**China holds drills around Taiwan, vows ‘punishment for separatists’**

China on Thursday encircled Taiwan with naval vessels and military aircraft in war games, as it vowed the blood of “independence forces” on the self-ruled island would flow.

The two days of drills are part of an escalating campaign of intimidation by China that has seen it carry out a series of large-scale military exercises around Taiwan in recent years. The drills come after Lai Ching-te was sworn in as Taiwan’s new President this week and made an inauguration speech that China denounced as a “confession of independence”.

As the drills got under way, China’s military said they would serve as “strong punishment for the separatist acts of ‘Taiwan independence’ forces”. Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin then delivered a warning that included language more commonly used by China’s propaganda outlets.

“Taiwan independence forces will be left with their heads broken and blood flowing after colliding against the great... trend of China achieving complete unification,” Mr. Wang told presspersons. China — governed by the Communist Party since 1949 — claims Taiwan as part of its territory and has vowed to bring the democratic island under its rule, by force if necessary.

Thursday and Friday’s drills — codenamed “Joint Sword-2024A” — involve aircraft and ships surrounding the island to test their combat capabilities, China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) said.

Taiwan’s response

Taiwan responded by deploying air, ground and sea forces, with the island’s Defence Ministry vowing to “defend freedom”. President Lai said he would “stand on the frontline” to defend Taiwan in a speech on Thursday afternoon, without directly referring to the ongoing drills.

“Faced with external challenges and threats, we will continue to defend the values of freedom and democracy, and safeguard peace and stability in the region,” he said. China has repeatedly branded Mr. Lai a “dangerous separatist” who would bring “war and decline” to the island. Beijing was further incensed with his inauguration speech in which he hailed a “glorious” era for Taiwan’s democracy.

The drills, which began on Thursday morning, are taking place in the Taiwan Strait and to the north, south and east of the island, as well as areas around the Taipei-administered islands of Kinmen, Matsu, Wuqiu and Dongyin.