around [Taiwan](#), warning ships and aircraft against entering those areas.

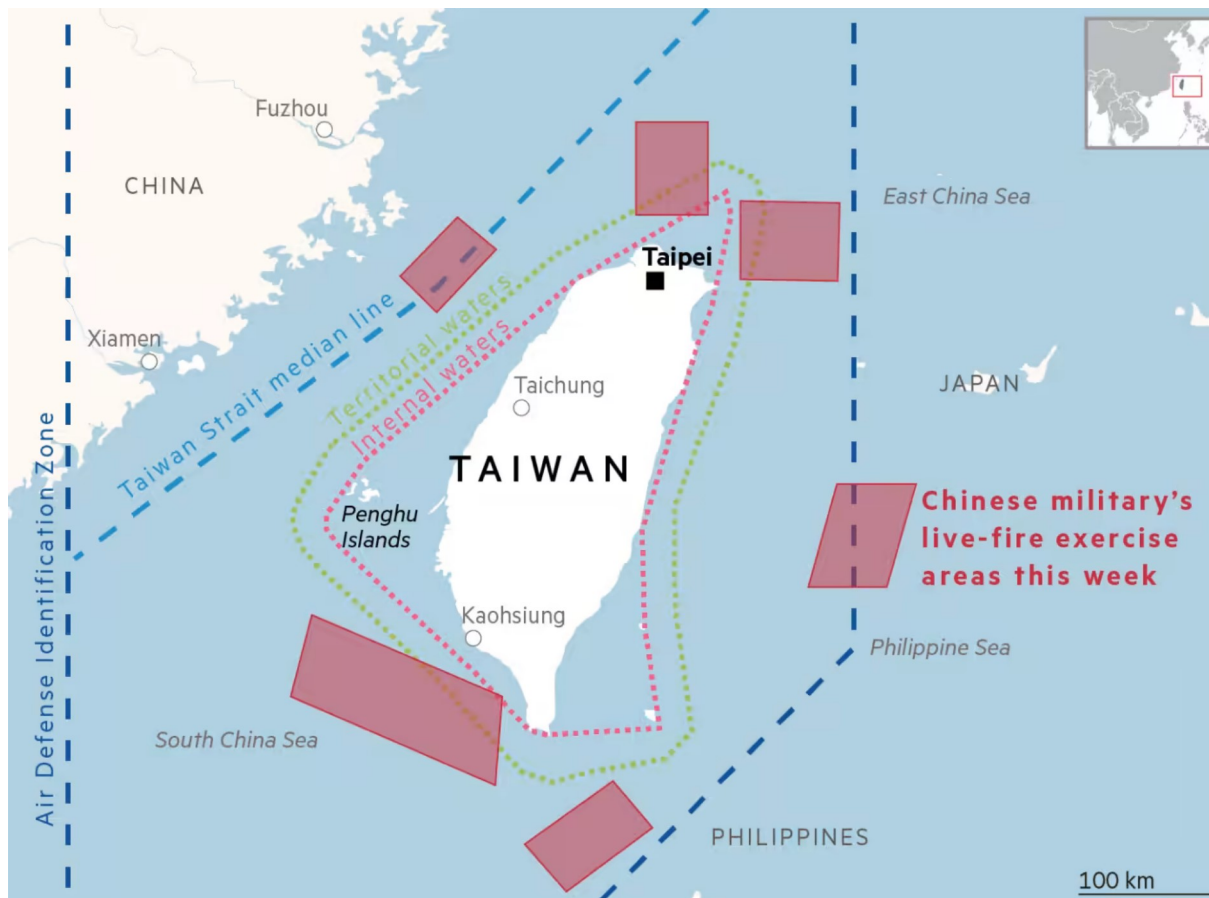
With Beijing's reaction, the [warnings that Pelosi's visit](#), the first by a US House Speaker in 25 years, could risk war in one of the world's most dangerous flashpoints appeared to come true. China claims Taiwan as part of its territory and has long threatened to use force if Taipei refuses to submit to its rule indefinitely or if an external power interferes with its claim.

The [drills announced for later this week](#) could amount to a blockade of a country whose economic lifeblood comes from exports and which is highly reliant on energy imports. “It is a scenario we did consider: once our guest is gone, they are going to

punish us," said a senior Taiwanese government official.

Although Taiwan has long feared a Chinese invasion, a blockade would be a more immediate but still serious threat, causing chaos in one of the world's busiest shipping lanes and disrupting supply chains crucial for global technology exports, already under strain from the pandemic.

Still, security experts argued that Beijing's military posturing should not be confused with an imminent invasion.



“Beijing is calculating what military manoeuvres they can do to express their maximum displeasure and at the same time maintain China’s ability to control the escalation dynamic,” said Meia Nouwens, an expert on the [PLA](#) at the International Institute for Strategic Studies think-tank. “I don’t see the connection to an invasion scenario — I think Beijing is still trying to avoid open conflict.”

Experts believe Beijing’s decision to schedule war games after Pelosi’s departure lowers the danger of a collision with US forces, although they cautioned that risks remained because it was unclear how well communication channels between the sides would work in the event of a real crisis.

Most importantly, [plans for taking Taiwan by force](#), discussed in PLA writings since China's Nationalist government lost the civil war and fled to the island in 1949, envision a barrage of cyber attacks, missile strikes and bombing raids to cripple the country's infrastructure and blind its defences.

Special forces would try to take out Taiwan's elected government and military leaders, paratroopers would attempt to seize a port and then hundreds of thousands of troops would land using amphibious assault ships, civilian ferries and helicopters.

Taiwanese defence officials said that if Beijing were to plan such an assault, Taipei, Washington and its allies would detect it weeks in advance. "The amount of movement of troops and equipment they would need to get under way, they could not entirely be concealed," said a senior official briefed on defence issues. "And we have not seen those kinds of movements."

Security experts in Taiwan said footage of tanks and armoured personnel carriers in coastal areas in recent days was related to a propaganda push surrounding the PLA's 95th anniversary on Monday, as well as the peak of the [Chinese military's](#) annual exercise cycle, rather than preparations for invading Taiwan.

Despite warnings from US military and intelligence officials over the past year that the threat of such an attack was becoming more severe, experts also argued that the PLA was not ready.

"There are questions about the ability of a military that hasn't been in combat since 1979, and questions [about] their strategic lift capacity," said Randy Schriver, who was assistant secretary of defence for Indo-Pacific security affairs in Donald Trump's administration, in a reference to China's ability to ferry occupying troops across the Taiwan Strait.

Research by the US Naval War College has shown that although the Chinese military is single-mindedly pursuing such capabilities, its annual summer exercises showed that it was still training at a more basic level.

"They have a lot more confidence in actions in the grey zone, in coercive actions, than in the ability to successfully invade and occupy Taiwan," Schriver said.

The PLA has aggressively ramped up such grey-zone activities — military manoeuvres below the threshold of war that are meant to intimidate the adversary and gradually force it into submission — since President Tsai Ing-wen won office six years ago. Beijing denounces her as a "Taiwan independence element".

Almost on a daily basis, Chinese military aircraft fly into Taiwan's air defence identification zone, forcing the island's air force to scramble planes in response.

The Chinese navy is also quickly expanding patrols between Taiwan's east coast and the westernmost territories of Japan, which Tokyo aims to fortify with missiles. Beijing sees these islands as a potential launching ground for US Marines to defend Taiwan in case of an attack.

The manoeuvres the PLA has pledged to conduct around Taiwan for the rest of this week build on the skills practised in those operations.

Analysts said the drills resembled a larger, more threatening version of the war games China staged in 1995 and 1996 to punish Taiwan for a visit by its then-president Lee Teng-hui to the US, and to warn Taipei against choosing a pro-independence successor in the country's first free and direct presidential election.

"We are likely to see another round of coercive diplomacy, perhaps more robust than in 1995," said Richard Bush, who was a US intelligence officer for Asia at the time. "The goal would be to scare people in Taiwan, and to let them understand that doing things like having Pelosi there has a price. The other goal is restraining the US."

The areas Beijing has declared off-limits for exercises after Pelosi's departure are larger and closer to Taiwan than during the last crisis. Two of the areas appear to reach into Taiwan's territorial waters — a huge escalation.

Observers believe China could also field both of its aircraft carriers in the drills in the Taiwan Strait for the first time. Its newest carrier has left its home port in Hainan with amphibious assault vessels. The other is heading south from its home port in north-eastern China.

"That would certainly have a strong psychological effect," said Hsu Yen-chi, a PLA expert at the Council on Strategic and Wargaming Studies in Taipei.

The big unknown is how long the PLA will keep the pressure up. "I don't think this will last just a day or two. In the past these responses have been directed at Taiwan for longer than the visit lasted," said Nouwens.

If the PLA succeeds in blockading Taiwan's vital sea lanes and air routes for three full days later this week, analysts said it could be emboldened to extend such measures or use them more often in the future.

---

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

---