

PLA aircraft probing for weakness

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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In a drill on Nov. 25, People's Liberation Army (PLA) aircraft flew once around Taiwan. On Saturday, PLA aircraft were once again engaged in a drill. The Chinese military aircraft not only circled Taiwan's airspace, they also challenged the US and Japan's control of the first island chain, and this carries huge strategic and tactical significance. Although all parties maintained their cool and avoided a clash, a war of nerves in the Asia-Pacific region is under way.

There have been media reports that the Ministry of National Defense responded to the latest exercise by the PLA Air Force by holding a drill on Saturday to prevent an enemy air raid that included Kidd-class warships at sea, Tien Kung and Patriot missiles on land and F-16 and Indigenous Defense Fighter jets in the air, while Minister of National Defense Feng Shih-kuan (馮世寬) went to the Hengshan Military Command Center in Taipei.

The Japan Air Self-Defense Force scrambled 10 F-15J aircraft to intercept the Chinese aircraft and US forces in Japan sent EP-3 and RC-135 surveillance aircraft to gather intelligence. After the Japanese aircraft reportedly fired "jamming shells", the PLA aircraft left.

All parties engaged in massive military mobilization and raised the alert in case things spun out of control. Luckily, things did not go that far, and the intelligence and national security agencies of all affected parties got away with just biting their nails.

After two such exercises, it seems the PLA sees them as a routine training assignment, and it is likely that such events will become increasingly frequent. China is testing Taiwan's, Japan's and the US' willingness and determination to defend their airspace. It is also a test to discover the military deployments and capabilities of the three nations. This is to be a long-term endurance war, and none of the parties want to reveal their preparedness, while they try to reveal their counterpart's strength.

Judging from China's military activity in Northeast Asia and the South China Sea, it is becoming quite clear what it is attempting to do: It is increasing its military preparations in the disputed territorial waters in the South and the East China seas, which could be because Beijing thinks that US President Barack Obama's "pivot" toward Asia will come to an end when Obama leaves the White House and because US president-elect Donald Trump's Asia policy is still unclear. China is likely consolidating its military power in Asia.

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Taiwan controls Itu Aba Island (Taiping Island, 太平島) in the South China Sea and is a claimant to the Diaoyutai Islands (釣魚台) in the East China Sea. One of several claimants in these waters, the nation cannot remain aloof as larger powers compete to exert their influence in the region.

Taiwan proper is also under threat from the Chinese military, and President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) is unwilling to accept the so-called “1992 consensus.”

To pressure Tsai and force her to comply with China’s demands, Beijing is resorting to propaganda as well as military measures.

In this war of nerves, Taiwan must toughen up, bolster its defense abilities and initiate preventive exercises.

Taiwan must increase diplomatic and military cooperation with the US and Japan to prevent any minor oversight that could give China the opportunity it is looking for.

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