

September 12, 2024

The Honorable Lloyd Austin  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Defense  
1000 Defense Pentagon  
Washington, D.C. 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Austin:

I write with regard to the United States' participation in Operation Formosa, an annual military exercise hosted by Brazil. Specifically, I am alarmed by the participation of the Chinese Communist Party's armed wing, the People's Liberation Army (PLA). While the Department of Defense (DoD) has assured that U.S. and PLA forces will not be training together during the exercise, the presence of PLA forces at Operation Formosa presents a great risk to our national security. The People's Republic of China (PRC) has a well-documented history of using military exercises to gather intelligence and gain insights into U.S. operations, capabilities, and strategic planning. Therefore, I urge you to immediately put safeguards in place to ensure U.S. participation in Operation Formosa does not unintentionally benefit the PLA's ambitious military modernization efforts.

The DoD consistently messages the PRC is our country's pacing threat, and should be treated as such. The PRC is known to utilize its military interactions with other nations to undermine U.S. military, diplomatic, and economic leadership. It utilizes these exercises, military-to-military engagements, arms sales, and other means of military cooperation to gain valuable knowledge into the workings of our allies and partners in hopes to gain an edge over U.S. military capabilities and strategy. This threat is amplified when U.S. forces participate in the same exercise as the PLA, as it creates additional opportunities for China to observe and exploit our strategies, even if the forces are not directly engaging with one another.

The risk of not only the PRC obtaining knowledge of U.S. military capabilities and tactics, but sharing such knowledge with other malign actors should not be understated. According to the DoD's China Military Power Report for 2023, the PLA's bilateral and multilateral exercises include several other countries that our government has identified as adversaries, including several exercises with Iran and Russia.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, news of the PLA's involvement in Operation Formosa comes directly as the PRC participates in the massive Russian military exercise "Ocean-24" that dictator Vladimir Putin claims is the largest exercise of its kind in three decades.<sup>2</sup> It should be understood there is a heightened likelihood that any

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Oct/19/2003323409/-1/-1/1/2023-MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA.PDF> Appendix II

<sup>2</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/russia-naval-air-drills-china-f941584643d6503df2b42dae7abe7f15>

intelligence gained during Operation Formosa by the PLA could be shared with these adversaries, compounding the threat to U.S. interests.

Accordingly, I expect the DoD to take appropriate steps to mitigate any transfer of U.S. military knowledge to the PLA, and request answers to the following questions:

1. When were you first made aware of China's participation in the Brazilian military exercises alongside U.S. forces?
2. How approximate will PLA forces be to the U.S. military during the exercise? Will they be within distance to observe U.S. military movements?
3. Has the DoD communicated restrictions between engagements to Brazil, and if so, what was their response?
4. While our partnerships with Brazil are important, could you explain the rationale behind continuing U.S. involvement in the military exercises after it was known that the PLA would be participating, and how this decision aligns with safeguarding U.S. national security interests?
5. What specific precautions are being taken to ensure that PLA personnel do not gain access to sensitive U.S. information, technology, or personnel interactions during the exercises? And how is the DoD ensuring compliance with these measures?
6. How does the DoD assess the risk posed by China's participation in joint exercises, particularly in terms of potential espionage or intelligence gathering?
7. What conversations has the DoD had with Brazil to prevent the unwanted transfer of knowledge to the PLA?
8. Are there any considerations or restrictions on joint activities to minimize the risk of exposure of U.S. operational tactics or classified information?

I appreciate your attention to this important issue.

Sincerely,



Marco Rubio  
U.S. Senator