

# China ends military drills around Taiwan

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Online Desk :

China has ended two days of military drills around Taiwan that saw jets loaded with live munitions and warships practise seizing and isolating the self-ruled island.

The exercises simulated strikes targeting Taiwan's leaders as well as its ports and airports to "cut off the island's 'blood vessels'", Chinese military analysts told state media.

Beijing considers the democratic island part of its territory and has not ruled out using force to bring it under its control.

The war games kicked off Thursday morning, as aircraft and naval vessels surrounded Taiwan to conduct mock attacks against "important targets", state broadcaster CCTV said.

Codenamed "Joint Sword-2024A", the exercises were launched three days after Taiwan's new President Lai Ching-te took office and made an inauguration speech that China denounced as a "confession of independence".

Beijing's defence ministry spokesman Wu Qian said Friday that Lai was pushing Taiwan "into a perilous situation of war and danger".

"Every time 'Taiwan independence' provokes us, we will push our countermeasures one step further, until the complete reunification of the motherland is achieved," he said.

Taiwan has been self-governed since 1949, when nationalists fled to the island following their defeat by the Chinese Communist Party in a civil war on the mainland.

The drills are part of an escalating campaign of intimidation by China that has seen it carry out a series of large-scale military exercises around Taiwan in recent years.

Beijing has also amped up its rhetoric, with its foreign ministry on Thursday using language more typical of China's propaganda outlets.

"Taiwan independence forces will be left with their heads broken and blood flowing after colliding against the great... trend of China achieving complete unification," spokesman Wang Wenbin told reporters.

On Saturday, Taiwan's presidency said the public could be assured it had "a full grasp of the situation and appropriate responses to ensure national security".

"China's recent unilateral provocation not only undermines the status quo of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait but it is also a blatant provocation to the international order," Presidential Office spokesperson Karen Kuo said.

– 'Closer than ever' –

A total of 111 Chinese aircraft and dozens of naval vessels took part in the drills over two days, according to Taiwan's defence ministry.

On Friday evening, China's army published images of the drills' "highlights", featuring missile-launching trucks ready to fire, fighter jets taking off and naval officers looking through binoculars at Taiwanese ships.

Meng Xiangqing, a professor from Beijing-based National Defense University, told state news agency Xinhua that People's Liberation Army vessels "were getting closer to the island than ever before".

Beijing launched similar exercises in August and April last year after Taiwanese leaders visited the United States.

China also launched major military exercises in 2022 after Nancy Pelosi, then the speaker of the US House of Representatives, visited Taiwan.

The scale of the most recent drills was "significant, but is nowhere near as big, it seems, as last August's", Wen-Ti Sung, a non-resident fellow at the Atlantic Council's Global China Hub, told AFP.

Sung and other analysts told AFP that the geographic scope of the exercises had increased, with a new focus on isolating Taiwan's outlying islands.

The drills took place in the Taiwan Strait and to the north, south and east of the island, as well as areas around the Taipei-administered islands of Kinmen, Matsu, Wuqiu and Dongyin.

Tong Zhen, an expert from the Academy of Military Sciences, told Xinhua the drills "mainly targeted the ringleaders and political centre of 'Taiwan independence', and involved simulated precision strikes on key political and military targets".

– Calls for restraint –

The dispute has long made the Taiwan Strait one of the world's most dangerous flashpoints.

The United Nations called for all sides to avoid escalation.

The United States, Taiwan's strongest partner and military backer, on Thursday "strongly" urged China to act with restraint.

The Pentagon announced on Friday that Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin would meet his Chinese counterpart Dong Jun at the end of the month at the Shangri-La Dialogue, an annual gathering of defence officials from around the world.

"Beijing is trying to use this very high-profile show of force to not only show displeasure against Taiwan, but also... to deter and dissuade other countries and partners from contemplating further cooperation or engagement of Taiwan," said the Atlantic Council's Sung.

"That furthers isolation of Taiwan, which allows Beijing to negotiate with Taiwan going forward from a position of strength."

Chinese military analyst Meng noted that the drills to the east — considered by the PLA the most likely direction from which external intervention could come — was designed to reinforce that message.

"'Taiwan independence' separatists have long considered the island's eastern direction to be their backyard and 'shelter', but the drills have shown that we can control that eastern area," Meng told Xinhua.