TA Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: TA | AP Insight

What lies behind the falloff in China's military flights around Taiwan?

Over the years, a regular Chinese campaign of sending warplanes flying toward Taiwan — the self-governing island it claims as its territory — has raised alarm from Taipei to Washington.

Now, a sharp drop in the number of flights in the past two weeks has analysts scratching their heads about what China's military may be up to.

And that mystery carries risks, former U.S. defense official Drew Thompson said.

“There are so many theories and the lack of understanding of China’s intentions is what’s disconcerting,” said Thompson, now a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore. “You fill the void with uncertainty, and uncertainty increases risk.”

Flights stopped for 7 straight days

The falloff in flights started earlier, but the latest drop has been particularly dramatic.

Taiwan's Defense Ministry issues daily reports on Chinese air force and naval activity around the island.

More often than not, recent ones haven't included the usual map with flight paths, because no flights were detected.

Taiwan didn't report any Chinese military planes in an area known as its Air Defense Identification Zone for a week from Feb. 27 to March 5. And then after two were detected on March 6, the next four days had none.

The flights have resumed in small numbers in the last two days, with three on Wednesday and two on Thursday.

That brought the total for the past two weeks to seven. In the same period last year, there were 92.

The reasons could be political

The drop coincided with the annual meeting of China's legislature, and such flights have fallen in the past during major events and public holidays. But this year's fall was much greater than in the past.

“That alone would not be the only or primary reason for sorties dropping to zero,” K. Tristan Tang, a Taipei-based nonresident fellow at the National Bureau of Asian Research, said in an email response.

Another factor could be a desire to calm the waters with Washignton two weeks before a visit by U.S. President Donald Trump. The White House has said that Trump would travel to China from March 31 to April 2.

Thompson, though, noted the Taiwan issue isn't what matters to the American president.

“Trump sees China as an economic negotiation, not as a security challenge,” he said.

The United States opposes any attempt to change Taiwan's status by force — such as an invasion by China, which says the democratic island of 23 million people must come under its control in the future.

Military considerations

Tang believes the decline in flights may be driven by a shift to a next phase in China's military training and modernization.

The military appears to be exploring a new model for joint training between its air force and navy and possibly its ground forces, he said in his response.

Such exploratory activity would likely be conducted away from Taiwan to prevent other countries from monitoring it, he said, which could explain why fewer Chinese planes are in the area.

We cannot rely solely on a single symptom like the absence of PLA aircraft to make a judgment - Wellington Koo

Taiwan's military has signaled that it isn't changing its defense posture because of the falloff in Chinese warplane activity.

Defense Minister Wellington Koo noted that China's navy has remained active in nearby waters, even as military flights have fallen off.

“As I have said before, we cannot rely solely on a single symptom like the absence of PLA aircraft to make a judgment,” he told journalists. The PLA is the acronym for the Chinese military's official name, the People's Liberation Army.

"We will continue to closely monitor the PLA’s movements,” he said.