

China mounts military exercises near Taiwan after new president inaugurated

Peter Symonds
24 May 2024

The Chinese military or People's Liberation Army (PLA) has carried out two days of military exercises in the Taiwan Strait including near the Taiwanese-controlled islands of Kinmen, Matsu, Wuqiu and Dongyin that lie just kilometres off the Chinese mainland.

The military drills come just days after Lai Ching-te from the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) was inaugurated as Taiwan's new president. Lai is known for his stance in favour of Taiwanese independence. China has repeatedly warned that it would respond to any formal declaration of independence with force to reintegrate the island with China.

China's Xinhua news agency reported that the exercises were the largest for over a year, and were intended to “serve as a strong punishment for the separatist acts of ‘Taiwan independence’ forces and a stern warning against the interference and provocation by external forces.”

PLA spokesman Li Xi told the news agency that the “Joint Sword-2024A” exercises were focused on “sea-air combat-readiness patrol, joint seizure of comprehensive battlefield control and joint precision strikes on new targets.”

The drills have been accompanied by nationalist rhetoric from Beijing, amplified further in the Western press, but the exercises have been on a smaller scale than those held in 2022 and 2023. According to the Taiwanese military, Beijing did not declare any no-fly zones and no live fire took place, other than in military areas on the Chinese mainland.

US and international media reports featured maps showing the Chinese military “encircling” Taiwan and comments from the Chinese defence ministry declaring the PLA was testing its ability to “seize power.” In reality, the exercises were largely limited to the Taiwan

Strait between the Chinese mainland and Taiwan, with some Chinese coast guard vessels staging mock inspections of civilian vessels to the east of Taiwan.

On Thursday, the Taiwanese military detected 35 PLA navy and coastguard ships and 49 aircraft, and on Friday, 27 PLA naval ships and 62 PLA aircraft. Some aircraft crossed the median line of the Taiwan Strait—regarded by the US as international waters and airspace—but none entered what Taiwan treats as its immediate territorial waters and airspace.

Chinese defence ministry spokesperson Wu Qian said Taiwan's new president had “seriously challenged the one-China principle... pushing our compatriots in Taiwan into a perilous situation of war and danger.” He warned of “countermeasures” in response to further provocations by Taipei.

During his inauguration on Monday, Lai, who represents the DPP's more hardline, separatist wing, stopped short of hinting at any formal declaration of independence. During the election campaign, well aware of widespread popular fears of war with China, Lai toed the more moderate line of his predecessor Tsai Ing-wen, that Taiwan is already a sovereign country and has no need to declare independence.

Nevertheless, Lai's speech, replete with peans to “peace” and “democracy” was highly provocative. After declaring that Taiwan and China were “not subordinate to each other,” he stated: “All of the people of Taiwan must come together to safeguard our nation; all our political parties ought to oppose annexation and protect sovereignty; and no one should entertain the idea of giving up our national sovereignty in exchange for political power.”

The statement is not only a complete repudiation of the “One China policy” that underpins international relations with China. It is also a threat directed against

the opposition Kuomintang (KMT) and any other party seeking to improve relations with Beijing or willing to enter negotiations for its peaceful reunification with China.

Following the 1949 Chinese Revolution, the hated KMT regime retreated to Taiwan under the protection of the US Navy and established a brutal military dictatorship. Both Taipei and Beijing claimed to be the legitimate government of “One China,” while a layer of indigenous Taiwanese elites now represented by the DPP pushed for “independence” for the island.

While formally the junta has been disbanded and the façade of democracy erected, much of the old anti-democratic state apparatus remains intact, with power heavily concentrated in the hands of the president. Far from Lai receiving overwhelming popular support, he won the January election with just 40 percent of the vote, ahead of candidates for the KMT on 33.5 percent and the Taiwan People’s Party (TPP) on 26.5 percent. Under the Taiwanese electoral system, there was no run-off second round, which Lai would likely have lost.

The DPP also lost control of Taiwan’s Legislative Yuan or parliament. This is plunging the island into political crisis as the KMT, with the backing of the TPP, enacts legislation to put the president and his administration under closer parliamentary scrutiny. KMT/TPP legislators pushed through laws on Friday to ensure cooperation from administration officials and to expand parliamentary investigative powers, including access to classified military information, while tens of thousands of DPP supporters protested in the streets.

Justifying the new legislation, Wu Tsung-hsien, the KMT’s convener of the judiciary committee, asked rhetorically: “In what country in the world is the executive not supervised by anyone?” Of course, he did not point out that the KMT had established the current presidential system after disbanding its dictatorship, confident that the presidency would always be in its hands.

Echoing Lai’s comment that all Taiwanese must come together to protect “the nation,” DPP lawmaker Kuo Po-wen challenged any disclosure of military documents and effectively branded the KMT as traitors. “Do you want to get hold of intelligence that you can then bring as gifts the next time you visit China?”

The rising tensions across the Taiwan Strait, which are precipitating the political turmoil in Taipei, are

being deliberately stoked by US imperialism. Washington embraced the One China policy in the 1970s and effectively acknowledged Beijing as the legitimate government of all China, including Taiwan, when it established diplomatic relations with Beijing and cut all formal relations with Taipei.

Now Biden, following Trump, had virtually abandoned the One China policy—tearing up longstanding diplomatic protocols, boosting arms sales to Taiwan, sending military “advisers” to the island and carrying out naval provocations through the Taiwan Strait—as his administration prepares for war with China.

The Biden administration condemns Chinese “aggression” and “expansionism” toward Taiwan and in the East China and South China Seas—that is, military drills in waters and airspace close to the Chinese mainland that it regards as its own. Yet, the US military routinely engages in naval operations thousands of kilometres from its nearest territory.

As the Chinese military drills were taking place on Thursday and Friday, the nuclear aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan and its associated battlegroup were conducting “routine” operations in the vicinity of Taiwan in the Philippine Sea. On Wednesday, the US Navy and the Royal Netherlands Navy conducted joint operations in the South China Sea—just the latest in escalating joint military drills in the western Pacific involving European NATO allies.

Even as it wages war against Russia in Ukraine as part of the NATO alliance and backs the Israeli genocide in Gaza as part of a wider conflict against Iran in the Middle East, US imperialism regards China as the chief threat to its global dominance. Already engaged in an economic war against Beijing, Washington will use all means, including military, to undermine and subordinate China, despite the dangers of nuclear war.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact