

Chinese military conducts exercises in South China Sea and Taiwan Strait

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Amid rising tensions in East Asia, the Chinese military recently conducted major naval exercises in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait. While the Western media emphasised their size and supposedly menacing character, the drills are in response to Washington's provocative and confrontational stance toward Beijing.

Since the end of last month, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) navy has completed two major exercises off the coast of Hainan Island in the South China Sea, followed this Wednesday by a "live-fire" exercise in the Taiwan Strait.

The naval drills were the largest ever, with an estimated 10,000 personnel, 76 aircraft and 48 warships involved, including China's only aircraft carrier and one of its nuclear submarines. Further underscoring the importance of the exercises, Chinese President Xi Jinping was present, along with all members of China's top military body, the Central Military Commission.

Reviewing the assembled armada, Xi delivered a speech, urging the navy to urgently become a world class fleet because "a mighty navy is an important pillar of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation ... Today's people's navy is standing in the east of the world with a new attitude."

Facing US challenges to Chinese interests in Asia and internationally, China has been transforming its navy from one devoted to coastal defence to a blue water fleet capable of operating around the world.

Describing the exercise as a routine operation, the Defence Ministry stated: "Its aim is to test the training capabilities of the People's Liberation Army ... It is also aimed at improving combat abilities of the whole military." While it claimed the exercises were not aimed "at any country in particular," there are clearly fears in Beijing over the mounting US military threat.

Under President Barack Obama and now Donald Trump, the US has deliberately inflamed tensions over

territorial claims in the South China Sea, which involve China and its South East Asian neighbours. The US Navy has carried out provocative "freedom of navigation" operations by sending warships to challenge China's maritime claims. Most recently, the destroyer USS Mustin last month sailed within the 12-nautical-mile territorial limit claimed by China around its outpost on Mischief Reef in the Spratly group of islands.

The US military has also increased its overall presence in the Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam, including the regular presence of aircraft carrier battle groups. In February, the US conducted a naval exercise in the South China Sea close to Chinese-controlled islets, involving the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson.

The Chinese live-fire exercises in the Taiwan Strait on Wednesday appear to have been relatively limited. The state-owned Xinhua news agency reported that a PLA air unit had been involved in dispatching various types of armed helicopters to attack targets at sea. The exercise was confined to a two-square-mile area off the coast, near the city of Quanzhou in Fujian Province.

While the US press criticised the live-fire exercise as an attempt to intimidate Taipei, the Trump administration has deliberately stoked tensions with China over Taiwan. Last year, Trump suggested he would abrogate the "One China" policy that has underpinned diplomatic relations since 1972. Under this policy, Washington recognised Beijing as the sole legitimate government of all China, including Taiwan, while at the same time opposing any forcible China take-over of the island.

In a move protested by Beijing, the US Congress voted last month to allow visits to the US by Taiwanese politicians and officials at all levels, including military officials, and also by American officials to Taiwan. Previously, Washington had avoided provoking China by not permitting the entry of top-level Taiwanese figures. Congress also passed legislation to authorise the sale to

Taiwan of restricted military hardware and designs, including submarine blueprints.

China has long considered reunification with Taiwan an essential national objective and warned that any attempt by Taiwan to declare formal independence would be regarded as a “red line” for military action. Emphasising this point, Chinese Taiwan Foreign Office director Liu Jieyi declared that the live-fire drill this week was “an action to safeguard the sovereignty and territorial integrity of our motherland.”

Sections of the Chinese military and state bureaucracy are pushing for China to take a stand against the US military build-up in the Asia Pacific. Yue Gang, a retired PLA colonel, told the *Financial Times*: “[T]he US aircraft carrier [Carl Vinson] has stayed long within this region. China now is showing that it’s not afraid.” Making clear that the live-fire exercises were meant to send a warning to Washington, the hawkish state-owned *Global Times* headlined its comment on Monday as “PLA drill draws red line to the US and Taiwan.”

Under President Xi, China has been building up and restructuring its military in what amounts to an undeclared arms race with the United States. At the same time, Xi has continued to seek to balance diplomatically even as Trump has threatened trade war measures against the Chinese economy. Xi’s One-Belt One-Road initiative for massive infrastructure projects aimed at linking the Eurasian landmass is not only an economic plan, but also a strategic initiative aimed at boosting Chinese partnerships, and potentially alliances, to counter the US.

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