

Taiwan Strait Crisis Once Again? Comparison of the Two Taiwan Strait Crisis

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Keywords: Taiwan Strait Crisis, missile exercise, joint amphibious landing,
joint firepower strike

Foreword

China, spurred on by Speaker of the US House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, planned a major live-fire military exercise within a short period. Since all six or seven exercise areas were designated around Taiwan and delineated into Taiwan's territorial waters, some media described it as the "fourth Taiwan Strait crisis." In academic terms, there is a traditional definition of "crisis," which mainly emphasizes that when a break in normal operations occurs and things get too serious to be fixed, it can certainly be categorized as a crisis. But it would be premature to define the situation as a crisis before the operation's actual actions, scope, and impact have been established, as the Chinese exercise had just begun. To avoid the overly expanded interpretation and misjudgment of China's

actions, this article will compare the 1995 and 1996 Taiwan Strait crises with the 2022 military actions to offer insights into China's intentions.

Purpose of Actions

The Chinese military exercises in 1995 and 1996 were mainly due to former President Lee Teng-hui's visit to Cornell University at the invitation of the US Congress and his speeches, which led to Jiang Zemin's agreement to hold military exercises against Taiwan at the request of hawkish Chinese general Zhang Wannian and others. In 1995, two military exercises were conducted in the northern waters of Taiwan, and in 1996, four exercises were conducted. The most notable were missile test launches targeting Taiwan's northern and southern waters. After the missile launch, China held a joint amphibious

landing exercise involving 10,000 soldiers near Dongshan Island, Fujian. However, the exercise was terminated due to the leaked “dumb warhead” intelligence, which rendered the action ineffective. But China still sees the exercise as a major victory in the “struggle against Taiwan independence.”

Taiwan did not use any provocative language in response to China’s military actions toward the US House Speaker’s visit. However, since the visit coincided with the Chinese government’s Beidaihe meeting, China had to show a hardline attitude and strengthen its intimidation against Taiwan, given the sensitivity of the current US-China diplomatic situation. Considering the sensitive timing and the uncertainty of the outcome, China should have no intention to start a war.

Ways of Actions

The previous Chinese exercises in the Taiwan Strait Crisis focused on missile test firing, joint amphibious landings, and live fire against sea surface targets. Two exercises occurred in July and August 1995 respectively in the region north of Taiwan, and one in March 1996 for missile test firing and an amphibious landing. According to the division of

the exercise area and the information released by China, the 2022 exercise may have focused on missile firing from the PLA Rocket Force, air and sea joint strikes, long-range bomber attacks, submarine warfare, and aircraft carriers carrying out anti-intervention operations. The previous exercises had obvious intimidating connotations, but the US sent two carrier battle groups at the time while the Taiwanese forces elevated the combat readiness, reinforced the operational preparation of its outer island garrisons, and converted anti-aircraft missiles into ground-to-ground missiles. With the comprehensive military deployment, the crisis was successfully resolved.

In addition to the military exercises, the 2022 crisis was preceded by the dissemination of misinformation, cyber hacker attacks, and finally followed by joint firepower exercises. The exercise areas were designated within Taiwan’s territorial waters to encircle the island’s primary ports, international air routes, and runways of major airports to validate the feasibility of blockading Taiwan. To avoid international controversy, the exercise lasted only three days. Although it did not cause disruptions in the transportation of energy and natural gas to Taiwan,

the schedule of international flights and seaport traffic were actually affected. It cannot be ruled out that China will use this exercise as a reference for future attacks on Taiwan.

Means of Actions

The previous Taiwan Strait Crisis was led by Zhang Wannian, the Vice Chairman of CCP's Central Military Commission, who established the Nanjing Theater to plan all military operations. The PLA Second Artillery, Navy, Air Force, Army amphibious motorized infantry division, and the Marine Corps were mobilized in the exercise. According to the media coverage, although the *Xinhua News Agency* announced the scope of the exercise, the troops involved were mainly from the Eastern Theater. Due to the uncertainty of Pelosi's visit schedule, the military operation was planned in a hasty manner. Although China released videos of armored vehicle maneuvers in Zhejiang and the launching of DF-17 missiles beforehand, they were not of the actual exercise. However, the division of the exercise areas and media reports indicate that long-range rocket launchers and air-launched cruise missiles were used in air-sea joint live-fire operations,

and carrier battle groups and nuclear submarines necessary for anti-intervention operations also participated. The blockade missions require heavier vessels, such as large destroyers, but ship-intercepting operations require more naval resources.

It's also noteworthy that at the beginning of the exercise, the Cyberwarfare Department of China's Strategic Support Forces launched cyberattacks against the critical infrastructures (e.g., power) of Taiwan's government agencies and private sectors. Although the cyberattacks were relatively low-level, the future use of more targeted, high-level cyberattacks cannot be ruled out.

What to Make of this Chinese Military Exercise

1. This military operation is not a prelude to war. Although it cannot be ruled out that China might take a favorable opportunity to turn the exercise into an invasion, they need more time to mobilize and assemble troops from other theaters and services.

2. As China might have taken advantage of the exercises to form the sequence and procedures to wage war with obvious influence from the Russian

invasion of Ukraine, they could take further military actions against Taiwan at a critical time in the future.

3. The exercise was merely China's response to the visit of senior US officials to Taiwan, which was escalated due to the sensitive timing as it came ahead of the 20th National Congress. Since Taiwan did not have any provocation actions, China's actions were obviously lacking legality and legitimacy.

4. Taiwan was able to analyze the situation in advance, grasp the situation, and deploy troops and combat capacities in a timely manner to deal with the threat. In the future, such Chinese exercises can be used as opportunities to test Taiwan's resilience and readiness for defensive operations. Since the procedures of the Chinese exercises, from cyberattacks to physical blockades, are similar to those of future military operations against Taiwan, they can be used by the Taiwanese forces and related units to improve the existing standard operating doctrines and strategies.

5. In response to China's intensified military threats, Taiwan's existing defense and reserve mobilization reform must be accelerated, and the original long-term armed forces building plan

must take emergency preparedness into consideration as well.

6. China launched a cyberattack on Taiwan's military and civilian facilities before the exercise, but fortunately, the damages were quickly restored thanks to the government's previous efforts to enhance cyber resilience. However, most websites of private enterprises, usually built by third-party companies, were vulnerable to attacks and should be included as a part of the overall national resilience initiative.

(Originally published in the "National Defense and Security Real - time Assessment", August 5, 2022, by the Institute for National Defense and Security Research.)

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