

Prospects & Perspectives



Considering the current situation in China, with frequent cases of corruption in the PLA, Xi is feeling insecure about the military and does not trust some of his generals. The exercises were therefore necessary to maintain the view that Xi is in a strong position. The United States and Taiwan must understand China's intentions when responding to such exercises to avoid misjudgment and escalating the situation. Picture source: Ministry of National Defense (China), December 1, 2024, *Ministry of National Defense (China)*, <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/tp_214132/kttd/16355298.html>.

China's 'New New Normal' Military Exercises Against Taiwan and Their Implications

By *Ming-Shih Shen*

After Taiwanese President Lai Ching-te visited official diplomatic allies



in the South Pacific and transited through Hawaii and Guam in December 2024, China, as expected, conducted military exercises near Taiwan. Similar drills have been launched following the visit of then-President Tsai Ing-wen and then-Vice President Lai to Central America, with transits in the United States, in 2023. The military exercises in December 2024 were unnamed, but Beijing authorities specified that the exercises were a joint combat readiness patrol. This type of exercise is giving routine training a special purpose, with the aim of deterrence and warning.

After May 20, 2024, President Lai pointed out that the two sides of the Taiwan Strait are not subordinate to each other. The remarks caused China to conduct a military exercise codenamed “Joint Sword 2024A.” Although there was no live fire component to the drills, judging from video released by the PLA Eastern Theater Command, it was a joint fire strike drill, involving the Rocket Force, Air Force, Navy and Army long-range rockets against Taiwan. From the exercise videos of “Joint Sword 2024A,” we can conclude that all the military services were involved. Rocket Force troops were also in forward position, Air Force fighter jets used scheduled routes and locations, and Navy warships moved to exercise areas to conduct the drill.

In October 2024, President Lai mentioned that the two sides of the Taiwan Strait were not affiliated with each other in his National Day speech, but repeatedly mentioned the Republic of China. Although there was no provocation, China launched the “Joint Sword 2024B” exercise on October 14, dispatching aircraft and ships to Taiwan to conduct exercises simulating a quarantine or blockade operations. However, because the exercise started in the morning and ended in the afternoon the same day, the real scope and effects of a blockade operation was unclear.

Anticlimactic endeavor

In December 2024, China launched another military exercise in response to President Lai’s visit and stopovers. Unlike the past exercises this year, there was no name for the December 2024 exercise, more than 95 ships from the North Sea Fleet, the East Sea Fleet, and the South Sea Fleet sailed to the waters northeast, east, and southwest of Taiwan to conduct substantial anti-access and area denial operations.



In addition, the Chinese Air Force conducted harassing mission around Taiwan, but the number of sorties were not as high as those seen during “Joint Sword 2024B.” Many saw the drills as anticlimactic.

The latest drill also occurred amid the purges within the People’s Liberation Army. Miao Hua (苗華), director of the Political Work Department, was purged and resigned. Lin Xiangyang (林向陽), commander of the Eastern Theater Command, Qin Shutong (秦樹桐), Political Commissar of the PLA Army, and Yuan Huazhi (袁華智), Political Commissar of the Navy, were also purged. Despite the turmoil, it is possible that the exercise had to be carried out for Xi Jinping to save face.

For the first two exercises, the United States had intelligence beforehand, and warned China before the exercises not to use the inauguration speech and the National Day speech as an excuse to increase tensions, which put China in a dilemma. This may explain what the scale of the latest exercises was reduced.

Since U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan in 2022, China has used using military exercises to deter important U.S. officials from visiting Taiwan, or important Taiwanese leaders from transiting in the U.S. As such routine visits serve to highlight Taiwan’s sovereignty, no Taiwanese president will suspend overseas visits because of Chinese military exercises. If China conducts exercise every time a Taiwanese present embarks on a visit abroad, it will not only affect Beijing’s international image, but also waste resources. All in all, the new normal that has been established through those exercises starting in 2022 has only had superficial effects.

The December 2024 exercises and their implications

As China must avoid escalating its conflict with the United States, the urgency of invading Taiwan may have been reduced. Considering the current situation in China, with frequent cases of corruption in the PLA, Xi is feeling insecure about the military and does not trust some of his generals. With all generals in danger, only a few generals hope to implement Xi’s will of unifying Taiwan and defying the United States. The exercises were therefore necessary to maintain the view that Xi is in a strong position. The United States and Taiwan must therefore understand China’s intentions when responding to such exercises to avoid misjudgment and escalating the situation.



Judging from the various exercises held in 2024, whether it is “Joint Sword A,” “Joint Sword B” or the third unnamed exercise, it can be seen that China’s operational scenarios and preparations focus on quarantine, blockade, and a large-scale invasion of Taiwan. However, China’s mature model of joint operations was absent from the exercises. Its weaknesses in integration and basic training can be seen from the operational concepts and implementation of the exercises.

Showing your cards

Whether it is an exercise focused on deterrence, or mainly testing China’s tactics against Taiwan, China’s military exercises have shown possible future strategies and tactics against Taiwan, and have also enabled Taiwan and the United States to know such combat models and develop effective countermeasures. For example, the deployment of U.S. missiles in the Philippines, the strengthening of the alliance between the U.S., Japan and South Korea, and the increasing of the military deployment in Guam are all aimed at countering China’s anti-access and area denial strategies and expanding the flexibility of military by the United States, Japan and other countries. In future, intelligence exchanges and cooperation between the United States, Japan and Taiwan on China’s military exercises must become closer, because the 2024 exercises not only target Taiwan, but will require responses by the United States and Japan.

China will continue to hold exercises in 2025 if senior Taiwanese officials visit the United States or top U.S. officials visit Taiwan. The exercises in 2024 featured joint fire strike, joint blockade, and joint anti-access and area denial operations. If China continues to conduct exercises targeting Taiwan in 2025, it will need a new operational strategy and deployments, otherwise it will continue to use the same model and thus make the results less effective. Only demonstrating one’s military capabilities will not cause great concern and panic, but will instead reduce the effectiveness of the PLA’s deterrence and cognitive warfare against Taiwan.

(Dr. Shen is Research Fellow, Institute for National Defense Security Research.)

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Prospect Foundation

No.1, Lane 60, Sec. 3, Tingzhou Rd., Zhongzheng District

Taipei City, 10087, Republic of China (Taiwan)

Tel: 886-2-23654366 Fax: 886-2-23679193

<http://www.pf.org.tw>

