

China holds 'biggest ever' naval drill in disputed South China Sea - Taiwan held its own military drill

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More than 10,000 personnel, 76 fighter jets and 48 warships took part in the exercises attended by President Xi Jinping.

Chinese President Xi Jinping has overseen what is being labelled as the country's largest naval military drill in the contested South China Sea.

Clad in military fatigues and as determined as ever to modernise the People's Liberation Army, Xi on Friday presided over a large military parade involving the country's only aircraft carrier, the Liaoning.

"Building a strong navy has never become so urgent as today. We will carry out the thought of building a strong military in a new era," Xi was filmed telling service men and women.

Also included in the tour de force were 10,000 personnel, 76 fighter jets, 48 naval vessels and a nuclear-powered submarine, according to the defence ministry.

Reporting from Beijing, Al Jazeera's Adrian Brown said Xi's remarks came as three US navy aircraft battle groups passed through these same contested waters.

"Just 48 hours earlier, before an audience that included world leaders, President Xi had sought to present China as the guarantor of free trade."

"Now in the South China Sea, which contains some of the busiest shipping lanes, he had another message 'these are our waters, and we have the strength to defend them,'" Brown said.

China's navy announced on Thursday it will be holding a live-fire drill in the Taiwan Strait on Wednesday, the first such exercise in over 20 years.

'Protect our country'

Taiwan for its part held its own military drill on Friday amid rising tensions between the two countries.

Authorities in Beijing have long considered Taiwan, a self-ruled island republic, a breakaway province that forms an integral part of mainland China.

The naval exercise was the first of its kind since Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen assumed power in 2016.

“I believe our nationals should feel very confident about our army’s determination to defend and protect our country”, Tsai said onboard a warship off the country’s east coast.

Asked to comment on Beijing’s planned fire-drill in the Taiwan Strait, Tsai said the exercise amounted to a “routine drill” which the Taiwanese navy has made the relevant preparation for and will fully monitor.

Tsai, however, warned against what she called China’s “military expansion”, a reference to Beijing’s increasing military drills around Taiwan.

China’s air force alone conducted some 25 drills around Taiwan between August 2016 and December 2017.

On March 20, the Liaoning aircraft carrier sailed through the Taiwan Strait on the same day Xi warned against attempts to separate Taiwan from China.

The US has recently given the green light to defence contractors to help the island state construct its own submarines, adding to existing tensions between the two neighbours.

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