

China's Navy Swarms the First Island Chain



Courtesy Taiwan Coast Guard

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China's military has deployed its largest fleet of naval and coast guard vessels in East Asia in three decades, according to Taiwan's defense ministry. No maritime drills have been declared, but massive Chinese maneuvers are under way in waters stretching between Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines and the South China Sea - as well as further out in the Pacific. It appears to be the first time that China's maritime forces have tested out a simultaneous operation throughout the first island chain.

Taiwan put its military on high alert on Monday after detecting a surge of Chinese military activity. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has declared seven zones for aviation drills just off the coast of the Chinese mainland, and it has been dispatching airborne patrols near Taiwanese airspace, particularly north of the island. Nearly 90 Chinese government vessels - including both China Coast Guard and PLA Navy ships - have been detected up and down the first island chain, according to AFP.

Hsieh Jih-sheng, a Taiwanese defense ministry intelligence official, told reporters on Tuesday that China's navy has set up two cordons: one in the First Island Chain, and a second "wall" further out in the Pacific, blocking areas that U.S. reinforcements would have to transit. "They are sending a very simple message with these two walls: trying to make the Taiwan Strait an internal sea," Hsieh told AFP.

Taken as a whole, the operation is larger than any of the previous Taiwan-centered war games that the PLA has conducted in recent years. Unusually, the deployed force draws on units from the PLA Northern and Southern Theater Commands, not just the Eastern Theater Command. "Regardless of

whether they have announced drills, they are posing a great threat to us," said Sun Li-fang, a spokesman for Taiwan's defense ministry.

Some form of a major Chinese exercise has been widely expected in Taipei and abroad. Taiwanese President Lai Ching-te recently concluded a goodwill tour of Pacific nations, including a rare stopover on U.S. territory in Hawaii and Guam - and a rare phone call between President Lai and U.S. House Speaker Mike Johnson. China views any recognition of Taiwan's independent government as an affront, and Beijing has reacted with anger after each previous contact between U.S. and Taiwanese leaders.