

DEFENCE

Chinese military activity in the Taiwan Strait and East China Sea

On 23 February 2025, Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense (MND) reported that it had detected 11 Chinese military aircraft, six naval vessels, and two official ships near its borders, all of which crossed the median line of the Taiwan Strait and entered areas of Taiwan's air defence identification zone (ADIZ) between 6 a.m. on Saturday (22nd) and the beginning of Sunday (23rd).^{1 2 3}

On 25 February, multiple Chinese reconnaissance drones, including a BZK-005 and a GJ-2, were reported flying between the islands of Okinawa and Miyako. The BZK-005 flew eastwards, circled over the Pacific, and returned along the same route. In its press release, the Japanese Ministry of Defence highlighted that this is the first time the GJ-2 was sighted in an airspace violation operation.^{4 5}

Also on 25 February, the Taiwanese coastguard detained a Chinese-crewed cargo ship, alleging it had severed Penghu No. 3, a subsea telecoms cable which connects Taiwan's Penghu island group to its main island.^{6 7} Taiwanese authorities are reportedly investigating the role of 'Hong Tai', a Togo-registered freighter which authorities described as a "Chinese-funded vessel", saying that they had not yet ruled out "grey zone harassment" by China from ships flying "flags of convenience" after observing a rise in such instances of cable damage.^{8 9} The captain has reportedly been remanded in custody, while the other seven crew members – all Chinese nationals – have been released but barred from leaving Taiwan pending the investigation.^{10 11}

On the night of February 25, 2025, 21 sorties of Chinese aircraft composed of fighters, UAVs, bombers, and support aircraft were reported west of Taiwan, with 14 of those crossings occurring over the Median Line.¹² The MND also reported that Chinese transport helicopters and support aircraft were observed northeast and south of Taiwan, corresponding with the same timeframe of late on 25 February, into 26 February.^{13 14}

On 26 February the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) conducted a live-fire exercise 74km off the coast of southern Taiwan without prior announcement, claiming this was necessary for joint combat readiness patrols.^{15 16} In its statement, the MND said that since 8:42 a.m. local time, it had detected 32 Chinese military aircraft, including Shenyang J-11 jet fighters, Shaanxi KJ-500 early warning and control aircraft, drones, as well as additional fighter jets around Taiwan.¹⁷

The MND condemned these actions as "a blatant provocation to regional security", asserting that such exercises disregard international norms and pose risks to air and maritime navigation.^{18 19 20 21} In its response, Taiwan actively dispatched its own aircraft and naval ships and positioned coastal missile systems to monitor these activities.^{22 23} Meanwhile, the MND's official statement as well as local media outlets highlighted that 'a surge' in Chinese military movements has become a recurring occurrence, with Taiwan tracking 373 instances of Chinese military aircraft and 157 naval ships in the month at the time of reporting.^{24 25 26 27}

Adarga Analysis:

China's recent military operations around Taiwan and the East China Sea are best understood not as isolated incidents, but as part of a deliberate, multi-pronged strategy aimed at force projection across the Taiwan Strait and the broader Indo-Pacific region. The past week has seen a convergence of tactics, including air and naval incursions, drone reconnaissance, possible sabotage, and live-fire drills, all executed within a compressed timeframe. Our assessment is this likely indicates a step-change in operational tempo rather than routine posturing.

The repeated incursions made by Chinese aircraft and naval vessels across the median line of the Taiwan Strait – an implicit boundary long observed by both sides – highly likely represents a deliberate erosion of the median line's significance, an approach consistent with China's broader goal of normalising its military presence beyond the First Island Chain.

However, in this case, by 25 February, those incursions expanded beyond Taiwan to include Chinese drone activity near Okinawa and Miyako, marking an additional direct challenge to Japan and the United States' security interests in those islands. The reported first sighting of the GJ-2 reconnaissance drone also suggests China is both refining its surveillance capabilities and probing Japanese response mechanisms, reinforcing the idea that these actions are not limited to Taiwan but encompass a wider Indo-Pacific power play.

Simultaneously, the interception of a Chinese-crewed cargo ship and its subsequent accusation of severing a key subsea telecoms cable linking Taiwan's outlying Penghu islands with its main island raises additional concerns over Beijing's potential growing utilisation of "grey zone" warfare tactics, as well as their increasing combination with more traditional posturing tactics like ADIZ incursions. The fact that Taiwanese authorities have not ruled out deliberate sabotage demonstrates the increased sensitivity to non-military coercion, particularly in the realm of its critical infrastructure security, and its link to potential blockade scenarios.

However, the most significant development is the PLAN's decision to conduct a live-fire exercise just 74km off Taiwan's southern coast without prior notification. This represents a departure from previous patterns of Chinese military drills, which, while frequent, have typically been pre-announced to avoid triggering unintentional escalation. The Joint Swords series in 2024 is the last time the PLAN conducted live fire drills without warning. China's decision to forego prior notice in this instance raises the stakes significantly. On the one hand, it increases the risk of miscalculation and unintended escalation, particularly in a crowded air and maritime theatre. Furthermore, it also complicates response planning for Taiwan and its partners, as it removes the buffer period usually available for both intelligence gathering and defensive posturing. Finally, and most crucially, it also sends a stronger deterrence signal, as China demonstrates its willingness to break from established signalling norms, effectively lowering the threshold for future provocations.

Taken together, these incidents illustrate China's layered approach to coercion, blending conventional military intimidation with non-military hybrid tactics. The incursions, potential infrastructure sabotage, and unannounced drills are almost certainly not separate developments; rather they are highly likely components of a wider pressure campaign aimed at straining Taiwan's defence capacity, while simultaneously normalising Chinese military presence beyond the First Island Chain and signalling to regional actors, including Japan and the United States, that China is willing to escalate further. When examined in the context of the broader pattern of military intensification identified by the MND and media outlets alike, our assessment is that these developments are best understood as a deliberate sustained pressure campaign rather than as an isolated surge.

The convergence of military and grey zone tactics also presents a challenge for Taiwan and its partners, particularly the U.S. and Japan. The increased use of drones and naval activity near Okinawa and Miyako suggests an attempt to also test Japan's response mechanisms, mirroring similar tactics used by China against Taiwan. If these incursions continue, it is likely Tokyo may seek to augment its own deterrence measures, including new defence investments or policy shifts towards Taiwan.

Looking ahead, this escalation will likely lead to a coordinated response. Taiwan's military posture may shift in its balance towards favouring more proactive air and naval patrolling, rather than more reactive approaches. Ultimately, this escalation is not just about Taiwan; it is a calculated demonstration of China's ability to dictate terms across multiple domains, simultaneously challenging Taiwan, Japan, the United States, and regional security norms.

The unannounced drills, as well as marking a notable shift in China's tactics, also indicate a trend towards greater unpredictability and higher-stakes brinkmanship. If left unchecked, this has the potential to establish a dangerous precedent, where China's assertiveness expands without meaningful pushback, further eroding regional stability and undermining existing defence postures in the Indo-Pacific. Therefore, it is likely that in the short- to medium- term Japan and the U.S. will re-evaluate their deterrence framework, particularly in the East China Sea, where reconnaissance activity is increasing. Regional partners will also increasingly have to confront the reality that China's coercion campaign against Taiwan is becoming less predictable and more aggressive, thereby raising the likelihood of an accidental escalation.

ABOUT

Briefly - China in the Changing World Order

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