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**THE COMING BATTLE OF TAIWAN:**

**A predictive battle analysis of the future Battle of Taiwan**

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## Abstract:

*As the conflict in Ukraine enters what appears to be its final stage, all eyes begin to shift to the next arena of globally impacting conflict, the Pacific. Taiwan finds itself caught in the midst of a power struggle between two rival superpowers that could determine the center of global hegemonic control. China's long term strategic policy dictates the reintegration of Taiwan into the CCP, yet the U.S. has a vested strategic interest in maintaining the current status quo. Who blinks first and how will this showdown end? This paper examines the complex political, geographical, and military environment that surrounds Taiwan and lays out how a potential invasion attempt by China would play out.*

**Key words:** Taiwan, China, U.S. Strategic Defense, Belt and Road Initiative, Global Hegemony

## Introduction

Douglas MacArthur, famous for his quote that he, “understood the oriental mind” (Sandler, 1999, p. 118), was caught completely by surprise when against all his predictions China invaded Korea. Anyone who assumes with confidence to know exactly what China will do is doomed to a similar fate. While we cannot know for certain what China will do, it is possible to lay out the most likely scenarios based on current capabilities and guiding doctrines. This paper will attempt to detail what a future battle over Taiwan may look like. Numerous sources are taken into account to develop the analysis used in this paper including research articles, news reports, strategic analysis from respected think tanks and leading strategic analysts, interviews with key strategic leaders, and official government publications and guiding strategic documents.

## The Battleground

### Geographic Overview

Taiwan sits in a key strategic location bordered by the East and South China Seas to its north and south and the Philippines Sea to its east. Only the Taiwan Strait of a mere 100 miles separates the small island nation from mainland China. Taiwan would be tiny in comparison to most nations of the world, but it is truly dwarfed in comparison to China. While China measures over 9,500,000 square kilometers, (CIA.Gov, 2024) Taiwan's total land mass consists of only 32,260 square kilometers (CIA.Gov, 2024). The comparison in population is even more extreme. While Taiwan boasts a moderate-sized population of just over 23 million (CIA.Gov, 2024), China's population is just under 1.5 billion and one of the largest in the world (Hackett, 2022). Taiwan is a largely mountainous island with rugged peaks along its eastern coast reaching a height of nearly 13,000 feet (Country Reports, 2024). The west side of the island that faces China is mostly comprised of gently sloping coastal planes opening as one pushes south, and most of Taiwan's population is concentrated in these coastal planes on the north and south end of the island (Everington, 2022). The capital of Taipei is nestled on the northern coastal plain against the base of the mountains. There are few ports or navigable waterways in Taiwan with the country's two main ports located on opposite sides north and south of the island and numerous fast-flowing rivers with high levels of flooding hindering travel in the nation's interior (MOEA, 2024). The littoral of Taiwan is also extremely shallow on the northern end of the island as a long underwater shelf extends along the northwestern edge of the coast (Sacks, 2024). The weather in Taiwan varies by season with the summer months bringing the highest levels of rain, although rain can be expected year-round and Taiwan experiences an average of 2,500 mm

of rain each year (MOEA, 2024). The driest time of the year for Taiwan is between September and November after the monsoon season and before the nation is impacted by thick fog rolling in from Siberia (China Highlights, 2024). Altogether, Taiwan may be a small island, but it has a varied topography and climate that definitely presents challenges to any invasion force.

### Historical Overview

Like its geography, the history of Taiwan is no less complex. In 1949, Mao Zedong's Communist forces completed the uprising they had started prior to WWII with a defeat of the nationalist forces under Chiang Kai-Shek (The National Archives, 2024). Following their defeat, the nationalist forces under the name Republic of China (ROC) retreated to the island of Taiwan (formerly Formosa) along with over 1,000,000 Chinese refugees (Taiwan Government, 2024). Despite having no presence on the mainland, the ROC government in Taiwan maintained international recognition as the true government of China until U.S. President Jimmy Carter in a highly controversial move officially recognized the mainland communist government in 1978 (Office of the Historian, 2024). China has continuously maintained that Taiwan is part of mainland China, a statement Taiwan has never accepted. Taiwan's list of nation-states that officially recognize it is small and ever shrinking as China expands its global reach (Reuters, 2024), however, many nations and importantly the U.S. maintain unofficial relationships despite China's protests (Wu, 2023).

### The Battlelines

#### US and Taiwan Force Composition

It is Taiwan's relationship with the U.S. that maintains its sovereignty although Taiwan is certainly invested in its own defense. Taiwan's military stands at just under 170,000 and is backed by over 1.6 million reservists (Guzman, 2023). Taiwan's military budget for 2024 is close to \$14 billion with the majority of that going towards American-made weaponry systems (Dotson, 2024). Taiwan's military is relatively advanced for a small nation with over 400 combat-capable aircraft including recent purchases of U.S. F-16 fighters (Tirpak, 2024) and has a large missile arsenal (MDAA, 2018) that has traditionally been focused on defensive systems but has recently shifted towards increasing the offensive and long-range striking capability of Taiwan (CSIS Missile Defense Project, 2021).

However, Taiwan cannot hope to thwart China's territorial claims alone. Taiwan's military budget may seem impressive to the layman until compared to China's massive defense budget of \$245 billion (Bodeen, 2025). It is the might of U.S. military backing that maintains Taiwan's independence. The U.S. recognizes China as a threat to U.S. interests not just in Asia but globally (FBI, 2024), and Taiwan is viewed as a key point to deterring Chinese aggression (U.S. DOD, 2022). In terms of military presence in the Indo-Pacific theater, the U.S. has 375,000 troops spread across 66 defensive sites (Congressional Research Center, 2023). U.S. Pacific fleet makes up just under half of the troops in theater with 200 ships, 1,500 aircraft (including next-generation fighters), and 150,000 military and civilian personnel (U.S. Navy, 2024). U.S. Air Force personnel account for 45,000 of the troops in theater and possess approximately 340 fighter and attack aircraft including 3 next-generation fighter squadrons (U.S. Air Force, 2024). Finally, the U.S. has a wealth of missiles available to them for both ground and air-launched platforms (Panda, 2023). Some strategists believe the most important missile in the U.S.'s arsenal are their air-launched ballistic cruise missiles which by 2026, the U.S. is anticipated to

have over 3,600 in theater (Axe, 2023). As of 2023, DOD officials were optimistic about the position of the U.S. in the Pacific Theater (Garamone, 2023).

### China Force Composition

Facing Taiwan and the U.S. is the largest military in the world. Per a 2020 report by the DOD, China has over 400,000 troops positioned in the Taiwan Strait area out of a standing army of over 1,000,000 which includes; over 250 ships, 650 fighters, 250 bombers, and 1,350 missiles (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2021). As of 2023, China also possesses over 500 nuclear warheads with the expectation for that number to surpass 1,000 by 2030 (Cliff, 2023). Most dangerous for U.S. military operations in the Pacific are China's stock of hypersonic missiles which are capable of hitting targets up to 2,000 km away (Shaikh, 2021). Another development in modern warfare is the use of drones and China has recently used the war in Ukraine as a testing field for its long range attack drone technology (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2024). In terms of assault power, China also possesses advanced amphibious and aerial assault capabilities (Lague, 2020) (Fu, 2023). When Xi Ping came to power in 2013, he began a push to modernize China's military by focusing on what he called "military intelligentization," which sought to improve and incorporate advanced technology and cyber capabilities into China's military and strategic doctrines (Bresnick, 2024). This process has seen China not only improve its combat capability on the physical battlefield but also in the realm of electronic warfare. China's advanced satellite and radar disruption capabilities (also known as jamming or spoofing) are now a serious concern to U.S. operations in the theater (Honrada, 2024). Buttressing China's military efforts are their intelligence and cyber capabilities which the FBI considers a grave threat to U.S. interests (FBI, 2024). China has used its cyber capabilities to attempt to influence Taiwanese elections (Miller and Gedeon, 2024) and its agents have managed to penetrate the Taiwanese military itself as a recent spy ring bust demonstrated (Hsiao, 2024). In all areas, China shows advanced capabilities that they are continuously improving upon. With a defense budget matching and potentially exceeding the U.S. (Robinson and Beaver, 2023), China's military capabilities can only be expected to become more dangerous.

### Objectives

With the battlelines laid out, what then are the goals of the two opposing forces? The U.S. goals regarding Taiwan are simple, they seek to maintain the status quo and prevent China from expanding their reach into the Pacific (Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 2022). The U.S. does not support Taiwanese independence, but they also do not support Chinese control of the island. There are of course moral reasons for supporting Taiwan, however, Taiwan represents a crucial link in the U.S. defensive chain in the Pacific (Sacks, 2024). Not only does Taiwan sit on key shipping routes, but it also allows the U.S. to maintain a forward operating presence near China's borders. If Taiwan were to fall to China, South Korea and Japan would be outflanked and the U.S. would be forced into a backfoot defensive position in the Marianas (Murray, 2021).

While the U.S. looks to maintain the status quo, China wants just the opposite. China has directly stated that if all peaceful options of reunification are exhausted, they will not hesitate to use military options to force reunification. Chinese President Xi Jinping has stated that the Communist Party has an "unshakable commitment" to resolve the Taiwan issue (Congressional Research Center, 2021). So why has China not yet attacked? The answer lies in the deep underlying strategic policy of the Chinese Communist party that Mao Zedong instituted in 1949 when the Communists came to power called "The Hundred-Year Marathon." Michael Pillsbury,

one of America's leading experts on Chinese affairs, first introduced the strategy to the West in his seminal book of the same name. For summarization purposes, *The Hundred-Year Marathon* is a strategy for China to replace the U.S. as the global superpower or hegemon by 2049 (Pillsbury, 2015, p. 99), the hundredth anniversary of the PRC. This strategy is officially recognized by the DOD and part of U.S. strategic planning to counter China (Garamone, 2023). Three key principles of the Marathon are, "1. Inducing complacency to avoid alerting your opponent....2. Be patient – for decades, or longer – to achieve victory...3. Never lose sight of shi" (Pillsbury, 2015, pp. 35-36). Shi is defined by deception and waiting for the opportune moment to strike. China does not think in terms of months or years, it thinks in terms of decades and centuries as one would expect from a culture thousands of years old. China has been biding its time and will not strike until it senses that the U.S. has weakened to such a point that China can assert itself in full confidence of victory. This does not mean China will wait till 2049 to make its move, but as the balance of power shifts it will become more assertive and aggressive through a phased approach (Pillsbury, 2015, p. 211). It is not a question of if China will move against Taiwan, but rather of when.

### **The Battle**

#### Setting the date

So when is when? A lot of speculation and theorization has gone into trying to determine a time frame for when China may strike. In 2021, the commander of Indo-Pacific Command stated China would make a move on Taiwan by 2027 (Congressional Research Center, 2021). His successor has repeated the same warning stating, "All indications point to the PLA meeting President Xi Jinping's directive to be ready to invade Taiwan by 2027" (Johnson, 2024). Taiwan itself has stated that it believes China could be prepared to invade as early as 2025 (Hills, 2021). Others, however, are not so sure an invasion is impending. John Culver, former CIA head of intelligence for East Asia stated in a 2021 interview that "war isn't the plan," for China and disagrees with the defined short-term timetables set out by others (Culver, Hass, 2021). A big reason many are hesitant about predicting a Chinese invasion of Taiwan in the short term is the economic fallout China would experience (Roy, 2024). China has been one of the fastest growing economies for decades, but that growth has slowed significantly and China is currently experiencing an economic downturn (Sier, 2024). While experts disagree on the cause and significance of the current economic struggles (CSIS, 2024), what is clear is that China is no longer in the same economic position of strength it was a few years ago. The international response to Russia's war on Ukraine, particularly the imposition of economic sanctions has had a minimal effect on Russia's energy-based economy (Congressional Research Service, 2022) but has sent a strong warning message to China (Berman, 2024) who is far more dependent on the global export trade of manufactured goods easily targeted by sanctions (Global Finance, 2024). Due to the global dependence on Chinese markets, any sanctions would come with heavy costs for the imposing countries as well (Vest, Kratz, 2023). However, the clear resolve by G7 nations to impose sanctions despite costs to themselves in the Russia-Ukraine crisis should certainly be concerning to China. The world reaction to Russia's attack on Ukraine has likely pushed back the timetable for China's assault on Taiwan. Given the current economic conditions and the comparative military power of China and the U.S. it is the assessment of this paper that China will wait to attack Taiwan until it has made further economic inroads specifically into Africa, Asia, and Europe via the Belt and Road Initiative (Feingold, 2023), and has further increased its

military advantage over the U.S. Sometime between 2030 and 2040 seems most likely for any invasion scenario of Taiwan.

### Two Scenarios

There are two possible scenarios for an invasion of Taiwan. The first relies on an attempt to catch a complacent U.S. by surprise and complete the successful invasion of Taiwan before U.S. forces can intervene. This scenario, if completed successfully, would force the U.S. into having to play the role of aggressor by initiating attacks against Chinese military forces on and around Taiwan or perhaps even on the Chinese mainland itself. The U.S. would be faced with the same decision Neville Chamberlain faced with Hitler's invasion of Czechoslovakia or Obama faced when Putin annexed Crimea, do you attack an aggressor who has not yet directly attacked you or do you compromise and hope you can contain future expansion? It would be a tough decision and would greatly depend on the nature of the person occupying the Oval Office. Depending on the U.S. response, the battle of Taiwan in this scenario could be constrained to simply Taiwan itself although the U.S. position and standing in the Pacific and globally would be highly compromised.

The second scenario would occur if China assessed that future war with the U.S. was inevitable and decided to make its play for regional hegemony by removing the U.S. from the western Pacific while it had the advantage of surprise. This scenario would see China directly attack U.S. military assets and bases in the theater while moving to blockade Taiwan and force the U.S. into a compromised defensive footing. This scenario would mean all-out war, World War III. It would be extremely costly for both sides and would leave both nations in a weakened state regardless of who won. Due to nuclear deterrence, neither country would be likely to use its nuclear arsenal or target key civilian/leadership sites in either China or the U.S. but the Pacific from the Philippines to the edge of China would devolve into a war zone. With the inability of either country to force the full surrender of the other without inciting possible nuclear war, a stalemate would be highly likely which would either induce a certain level of U.S. drawdown in its forces in the Pacific (there are different levels to how significant this drawdown would be) if China "won," or simply a reestablishment of the status quo (similar to the Korean War) if the U.S. "won." Given China's long-term goals in line with the Hundred-Year Marathon, this scenario seems highly unlikely. This paper will focus on how scenario one would play out.

### How it will Happen

As stated at the beginning of this paper, no one truly knows how or when an attack on Taiwan will take place and those who pretend to have absolute knowledge of Chinese plans are doomed for embarrassment. However, listed below is a possible set of events that could follow scenario one which this paper deems as most likely to occur based on all data so far presented.

It is February 11<sup>th</sup>, 2032, the time of Chinese New Year, thick fog hangs in the air but it doesn't deter the revelers. Millions line the streets and fireworks fill the air as there is a lot to celebrate this year. After years of tension between China and Taiwan culminating in a series of final ultimatums a few years back that came to nothing, relations have finally begun to normalize. There is even talk that some members of China's military and government establishment support partial Taiwanese independence and China just signed new technology-sharing and trade deals with Taiwan meant to boost collaboration and economic ties between the two parties. At the height of the festivities, a series of explosions rock the island. Initially many

assume the sounds are more fireworks until suddenly the power goes out and a few stray missiles hit city centers. The Battle of Taiwan has begun. China launches missile and drone strikes against all key Taiwan defensive and energy positions concentrating on anti-aircraft, radars, airfields and power plants. The missile attack is worked in concert with a massive cyber-attack against Taiwan as well as key U.S. communication nodes and bases. The rocket strikes are followed by aerial attacks while at the same time, Chinese saboteurs posing as tourists as well as undercover agents who have infiltrated all levels of the country's military, political, and energy infrastructure disable communication towers, power grids, and radar systems. Chinese merchant vessels in both the south and north harbors explode, sowing chaos as hidden Chinese assault teams pour out of other merchant vessels to seize key port facilities. With Taiwan's air defenses mostly neutralized and the army responding to the fighting at the ports, China (under the cover of intensive radar and satellite jamming) deploys thousands of airborne paratroops launched from bases deep within China. The paratroop force concentrates on securing the southern plain and capturing upper-level Taiwanese leadership. China now launches its amphibious assault under a defensive screen of aircraft and surface vessels. The remainder of China's fleet is deployed around the island to prevent any U.S. response from reaching the beaches without making the conscious decision to attack Chinese vessels. Chinese aircraft and missiles continue to pound the island's defensive positions, and any military responses Taiwan attempts to make. Within hours of launching the first strikes, Taiwan's leadership surrenders. The U.S. forces in theater are caught completely by surprise and initial response is further slowed by the recent changes in leadership following the Presidential inauguration only weeks before. The cyber-attack, as well as satellite and radar jamming, causes problems in force deployment as well as adequately assessing what is going on in the assault. Fighters are scrambled and U.S. naval destroyers steam towards the area but by the time they arrive, it is too late. Chinese paratroopers and special forces have sized key military and political positions, and China has established complete air supremacy over the island.

### Results

If China was able to successfully take Taiwan or most of Taiwan before U.S. forces could reach the area, a U.S. military intervention against a nation they are not at war with and who has not yet physically attacked them directly would be unlikely. A series of sanctions would follow, and tensions would escalate between both nations, however, once secured Taiwan would be lost. International commitment to sanctions would likely be limited due to the reliance on Chinese markets spurred on by the Belt and Road initiative. Eventually, any commitment to sanctions would lapse and U.S. public support for military or economic actions against China would dissipate. The U.S. would re-align its defensive posture in the Pacific, but China would have established itself as the regional hegemon and key U.S. allies in the region would slowly shift to China's court, further decreasing the U.S. military and political influence in the theater.

### **Learning Lessons now Before its too late**

It's a grim description of the future but can it be prevented? America sits on the precipice and its actions today will impact their standing as a global superpower tomorrow. There are certain lessons that the U.S. can learn now that could help prevent this scenario from occurring.

The first steps the U.S. needs to take are to reduce its own reliance and that of the global economy on China. As of 2020, China accounted for 17.7% of global manufactured products and 24.9% of high-tech manufacturing (Jones, 2022). The European Union's share of Global Chinese

manufacturing imports was 27% alone (Jones, 2022). The U.S. needs to look to encourage homegrown industry through tax breaks and to encourage economic manufacturing development in third-world nations. America, with its global partners, needs to present an alternative to the Belt and Road Initiative for developing countries. Before a single shot is fired, the Battle for Taiwan will be won or lost on the global economic stage.

The second step is to maintain military peerage with China. Whatever China spends, the U.S. needs to continue to match it in terms of both defense spending and technological innovation. Just as Reagan defeated the USSR through aggressive defense spending (Sempa, 2004), so too must the modern U.S. match and exceed every yen China puts towards its defensive fighting power. A China that never has a significant military edge is a China that will not challenge the U.S. for hegemonic dominance. Another principle of this is force posture. China, who is playing on its home turf, has the advantage in that it can concentrate all of its forces on one theater whereas the U.S. military is spread out all across the world and especially tied down in Europe. Without removing itself from NATO entirely, the U.S. must find ways to shift the main role of defense to its regional partners in Europe and extract itself from its primary commitment to European defense. Currently, the U.S. has over 100,000 troops stationed in Europe (U.S. DOD, 2022) and accounted for just under 16% of the NATO defense budget in 2022 (\$567 million) (NATO, 2024). Russia is certainly a threat to U.S. interests, however, in that theater there are a wealth of well-armed and nuclear-capable states with an inherent self-interest in countering the Russian threat (IISS, 2024). In Asia, the U.S. stands almost entirely alone. The U.S. cannot lose sight of Europe in its focus on China, but it certainly needs to utilize the defensive partnerships available in the region better.

The third and final lesson the U.S. must learn and take to heart is that China will never waver, and neither can the U.S. China employs deceit and misdirection as a fundamental policy of its military and political strategy (Pillsbury, 2015, 45). The more friendly and open to non-military options China appears, the more likely they are to attack because that is when their opponent will least suspect them. The U.S. must always be wary of Chinese aggression and ready to counter or contain any attempts at outward expansion. The task is not easy and puts a heavy toll on the U.S. economy and political system, but such is the cost of empire. The day the U.S. relaxes its guard is the day Taiwan falls.

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