



Situation Room

**** SOUTH CHINA SEA DISPUTE ****

Period under review: from **11 April 2023** to **23 April 2023**.

[This report is based on publicly available sources to describe a changing situation. Information subject to change.]

Situation analysis recap:

- On 11 April, Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen condemned the three-day long Chinese military exercises in the Taiwan Strait and around Taiwan, saying that China is acting irresponsibly and that it is threatening regional stability. The exercises began after President Tsai visited USA and met the Speaker of the US House of Representatives Kevin McCarthy. Taiwan's military also spotted between 35-91 Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) aircraft and between 8-12 PLA Navy (PLAN) vessels around the island, depending on sources, despite the exercises' official end the day before.
- Japanese defence minister Yasukazu Hamada also responded to the Chinese military exercises, describing them as an intimidating training of seizing air and sea control over and around Taiwan. He added that with its actions, China has shown that it holds uncompromisable approach regarding its policy of Taiwan's independence.
- On the same day, the United States and Philippines launched one of the largest military exercises in decades, named Balikatan (the name meaning standing shoulder to shoulder in the Tagalog language), close to the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait. The annual combat drills will last until 28 April and will involve more than 17.600 military personnel, including 12.200 US troops, 5400 Filipino soldiers and 111 Australian servicemen.
- Balikatan – Tagalog drills are most likely a direct response to the Chinese military exercises around Taiwan, while the US administration describes it as a strengthening of alliance between different states to counter Chinese actions. The exercises will include operations in the air, on sea, and land, while military officials have stated that they will use US warships, Patriot anti-air systems, HIMARS rocket launcher systems, and anti-tank weapons, such as the Javelin missile.
- Also on 11 April, Chinese President Xi Jinping declared that the exercises were a successful demonstration of PLA and PLAN air and naval capabilities and called for more military combat drills in the future to prepare the PLA for the defence of China's territorial sovereignty and its national interests along with regional stability. Chinese officials also again condemned President Tsai Ing-wen's trip to the US, claiming that Taiwanese separatists intensified cooperation with external forces and that Taiwan is acting provocatively.

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- On 12 April, Chinese officials stated that the three-day no-fly zone north of Taiwan, scheduled next week, will be shortened to just 27 minutes. According to Taiwan's defence ministry, the no-fly zone was supposedly established for possible aerospace activities, including satellite launches. If the no-fly zone would last for three days as planned, it would have a serious impact on air travel between northwest and southeast Asia.
- On the same day, Japanese analysts stated that the recent visit of French President Emmanuel Macron and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen to China stirred up Japan's political and diplomatic circles, because of President Macron's comments regarding the South China Sea and Taiwan.
- Also on 12 April, Taiwan's ruling political party nominated current Vice President William Lai as a candidate for next year's presidential elections. Vice President Lai is known to be more outspoken for Taiwan's independence from China than the current president Tsai Ing-wen and his election could further deteriorate Chinese-Taiwanese relations.
- Recent US classified intelligence documents leaks, which stirred up responses from US allies, has shown that China has tested and deployed a new longer-range hypersonic missile that could potentially avoid US ballistic missile defences. During the test, the DF-27 hypersonic is said to have flown for about 12 minutes and crossed 2100 kilometres, while other intelligence reports suggest that the missile has a range between 5000-8000 kilometres and can strike both land and naval targets far beyond the so-called Chinese Second Island Chain. The same documents covering possible Taiwan invasion-related scenarios show that the PLAN recently deployed a new helicopter-carrying assault ship.
- Leaked documents also show that Taiwan is far more vulnerable to Chinese air attack than it was previously stated by US military officials and that Chinese military tactics are hindering the US ability to assess where exactly could PLA forces land on the Taiwanese coast.
- On 15 April, Taiwan's Vice President William Lai said that war over Taiwan would result in a global catastrophe and that China would not be excluded from the damage this war would cause.
- On the same day, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken visited Vietnam, almost 50 years after he last US troops had left South Vietnam. US and Vietnam are both looking to further strengthen their cooperation to counter Chinese influence in Southeast Asia. Blinken also announced a deal that the US will build a \$1.2 billion embassy complex in the Vietnamese capital of Hanoi. The US sees Vietnam as a key part of its strategy in the South China Sea.

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- On 17 April, the destroyer *USS Milius*, sailed through the Taiwan Strait, only days after the Chinese military conducted their combat exercises in the area. US Navy's 7th fleet described the event as a routine transit allowed by the international maritime law.
- On 18 April, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen gave a statement to the European Parliament about the EU's strategy towards China and its growing global influence. The EU is worried about a military escalation in the Taiwan Strait and supports peace, stability, and the current status quo regarding the situation in the South China Sea.
- On the same day, foreign ministers of the G7 member states called on China to hold back and abstain from threats, coercion, intimidation, and use of force in the South China Sea region. They also expressed concern over tensions in the East and South China Seas, growing militarisation in Indo-Pacific, and made a joint statement on the situation regarding Taiwan.
- On 20 April, Vietnam again protested the unilateral annual Chinese ban on fishing in a large part of South China Sea, which is supposedly needed to improve ecological conditions and promote sustainable fishing in the region. This ban covers an area that includes parts of Vietnam's exclusive economic zone, as well as the contested Paracel Islands, which are claimed by both countries.
- On 22 April, Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos Jr and his foreign secretary met with Chinese foreign minister Qin Gang to discuss how to resolve their maritime issues in the South China Sea. This is the latest in a series of high-level diplomatic meetings conducted by the Philippines alternatively with both China and the US in the last few months.

Analysis by: **Gregor Črnugelj**

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