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Superpowers face off over South China Sea, as Taiwan drills for war

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The roar of war crackled across the Taiwan Strait from a sandy beach on the west coast of the independent island towards the Chinese shoreline just 100 miles away.

Missiles fired from attack helicopters streaked through the air, fighter jets unloaded their bombs and submarines fired torpedoes, as Taiwan's outgunned and outnumbered military repelled an invasion by Beijing's forces.

The five-day operation last week was a drill by Taiwan, and the incursion was simulated. But as tensions between China and its rivals sweep east Asia to the brink of confrontation, these "war games" were deadly serious.

The region's waters have been churned into a cauldron of superpower confrontation by the breakdown in relations between America and China — a new cold war driven by the aggressive ambitions of President Xi Jinping and the increasingly desperate electoral calculus of Donald Trump.

Chinese aircraft have repeatedly buzzed Taiwan as Beijing has intensified its campaign of intimidation and threats against what Xi regards as a breakaway province, to be claimed by force if necessary.

As the exercise began, a US surveillance aircraft flew close to the Chinese coastline in a rare operation to monitor any military activity.

Tsai Ing-wen, the Taiwanese president loathed by Beijing as an arch-separatist, watched the live-fire drills in combat gear. American military observers were also believed to be among those in attendance.

The US has just approved a £495m deal by Lockheed Martin to upgrade Taiwan's Patriot missile defences, prompting Beijing to vow to impose sanctions on the US company. Trump has also signed off on the sale of F-16 fighter jets and other hardware.

But the military mismatch remains deep. So, central to Taiwan's counter-invasion strategy is holding out long enough for international support to be deployed. In practice, that means relying on American armed intervention to defend the democratic state against Chinese annexation.

The Taiwan Strait flows into the South China Sea, home to the world's most lucrative shipping lanes and its most dangerous maritime flashpoint. For the second time in two weeks, two US aircraft carriers cruised into the waters on Friday, to the fury of Beijing.

The sea, which China claims almost in its entirety, has been the venue for increasing displays of military might on water as well as belligerent salvos from Beijing and Washington.

Earlier this month, China conducted drills near the disputed Paracel Islands, while the US navy held its own exercise elsewhere in the South China Sea.

Beijing's maritime forces, including swarms of militarised fishing boats, have harassed, threatened or at times sunk vessels from Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia, even as they operated within their own waters in the South China Sea. The four countries, plus Taiwan and Brunei, all have claims on parts of the sea.

Neither Beijing nor Washington may want open conflict, but the danger that a seaborne confrontation between the superpowers could spin out of control has risen dramatically in the current combative climate. The near-ramming of a US warship by a Chinese vessel in 2018 was a stark reminder how easily that could happen.

“Given the militarisation of the South China Sea, the prospect of an accidental collision and the potential for unmanaged escalation of hostilities are strong and they are mounting,” said Alexander Neill, an Asia-Pacific security consultant in Singapore.

Even as the two US strike groups returned, Chinese military sources revealed that Beijing was expected to launch its next-generation aircraft carrier within a year and construction on a sister ship has been hastened.

The new vessel will carry the world's most advanced electromagnetic aircraft launch system, equivalent to the latest US technology, the sources said. A new stealth fighter jet recently entered mass production, ready to make its debut when the carrier is launched.

The Chinese navy's destroyer fleet will double by 2025 and it plans to have at least six carrier battle groups on the water by a decade later, as it aims to match US naval strength in the Asia-Pacific. Worldwide, the US has 11 large carriers, with two more under construction.

With an Asian arms race under way, Japan last week unveiled plans to bolster military spending and upgrade its naval forces to counter Beijing's aggressive territorial claims, which it said had intensified during the coronavirus pandemic. Tokyo condemned the “relentless” intrusion of Chinese ships around the Senkaku Islands, which are under Japanese control but claimed by China.

Scott Morrison, Australian's prime minister, described the Indo-Pacific region as “the dominant global contest of our age”, and said “the risk of miscalculation, and even conflict, is heightening”, as he announced new defence spending plans of £150bn.

Australia has been the target of Chinese ire, punitive trade tariffs and suspected cyber-sabotage after Morrison called for an independent investigation into the origins of the coronavirus pandemic. America is also hoping to build a new naval base in northern Australia

Britain is expected to add its muscle to the coalition opposed to Beijing's maritime ambitions by deploying its new aircraft carrier, HMS Queen Elizabeth, to the South China Sea on her maiden grand voyage. Asian security analysts downplayed talk that the vessel could be “based” in the region, but said she could be “hosted” during a lengthy visit in Singapore, Japan and Australia.

Liu Xiaoming, China's ambassador to London, warned Britain not to “gang up with the United States on the Chinese” by sending the carrier to the South China Sea. In an interview with The Times yesterday, he said that basing a carrier in the region would be “a very dangerous move”.

Britain's relations with China are already in free fall after Beijing imposed sweeping new national security legislation on Hong Kong, in breach of the “one country, two systems” model it agreed with London to guarantee autonomy after the 1997 handover. The government's decision

to ditch Chinese technology giant Huawei from its 5G network has deepened the fissure between Beijing and London.

In Washington, Trump has pinned hopes for resurrecting his faltering re-election campaign on an ultra-hawkish China policy, ordering top administration figures to deliver a co-ordinated roll-out of assaults on Beijing.

In a Rose Garden address, the president announced the removal of Hong Kong's special trading status in response to the Chinese crackdown, while William Barr, his attorney-general, accused Beijing of staging an "economic blitzkrieg" to challenge the US.

The White House is considering a travel ban on all Communist Party members and their families — an estimated 270 million people. Beijing would be certain to impose counter-measures on American travellers if Trump signed the draft proclamation. The two countries have already expelled journalists in tit-for-tat rounds in recent months.

Mike Pompeo, the secretary of state, delivered the toughest US rebuttal of Beijing's claims to sovereignty of vast tracts of the South China Sea, through which shipping worth £4.2 trillion passes each year and beneath which is a huge trove of gas and oil.

He denounced Chinese efforts to establish a "maritime empire" and claim undersea resources as "completely unlawful" under international law. How the US will try to firm up that stance is expected to be addressed by Mark Esper, the defence secretary, on Tuesday in a speech outlining the "US vision for security in the Indo-Pacific region".

Troubled waters



	Total assets					Assets in region
	China	Japan	Taiwan	Australia	N Zealand	US*
 Warships	777	155	117	48	11	70
 Aircraft carriers	2	-	-	2	-	2
 Submarines	74	20	4	6	-	12
 Fighter jets	1,232	279	289	82	-	172

*Based on the capacity of carriers USS Ronald Reagan and USS Nimitz and the US Navy 7th Fleet

Source: GlobalFirepower

As the barrage from Washington intensified, a Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman said US leaders have “lost their minds and gone mad” in their criticism of Beijing.

But Trump was still praising Xi as a friend and partner in trade talks until recently, even as Beijing pursued its aggressive gambits across east Asia. The the recent attack by Chinese forces on Indian troops on their Himalayan border opened yet another front.

“There was clearly a strategic decision by the Chinese central military commission to take a more strident, assertive approach over what it calls its core interests,” said Neill. “Beijing is feeling emboldened after ditching the ‘hide and bide’ strategy of former leader Deng Xiaoping.”

Beijing has forged ahead with its coercive behaviour while the pandemic has distracted rivals. The tactics were business as usual for Beijing, said Richard McGregor, a China expert at the Lowy Institute in Sydney.

“China is doing what they were doing before the virus,” he said. “It’s just that they haven’t stopped, while much of the world is immobilised.”

“The US feels it is late to the game, and is now looking at every option to push back against China.

“But China under Xi is not going to consider any backward step. There will be no recalibration in Beijing. It’s full steam ahead.

“Neither side is looking for an off-ramp. Don’t expect this to dial down anytime soon.”

The Trump administration blames his predecessor Barack Obama and the Democratic foreign-policy establishment now clustered around Joe Biden for not standing up to Beijing in the South China Sea during its military build-up there.

But Neill noted that China had now turned to civilian and scientific activities to consolidate its claims to once remote rocky outcrops and manmade islands that already bristle with airstrips, bases, artillery and harbours.

The Chinese Academy of Sciences established an oceanographic research centre on Mischief Reef last year. There are large “maritime militia” fishing fleets in lagoons, and a new maritime rescue centre opened on Fiery Cross Reef. Beijing has also created civilian administrations to run the territory.

“It’s basically a fait accompli,” said Neill. “I would expect the US to challenge any fresh grabs, but China has already created the military bases and civilian infrastructure.”

“They are saturating the South China Sea with their presence. Populating the islands is the clear objective. They have moved on to their second phase to make the waterway irreversibly Chinese.”