

37 Chinese aircraft skirt Taiwan on way to drill: Taipei

AFP- Taiwan's defence ministry said 37 Chinese aircraft were detected around the self-ruled island Wednesday as they headed to exercises with an aircraft carrier in the western Pacific. China claims democratic Taiwan as part of its territory and maintains a near-daily presence of fighter jets, drones and warships around the island, which is located 180 kilometres (110 miles) from the southern Chinese coast.

It is also a crucial part of a chain of islands that military strategists say serve as a gateway from the South China Sea – which China claims in nearly its entirety – to the Pacific Ocean.

At around 9:30 am (0130 GMT) Wednesday, Taipei said that “since 0520 today, the Ministry of National Defence detected a total of 37 Chinese aircraft” around Taiwan, including fighter jets, bombers and drones.

Thirty-six of the aircraft crossed the sensitive median line of the Taiwan Strait – which bisects the narrow waterway separating the island from China.

“(The aircraft) headed to the Western Pacific via our southern and southeastern airspace to cooperate with the aircraft carrier the Shandong in conducting ‘joint sea and air training’,” the defence ministry said in a statement.

Defence Minister Wellington Koo told reporters the Shandong “did not pass through the Bashi Channel”, the area off Taiwan's southern tip where Chinese ships typically transit en route to the Pacific Ocean.

Instead, it “went further south through the Balingtang Channel

towards the Western Pacific," he said, referring to a waterway just north of the Philippines' Babuyan Island – about 250 kilometres south of Bashi.

The Chinese flights come a day after Japan's Joint Staff Office said four PLA navy vessels – including the Shandong – were sailing 520 kilometres southeast of Miyako Island.

"On the same day, the Chinese navy's Kuznetsov-class aircraft carrier 'Shandong' was observed landing and departing fighter aircraft and helicopters on board," it said in a statement.

China has never renounced the use of force to bring Taiwan under its control and has ramped up military and political pressures on the island in recent years.

In May, days after Taiwanese President Lai Ching-te took office, China launched war games around the island as "punishment" for an inauguration speech that Beijing called a "confession of Taiwan independence".

On Wednesday, Lai met with Raymond Greene, new director of the American Institute in Taiwan – the de-facto US embassy, emphasising their "solid partnership... in the midst of China's repeated provocation and attempts to change the status quo in the Taiwan Strait".

While the United States, like many other countries, does not officially recognise Taiwan diplomatically, it is Taipei's key partner and major provider of weapons – a point of consternation for Beijing which has repeatedly called on Washington to stop arming the island.

Greene said Wednesday that Washington would continue to "strongly support Taiwan's ability to defend itself".

"We have a long-term and shared interest to maintain the peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. This is vital to the prosperity of the Indo-Pacific region, as well as to global

security," he said during his meeting with Lai.

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