

Chinese military

China improves ability to launch sudden attack on Taiwan, officials say

Military build-up enables Beijing to switch from peacetime to war operations quickly



China's Type 075 amphibious assault ships are capable of dropping special forces into Taiwan

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

Published YESTERDAY

China has increased its ability to launch a sudden attack on Taiwan with faster-paced air and operations, new artillery systems and more alert amphibious and air assault units, according to Taiwanese and US officials and experts.

One senior Taiwanese military official said Chinese air force and missile units that would play a role in a [Taiwan](#) invasion had improved to a point where they could “switch from peacetime to war operations any time”.

Other Taiwanese defence officials said People’s Liberation Army operations now included continuous training of amphibious forces near departure ports for a Taiwan invasion, constant readiness of army aviation units that would air-drop into Taiwan and a new rocket system capable of hitting anywhere on the island.

[Admiral Samuel Paparo](#), head of US Indo-Pacific command, in February said it was “very close” to the point where the “fig leaf of an exercise” could mask preparations for an attack.

PLA warplanes enter Taiwan’s air defence identification zone more than 245 times a month, compared with fewer than 10 a month five years ago, according to Taiwan’s defence ministry. They also cross the median line in the Taiwan Strait 120 times a month, obliterating the once unofficial boundary.

“That alone is a clear demonstration of the escalation and the sustained pressure in the air domain that is being conducted against Taiwan,” said a US defence official.

Underscoring its robust air power, China flew 153 fighter jet sorties near Taiwan on a single day last October.



The J-10 fighter has the capacity to fly into Taiwanese airspace without refuelling © Athit Perawongmetha/Reuters

A Taiwanese defence official said the enhanced air power was achieved because the PLA air force had “expanded its combat radius” with new fighter jets — the J-10, J-11, J-16 and J-20 — that can reach Taiwan from interior bases without having to refuel at coastal bases, and with its Y-20 refuelling aircraft.

The PLA Navy has also seen rapid improvements. Since 2022, it has had a rotational presence of warships, most frequently Type 052D destroyers, in the Miyako Strait and in the Bashi Channel that provide the only route into the Pacific Ocean for Chinese vessels.

Yang Tai-yuan, former chief instructor of Taiwan’s Army Command, said that to attack Taiwan, Chinese warships “would have to sail out into the Pacific very early on” to avoid getting trapped closer to China once war began. There was a build-up of PLA Navy ships in the western Pacific last year as a rehearsal for that scenario.

The US defence official said the PLA Navy and Chinese Coast Guard had a constant presence of roughly a dozen ships deployed around Taiwan. That, with the combination of ports nearby, meant the PLA Navy and affiliated vessels could

“move into a blockade posture . . . in a matter of hours”.

The Taiwanese defence official said the warship presence meant China could launch an air assault without warning. Taipei closely monitors the types of helicopters the PLA operates on destroyers or Type 075 amphibious assault ships since they could air-drop special forces into Taiwan. “With these naval forward deployments, they have shortened both the distance and the time” to Taiwan, he added.



Xi Jinping reviews the troops during his inspection of the Chinese People's Liberation in 2024 © Li Gang/Xinhua/AP

But military officials and experts said the PLA had also made significant progress in other areas.

US intelligence says President Xi Jinping in 2019 told the PLA to develop the capability to invade Taiwan by 2027. Speaking at the [Sedona Forum](#), Paparo said it appeared to have met some of the goals already, citing its rocket forces and the constellation of satellites that it has placed in space.

In 2015, Xi started to restructure the PLA's command structure and units. Experts said the large exercises the PLA has conducted around Taiwan since Nancy Pelosi, then US House Speaker, visited in 2022 showed it was mastering joint operations across its services, which was the main aim of that reform.

Joshua Arostegui, a US Army War College expert on the PLA, said that during the exercise conducted in response to the Pelosi visit, the PLA practised different operations — such as rockets and missiles, naval and air power manoeuvres — on

separate days.

“Fast forward to the last Taiwan-focused exercise and they were doing them all concurrently,” he said. “They’re getting more confident that they are able to command and control major operations . . . That scares everybody.”

Some of the biggest changes have taken place in the PLA ground forces, which would provide the bulk of the hundreds of thousands of troops needed to take and occupy Taiwan.

Xi’s reforms broke many big army units down into smaller, more flexible ones, including six amphibious combined arms brigades deployed along the coast opposite Taiwan. “This reflects the PLA’s renewed emphasis on Taiwan and lays the foundation for actual warfighting capabilities,” Arostegui said.

A senior Taiwanese military official said the PLA would only need “minimal conversion time” for an attack since it was “training nonstop in their bases and . . . already based very close to the ports where they would embark”.

The amphibious units can operate more independently with their more varied transport equipment, reconnaissance capabilities and wider range of arms. They include the PCH-191, a multiple rocket launcher with a 300km range that can hit anywhere in Taiwan from China’s coast. It has similar reach to short-range missiles, but is cheaper, can be reloaded more quickly, and is harder to detect since it can be launched from trucks.

First used immediately after Pelosi’s visit, the launchers are now deployed widely along the entire coast opposite Taiwan and employed in every Taiwan-directed exercise since, according to Taiwanese officials.

The launchers could be used by ground forces in the initial bombardment to disable Taiwan’s air defences and also by amphibious units to strike small Taiwanese coastal units designed to target against an invasion fleet.

“Those kind of capabilities could be used without a lot of preparation,” said Dennis Blasko, a veteran analyst of the PLA. “With their help, amphibious or army aviation units could launch from much more of a standing start. It is something that’s very difficult to counter.”

The US defence official said the area where the PLA appeared to have the greatest success was “in the development and integration of the joint firepower strike campaign”.

But it is struggling in some areas, particularly military leadership and decision

making. “This is an enormously complex kind of operation . . . and they just have not demonstrated the ability to adapt to modern warfare.”

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2025. All rights reserved.

Follow the topics in this article

Military technology
Aerospace & Defence
Chinese military
US foreign policy
Taiwan