

Taiwan holds military exercises amid rising US-China tensions

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18 April 2013

Taiwan is staging live-fire military exercises this week, based on a scenario of a Chinese attack on Taiwan's Penghu Islands. This comes amid escalating tensions in East Asia stoked by the US "pivot to Asia" strategy aimed at containing China, including recent US war threats over North Korea's nuclear program and disputes over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.

Taiwan's five-day Han Kuang exercises are testing 145 different types of equipment—such as navy frigates, army tanks, artillery, and anti-ship and anti-air missiles—on the islands, which lie in the Taiwan Strait between mainland China and the island of Taiwan.

For its part, China has stationed hundreds of thousands of troops in parts of its territory along the Taiwan Strait, together with hundreds of warplanes and 1,000 tactical ballistic missiles. This has led military commentators to suggest that China could likely win a localised, conventional war fought in the Taiwan Strait against Taiwanese and US forces.

Yesterday, President Ma Ying-jeou of Taiwan's ruling Kuomintang (KMT) inspected the drills, ostensibly held to dampen criticisms by media and lawmakers that the Taiwanese military was not doing enough to protect Taiwan from China.

Ma said: "In the past few years, the Chinese communists [i.e., the mainland Chinese government] have conducted a massive build-up, in both quality and quantity, following fast economic development. In the face of the threat, we have to make preparations if we are to sustain peace in the Taiwan Strait."

On Tuesday, China released a defence White Paper, which criticised "Taiwanese independence separatist forces" and said a formal declaration of independence by Taiwan would constitute the "biggest threat to the peaceful development of cross-straits relations."

After being overthrown by the Chinese Communist

Party (CCP) in the 1949 revolution, the US-backed KMT regime of Chiang Kai-shek fled to Taiwan. Taiwan's government still claims to be the government of all China. The mainland Chinese government in Beijing asserts that Taiwan is part of China, and has previously threatened to go to war if Taiwan declares independence. In 2005, Beijing adopted an "anti-secession law," requiring military action if Taiwan seceded.

These tensions underscore the significance of the recent signing of a fishery agreement—after 17 years and 16 rounds of fruitless talks—between Taiwan and Japan over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. Japan made concessions, allowing Taiwanese vessels to fish within 19 kilometres of the islands.

Known as Senkaku in Japanese and Diaoyu in Chinese, Japan annexed the islands, as well as Taiwan, after the First Sino-Japanese War of 1895. Last year, the rocky outcrops were the focus of an explosive military stand-off between China and Japan, which administers the islands, after Japan bought them from their private owners. Both Japan and China mounted chauvinist campaigns promoting their claims to the islands, while deploying naval forces to the region.

Immediately after the current deal with Japan emerged, Taiwanese Coast Guard Administration Director Wang Jin - wang said that any non-Taiwanese fishing boats—i.e., including mainland Chinese boats—in the islands' territorial waters would be expelled, "according to the laws."

The agreement was bound to antagonise China. Firstly, Tokyo in effect violated the "one China" policy by treating Taipei as a sovereign government, able to sign a deal with Japan. China regards Taiwan as a renegade province. Secondly, Taiwan, in reaching the fishing agreement, tacitly acknowledged Japan's control

over islands that China claims.

China immediately criticised the deal. “We are extremely concerned about Japan and Taiwan discussing and signing a fishing agreement,” Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Hong Lei declared.

China sent two warships to patrol near the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands yesterday, the anniversary of the Treaty of Shimonoseki that ended the 1895 Sino-Japanese War, to show its opposition to Japanese control of the islands.

The latest military exercises in Taiwan and the sudden shift in Taiwanese policy over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands indicate that powerful forces are pushing the Taiwanese ruling elites toward a closer alignment with American imperialism and its regional allies, such as Japan—just as the US escalates tensions with China.

After the KMT won the 2008 elections, Washington watched with unease as Taiwan signed free-trade agreements to integrate China economically with Taiwan, which has tens of billions of dollars of investment on the mainland. Ma followed a policy of “no independence, no unification, and no use of force” against pro-independence parties in Taiwan’s political establishment. However, the KMT also maintained its long-standing ties with US imperialism.

Last September, at the height of China-Japan confrontations over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, Japanese and Taiwanese coast guard ships fired water cannons at each other near the islands, as Taiwanese fishing boats entered into waters claimed by Japan. Like Beijing, the government in Taiwan, officially known as the Republic of China, claims the islands as Chinese territory.

This led some analysts to speculate about an alliance between mainland China and Taiwan against Japan over the islands. However, US strategic relations with Taiwan remained close. In 2010 and 2011, the Obama administration signed off on several arms sales packages worth billions of dollars to beef up the Taiwanese military, prompting strong protests from China.

While visiting President Ma in Taiwan this January, US Senator James Inhofe leaked that Washington planned massive arms sales to Taiwan—including 30 AH-64E attack helicopters, 60 UH-60 Black Hawk military transport helicopters and Patriot Advanced

Capability-3 surface-to-air missiles. Inhofe leads the so-called Senate Taiwan Caucus, which has called for F-16C/D fighters to be also sold to Taiwan—a move the Obama administration has previously rejected.

According to articles published in *China.org.cn* this January, if the latest package is approved, Obama administration arms sales to Taiwan will account for one third of total US military exports to that country since Washington established diplomatic relations with Beijing in 1979. During that same year, the Taiwan Relations Act was enacted to supply arms to Taiwan to “maintain sufficient defence capability” against China.

By bolstering Taiwan’s defences against China and escalating tensions throughout East Asia, the Obama administration is pushing the region closer to full-scale war.

Taiwan has been quietly included in the US anti-ballistic missile network in the Asia-Pacific, which is primarily aimed at undermining China’s nuclear forces and is a key component of the US “pivot to Asia.” In February, a \$1.4 billion radar installation was activated in Taiwan’s north. It can detect incoming missiles at a distance of up to 5,000 kilometres.

Taipei used the radar to monitor North Korea’s ballistic missile test in December and China’s testing of an anti-ballistic missile in outer space in January. Kevin Cheng, editor of Taiwan’s *Asia-Pacific Defence Magazine*, said: “Through the sharing with the United States of the information it collects from the radar system, Taiwan becomes a critical link in the US strategic defence network in the region.”



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