

Chinese Air Force drills in South China Sea and Western Pacific, calls exercises ‘rehearsals for future wars’

The Chinese Air Force has conducted a series of exercises in the contested South China Sea and the Western Pacific, where it sent fighter jets and bombers through Okinawa’s Miyako Strait on Friday, labeling the exercises “rehearsals for future wars.”

In a statement Sunday, the air force said it had dispatched H-6K bombers and Su-30 and Su-35 fighters, as well as other aircraft, for separate combat training missions in an unspecified area of the South China Sea and through the Miyako Strait between Okinawa and Miyako Island.

It did not say when the exercises took place, but Japan’s Defense Ministry said Friday that it had scrambled fighters after four H-6K bombers, two fighters and two information-gathering planes flew through the strait.

China is currently in the midst of a military modernization program heavily promoted by President Xi Jinping, who has overseen a shift in focus toward creating a more potent fighting force, including projects such as building a second aircraft carrier, integrating stealth fighters into its air force and fielding an array of advanced missiles that can strike air and sea targets from long distances.

The Chinese military has also seen its forces drill to extend their reach further into the Western Pacific with what it calls “regular” exercises.

While Beijing insists that these exercises are in line with international law and practice, and that its modernization program is not directed at any particular country, its moves in the disputed South China Sea and near Japanese islands has prompted concern.

In its statement, the air force said that the aim of sending Su-35 fighters over the

South China Sea was to bolster its long-range combat capabilities under high-seas conditions.

Flying through the South China Sea and Miyako Strait, which sits to the northeast of self-ruled Taiwan, an island China claims as its own, accorded with international law and practice, the statement added.

“Air force exercises are rehearsals for future wars and are the most direct preparation for combat,” it said.

The more exercises China practices far from its shores, the better it will be positioned as “an important force for managing and controlling crises, containing war and winning battles,” it added.

Collin Koh, a specialist in regional naval affairs at Singapore’s S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, said that despite the harsh rhetoric, the talk of “combat training” mirrored past Chinese statements.

“This is not actually anything new — previous official statements by the Chinese political and military leadership had emphasized the need for training under realistic conditions, and in preparation for real war,” Koh noted.

The two recent drills come on the heels of a U.S. Navy “freedom of navigation operation” (FONOP) patrol Friday in the South China Sea, where a destroyer came within 12 nautical miles (22 km) of an artificial island China built in the strategic waterway.

Beijing accused the U.S. of “serious political and military provocation” after Friday’s patrol, the first by the United States since January.

Washington has lambasted Beijing for its man-made islands in the South China Sea, with some hosting military-grade airfields and weapons. The U.S. fears the outposts could be used to restrict free movement in the waterway — which includes vital sea lanes through which about \$3 trillion in global trade passes each year — and has conducted several FONOPs in the area.

Beijing has disputed this claim, saying the militarization of the outposts — over which it claims absolute sovereignty — has been for self-defense purposes.

China claims virtually the entire South China Sea, and has built up a series of

man-made outposts there. The Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Taiwan and Brunei all have overlapping claims in the waters.

China's navy is also expected carry out "combat exercises" in the South China Sea in the coming days, it said Friday. Those drills could involve the Liaoning, the country's sole operating carrier, which is believed to be in the area after sailing through the Taiwan Strait last Wednesday.

The state-run Global Times newspaper quoted Song Zhongping, a military expert and TV commentator, as saying that " the 2018 drills will be routine and will be held every month, unlike in previous years," when they were usually held in the spring and autumn.

Source: <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/03/26/asia-pacific/chinese-air-force-drills-south-china-sea-western-pacific-calls-exercises-rehearsals-future-wars/#.Wro5P4jwZGM>

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