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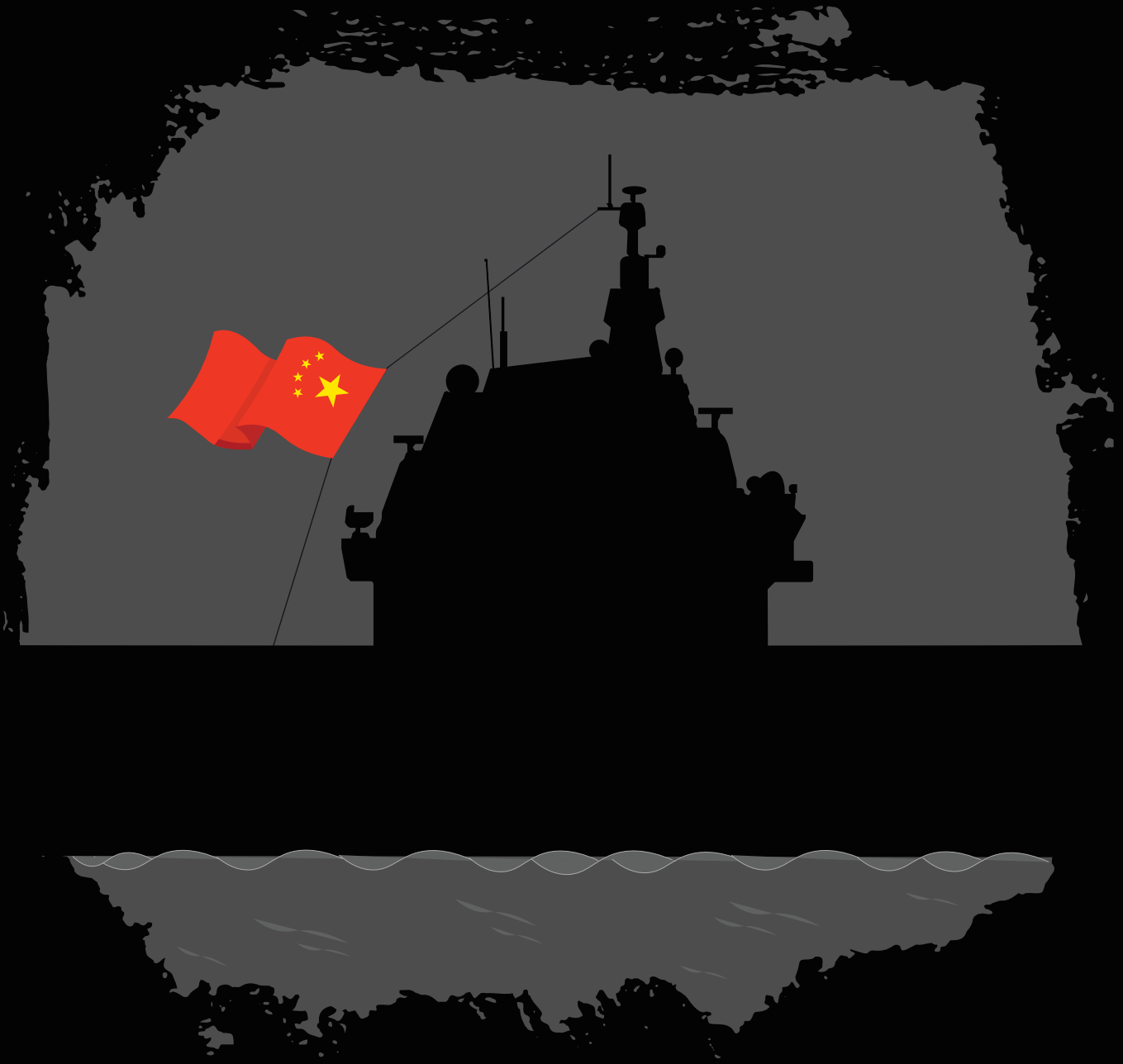
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中国海事研究所
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NOTES: 13



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PLA Navy Enhances Realistic Combat Training: Observations of PLA Navy Operations Around Taiwan

K. Tristan Tang¹

Key Takeaways

- Chinese activities around Taiwan in the first two months of 2025 indicate that the PLA is strengthening realistic combat training around the island. This trend aligns closely with the PLA's emphasis in recent years on using peacetime interactions with foreign forces to achieve training outcomes, a practice it calls “using the enemy to train the troops.”
- The PLA has exhibited a noticeable increase in the daily number of naval vessels operating around Taiwan, as well as increased frequency and scale of joint combat readiness patrols and maritime-aerial training exercises, when comparing January and February of this year to the same period in previous years.
- Noteworthy among these PLA Navy activities was an exercise conducted by a Type 075 (LHD) task force in the vicinity of Taiwan in February 2025. This episode was remarkable for the size of the task force (the largest publicly disclosed LHD task force ever to have operated near Taiwan), the location of the exercise (southwest of Jia Lu Tang Beach), and its occurrence very early in the annual training cycle.
- This acceleration of realistic combat training near Taiwan *likely* reflects efforts by the PLA to develop the capabilities needed to achieve “national unification” before its centenary in 2027.

Introduction

In recent years, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has consistently deployed naval assets in the waters and airspace surrounding Taiwan, with activity levels reaching a new high in 2024.² However, this trend was exceeded in the first two months of 2025, with naval operations during this period significantly surpassing those of previous years. While this escalation could reflect a decision by Beijing to ramp up pressure on Taiwan, the more likely explanation is that the PLA Navy has further enhanced its “realistic combat training” around

the island, likely reflecting an effort to develop the capabilities needed to achieve “unification” with Taiwan by the PLA Centenary in 2027.

PLA’s Realistic Combat Training

Intuitively, the PLA Navy should conduct most training in coastal waters near China where there is no foreign military activity, ensuring that training operations proceed smoothly while avoiding unnecessary risks and confrontations. However, this may not be the case when conducting “realistic combat training” (实战化训练), which the PLA defines as “training carried out in an environment or under conditions that are close to real combat.”³ On these occasions, it is ideal to operate in areas where foreign military activity is taking place. Such training is unplanned and conducted against real adversaries, potentially with live munitions on standby. For Chinese Navy personnel, who lack actual combat experience, this opportunity may be the best chance to accumulate experience akin to real combat. The PLA describes this approach as “using the enemy to train the troops” (拿敌练兵).⁴

While the PLA has long touted the importance of “realistic combat training,” the concept has received unprecedented emphasis in the Xi Jinping era. At the Central Military Commission (CMC) military training conference (中央军委军事训练会议) on November 25, 2020, Xi stated that since the 18th Party Congress in 2012 China had firmly promoted realistic combat training and ordered the PLA to further comprehensively strengthen realistic combat training.⁵

“Using the enemy to train the troops” is considered a valuable approach to realistic combat training. In 2021, the CMC formally issued the “Decision on the Establishment of the New-Type Military Training System” (关于构建新型军事训练体系的决定), which emphasizes shaping a deep coupling of combat and training (战训深度耦合), advancing integrated combat and training (战训一体).⁶ According to a spokesperson for the Chinese Ministry of Defense, *the focus of combat-training integration is using the enemy to train the troops on the frontlines* [emphasis added], enhancing training under extreme and harsh conditions, and maintaining readiness for 24/7 combat, ensuring the ability to fight at any time.⁷

Articles published in *PLA Daily* further confirm the PLA’s recognition of the value of operating in close proximity to hostile foreign forces as a means to bolster training realism. In 2023, for example, scholars from the Military Management College of the National Defense University of China pointed out that advancing realistic combat training requires forces to confront real-world challenges, actively seize various opportunities, and cautiously but boldly organize frontline tasks for “using the enemy to train the troops.” The goal is to enable units to effectively adapt to the battlefield environment, familiarize themselves with adversaries, accumulate combat experience, and cultivate combat spirit.⁸ Additionally, in 2024, scholars

from the Chinese Naval Command College emphasized the importance of cultivating and developing talent through “using the enemy to train the troops,” as well as testing and identifying talent during major tasks and key positions.⁹

For the Chinese Navy, the skies and waters surrounding Taiwan could be the best location to implement this practice. First, they are closer to mainland China than those near Japan or the Philippines. Additionally, they are situated between the homeports of the primary destroyers and frigates of the Eastern and Southern Theater Navies. Lastly, this is an area of concentrated foreign air and sea activity, including from the militaries of Taiwan, Japan, and the United States.

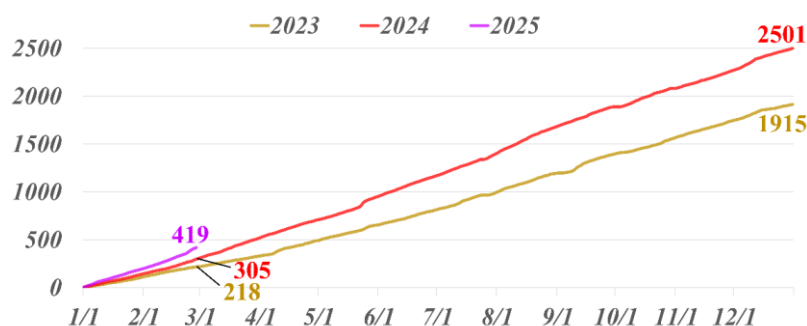
Admittedly, the PLA Navy's activities around Taiwan may also serve a political purpose in exerting pressure on Taiwan. However, if these activities continue around Taiwan during a period of relative calm in cross-strait relations, without clear and specific political language from the Chinese government, the naval activities around Taiwan are more likely to be driven by a desire to achieve certain training outcomes.

Phenomena Around Taiwan in 2025 (So Far)

Two key developments around Taiwan since January 2025 indicate that the PLA Navy has been enhancing its realistic combat training, with a key characteristic of "using the enemy to train the troops."

First, the number of PLA Navy activities around Taiwan has surged this year, showing a general increase rather than just a few days of large-scale operations. As shown in Figure 1, the total number of PLA Navy vessels that operated near Taiwan in the first two months of 2025 is significantly higher than in 2023 and 2024 (Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense began releasing PLA Navy vessel data on August 6, 2022). The 2025 total of 419 vessels is 1.92 times higher than the 218 vessels in 2023 and 1.37 times higher than the 305 vessels in 2024.

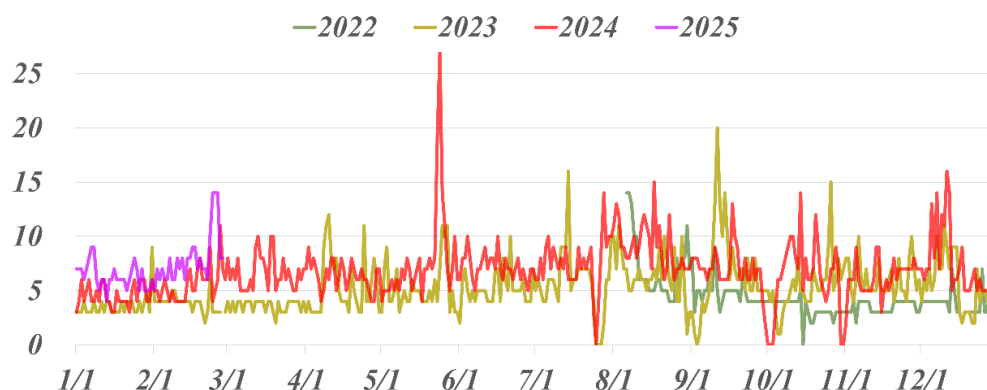
Figure 1: Accumulated Number of PLA Navy Vessels Around Taiwan



Source: Compiled by the author from Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense press releases

As shown in Figure 2, it is clear that the number of PLA Navy vessels in January and February 2025 exceeded that of 2023 and 2024 on nearly every day.

Figure 2: Daily Number of PLA Navy Vessels Around Taiwan



Source: Compiled by the author from Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense press releases

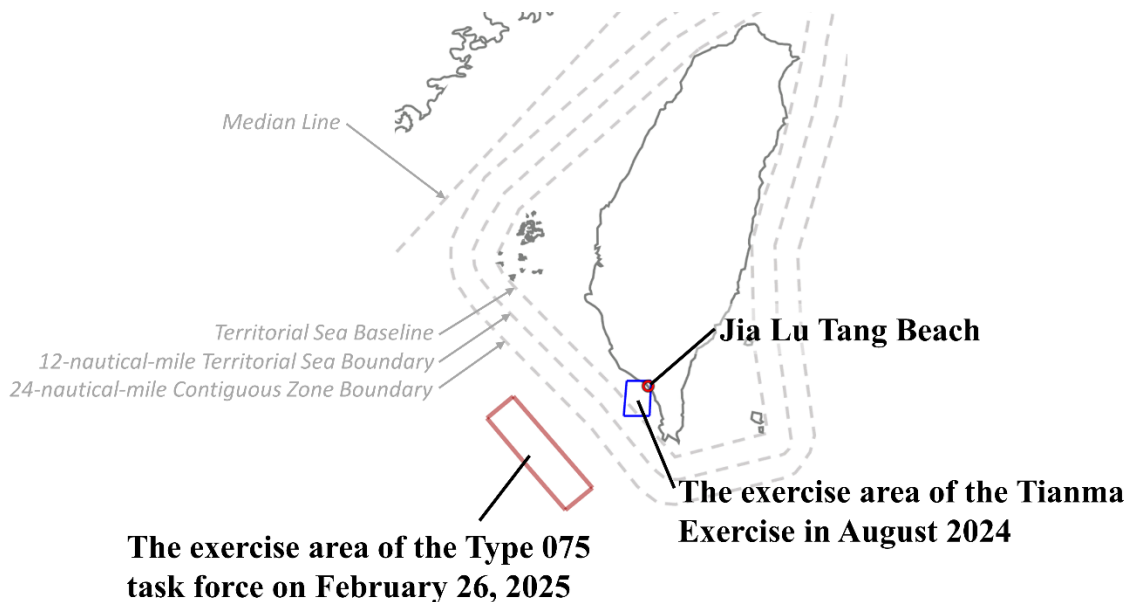
Noteworthy among these PLA Navy operations around Taiwan in early 2025 was the deployment of a Type 075 (LHD) task force in waters southwest of the island. This episode was significant for three main reasons. It was the largest publicly disclosed Type 075 task force to have ever operated around Taiwan, consisting of the Type 075 LHD, a Type 071 LPD, two destroyers, two frigates, and a supply ship. See table below. Moreover, on February 26, 2025, the task force conducted a drill near Taiwan's Jia Lu Tang Beach (加祿堂海灘) a well-known location that potentially could be used by the PLA for amphibious landings.¹⁰ See Figure 3 below. Lastly, while similar deployments have been conducted in the past, none has occurred this early in the annual PLA training cycle (年度军事训练计划), which could suggest an effort by the PLA Navy to bolster its readiness for major operations throughout the calendar year.¹¹

Table: PLA Navy Type 075 Task Force Entries into the Philippine Sea

Date	Vessel Type	Hull number	Waters transited
June 29-30, 2023	075	32	Osumi Strait
	052D	133	
	054A	599	The Waters Between Amami Oshima and Yokoatejima
	903A	890	
August 17, 2024	052?	?	Miyako Strait
	075	?	
February 10-11, 2025	075	33	
	071	986	
	052D	134	
		155	
	054A	530	
		577	
	903	886	

Source: Compiled by the author from Japan's Ministry of Defense press releases

Figure 3: Type 075 Task Force Exercise Area in February 2025 and the Location of Jia Lu Tang Beach



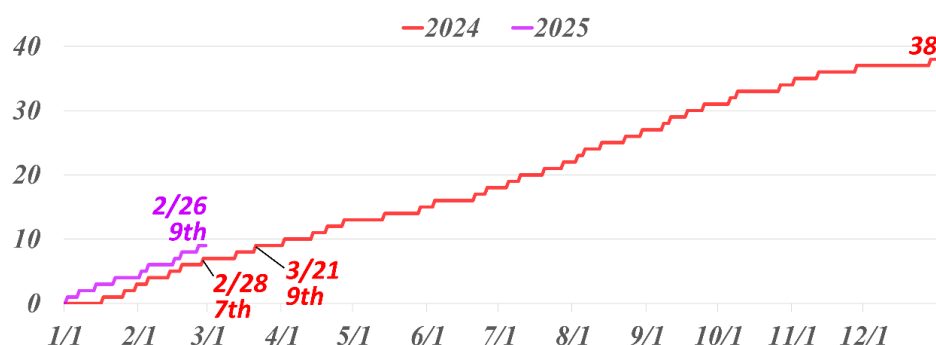
Source: Compiled by the author from press releases by Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense and Coast Guard Administration.

Second, the frequency of joint combat readiness patrols (联合战备警巡) by the PLA Navy and Air Force, as reported by Taiwan's military, has increased this year.¹² According to the

PLA Daily, these patrols evaluate the integrated operational capabilities of multiple military branches. The preparations leading up to the patrol reflect combat readiness, with the patrol itself conducted in a combat-ready state. The term "joint" signifies, at a minimum, the participation of both the PLA Air Force and PLA Navy, indicating that military aircraft and warships around Taiwan are in formal combat readiness and prepared for combat operations, including joint operations.¹³ The Taiwan Ministry of National Defense defines the occurrence of a "joint combat readiness patrol" and announces it publicly whenever the PLA Navy and Air Force conduct certain types of joint training (the Taiwan Ministry of National Defense has been regularly releasing information on PLA joint combat readiness patrols since June 2023).¹⁴ Joint combat readiness patrols clearly represent a typical example of the integration of training and real combat and “using the enemy to train the troops.”

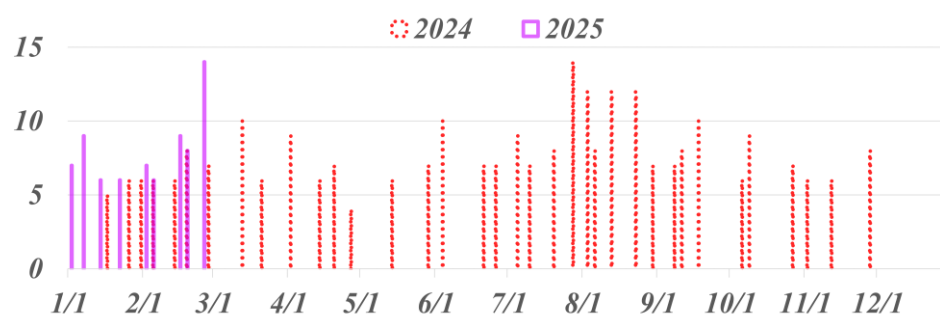
As shown in Figure 4, the number of joint combat readiness patrols in the first two months of 2025 exceeded that of 2024. Additionally, Figure 5 shows that the number of PLA Navy vessels involved in each joint combat readiness patrol in the first two months of 2025 was higher than the number during the same period in 2024 in most cases.

Figure 4: Cumulative Number of PLA Joint Combat Readiness Patrols Around Taiwan



Source: Compiled by the author from Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense press releases

Figure 5: Number of PLA Navy Vessels Involved in Each Joint Combat Readiness Patrol



Source: Compiled by the author from Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense press releases

Implications

The increased training volume and intensity of realistic combat training in January and February this year indicate that the PLA Navy has changed its previous annual training practices. A commentary article published in *PLA Daily* on January 3, 2025 revealed that many units have recently focused on improving training quality in the new year's training, breaking away from the past approach of “starting from scratch” (从零开始).¹⁵ However, why has the training of the PLA Navy around Taiwan significantly changed in 2025?

Taiwan has always been considered by the People's Liberation Army as a lost territory of China that must be “unified,” or “liberated,” making training around Taiwan and confronting Taiwan's military directly aligned with and highly effective for the purpose of “using the enemy to train the troops.” In 2023, then-CIA Director William Burns pointed out that intelligence shows Xi Jinping has instructed the PLA to be ready by 2027 to conduct a successful invasion of Taiwan.¹⁶ Although William Burns emphasized that this does not mean Xi has decided to conduct an invasion in 2027, it is worth noting that 2027 also marks the PLA Centenary (建军百年). In discussing his vision for the PLA Centenary, Xi Jinping has mentioned that the PLA “has the confidence and capability to safeguard national sovereignty, unification, and territorial integrity, as well as the confidence and capability to provide strategic support for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (中华民族伟大复兴).”¹⁷ In addition to directly mentioning unification, the necessary conditions for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation include the “realization of complete national unification.”¹⁸ Thus, the strengthening of realistic combat training around Taiwan likely reflects a PLA that is accelerating efforts to meet its 2027 timeline, regardless of whether an actual invasion of Taiwan occurs.

The views expressed or implied within are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Naval War College, the Department of the Navy, the Department of Defense, or any other U.S. Government entity.

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² Cheng-kun Ma and K. Tristan Tang, "Military Implications of PLA Aircraft Incursions in Taiwan's Airspace 2024," *China Brief*, The Jamestown Foundation, January 17, 2025, <https://jamestown.org/program/military-implications-of-pla-aircraft-incursions-in-taiwans-airspace-2024/>

³ The PLA translates the term 实战化训练 as "warfighting-oriented training." See 中国人民解放军军语 [*PLA Dictionary of Military Terms*] (Beijing: Academy of Military Science Press, September 2011), p. 300.

⁴ For more on "using the enemy to train the troops", see: Ryan D. Martinson and Conor Kennedy, "Using the Enemy to Train the Troops—Beijing's New Approach to Prepare its Navy for War," *China Brief*, The Jamestown Foundation, March 25, 2022, <https://jamestown.org/program/using-the-enemy-to-train-the-troops-beijings-new-approach-to-prepare-its-navy-for-war/>

⁵ 习近平在中央军委军事训练会议上强调 全面加强实战化军事训练 全面提高训练水平和打赢能力 ["Xi Jinping Emphasizes in the Central Military Commission Military Training Conference the Comprehensive Strengthening of Realistic Combat Training and the Overall Improvement of Training Standards and Combat Effectiveness"], 新华社 [*Xinhua*], November 25, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2020-11/25/c_1126786197.htm

⁶ 经中央军委主席习近平批准 中央军委印发《关于构建新型军事训练体系的决定》 ["With the approval of Xi Jinping, Chairman of the Central Military Commission, the Central Military Commission issued the Decision on the Establishment of the New-Type Military Training System."], 新华社 [*Xinhua*], February 20, 2021, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2021-02/20/c_1127119798.htm

⁷ 全军部队迅即掀起新年度实战化军事训练热潮 ["The Entire Military Quickly Launched a New Wave of Realistic Combat Training for the New Year"] 中华人民共和国国防部 [*Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China*], January 27, 2022, <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/xwfy/lxjzhzt/2022njzh/2022n1y/4903725.html>

⁸ 深入推进实战化军事训练 ["Deeply Advancing Realistic Combat Training"] 解放军报 [*PLA Daily*], February 16, 2023, http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2023-02/16/content_333788.htm; The lead author, Chen Naili (陈乃利), is an associate professor at the Military Management College of the National Defense University of China. He has served as a division staff officer and deputy division commander. He has participated in numerous joint operational exercises and non-warfare military operations, establishing himself as an expert in joint operations training. See 如何加速培养联合作战指挥人才？这个时代命题他们来作答！ ["How Can We Accelerate the Development of Joint Operations Command Talent? This is the Question of Our Time, and They are Here to Provide the Answer!"] 中华人民共和国国防部 [*Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China*], March 22, 2022, http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/gfjy_index/jsyxgfs/4907216.html

⁹ 确保人民军队始终敢打必胜 [“Ensure that the People's Army is Always Ready to Fight and Certain to Win”] 解放军报 [PLA Daily], August 12, 2024, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2024-08-12&paperNumber=07&articleid=937357; The lead author, Song Lianjiang (宋联江), is a professor at the Naval Command Academy. See 全军学习贯彻党的十九届六中全会精神宣讲团赴西部战区东部战区宣讲 [“The Central Propaganda Group for the Dissemination of the Spirit of the 6th Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China has been dispatched to the Eastern and Western Theater Commands for briefings.”] 中國軍網 [China Military], December 1, 2021, http://www.81.cn/yw_208727/10111858.html

¹⁰ 114/02/27 中共解放軍臺海周邊海、空域動態 [“PLA activities in the vicinity of Taiwan”] 中華民國國防部 [Ministry of National Defense R.O.C.], February 27, 2025, <https://www.mnd.gov.tw/Publish.aspx?p=84074&title=%e5%9c%8b%e9%98%b2%e6%b6%88%e6%81%af&SelectStyle=%e5%8d%b3%e6%99%82%e8%bb%8d%e4%ba%8b%e5%8b%95%e6%85%8b>; Joint Staff Press Release, Japan Ministry of Defense, February 12, 2025, https://www.mod.go.jp/js/pdf/2025/p20250212_02.pdf

¹¹ In 2021, the PLA began implementing a twice-yearly conscription cycle in order to minimize the impact on unit training and readiness caused by a single annual conscription. See Kenneth Allen, “The Evolution of the PLA’s Enlisted Force: Conscription and Recruitment (Part One),” *China Brief*, The Jamestown Foundation, January 14, 2022, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-evolution-of-the-plas-enlisted-force-conscription-and-recruitment-part-one/>; Kenneth Allen, “The Evolution of the PLA’s Enlisted Force: Training (Part Two),” *China Brief*, The Jamestown Foundation, February 11, 2022, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-evolution-of-the-plas-enlisted-force-training-part-two/>.

¹² For more on “joint combat readiness patrol”, see: Cheng-kun Ma and K. Tristan Tang, “The Overlooked Trend in China’s Military Violations of Taiwan’s ADIZ,” *The Diplomat*, December 7, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/12/the-overlooked-trend-in-chinas-military-violations-of-taiwans-adiz/>

¹³ 《中国人民解放军联合作战纲要（试行）》施行一周年综述 [“Overview of the First Anniversary of the Implementation of the Joint Operations Outline of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (Trial Version).”] 中华人民共和国国防部 [Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China], January 5, 2022, <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/qwfb/4902340.html>

¹⁴ 共軍對台「聯合戰備警巡」 國防部：就是海空聯合訓練 [“The Chinese Military’s “Joint Combat Readiness Patrol” around Taiwan: Ministry of National Defense: It is Joint Training between the Navy and Air Force.”] 自由時報 [Liberty Times Net], February 18, 2025, <https://def.ltn.com.tw/article/breakingnews/4954756>

¹⁵ 新年度训练不是“从零开始” [“The New Year’s Training Does Not Start from Scratch”] 解放军报 [PLA Daily], January 3, 2025, http://www.81.cn/yw_208727/16362451.html

¹⁶ CIA Director William Burns: “I wouldn’t underestimate” Xi’s ambitions for Taiwan, CBS News, February 3, 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/cia-director-william-burns-i-wouldnt-underestimate-xis-ambitions-for-taiwan/>

¹⁷ 实现建军一百年奋斗目标，开创国防和军队现代化新局面 [“Achieving the PLA

Centenary Goal and Opening a New Chapter in the Modernization of Defense and the Military”] 求是 [*Qiushi*], July 31, 2024, http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2024-07/31/c_1130186965.htm

¹⁸ 台湾问题与新时代中国统一事业 [The Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era], 新华社 [*Xinhua*], August 10, 2022, http://www.news.cn/2022-08/10/c_1128903097.htm