

Taiwan

## **China's war games in Taiwan hone military strengths but reveal restraint**



Beijing makes rare backtrack on no-fly zone after drills focused on improving invasion capabilities

**Kathrin Hille** in Taipei YESTERDAY

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The last time Taiwan's president met a US House Speaker, China launched unprecedented military drills, simulating a complete attack on the island from missile bombardment to amphibious invasion.

But after President Tsai Ing-wen met Speaker Kevin McCarthy in California last week, China's military response was more narrowly defined. The [People's Liberation Army](#) mainly practised preventing Washington and its allies from coming to Taipei's rescue if Beijing did attack the country.

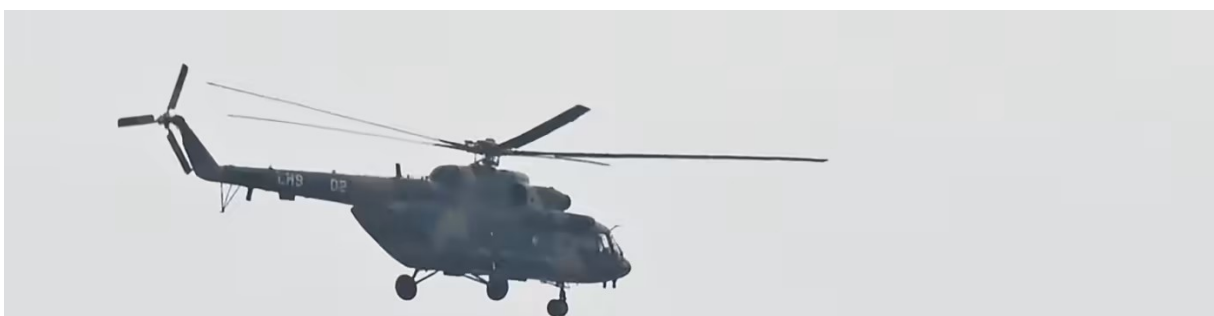
"This time, there was a big focus on anti-access and area denial," said a senior Taiwanese government official, referring to a strategy of blocking US forces from entering and operating in airspace and waters close to [China](#).

"There were a lot of simulated attacks on aerial and sea targets, focused on keeping forces out that would be arriving from outside the island chain."

China's latest [three-day manoeuvres](#) around Taiwan, launched on Saturday to punish the country for Tsai's US trip, demonstrated Beijing's desire to refine tactics crucial for an annexation while limiting the impact of its campaign.

"The level of provocation and intensity was much lower this time than last year," said a senior Japanese government official. "The Communist party [needs] to demonstrate their determination to uphold what they call territorial integrity, but Tsai's US visit was less serious than [then-Speaker Nancy] Pelosi's Taiwan visit" in August.

Beijing briefly set off alarm in Taipei on Tuesday when it told officials it would impose a no-fly zone next week north of the island, in some of the world's busiest airspace. But a day later, it [cut the planned three-day closure](#) to just 27 minutes, a reversal that suggested some restraint.





A Chinese helicopter flies over a military base in China's south-east Fujian province on Friday © Greg Bakler/AFP/Getty Images

During last year's drills, which lasted a week, the PLA went through its complete multi-stage war plan [all the way to an invasion](#).

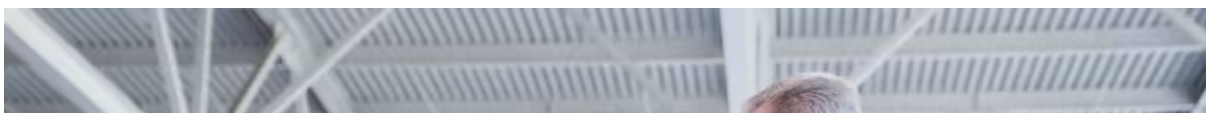
“This time, the exercises looked more like a campaign to exhaust our military’s fighting power so the PLA can gain air and sea control,” said Chieh Chung, an expert on the Chinese military at the National Policy Foundation, a Taipei think-tank. “The exercise did not follow all three stages — firepower campaign, blockade and invasion campaign — like they did last August.”

Government officials and military experts interpreted the changed patterns as a sign that China was trying to make the drills less disruptive while honing specific skills the PLA needs to conquer [Taiwan](#), which Beijing claims as part of its territory and has threatened to take by force.

Last year, Beijing had declared several areas around Taiwan off limits for ships and aircraft and fired missiles over the island. Some of the missiles landed in Japan’s exclusive economic zone, an area beyond territorial waters extending 200 nautical miles off the coast.

Taiwanese intelligence officials said China’s leadership had refrained from imposing a ring of missile-landing zones around Taiwan this time for fear of threatening supply chains and jeopardising a [still-fragile economic recovery](#).

“Last August, sea transport volumes were still only at 60 per cent of normal levels, so the impact of a simulated blockade would have been much more significant now” than last year, said one official. “They definitely have their own considerations regarding the economic fallout.”





The meeting between Tsai Ing-wen, left, and Kevin McCarthy was the first between a Taiwanese president and US House Speaker on American soil © Eric Thayer/Bloomberg

Despite the narrower focus, analysts said the exercise showcased the PLA's growing capabilities. It set records for daily air incursions, with 91 aircraft operating around Taiwan on Monday, according to the Taiwanese defence ministry.

Even after Beijing declared the manoeuvres complete on Monday, Taiwan's defence ministry said 35 Chinese military aircraft and eight naval vessels continued to operate near its borders in the 24 hours to Wednesday morning.

"This shows that the PLA's overall fleet availability, their pilots' capabilities and their ability to control large forces in the Taiwan Strait and in the airspace off the south-west of Taiwan have all increased significantly," Chieh said.

The PLA Navy also conducted operations east of Taiwan, which included take-off and landing drills with fighters and helicopters from the Shandong, its newest aircraft carrier in service.

According to officials briefed on the drills, the carrier, which was accompanied by submarines, mirrored movements by the US aircraft carrier Nimitz to the north-east.

In wartime, both carrier and submarine operations would be crucial to targeting incoming US forces and destroying Taiwan's air force, which has most of its hardened shelters on the east coast, and its navy, which under Taipei's plans would seek to survive by sailing out into the western Pacific.

The PLA also practised so-called joint operations, the integration of naval, air and missile forces and units from regional commands

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“Following the military reforms [Chinese leader] Xi Jinping undertook in 2015, they now want to demonstrate that those are coming to fruition,” said Alexander Neill, an expert on the Chinese military at the Pacific Forum.

But the drills also highlighted the PLA's shortcomings in carrying out — and defending — a successful invasion, experts said.

Su Tzu-yun, a research fellow at the Institute for National Defense and Security Research, a think-tank backed by Taiwan's defence ministry, said the aircraft carrier operations showed that the PLA Navy was executing flight sorties at a much slower rate than the US Navy.

Experts also observed weaknesses in electronic warfare — operations to disrupt enemy communications and control systems — which China “had a huge problem with during the August exercise”, according to Kitsch Liao, assistant director at the Atlantic Council's Global China Hub in Washington. He added that the PLA appeared to have made electronic countermeasures a focus in the latest drill.

Moreover, perhaps China's biggest obstacle to an invasion of Taiwan — getting troops across the strait — remains unproven, said the Pacific Forum's Neill.

“None of what we have seen in the drill indicates that the PLA is currently able of mounting an amphibious operation and hold the island.”

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