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Growing CCP Pressure

Beijing's naval maneuvering in the Taiwan Strait represents escalation

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NAVAL DEPLOYMENTS INTO and through the Taiwan Strait were a prominent feature during the second half of 2024. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) conducted three significant naval and air exercises in May, October and December in and around the Taiwan Strait, which the People's Republic of China (PRC) considers its own waters. Even as China carried out these exercises, outside powers were increasingly passing through the Taiwan Strait from May to October for explicit freedom of navigation operations (FONOP) purposes, but also showing some implicit support for Taiwan's beleaguered administration. The backdrop for the PRC deploy-

ments and outside FONOP transits was the victory of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which maintained its political power in the elections held in January 2024 for the president of the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan, with Lai Ching-te duly inaugurated on May 20.

The PLA exercises represented an escalation to double and triple in terms of frequency and numbers, compared to 2022 and 2023.

Joint Sword-2024A took place May 23-24, three days after Lai's inaugural address. Sixty-two planes and 27 vessels were dispatched to five exercise areas around Taiwan. The destroyer Kunming took up station off



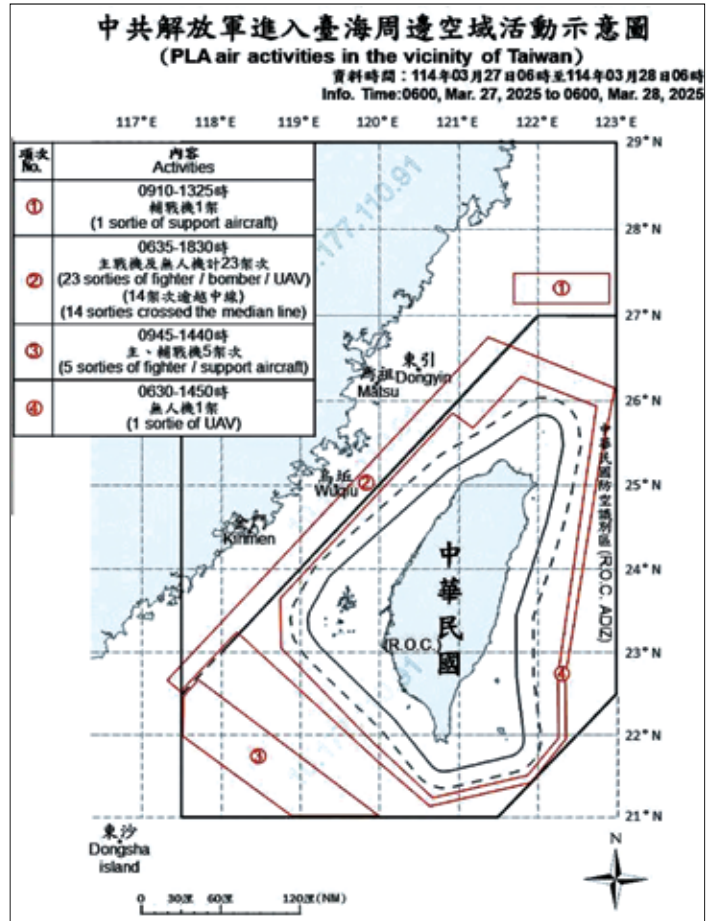
This photo of a PRC serviceman observing a Taiwan warship caused controversy for appearing altered when it was released by the PRC government.

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Kaohsiung south-west of Taiwan. This zone did not feature in the previous Joint Sword exercises held in 2022 and 2023. Located just west of the Penghu Islands, this was meant to demonstrate the PLA's ability to cut off access to the Taiwan Strait. The Chinese Coast Guard was also dispatched to the northern and southern ends of the Taiwan Strait, suggesting a reinforcing role in future naval operations against Taiwan. *The Global Times* was explicit concerning the purpose of the exercises, running an article on May 23 under the headline "PLA holds joint drills surrounding Taiwan island to punish secessionist forces."

Joint Sword-2024B took place on October 14, three days after President Lai's address to commemorate the ROC's National Day. This time, 153 aircraft (111 crossing the median line), and 26 vessels (14 naval ships and 12 coastguard ships) were dispatched to six areas around Taiwan. This included the four PLA units that make up the *Liaoning* Carrier Strike Group to the southwest of Taiwan. In their October 14 profile titled "*Liaoning* aircraft carrier participates in PLA's joint drills surrounding Taiwan"—again, published in the regime's mouthpiece, *The Global Times*—Liu Xin and Guo Yuandan were explicit that "from its strategic position, the *Liaoning* carrier controls a key chokepoint, forming a solid maritime barrier and establishing external blockade and internal pressure, effectively exerting pressure on the 'Taiwan independence' secessionists."

The PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson was unconcerned, blandly stating on October 22 that "Taiwan is Chinese territory. It is perfectly normal for Chinese aircraft carriers to sail in its own territory and territorial waters." The Chinese Coast Guard was used



more extensively. A heart-shaped circumference of the island was posted by them on October 14 with the image and caption "[Our] patrols take the shape of loving you". Beijing's Ministry of National Defense (MND) spokesperson Wu Qian was clear on October 14 that "Joint Sword-2024B is not a repeat of 2024A, but an increased pressure attack on 'Taiwan independence.'" Equally explicitly, Wang Wenjuan's piece in *The Global Times* on October 14 was titled "'Joint Sword-2024B' drill indicates two swords hanging over 'Taiwan independence,'" the two swords being "military punishment" and judicial punishment.

A third set of PLA drills were carried out December 9-13, in effect a Joint Sword-2024C. Taiwan's Emergency Response Center was immediately opened. These followed President Lai's high-profile Pacific tour in ear-



The Chinese aircraft carrier Liaoning took part in the “Joint Sword” military exercises around Taiwan.

ly December, which included the Marshall Islands, Tuvalu, and Palau (all of which recognize the ROC), as well as the American territories of Hawaii and Guam. This drill represented a further escalation as the PLA’s Eastern Theater Command was joined by the Southern Theater Command. On December 13, the PRC Defense Minister Wu Qian, quoting from Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*, said that “just as water retains no constant shape, so in warfare there are no constant conditions,” in a report in *The Global Times*.

Ongoing military presence

The naval deployment was wider, running across and up and down the First Island Chain, from Japan, past Taiwan, to the Philippines, with speculation being that this was a deliberate attempt by Beijing to normalize an ongoing military presence. Hence Taiwan’s Ministry of Defense warned on December 13 that “the threat posed by PLA to Taiwan and the region has escalated from coercion [of Taiwan] to directly affecting the First Island Chain.”

The US Navy’s presence in the Taiwan Strait con-

tinued to be frequent throughout 2024, generally declared to be “routine,” and reflecting an almost monthly pattern of freedom of navigation and aerial overflight transits, as has been established over the past few years. What was new in 2024 was the wider appearance of other navies, namely those of Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, Netherlands, and New Zealand.

The tone was set by HNLMS Tromp in late May, the first appearance by the Dutch navy in the Taiwan Strait in modern times. China’s response was denunciation by the Foreign Ministry, but also close monitoring by the guided-missile frigate *Nantong*, stationed on the eastern side of the median line; there to make the point that Beijing considers the whole Taiwan Strait to be “Chinese waters.”

Two German vessels, the FGS *Baden-Württemberg* and the support ship *Frankfurt* transited through the Taiwan Strait on September 13, the first German appearance in twenty years. The German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius was sanguine that day, stating that “international waters are international waters. It is the shortest and, given the weather conditions, also

the safest route. So we are going through.” The German ships were shadowed by PLA Navy (PLAN) vessels. On September 13, the PRC Foreign Ministry spokesperson condemned Germany’s decision, stating that the “Taiwan question is not about freedom of navigation but about China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.” They furthermore stated their opposition to “any act of provocation under the pretext of freedom of navigation that harms China’s sovereignty and security.”

In the wake of Joint Sword 2024-B, there was a joint transit by US and Canadian vessels, the USS *Higgins* and HMCS *Vancouver*, on October 20. The next day, the ROC Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that Taiwan “welcomes and affirms the United States and Canada once again taking concrete action to emphasize the Taiwan Strait’s status in law as an international waterway and their firm stance on safeguarding freedom of navigation and regional stability.” Predictably, the PRC condemned the transit, with the PLA’s Eastern Theater Command saying “The actions of the United

States and Canada caused trouble and are disruptive to peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait.”

A different permutation was the joint transit by New Zealand’s HMNZS *Aotearoa* (a first-time New Zealand appearance) and Australia’s HMAS *Sydney* on September 25, a first-time joint appearance, their mission stated as being to assert the right to freedom of navigation. Their joint transit had an implicit third partner, the simultaneous transit on September 25 by Japan’s JS *Sazanami*. Though their simultaneous appearance in the Taiwan Strait was not acknowledged as a trilateral appearance, the three ships then exercised together in the South China Sea—a further affront to Beijing. Finally France’s FS *Prairial* passed through the Taiwan Strait on October 29. The passage was low-key but permission from Beijing was deliberately not sought. In the Chinese state media, *The Global Times* headline on 30 October read “Cheering for Western warships’ Taiwan Strait transits reflects separatists’ trepidation.”



photo: Donavan Patubid

A sailor aboard the US Navy’s destroyer USS *Higgins* (DDG 76) observes the Royal Canadian Navy’s HMCS *Vancouver* (FFH 331) in the South China Sea.

Such transits of the Taiwan Strait by outside parties can be seen as maintaining the sea lines of communication and transit rights through freedom of navigation operations, reflecting the practical maxim; use it or lose it.

With regard to the Taiwan Strait, the most relevant parts of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) are Articles 34-45 “Straits used for International Navigation.” Nowhere does UNCLOS say that ships need permission or escorting of coastal states in question. This is bad news for the PRC position. Article 38.1 states quite simply: “All ships and aircraft enjoy the right of transit passage, which shall not be impeded.” Again; bad news for Beijing’s position.

However, Article 39.1.b is complicated. Transiting ships and aircraft “shall refrain from any threat or use of force against the sovereignty, territorial integrity, or political independence of states bordering the strait, or in any other manner.” The PRC could argue that naval transits, if they gave *de facto* support for Taiwan’s continuing existence as a separate political entity, particularly under the pro-independence leadership of the DPP administration, was threatening the

territorial integrity of the PRC. The counterargument is that the refrain of transit would threaten the political independence of another state bordering the Strait, namely Taiwan; and that China’s deployment of its own aircraft carriers in and through the Taiwan Strait very directly threatens the independence of another state bordering the Strait, Taiwan.

A picket line

There is an unstated practical side to these freedom-of-navigation appearances. The more that other navies deploy in the Taiwan Strait, the less monopoly the PRC has on presence, and the more Beijing’s monopolistic claim that the entire Taiwan Strait is “Chinese waters” remains unrealized. To some extent, naval transits can be seen as a form of picket line, getting in the way of unimpeded operations by Beijing across the Taiwan Strait.

Such freedom of navigation operations are designed to give some support to Taiwan’s continued existence as a separate entity from the PRC. This is implicit, to be inferred, but is discernible. The greater range of coun-



The Royal New Zealand Navy auxiliary oiler replenishment ship HMNZS Aotearoa (A 11) conducts a replenishment-at-sea with USS Boxer (LHD 4).



photo: Colby Mothershead

A gunner's mate monitors a surface vessel from the pilot house of the USS *Rafael Peralta* (DDG 115) during a freedom of navigation exercise in the SC5.

tries now periodically deploying through the Taiwan Strait (Australia, Canada, France, Japan, Netherlands, New Zealand, UK, US) are countries that have become more critical of the PRC and have edged towards some greater compensatory support for Taiwan. Deployment by the UK Carrier Strike Group later in the year would be a welcome sign of support for Taipei.

In the meantime, the military context continues to be the extent to which the PRC is increasing the tempo and invasion-readiness of its forces for cross-strait operations. Their three operations in the second half of 2024 makes this a growing concern for Taiwan and its security partners. The strategic fear for Taipei is that such normalized ongoing military deployments could be switched into invasion mode much more easily. In the wake of the latest drills, on December 26, Taiwan's Presidential Office for the first time conducted a tabletop exercise involving state and civil society agencies simulating a Chinese invasion. Taiwan's announcement in August of an US\$8.8 billion investment in sub-

marines—with seven (eight including the prototype) to come over the next decade through its Indigenous Defense Submarine Program—is a long-term effort rather than immediate help.

In conclusion, the key military issue for 2025 will continue to revolve around what military support the United States is prepared to render to Taiwan, including providing supplies to the island, as well as the deployment of its own naval forces. This is all the more central but potentially uncertain with the return to the presidency of Donald Trump. His appointments, including Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, Secretary of State Marco Rubio, and former National Security Adviser Mike Waltz, are all hawks on China. Firm US geopolitical support is needed for Taiwan, and the Trump administration needs to resist the geoeconomic protectionist calls for curbing Taiwan's advanced semiconductor business in favor of supporting Taiwan's continued autonomy, as a democratic ally in the face of mounting Chinese pressure. ■