COMMENTARY

Less Politics, More Military

The Outlook for China's 2025 Military Incursions into Taiwan's Airspace and Waters

K. Tristan Tang

Abstract

China's military incursions into Taiwan's airspace and waters in early 2025 mark a shift from politically triggered responses to a sustained military presence. Despite the absence of major political flashpoints, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has intensified its air and naval operations, setting record highs in median-line crossings and warship activity. Joint combat readiness patrols have expanded in both frequency and scope, incorporating long-range missions and drone flights encircling Taiwan. Even during the traditionally subdued Lunar New Year period, Beijing escalated maneuvers, dispelling the notion that cross-Strait tensions are solely driven by political catalysts. This sustained military presence reflects an evolving doctrine that prioritizes operational dominance and training over diplomatic signaling. Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense data reveal a deliberate pattern of increased activity, underscoring Beijing's goal of enhancing the PLA's warfighting capability. Analysts and policymakers must recalibrate their assessments, focusing not on political rhetoric but on the PLA's expanding operational footprint and long-term ambitions.

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China's military provocations against Taiwan have followed a familiar pattern, triggered by political developments in Taipei. In response to President Lai Ching-te's (賴清德) inauguration speech in May and National Day speech in October, Beijing conducted two rounds of Joint Sword-2024 military exercises around Taiwan. Military maneuvers timed to coincide with politically sensitive events have become routine. Yet, if Taipei avoids actions that Beijing deems provocative, will cross-Strait military tensions ease?

As of early 2025, no major political incidents have disrupted cross-Strait relations, and Beijing has adopted a seemingly softer stance. On 17 January, China announced the resumption of travel for residents of Fujian and Shanghai to Taiwan, a move that could signal a push for greater cross-Strait economic and social engagement.[1] Yet, this apparent thaw has not translated into a de-escalation of military activity.

[1] "The mainland will resume Fujian and Shanghai residents will visit Taiwan in the near future," *Xinhua Network*, 17 January 2025, http://www.news.cn/.

In January 2025, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) carried out the most aggressive incursions into Taiwan's airspace and waters since 2021, according to data from Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense (MND). Routine military aircraft and warship operations intensified, accompanied by joint combat readiness patrols and maneuvers, even during the Lunar New Year period. This trend suggests that analysts should not focus solely on Beijing's reactions to political events but also recognize the growing strategic importance of routine PLA military operations in Taiwan's vicinity.

Overall Trends

PLA air and naval activity around Taiwan has surged, with military aircraft and warships operating at unprecedented levels. In January 2025, the number of PLA aircraft crossing the Taiwan Strait median line reached an all-time high, far surpassing previous years. Taiwan's MND recorded 73 sorties in January 2021, 141 in 2022, 126 in 2023, 72 in 2024, and a staggering 248 in 2025—1.75 times greater than the previous peak in January 2022.

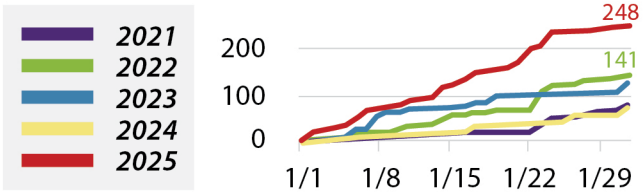


Figure 1. Comparison of PLA aircraft sorties crossing the median line in January since 2021. (Source: Author's compilation from Taiwan's MND data.)

Beijing also expanded its reach beyond the median line. PLA aircraft crossed the Bashi Channel into the Western Pacific more frequently than ever before, a marked shift toward longer-range operations. In previous Januarys, such crossings were rare—none in 2021 or 2024, just one in 2022 and 2023—but in January 2025, the number jumped to four. Flight path overlays released by Taiwan's MND further confirm intensified PLA activity in Taiwan's eastern airspace.

Naval operations followed the same trajectory. The number of PLA warships in Taiwan's surrounding waters climbed sharply: 112 in January 2023, 142 in 2024, and 200 in 2025—1.7 times the 2023 total and 1.4 times that of 2024. This rise reflects a sustained increase in daily PLA naval presence rather than a temporary surge concentrated on specific dates.

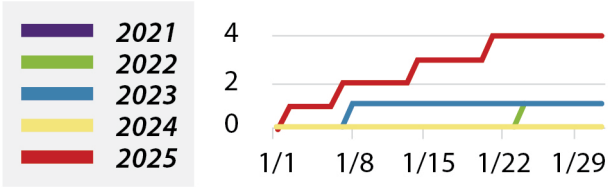


Figure 2. Comparison of PLA aircraft sorties crossed the Bashi Channel in January since 2021. (Source: Author's compilation from Taiwan's MND data.)

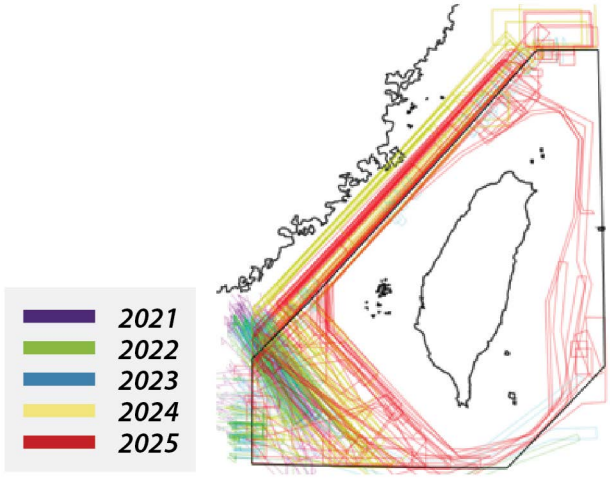


Figure 3. Map overlay of PLA aircraft flight paths around Taiwan in January since 2021. (Source: Author's compilation from Taiwan's MND data.)

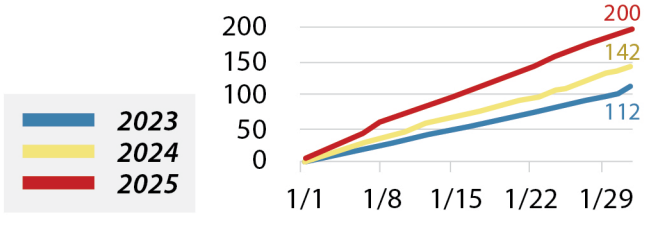


Figure 4. Comparison of PLA warships operating in the waters surrounding Taiwan in January since 2021. (Source: Author's compilation from Taiwan's MND data.)

Taken together, these trends point to a fundamental shift. PLA incursions are no longer defined by episodic spikes but by a steady, intensifying presence.

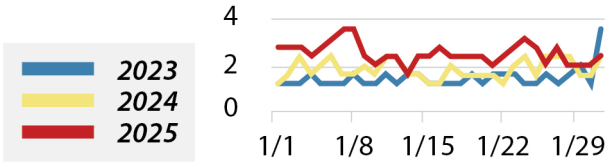


Figure 5. Daily number of PLA warships operating surrounding Taiwan in January since 2021. (Source: Author's compilation from Taiwan's MND data.)

Special Circumstances

The PLA's incursions against Taiwan have intensified, as evidenced by the scale and frequency of joint combat readiness patrols, particularly during the Lunar New Year period. These patrols, which surpass routine PLA activities in both scope and threat level, serve as a critical measure of China's operational preparedness.

Joint combat readiness patrols are more significant and pose a higher threat to Taiwan, as compared to routine PLA activities. According to *PLA Daily*, these patrols assess the integrated operational capabilities of multiple military branches.[2] The involvement of both the PLA Air Force and Navy signifies a heightened level of operational coordination, increasing the potential for exercises to transition into real-world engagements.

In 2025, the PLA has escalated its patrol operations beyond 2024 levels in both frequency and geographical extent. In January 2025, it conducted four joint patrols, up from three the previous year. Notably, one patrol took place each week leading up to the Lunar New Year—a period during which the PLA typically scales down operations. This pattern underscores a broader shift: rather than adhering to past seasonal norms, Beijing is intensifying its military presence around Taiwan, making heightened activity the new standard.

The geographic scope of PLA patrols in January 2025 marked a significant escalation. All four joint combat readiness patrols that month involved long-range missions, with military aircraft crossing the Bashi Channel—an operational pattern absent from the three patrols conducted in January 2024. More alarming, two of the 2025 patrols (on 14 January and 22 January) included drone flights encircling Taiwan, a development not observed the previous year.

[2] Han Lin, Wei Bing, and Liu Jianwei, "A review of the implementation of the 'Outline of Joint Operations of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (Trial)' for one year," *Liberation Army Daily*, 5 January 2022, http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/qwfb/4902340.html.

While long-range missions and drone operations have occurred before, they are typically rare at the start of the PLA's annual training cycle, when activity tends to be moderate in scale and intensity. Riskier maneuvers—such as extended-range missions and aircraft encircling Taiwan—are generally uncommon in January. Their repeated occurrence in early 2025 signals a deliberate intensification of joint combat readiness patrols.

The PLA's heightened activity during the Lunar New Year period further underscores this shift. Historically, military incursions around Taiwan decline during the holiday, either due to routine reductions in training or as a reflection of Beijing's "both sides of the Taiwan Strait are Chinese" narrative. In 2025, however, this pattern was decisively broken, with Lunar New Year operations exceeding those of previous years—a clear indication that seasonal pauses are no longer a constraint on China's expanding military posture.

At first glance, the 2025 Lunar New Year appeared to follow the usual pattern. The holiday began on 27 January, marked by a decline in PLA military aircraft flights around Taiwan compared to the heightened activity earlier in the month.

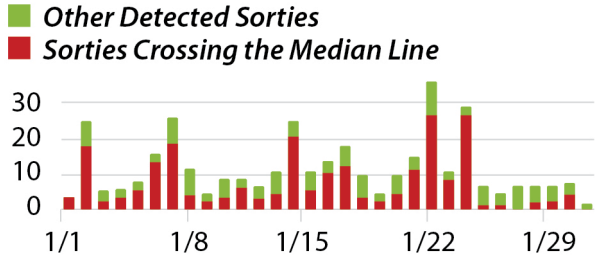


Figure 6. Daily PLA aircraft sorties around Taiwan in January 2025. (Source: Author's compilation from Taiwan's MND data.)

However, a closer analysis of PLA incursions during previous Lunar New Year periods reveals a stark escalation. In 2025, the number of sorties crossing the Taiwan Strait median line surged to 31—the highest ever recorded and a sharp increase from the 22 sorties observed in 2024. This trend signals a departure from past practices, suggesting that even traditional lulls in military activity are no longer a given in Beijing's evolving strategic calculus.

Table 1. Comparison of PLA aircraft sorties crossing the median line during each Lunar New Year since 2021. (Source: Author's compilation from Taiwan's MND data.)

Year	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Little New Year's Eve		4	1	3	
New Year's Eve		5		2	3
Day 1 of the Lunar New Year				1	3
Day 2 of the Lunar New Year	2				5
Day 3 of the Lunar New Year				1	
Day 4 of the Lunar New Year	1	1	1	1	6
Day 5 of the Lunar New Year	1	2	2	14	14
Total Aircraft Sorties	4	12	4	22	31

Although both 2024 and 2025 saw joint combat readiness patrols on the fifth day of the Lunar New Year—each involving 14 sorties crossing the Taiwan Strait median line—the nature of these operations shifted significantly. Flight path overlays released by Taiwan's MND indicate that in 2025, PLA aircraft operated much closer to Taiwan's airspace than in the previous year. This shift was especially pronounced in the north, where flight paths edged uncomfortably close to Taipei, underscoring an increasingly aggressive posture aimed at tightening military pressure on the island.

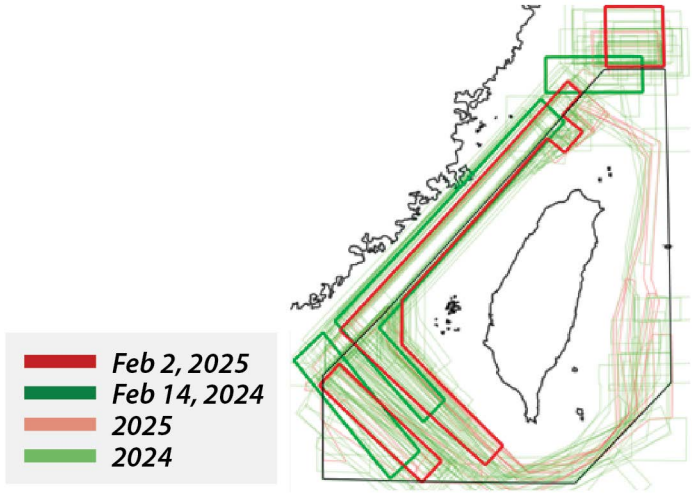


Figure 7. Map overlay of PLA aircraft flight paths around taiwan during joint combat readiness patrols. (Source: Author's compilation from Taiwan's MND data.)

Implications

The extent of the PLA's incursions into Taiwan's airspace and waters surged in January 2025, despite Taiwan's President Lai Ching-te and other key leaders avoiding actions China might deem provocative. This suggests that, irrespective of political developments or cross-Strait relations, Beijing is steadily intensifying its military training and exercises around Taiwan.

January is typically a lull in cross-Strait political activity. Even with the Lunar New Year, Chinese military maneuvers should, in theory, be restrained. Moreover, in his two major speeches that month—on 1 January and 27 January—Lai steered clear of language associated with Taiwanese independence and largely avoided the subject of cross-Strait relations. Taiwan, in short, maintained a low profile. The spike in PLA activity, therefore, cannot be attributed to political triggers.

The explanation is straightforward: the PLA is systematically escalating the scale and tempo of its operations. This trend was already apparent in 2024, when incursions became more frequent and sustained rather than tied to specific political flashpoints. The pattern suggests that Beijing's military presence is driven less by diplomatic grievances and more by military strategy. Analysts should focus on these military dynamics rather than Beijing's shifting political justifications.

Conclusion

The sharp increase in PLA incursions into Taiwan's airspace and waters in January 2025 signals a fundamental shift in Beijing's military policy. Rather than reacting to specific political events or perceived provocations from Taipei, the PLA is now conducting operations around Taiwan continuously, regardless of annual training schedules or traditional holidays. The unprecedented scale and consistency of these operations—especially during the traditionally subdued Lunar New Year period—demonstrate that Beijing has shifted its training from the airspace over mainland China to the surrounding airspace around Taiwan. Beijing has intensified the PLA's training regardless of the potential political impact or excessive military pressure on Taiwan, with the goal of enhancing the PLA's combat capability and capacity and even allowing pilots to accumulate real-world experience and pressure in confronting Taiwan's Air Force. This shift renders outdated the conventional assumption that cross-Strait tensions ebb and flow solely in response to political developments.

This evolution in PLA operations carries significant implications for Taiwan, broader Indo-Pacific security, and the United States and its allies. For Taiwan, the normalization of heightened military activity necessitates a recalibration of its military readiness. Taipei must prepare for an environment where frequent incursions, joint combat readiness patrols, and long-range operations are not anomalies but constants, indicating that both the psychological and operational strain on Taiwan's armed forces will only intensify. Given that Taiwan's air force is unlikely to significantly increase its number of aircraft—as China has done—it is imperative that Taiwan enhances the readiness of its air force personnel and the maintenance. Particularly concerning are the recurring aircraft accidents in recent years, which stem from human error or logistical maintenance issues; the intensification of PLA military incursions into Taiwan could further exacerbate these risks. In an environment of limited air assets, efficiently sustaining air defense and maintaining the capability to intercept PLA aircraft incursions has become more critical than ever for Taiwan.

For the broader region, China's expanding military presence around Taiwan challenges the status quo and increases the risk of miscalculation. The PLA has shifted away from its previous patterns of seasonal lulls, indicating an increase in both the intensity and duration of its military readiness and training activities. Military actions are now driven by training or exercises rather than being limited to specific political events or reasons. As a result, Taiwan is currently facing a persistent pattern of military intrusions, which could also extend to neighboring countries such as South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam. This also complicates the interpretation

of China's strategic intentions, as the PLA's ongoing incursions into the airspace of various nations—whether during significant political events or peacetime—raise the question of whether these actions reflect China's foreign policy stance or are merely part of the PLA's independently planned military training.

Finally, for the United States and its allies, the evolving nature of PLA operations requires a reassessment of deterrence strategies. A response framework focused primarily on reacting to discrete political crises—such as Taiwan's elections or high-level US–Taiwan engagements—by deploying three to four US Carrier Strike Groups and Amphibious Ready Groups may no longer be adequate. Instead, a more sustained presence of US and allied major military assets in the region will be essential. For example, operations by French Charles de Gaulle, British HMS *Prince of Wales*, and Italian Navy *Cavour* carrier groups alongside US forces in the Western Pacific would provide a stronger deterrent posture to China. This is not only for Taiwan but also a response to the PLA's increased military aggression toward neighboring countries.

In sum, the data from early 2025 suggest that China's military approach to Taiwan is no longer driven by immediate political events but by purely military considerations for training or exercises. This shift in military focus not only affects Taiwan but also has significant implications for the entire regional security environment. Recognizing this shift is crucial for crafting effective responses, ensuring stability, and preserving deterrence in the face of Beijing's expanding operational ambitions. ✪

K. Tristan Tang

Mr. Tang is a research associate at the Research Project on China's Defense Affairs in Taipei, Taiwan. He is also a member of the Pacific Forum's Young Leaders Program. His research focuses on China's defense industry, the People's Liberation Army, and Chinese foreign policy. You can connect with him on X: @KTristanTang.

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