

A series of events over the past few days and weeks has caused the Taiwan-US-China relationship to become increasingly fraught. As tensions rise to the boiling point, the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea have become a dangerous tinderbox.

The temperature must be ratcheted down to alleviate the risk of a miscalculation mushrooming into a major conflict.

In a virtual keynote address yesterday to a forum organized by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute yesterday, President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) acknowledged the danger.

“The risk of conflict requires careful management by all the parties concerned. We expect and hope that Beijing will continue to exercise restraint consistent with its obligations as a major regional power,” Tsai said.

She reiterated the government’s commitment to peace and dialogue with Beijing, and stressed the importance of all parties maintaining open lines of communication to prevent misinterpretations or miscalculations.

China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) is conducting large-scale maritime war games in four areas: the South China Sea, and the East China, Yellow and Bohai seas. While the scale of the exercises is comparable to previous years, holding near-simultaneous exercises in four different regions is rare.

The war games follow exercises in the South China, East China and Yellow seas last month, and additional exercises in the Taiwan Strait this month that coincided with US Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar’s trip to Taipei, the highest-level visit by a US official since 1979.

Last week’s exercises included two Chinese warplanes briefly crossing the median line of the Strait, a once rare event that has become a common occurrence in the past few years as

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Beijing attempts to normalize the incursions as part of its psychological warfare against the nation.

Earlier this week, rumors surfaced in the Taiwanese media that the air force had dispatched F-16s to Penghu County in response to the increased number of incursions by PLA aircraft.

Military analysts say that basing F-16s in Penghu would shorten the response time to intercept a PLA attack by about six minutes.

Tellingly, the Ministry of National Defense has not denied the rumors.

On Tuesday, tensions ratcheted up another notch when a US Air Force U-2 high-altitude reconnaissance aircraft flew close to the PLA's Northern Theater Command.

On Wednesday, a "source" close to the PLA speaking to Hong Kong's South China Morning Post said the PLA had earlier that day test-fired two ballistic missiles into the South China Sea, in an area between Hainan Province and the Paracel Islands, but the Pentagon later said four missiles had been fired.

The PLA source said that one of the missiles was a DF-21D "carrier killer," which China claims is the world's first operational anti-ship ballistic missile. The launches were aimed at improving China's ability to deny other forces access to the South China Sea, they added.

Evocative of Cold War cat-and-mouse games between the US and the Soviet Union, a pattern is developing whereby whenever the PLA conducts a military exercise, the US military either closely shadows the PLA or conducts reciprocal exercises to reassert Washington's presence in the region, acting as a deterrent against Beijing launching a blockade or full-scale invasion of Taiwan.

As the US and China go toe-to-toe in a dangerous game of brinkmanship, all sides must

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continue talking to each other and keep all available lines of communication open.

As the Chinese saying goes, avoid “brushing the trigger while polishing the gun.”

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