

INDICATOR INSIGHT BRIEF: CHINESE MILITARY EXERCISE JOINT SWORD 2024A

30/05/2024

Indicator

China conducted short-notice, large-scale military exercises around Taiwan, that included the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), and the People's Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF). The exercise was dubbed "Joint Sword 2024A". There was no official announcement of the exercise or the exercise areas, the only warnings were issued via media. The Chinese stated the exercise included manoeuvres involving "advancing", "besieging", "blockading", "attacking", "destroying" and "cutting off".

Two exercise areas overlapped with those previously used during military drills when US Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, visited Taiwan in August 2022, north of Taipei, and southwest of Kaohsiung. Additional areas, which were larger than previous exercise areas, were seen off the east, southeast and western coast of Taiwan and around islands close to mainland China, the Kinmen and Matsu Islands. The exercises around the outlying islands of Matsu and Kinmen were highly unusual and there have been escalating Chinese activities around these islands over the past 6 months.

Context

The exercises were assessed to be triggered by the inauguration of the incoming Taiwanese President, Lai Ching-te, which happened three days before the exercises. China has previously conducted military exercises around Taiwan during times of political importance, as when US Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, visited. She was the highest-ranking US politician to visit Taiwan since 1997.

The incoming Taiwanese President, Lai Ching-te, is against the one-China principle as well as reunification and has openly advocated for Taiwanese independence and strengthening ties with the US, two positions which China opposes.

Analysis

Although China has previously conducted military exercises around Taiwan, these recent exercises show levels of escalation. The exercise which occurred in August 2022 was announced via official channels and included the issuing of exclusion areas via the Chinese Maritime Safety Administration (MSA), whereas "Joint Sword 2024A" had no such notice. This was likely a method of exerting pressure over Taiwan and demonstrating China's unilateral ability to conduct large military manoeuvres in the Taiwan Strait and around Taiwan. The combined operation, which involved land, sea and air assets was assessed to be practicing an offensive against Taiwan. The subsequent actions of Taiwan also provide data to China, in terms of Taiwan's response time and capability.

The naming of the exercise "Joint Sword 2024A" also suggests there will be further exercises of the same nature in 2024. Ambrey has also observed, via satellite imagery, that following the two-day exercise the PLAN then continued to conduct military exercises in the Bohai Sea that included an aircraft carrier.

Implications

Ambrey assessed the aggressive posturing of China increases the likelihood of a cross-strait conflict occurring. The exercise was undertaken during the time of year when the sea state is favourable for amphibious operations, likely probing the potential effectiveness of tactics and equipment. The Chinese leadership is acutely aware that there is a specific window of opportunity to conduct an attack on Taiwan. China has an ageing population that will become a significant issue for the country in the long term. Furthermore, the US is increasingly supplying more defensive weaponry to Taiwan which will only compound as the US military-industrial complex increases production and technological advancements, prompted by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Chinese President Xi Jinping has reportedly requested the military be prepared by 2027 to conduct such an attack on Taiwan.

Ambrey would advise companies involved with vessels transiting the Taiwan area and calling Taiwan Strait adjacent ports to review and institute contingency plans around a potential conflict to ensure the safety of crews and assets.