

STRATEGIC CAPABILITIES COMPARISON

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In May 2020, Chinese Premier Le Keqiang published the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s annual work report, a document that recaps economic accomplishments in the year prior and lays out objectives for the year ahead. Normally, the publication receives little international coverage. That changed last year; When discussing the CCP's core strategic goal of reunification with Taiwan, Premier Keqiang removed the standard description of "peaceful reunification" with the de facto island nation Beijing insists it holds sovereignty over. The previous six work reports had all stated "peaceful reunification" was the objective.

This edit may not seem significant in its own right, but it's one of many examples of a well-documented change in the attitude of CCP leadership towards Taipei. Cross-Strait relations have been in sharp decline over the last 5 years as Beijing grows impatient with the Tsai administration. As China acclimatizes to its status as the ascendant power in the east pacific, the option of using force to reunify has been gaining steam in the ranks of CCP leadership. The potential for invasion can no longer be dismissed out of hand.

All hope is not lost for Taipei, however. Invasion remains an incredibly risky gamble for Beijing, and the potential for miscalculation is high. If war were to break out across the Strait, Taipei and Washington could work together to control escalation and bring about negotiations on terms favorable to Taipei. The two countries would have to credibly signal the massive costs Beijing would incur in a cross-strait invasion.

Beijing's military has grown considerably over the last 20 years, with the end goal of achieving parity with the United States military. This has led to a particular emphasis on creating a powerful blue water navy, capable of surrounding Taiwan, and even conducting a

mass amphibious invasion of the island. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is well-complimented by China's anti-access area denial (A2AD) capabilities, which will use a combination of ballistic, surface-to-air, air-to-air and anti-surface missiles to attempt to keep the Washington and other allies from breaking through the First Island Chain to come to Taipei's aid. Beijing has stepped up their information operations across the Strait in order to convince the people of Taiwan that their military stands no chance against these capabilities (Doshi, 2020).

Beijing enjoys many innate advantages in this narrow theater, but Washington and Taipei maintain several key response capabilities. The United States still has the capability to project power deep into the First Island Chain, namely through stand-off munitions, air-to-ground platforms, submarine warfare, and offensive cyber operations. Ohio and Virginia-class submarines stand to credibly challenge any PLAN operations in the Taiwan Strait. As "Agile Combat Employment" (ACE) doctrine matures, USAF fighter aircraft could spoil a Chinese attempt at securing air superiority over Taiwan.

Taipei has long planned for a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. Their national defense plan, titled the "Gu'an Operational Plan", lays out the objective of deterring a Chinese invasion, and repelling the PLA if deterrence fails (Easton, 2017). The Gu'an Operational Plan lays out a strong vision, but is too ambitious in its current form and will require a paradigm shift in Taipei to be more credible.

If Beijing were to throw caution to the wind, they would have 4 anticipated courses of action to capitulate Taipei: a combination of missile strikes and cyberattacks on Taiwan, a

blockade, a series of preemptive strikes against US bases in the region, and finally, an amphibious invasion of the island (Mastro, 2021). These options are not mutually exclusive; it is very likely some combination of the four would occur.

The four options have the potential to be conducted in three phases concurrent with the seizure of tactically significant islands along the Taiwan Strait, namely the Quemoy Islands and Peng Hu Islands. This will present Taipei with a dilemma; fight for key terrain along the Strait or preserve forces for an all-out assault on the island (Ferguson and Wood, 2001).

If Beijing were to conduct a cross-strait invasion in these phases, there would be several clearly defined off-ramps for de-escalation. Washington and Taipei have the ability to influence the CCP's decision-making calculus if they can signal the high costs that will be incurred.

The onus of this signaling falls on Taipei. The PLA and PLAN can concentrate on several key principles of warfare; surprise is not amongst them. Taipei will get a great deal of indications and warnings of a Chinese invasion. The mass mobilization of China's Southern and Eastern military districts, movement of People's Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF) CSS-6/7/11 ballistic missiles to preferred launch baskets, and pressing of civilian vessels into the PLAN will be giant red flags. April and October are the only months where the tides in the Strait are suitable for amphibious operations (Greer, 2019), so preparation will occur in the months leading up to those windows. The whole world will see the invasion coming.

And yet, as it stands now, Taipei may squander this advantage. The Taiwanese military continues to focus on acquiring "prestige" military capabilities that the Chinese can easily target. For example, Taipei agreed to a \$2 billion purchase of over 100 M1A2T tanks in 2019.

They have repeatedly stated the desire to purchase F-35 fighter aircraft (Greer, 2019) from the United States, and have expressed interest in purchasing a helicopter aircraft carrier. These assets will not provide the kind of survivable lethality the Taiwanese military needs. The average PLARF ballistic missile, once fired, can reach Taiwan in less than 8 minutes (Easton, 2017). Too many Abrams tanks and fifth generation fighters will be destroyed in the PLARF's opening salvo. Taipei buys these sophisticated assets for political purposes more so than military purposes (Greer, 2019).

The expensive acquisition of non-survivable assets has to end for Taipei to credibly deter Beijing from moving past the Peng Hu islands. Taiwan must re-allocate its acquisition budget to focus on cheap, mass, survivable assets. Examples include semi-autonomous, strike-capable unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), air defense and ground artillery, rockets, additional sea mines, fourth-generation man-portable air defense and anti-tank systems, road-mobile surface-to-air missile systems, jammers, etc. These assets are light, can be moved quickly, and can destroy PLA/PLAN assets in volume. "Prestige" assets should only be purchased if survivable in a contested, asymmetric environment; Virginia-class submarines or a domestic, Taiwanese equivalent are an example of a valuable, survivable "prestige" asset.

Combined with guerilla forces training for the Taiwanese Army and Marine Corps, Taiwan could find itself commanding a lethal asymmetric force capable of repelling the significantly larger PRC military. This template could follow, and even improve upon, the template set forth by the Iranian military, which has successfully deterred Washington and Riyadh from initiating open conflict in the Middle East (Carroll, 2017). The scrambling of these

assets could compel Beijing to cut their losses at the Quemoy or Peng Hu islands, if Taipei's actions were supported by Washington.

While Taipei focuses on turning their country into a slow, grueling battlefield, Washington should compliment their efforts by ratcheting up pressure in the Indo-Pacific area of responsibility (AOR). The non-kinetic steps to doing so are simple; USNDOPACOM can implement a request for force (RFF) during the aforementioned mobilization and buildup of the PRC's southern and eastern military districts. Virginia-and-Ohio-class submarines could be scattered throughout the northern end of the first island chain. Washington would need to work with East Asian allies to secure smaller bases for agile combat employment. Carrier Strike Groups will need to be moved to the INDOPACOM AOR, albeit outside of the range of DF-21 and DF-26 ballistic missiles during this phase of mobilization. There is a legitimate chance that Beijing will pre-emptively target US bases throughout the AOR; spreading mass forces can blunt the impact of their efforts.

If the PRC begins seizing the Quemoy/Peng Hu Islands, Washington must be ready to leverage a heavy cost on Beijing. In addition to striking Chinese assets in and around the Taiwan Strait, the United States must be ready to choke out the main sources of Chinese gas and oil; the Persian Gulf and Strait of Malacca. This would significantly challenge CCP's risk tolerance and spread the resources of the PLAN and PLARF, should Beijing choose to counter Washington's efforts.

The only way to control escalation and convince Beijing to abandon an invasion of Taiwan once commenced is to signal an extraordinary cost of blood, treasure, and prestige. The

combined threats of a swarming US presence in the Pacific, a direct cutoff of oil and gas shipments across the planet, and the potential for a multi-week slog across the mountainous terrain of Taiwan bristling with threats could force Beijing to recalculate their odds of victory and retreat. Beijing could settle for claiming smaller islands as a victory to show off to the citizens of mainland China while avoiding a perilous miscalculation. Perhaps that isn't the end-state that either side is most satisfied with, but the liberal world order Washington has created will survive. And for global security, *that* is the outcome that is desperately needed.

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