

Fighter jets land, rearm on highway

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A Republic of China Air Force F-16V jet conducts an emergency takeoff and landing drill as part of the Han Kuang military exercises in Changhua County yesterday.

Photo: Peter Lo, Taipei Times

The military yesterday displayed how its fighter jets can land, refuel and rearm on the nation's highways for the first time in five years as part of the annual Han Kuang military exercises simulating defense against a Chinese invasion.

On Monday, the streets across northern Taiwan were briefly deserted as authorities carried out an annual missile drill, with text messages sent to every mobile phone and air raid sirens wailing.

Yesterday, 1,600 soldiers were mobilized in central Taiwan as aircraft practiced landing on a closed section of highway for the annual exercises.

Three fighter jets, as well as an early warning aircraft, practiced refueling and loading missiles and other ammunition before taking off again.

An F-16V jet, a Mirage 2000-5, an Indigenous Defense Fighter and an E-2K airborne early warning aircraft landed on the Huatan section of the Sun Yat-sen Freeway (Freeway No. 1) in Changhua County at about 6am.

It was the first time an F-16V took part in the exercises.

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The military is upgrading its 144 F-16A/B jets to F-16Vs as part of a US\$3.68 billion project launched by the government in 2016.

The retrofit program involves installing advanced equipment on the fighters, including the AN/APG active electronically scanned array radar system used in the US' F-22 and F-35 jets.

The comprehensive upgrade of the air force's entire F-16 fleet is expected to be completed by the end of 2023, the air force has said.

"There are only a few military air bases [in Taiwan], which would become prime targets in the event of an attack. The highway drill is necessary, as highway strips would be our priority choice if the runways are damaged during a war," air force Colonel Shu Kuo-mao (舒國毛) told reporters.

Taiwan would be massively outgunned in terms of troop numbers and firepower in any war with China, but it has developed sophisticated asymmetric tactics to hold out for as long as possible and make any invasion of the nation very costly for Beijing.

President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文), who inspected the drill, commented on increased Chinese naval and air force patrols around Taiwan over the past few months.

"They have caused a certain degree of threat to regional peace and stability. We should maintain high vigilance," Tsai said.

The exercises aim to test combat capabilities of all branches of the armed forces in the face of a continuing military threat from China.

They came after the US, Japan, South Korea and Australia last week launched operation

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“Pacific Vanguard” near Guam, bringing together more than 3,000 sailors from the four countries.

Beijing has also been angered by warming relations between Taipei and Washington since Tsai came to power in May 2016.

On Monday, Beijing reacted frostily to photographs showing a rare meeting between uniformed Taiwanese officers and their US counterparts earlier this month.

Last week, China lodged a protest with Washington after two US warships sailed through the Taiwan Strait.

Additional reporting by CNA

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