

Asia maritime tensions

China's extended naval reach in western Pacific fuels Taiwan tensions

Deployment of warships near southern Japan and east of Taipei is big expansion of Beijing's military presence



Sailors on parade aboard a Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy destroyer: analysts see the western Pacific as the main location for a potential clash between the US and China © AP

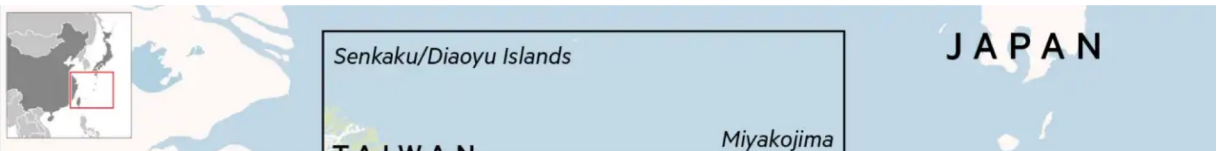
Kathrin Hille in Taipei and **Demetri Sevastopulo** in Washington YESTERDAY

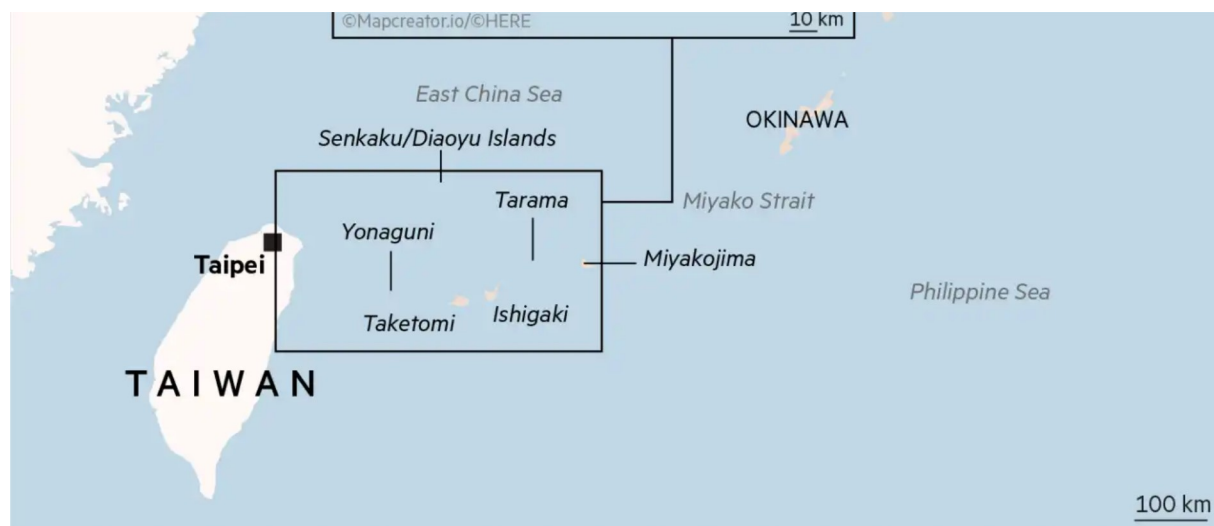
China has established a constant naval presence close to southern Japan and eastern Taiwan, in a marked expansion of Beijing's sea power that has focused attention on the area as a potential future battleground.

For at least six months, the People's Liberation Army Navy has rotated destroyers and missile corvettes through the waters east and south of the southernmost tip of the Ryukyu chain — which Tokyo calls the Nansei islands — according to officials from Taiwan, Japan and the US.

One US defence official said the PLA Navy had increased its presence in the western Pacific between the Nansei islands and Taiwan over the past year. He said it now had a consistent presence of one warship in the area that was often accompanied by a second warship.

The enhanced presence marks the Chinese navy's first continuous deployment outside the string of [islands](#) from Japan in the north to the Philippines in the south that separates China from the Pacific.





Beijing views the ability to operate freely in the waters as key to its naval strength. Military analysts see the western Pacific as the main location for a potential clash between the US and China if Beijing attacked Taiwan.

The new naval presence has accelerated [efforts](#) by the US and Japan to develop joint military operations plans for a potential Taiwan crisis.

Taiwanese and Japanese defence experts said the PLA Navy's movements made clear that China was exercising for situations that could be key in a potential future war over [Taiwan](#). These include attacking sheltered air bases on Taiwan's east coast and cutting off access for US forces approaching from Japan and Guam in support of Taiwan.

“In the past, one narrow interpretation of Chinese naval movements in this area was that they were mainly a concern regarding the Senkaku,” said one person briefed on talks between the US and Japan, referring to the islands China also claims and calls Diaoyu. “But it is becoming much clearer that the risk is to the Nansei Islands and to Taiwan.”

The person said Washington and Tokyo had made it a priority to prepare for emergency deployments of US marines with advanced mobile rocket launchers to the Nansei Islands, as recently [reported](#) by Kyodo News.

The High Mobility Artillery Rocket System would put Chinese ships operating near the Nansei islands at risk. “This plan is one of several components of our discussions

Chinese [attack](#), which was traditionally believed would come from the west. They include sheltering fighter aircraft in tunnels in a mountain range at a base in Hualien on the remote east coast.

“We talk a lot about the PLA’s [activity](#) to the south-west and increasingly to the south-east of Taiwan. But what they are really doing is practising battle-space management in our eastern waters,” said Hsu Yen-chi, a researcher at the Council on Strategic and Wargaming Studies in Taipei.

In November, while a Taiwanese minister [participated](#) in the US-hosted virtual democracy summit, Taiwan spotted two Type 071 amphibious transport docks between its east coast and Yonaguni, the westernmost Japanese island, which is just 150km away. Such warships can carry troops, helicopters and beach landing craft — the kind of equipment likely to be used in an attack on Hualien air base.

Underscoring the rising tension over Taiwan, the defence ministry in Taipei said China on Sunday flew 39 warplanes into its defence identification zone in the latest provocation aimed at the country.

The large sortie came as two US aircraft-carrier strike groups were conducting joint exercises with Japan in the Philippine Sea.

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