

Chinese military exercise raises tensions with Taiwan

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China is about to stage a major military exercise near the Taiwan Strait that is certain to heighten already sharp tensions with Taiwan following the island's recent presidential election. While an exact date is yet to be announced, the Chinese foreign ministry confirmed on June 1 that the exercise would take place in late June or early July at Dongshan Island in Fujian province—just 277 kilometres from Taiwan's Penghu Islands.

Previous Chinese exercises have focused on crossing the Taiwan Strait and making landings. The stated purpose of the latest military manoeuvres is to practice “taking control of the Taiwan Strait”—that is, to test the ability of Chinese forces to seize control of air space and sea lanes in battles that would, in all probability, involve not only Taiwanese, but US military forces.

Some 18,000 Chinese troops including a tank brigade, will be deployed along with submarines, warships, a cruise missile brigade and Russian-made Su-27 and Su-30 fighter jets. In recent years, the Chinese military has sought to build up its navy and airforce. In a show of force in late April, Beijing sent eight new warships, including a stealth boat carrying long-range supersonic anti-ship missiles, to Hong Kong and into the South China Sea.

While China is currently in no position to challenge the US navy, Beijing's latest sabre rattling is aimed at sending a sharp warning to the Chen administration in Taiwan not to take any steps toward proclaiming independence. Beijing, which regards Taiwan as a renegade Chinese province, has repeatedly declared in the past that it would intervene militarily against Taiwan in the event of any such proclamation.

Taiwan's President Chen Shui-ban narrowly defeated the Kuomintang (KMT) challenger in presidential elections in March by making a deliberate appeal to Taiwanese nationalism and threatening to call a future referendum on the independence of the island. In his inauguration speech, however, Chen attempted to pacify Beijing by indicating that he did not intend to make any change to the status quo in the near future.

Chen's conciliatory comment has not assuaged concerns in Beijing, where sections of the Stalinist bureaucracy are pushing for a more hard-line stance and, if need be, military action against Taiwan.

Sun Shengliang, a scholar from the Taiwan Institute of the

official Chinese Academic of Social Sciences, told the *Strait Times* earlier this month: “Before the end of 2006, we should make solid preparation, even preparation at all costs, so that Taiwanese people will understand that it is not empty words when we say ‘Taiwan independence means war’.”

Last month, the Chinese government declared that it was drafting a “national unification law”. Although its contents and purpose have yet to be made public, the Hong Kong media reported that the law may include measures to conscript civilian resources and manpower to engage in a war with Taiwan.

Some preparations for a more aggressive military stance towards Taiwan are already underway. *Ming Pao Daily News*, a pro-Beijing newspaper in Hong Kong, reported last month that local militia units had been ordered to be “operationally prepared for war at any time”.

According to the *Straits Times*, when Chinese Vice President Zeng Qinghong visited Fujian province earlier this month to check on preparations for the upcoming military exercise, he broached the idea of appointing military officers to top provincial posts. His aim was said to be to coordinate provincial resources in the event of war.

On June 20, CNN reported that several Chinese generals had petitioned President Hu Jintao for more funds and “faster war preparation” against Taiwan. A source in the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) told the *Straits Times* on June 23 that China was ready for war. “If fighting breaks out tomorrow, we will have enough food for the whole population to last for one year and oil reserves to survive a long drawn-out war,” he said.

China's tough stance against Taiwanese independence is in part aimed at preventing the growth of separatist sentiment in other regions. If Taiwan were to formally break from China, it would only encourage like-minded movements in Tibet, oil-rich Xinjiang and possibly other provinces.

China's threats against Taiwan are also a measure of the political crisis in the Stalinist bureaucracy. The huge social gulf between rich and poor that has opened up as a result of so-called market reforms has left Beijing's claims to represent “socialism” or even to provide for the social needs of the masses in tatters. Its initial encouragement of Western “democracy” among the middle class elite in early 1980s ended with the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989.

The demand for the unification of Taiwan with the mainland is one of the methods of whipping up Chinese nationalism, which is Beijing's only remaining ideological means of shoring up its base of support.

Beijing is also concerned at the US military threat to China. US relations with Taiwan are part of a string of alliances that Washington has with countries bordering China. Since the Bush administration came to power, the encirclement of China has become more pronounced. Under the guise of the "war on terrorism," the US now has troops in Afghanistan and military bases in a number of Central Asian republics. It has also strengthened its military ties with India, Nepal and in South East Asia.

During the 2000 presidential election campaign, Bush declared China to be a strategic competitor and, in the immediate aftermath of his insertion as president, adopted a belligerent stance towards Beijing. Following the September 11 terrorist attacks, Washington toned down its rhetoric as Beijing backed the war on terrorism and the US invasion of Afghanistan in particular. But Beijing is legitimately concerned that relations with Washington could easily turn sour.

Indeed some sections of the US political establishment are already pushing for a more aggressive stance toward China. At a Congressional hearing last week, the US-China Economic and Security Commission called on the White House to "conduct a fresh assessment of the 'one China' policy" and to step up its military assistance to Taiwan in order to counter China's military modernisation.

The commission is a bipartisan congressional committee set up in 2000 to conduct a far-reaching review of US-China relations. Any move by Washington to abandon the present "one China" policy, under which Beijing is recognised as the sole international representative of China—including Taiwan—would have a profoundly destabilising effect in North East Asia.

To justify its recommendations, the commission published a report last week portraying China as a serious security threat to Taiwan and the US, a major exporter of "weapons of mass destruction" to "terrorist sponsors" in Middle East, a supporter of North Korea's nuclear programs and a threat to democracy in Hong Kong.

Urging the provision of more US arms to Taiwan, commission chairman Roger Robinson commented: "Are they [Taiwan] maintaining a proper level of balance with this new offensive force structured by Beijing? The answer to that, in our view, is: No... We simply can't stand on the sidelines and see any sort of downward spiral in the cross-strait relations."

Beijing has urged Washington to reject the report, saying it was "full of Cold War mentalities". But according to John Tkacik from the right-wing Heritage Foundation, a high-level reexamination of the "one China" policy has been underway for months. He told the *Taipei Times* that a State Department review began prior to Vice President Dick Cheney's visit to

Beijing in April.

The commission's report dovetails with the thrust of the Pentagon's recently published *Annual Report of the Military Power of People's Republic of China*. It claimed that China's military spending is between \$50 and \$70 billion a year, making its defence budget the third largest in the world. The Pentagon concluded that China's development of space technology as well as naval and air power, supported by a rapidly expanding economy, would make the country a world military power in the next 10 to 15 years.

Beijing has accused the US of exaggerating data about the Chinese military in order to justify its own arms build-up against China. Chinese military spending has increased and its forces have access to more sophisticated weapons, but China is in no position to challenge the US militarily now or in the near future. As for the Chinese economy, it remains a huge cheap labour platform heavily dependent on foreign investment and associated technologies.

Calls in Washington for a tougher stance against China can only encourage Taiwan to take a less conciliatory approach to Beijing. Chen recently rejected an offer from Beijing to withdraw its 500 missiles targetting Taiwan if Taipei halted its latest purchases of US arms. He authorised a special budget of \$18 billion to buy submarines, sophisticated aircraft and missile systems.

The Taiwanese military retains close ties with its US counterparts. In an already volatile situation, it announced on Monday that it had just finished a six-day computer-simulated war game using a US-designed system, and with the assistance of 60 US military personnel. The defence minister justified the war game aimed against China by saying that China's rapid military expansion "increased the possibility of China using military force against Taiwan". A major live-fire drill involving Taiwan's army and air force is planned for August.



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