

China to conduct major military drill simulating seizure of Taiwan-held island



Chinese President Xi Jinping speaks after reviewing the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy fleet in the South China Sea in April 2018. The Chinese military is planning to conduct a large-scale landing drill in the waterway in August to simulate the possible seizure of the Taiwanese-held Pratas Island in the future, sources have said. | XINHUA/VIA AP

KYODO, REUTERS, STAFF REPORT

BEIJING/TOKYO – The Chinese military is planning to conduct a large-scale landing drill off Hainan Island in the South China Sea in August to simulate the possible seizure of the Taiwanese-held Pratas Island in the future, Chinese sources familiar with the matter have said.

The Chinese People's Liberation Army is becoming increasingly concerned about the growing U.S. military presence in the South China Sea, and such a drill could escalate tensions. The U.S. Navy said on Thursday it had sailed a guided-missile destroyer through the sensitive Taiwan Strait.

Pratas Island, located in the middle of the route from China's military base on Hainan Island to the Pacific Ocean, is strategically important for China's advance into the Pacific Ocean. China's first domestically built aircraft carrier, the Shandong, was also deployed last December to the base on Hainan, increasing pressure on the Chinese military to capture the islet.

The Southern Theater Command, which is in charge of protecting the South China Sea, will mobilize an unprecedented level of forces, including marines, landing ships, hovercrafts and helicopters. The island, known by the Chinese as Dongsha Island, is home to a small airfield used mainly by the Taiwanese military.

Maj. Gen. Lin Wen-huang, who heads an operations and planning office at the Taiwan Defense Ministry, was quoted by Taiwanese media as saying that the ministry is monitoring movements of “hostile forces,” adding that it has contingency plans in place for the South China Sea and that work to strengthen combat readiness and defense preparedness in the area will not stop.

U.S. electronic warfare aircraft have frequently been flying near Pratas Island to gather intelligence on the Chinese military, with some reports recording 13 flights in April alone. U.S. President Donald Trump’s administration has also been beefing up relationships with the administration of Taiwanese leader Tsai Ing-wen, and China regards the U.S. military presence as “joint military conduct with Taiwan.” Tsai will be sworn in for her second and final term on Wednesday.

China has been building up its military presence in the Spratly Islands and Paracel Islands in the disputed South China Sea, but it had been less vocal on the Pratas Island issue in a show of consideration for former Taiwanese President Ma Ying-jeou, who had cultivated closer ties with Beijing. However, momentum has been building inside the Chinese military to either capture Pratas Island or pressure Ma’s successor, Tsai, who has been less interested in the sovereignty issue in the South China Sea, to give it up, according to the Chinese sources.

Both China and the United States have ramped up military activities near Taiwan in recent months, including regular U.S. sailings through the Taiwan Strait, and regular Chinese air force drills near the island. Last Friday, Taiwan said a Chinese air force Y-8 aircraft had briefly crossed into Taiwan’s Air Defence Identification Zone, prompting Taiwan jets to warn it to leave. China operates the Y-8 both as a transport and early warning and electronic warfare aircraft.

Taiwan has denounced the Chinese drills as attempts at intimidation and has told Beijing it should focus its efforts on fighting the coronavirus rather than menacing the island.

Beijing claims much of the South China Sea, though Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei have overlapping claims in the waters where the Chinese, U.S., Japanese and some Southeast Asian navies routinely operate.

