

Chinese military

Big Chinese naval exercise leaves Taiwan and US struggling for response

Taipei and Washington draw different conclusions over meaning of unannounced military deployment



A Taiwanese coastguard ship monitors a Chinese coastguard vessel a few nautical miles from Taiwan's northeastern coast © Taiwan Coast Guard/AFP/Getty Images

Kathrin Hille in Taipei and **Demetri Sevastopulo** in Washington DECEMBER 14 2024

A week ago, Taiwan was bracing for a Chinese military exercise to “punish” its president, Lai Ching-te, for a trip abroad that included two short visits to the US. It would have been another show of force from Beijing in retaliation for Taiwanese leaders asserting their country’s independence.

But what happened next took Taipei by surprise. Its military and national security officials observed what they called the largest Chinese naval deployment in nearly 30 years. At the same time, Beijing announced partial restrictions on air traffic in seven zones hugging its coastline from Shanghai to Hong Kong for two days.

There was not a word from the People’s Liberation Army, in contrast to the propaganda campaigns which tend to accompany its drills targeting Taipei.

Taiwan and the US — its only foreign defender against China’s threat to [annex it by force](#) if Taipei resists unification indefinitely — have drawn drastically different conclusions.

Taiwan’s defence ministry on Monday set up an emergency response centre and held snap readiness drills. “No matter if they have announced drills, the level of the threat to us is severe,” it said.

Washington, however, said that while Chinese military activity in the East and South China Seas was “elevated” following a broader increase over the last several years, it was “consistent” with levels seen during other large exercises. US officials emphasised that they did not see the activity as a response to Lai’s brief visits to Hawaii and Guam.

One senior US official said it was important to distinguish between a coercion campaign in response to a transit and the kind of “routine large regional exercise” which appeared to have occurred. “They made a choice not to execute a pressure campaign in response to the Lai transit,” the official said.

[China](#) may have decided not to respond specifically to the Lai transit because it was “low profile”, they added. But it was possible Beijing did not want to create turbulence during the US presidential transition, or that the moves were related to political turmoil inside the PLA due to corruption probes.

The divergent messages highlight the challenge for Taiwan, the US and its allies in assessing China’s intentions and responding to Beijing’s use of its increasingly powerful military in a creeping pressure campaign on several of its neighbours.

Observers said that China could sow confusion and uncertainty among its adversaries by combining unannounced drills with traditional ones. They added that conducting exercises of this scale more regularly would make it harder to spot preparations for an attack on Taiwan.

Taiwanese national security officials said the deployments of the past week involved close to 100 ships, two-thirds from the PLA Navy and one-third from the coastguard. The presence, spread out over the East and South China Seas as well as waters far off Taiwan’s east coast in the western Pacific, was built up over 70 days. China did this in part by keeping ships offshore after smaller patrols and drills in October and November, officials added. Taiwan’s defence ministry said the manoeuvres involved all three of the PLA’s coastal theatre commands for the first time.

“We agree that this went far beyond Taiwan, it is a demonstration that they can lock down the First Island Chain,” said one of the officials, referring to the chain of islands from Japan to the Philippines that separates China from the Pacific Ocean. “But [grey zone tactics](#) like this pose a growing threat to us and our neighbours,” he said, referring to military moves below the threshold of war.

The senior US official said Taiwan may have become overly alarmed because it had more capabilities than in the past to detect what China was doing. The official added

more capabilities than in the past to detect what China was doing. The official added that the US had not asked Taiwan to dial back its rhetoric as it recognised Taipei might have domestic political considerations.

[Taiwan](#) confirmed this played a role. “We decided to communicate more clearly what we are seeing this time. Especially when China remains silent, the public needs to know what is going on around us,” said one senior official.

A western diplomat said Taipei was trying to “wake up the public” as Lai is scrambling to strengthen the country’s defences. “Making people aware of PLA exercises works better than government demands to increase military readiness.”

The US official said the exercises highlighted the increasingly expansive nature of the PLA’s manoeuvres further away from the Chinese mainland and later in the year into the winter. The changes also had implications for Japan and the Philippines.

“China has crossed some new line in every of their past exercises,” said a senior Japanese official. “Now they have created another new normal: That they can do manoeuvres of this size without announcement, leaving all of us struggling to respond.”

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