

Taiwanese are not easily rattled

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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Almost as soon as the plane carrying a US delegation led by US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi took off from Taipei International Airport (Songshan airport) on Thursday, Beijing announced four days of live-fire military drills around Taiwan. China unilaterally cordoned off six maritime exclusion zones around Taiwan proper to simulate a blockade of the nation, fired 11 Dongfeng ballistic missiles and conducted coordinated maneuvers using naval vessels and aircraft.

Although the drills were originally to end on Sunday, the Chinese People's Liberation Army's (PLA) Eastern Theater Command issued a statement through Chinese state media that the exercises would continue, and provided no end date.

Military experts disagree over whether the drills represent an escalation by Beijing, or are broadly in line with similar exercises China held in the past. Tamkang University Institute of Strategic Studies assistant professor Lin Ying-yu (林盈宇) said that the scope of the missile tests do not exceed the threat level during the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1995 and 1996, and were likely carefully calibrated so as not to escalate the situation. However, experts such as retired air force lieutenant general Chang Yen-ting (張延廷) said the drills are more serious than 26 years ago.

Back then, Beijing attempted to use military coercion to deter Taiwanese from voting for former president Lee Teng-hui (李登輝) in the nation's first direct presidential election. The PLA fired missiles that landed between 46km and 65km from the ports of Keelung and Kaohsiung, just inside Taiwan's territorial waters. Last week's drills saw missiles splash down just 20km from Kaohsiung.

Others have said the PLA maneuvers and missile landing sites were positioned off Taiwan's east coast for the first time, enabling China to completely surround Taiwan proper and theoretically prevent reinforcements arriving from the US during a wartime scenario.

International media coverage of the exercises was in stark contrast to the mood in Taiwan. Major international news outlets portrayed Taiwan and China as being on the brink of war. Some sought to cast Pelosi's visit as rash and poorly timed.

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However, here in Taiwan, life goes on as normal. There is no sense of tension in the air and certainly no sign of panic among the populace: Taiwan has seen this play out before. If Beijing's aim was to conduct psychological warfare against Taiwan, it has been a demonstrable failure. An opinion poll published on Monday by the Chinese Association of Public Opinion Research found that 60 percent of respondents were "unconcerned" that the PLA's drills could lead to military conflict; only 34 percent expressed concern. The Taiwanese public's apparent indifference can either be viewed as measured and rational, or as reflecting a dangerous degree of complacency toward the iceberg on the horizon.

One thing is certain: An invasion of Taiwan was never in the cards. Not only is Taiwan's military at near full mobilization, having just completed the annual Han Kuang exercises, the US has deployed a number of significant naval assets in the region, including the USS Ronald Reagan aircraft carrier group, which could respond rapidly to an attack by China. From a tactical perspective, an invasion of Taiwan now would be extremely high-risk. With both Taiwan's and the US' militaries on high alert, China could not exploit any element of surprise.

However, if Beijing's goal was to put up a massive smokescreen to obscure its discredited "zero COVID-19" policy and its catastrophic mismanagement of China's economy — coming home to roost in the form of parallel property and banking crises — then it has been a roaring success. Nobody is talking about these policy failures anymore.

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