

Asia maritime tensions

China sends warships to Pacific as Japan tensions grow

Beijing deploys naval destroyer group on same day Tokyo joins annual US-Philippine military drills



The opening ceremonies of the US-Philippine Balikatan exercise at a military camp in Metro Manila on Monday © Rolex dela Peña/EPA/Shutterstock

Leo Lewis in Tokyo and **Edward White** in Shanghai

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China said it had dispatched warships to test “operational capabilities” in the western Pacific on the same day that Japan for the first time joined a massive annual display of military strength by the US and Philippines.

China’s deployment of a naval destroyer group, which it described as a routine training drill, follows months of rising tensions with Japan and what it views as Tokyo’s more assertive military positioning under [Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi](#).

In a statement published on Sunday, the People’s Liberation Army said it had sent the task group, led by a Type 052D destroyer, to transit the Yokoate Waterway, which lies between Japan’s southwestern Amami Oshima island and the uninhabited volcanic island of Yokoate.

Xu Chenghua, spokesperson of the PLA Eastern Theater Command, said the drills would test the far-seas operations capabilities of its forces and were part of “routine training”. “It complies with

international law and practice, and does not target any specific country or entity,” Xu said.

The route taken by the Chinese ships is much closer to the Japanese mainland than the one usually taken to pass between the East China Sea and the western Pacific and is part of a pattern of increasing military assertiveness around Japanese territory.

Relations between [China](#) and Japan have been strained since Takaichi, who became prime minister in October, made comments in parliament indicating that Japan could, in theory, become involved militarily if a conflict erupted around Taiwan.

The timing of China’s deployment, said military experts in Tokyo, is significant. On Monday, Japanese combat troops joined the Balikatan drills held by the US and Philippine militaries for the first time.

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A joint US-Philippine military drill © Reuters

The exercises, which run until May 8, are the largest between the US and the Philippines and have expanded in recent years from bilateral exercises to a show of military might involving more than a dozen participating nations.

The exercises this year are among the most complex to date and will involve at least 17,000 troops, including contingents from France, Australia, Canada and New Zealand.

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Japan and the Philippines are both designated by the US as part of the “First island chain” — a natural island chain that separates the South China Sea from the Pacific — and key to America’s strategic containment of China.

The drills will involve about 10,000 US military personnel and come as Japanese and South Korean officials have voiced concerns that the war in Iran will sap American focus on Asian security issues.

In a statement at Monday’s opening ceremony, Lieutenant General Christian Wortman, the commanding general of the US Marine Expeditionary Force, said: “Regardless of the challenges elsewhere in the world, the United States focus on the Indo-Pacific and our ironclad commitment to the Philippines remains unwavering.”

Although Japan had previously participated both as an observer and with naval vessels, it is this year sending about 1,400 combat troops as well as warships, a beach-landing ship and a range of aircraft. It is also deploying Type 88 surface-to-ship missiles, a mid-range weapon built by Mitsubishi Heavy Industries.

The move is part of a broader effort to create what military experts say will be an “anti-ship fortress” across the Philippine archipelago.

The Type 88 missiles, which were live-fire tested on Japanese soil for the first time last year, will be used in an exercise that will involve sinking a decommissioned military vessel in the South China Sea.

In a separate statement on Friday, China said it had protested against Japan’s destroyer Ikazuchi transiting the Taiwan Strait on April 17. Zhang Xiaogang, a spokesperson for the defence ministry, said Japan was “stirring up trouble in the Taiwan Strait” and “sending wrong signals to ‘Taiwan independence’ separatist forces”.

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