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TAIWAN'S COUNTER MEASURES AGAINST CHINESE ASSERTIVE POSTURE

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Introduction

When Bill Hayton proclaimed the South China Sea to be “the most contested piece of sea in the world” in his seminal work titled ‘The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia’, he effectively gave literary form to an emerging geopolitical theatre of global power contestation which holds the potential to chart the course of history in the next few decades. With Chinese supremo Xi Jinping progressively pursuing a policy of boxing Taiwan in within the ‘One China’ framework, the perceived ‘issue’ of Taiwan and its ability to deter Chinese military hostility has developed into an existential threat, demanding urgency in the formulation of a concrete Taiwanese defence strategy.

Amidst the backdrop of the Ukrainian crisis, scholarly analysis of Taiwan’s military preparedness assumes paramount importance particularly for allies such as the United States of America (USA), Japan and other regional players witness to China’s belligerence over the years. This issue brief thus attempts to trace contemporary cross-strait conflict dynamics while drawing comparative analysis of military capabilities between the two countries. It evolves into an explanation of the ‘war of attrition’ style of porcupine military strategy emulated by Taiwan and the ensuing debates surrounding its applicability in modern day warfare. The broader objective of the paper would be to chart out a game plan analysing the legroom available for the Taiwanese leadership in defending its sovereign ambitions as more regional and global players outline their objectives for the region in terms of national interests.

A Historical Backdrop to China-Taiwan Conflict

In its latest bid to pursue its campaign of military aggrandization, China sent 43 military aircrafts and seven ships near the democratically governed island of Taiwan, prompting the latter to scramble jet fighters, dispatch ships and activate land-based missile systems in what is now perceived as ‘standard military responses’ to Chinese military incursions including crossing into

Taiwan's air defence identification zone.¹ Such military standoffs notwithstanding, since the 1990s onwards, security experts have deemed a conflict between Mainland China and Taiwan as a 'most likely scenario' with China's continued insistence on using all means possible to materialize its policy of 'One China'².

The Taiwan issue itself can be traced back to 1949 when the Chinese Communist Party under Mao Zedong established victory over the Chinese Nationalist Party led by Chiang Kai-shek, popularly referred to as the Kuomintang (KMT), which forced the latter to retreat to the Republic of China (henceforth referred to as Taiwan).³ Both sides continued promoting their aspirations of unification. While the Chinese communist revolution established as its goal "*the liberation of all of China and the defeat of the Chiang dynasty*", the KMT with disproportionately limited capacities also sought reunification under different terms.⁴ This has resulted in decades of military confrontations along the Taiwan strait, with the USA reversing its stance of neutrality on the Chinese Civil war in favour of Taiwan (prompted by communist misgivings during the Korean War), marking its formal entry as a player in the geopolitics of the Strait. In 1979, this relationship was further cemented through the Taiwan Relations Act which defined the USA's policy of "*providing Taiwan with arms of a defensive character*".⁵

The 1980s paved the way for unofficial bilateral negotiations with Taiwan insisting on a stratagem of "one country, two governments" as opposed to the People's Republic of China's (PRC) "one

¹ (The Hindu 2023)

² (Rahman 2001)

³ (Center for Security and International Studies 2023)

⁴ (Li 1988)

⁵ (Chai 1999)

country, two systems” policy, holding promises for a peaceful resolution of each entity’s sovereign claims⁶. The election of Chen Shui-bian, a legislator of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) who remained a strong proponent of complete independence, however, alarmed Beijing⁷. The eventual rise of Xi Jinping and the PRC’s progression towards a policy of belligerence in the Indo-Pacific has been frequently underlined by its dream of ‘national rejuvenation’, one which has as its core the ‘one China principle’⁸. In 2022, in a statement released by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, it explicitly stated:

*“There is but one China in the world, Taiwan is an inalienable part of China’s territory, and the Government of the People’s Republic of China is the sole legal government representing the whole of China.”*⁹

Since the election of incumbent president Tsai Ing-wen of the DPP in 2016, Beijing has formalized its policy of the legal right to use of force against Taiwan in the case of “illegal attempts of secession” by the democratic island¹⁰. With the Island headed for elections in 2024 amidst increasing Chinese assertiveness, it remains to be seen how the interpretation of ‘One China’ plays out in successive years, particularly in light of the USA’s lack of change of status with regards to its acknowledgement of Taiwan as ‘part of China’ (according to the US-PRC Joint Communiqué of 1979).

⁶ (Li 1988)

⁷ (British Broadcasting Corporation 2022)

⁸ (Dittmer n.d.)

⁹ (China 2022)

¹⁰ (Maizland 2023)

Grey-Zone Campaigns: China’s Tactical Chokehold on Taiwan

A plethora of strategic analysis reports have suggested that by 2027, the PRC would be capable of mounting a full-scale invasion against Taiwan owing to large scale military modernisation, with the question now being raised changing to ‘when’ rather than ‘if’¹¹. In an issue brief published for the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Jude Blanchett and Gerard DiPippo list the following reasons for a possible full-scale invasion:

1. Long-standing territorial and national identity aspirations
2. Xi’s own personal ambitions and sense of legacy
3. Addressing a perceived threat to its own security stemming from deepening USA-Taiwan defense cooperation
4. Responding to perceived provocations from Taiwan, specifically a formal declaration of permanent independence from the PRC¹²

In September of 2023 alone, the Chinese military (the People’s Liberation Army) reportedly made 225 sorties into Taiwan’s Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) in addition to frequent naval exercises conducted in the South China Sea in what it considers as its naval backyard¹³. On the international platform, the ‘threat of China’ has raised concerns about the preservation of Taiwanese sovereignty, with the US Department of State releasing the following statement:

¹¹ (Kolipaka 2023)

¹² (Blanchette and DiPippo 2023)

¹³ (Hale 2023)

“Contrary to its commitment to pursue a peaceful solution, the PRC has increasingly turned to military intimidation in an attempt to coerce Taiwan into submitting to Beijing. This includes an unprecedented number of air incursions, threatening propaganda, and exercises simulating attacks on Taiwan.”¹⁴

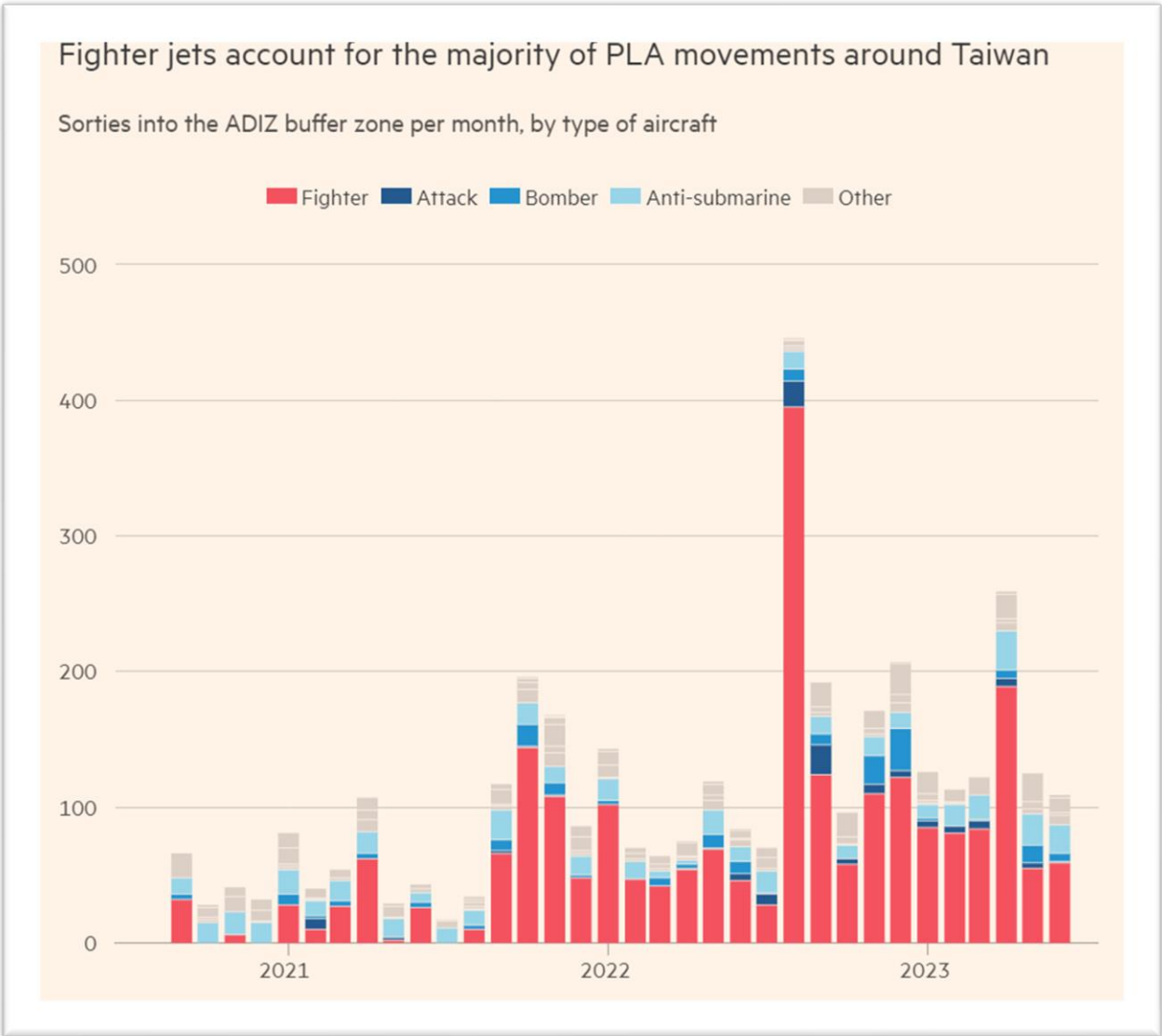
Contrary to popular perceptions of a total war scenario, defence experts have commented on the nature of ‘psychological warfare’ being conducted by the PLA using tactics of ‘gradual encroachment’ in what has now been termed as the PRC’s ‘grey zone campaign’: stepping up military pressure right up to Taiwan’s contiguous zone while staying below the threshold of warfare, nipping all possibilities of global retaliation in the bud all the while raising the costs of war¹⁵.

Consider the following statistics: since 2020, the number of Chinese military incursions into Taiwan’s Air Defence Identification Zone has increased to 139 based on data from July 2023¹⁶, of which fighter jets account for majority of movement based on the following graph:

¹⁴ (China’s Military Aggression in the Indo-Pacific Region: Intimidating Taiwan 2017-2021)

¹⁵ (Hille and Sevastopulo 2023)

¹⁶ (Hille and Sevastopulo 2023)



*Fig.1*¹⁷

¹⁷ The Financial Times (with inputs from Taiwan's Ministry of National Defence), 2023

The quality of weaponry utilised also marks a significant departure from transport aircrafts to drones, bombers, electronic warfare aircrafts, among others. The most serious incursion so far has been that of the Taiwan Strait median line in what the PRC has described as a ‘punishing exercise’ with over 300 aircraft crossings in August of 2022 after the controversial visit of USA House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan last year¹⁸. This points towards the broader trend of wearing down Taiwan’s defences capabilities over time through the PRC’s salami slicing tactics and raising the stakes of deterrence in the region. Taipei’s Intelligence Chief aptly depicts it as “*intimidation, rather than aggression*”.¹⁹

Military Capabilities of China and Taiwan: A Comparative Analysis

As geopolitical developments across the Indo-Pacific take centre stage, the perceived ‘issue’ of Taiwan and its ability to deter Chinese military hostility has developed into an existential threat, demanding urgency in the formulation of a concrete Taiwanese defence strategy. With possibilities of hostile Chinese takeover dominating the Taiwanese political space and defining electoral manifestos for the 2024 presidential election, the issue of formulating a comprehensive military doctrine addressing cross-strait conflicts assumes paramount significance.

What defines contemporary Taiwanese security dilemma is a difference in threat perceptions. There is no way of knowing whether Chinese threats of use of force represent a strategy of containing Taiwan’s aspirations of de jure independence, or if they point towards China’s recourse

¹⁸ (Hille and Sevastopulo 2023)

¹⁹ (Hille and Sevastopulo 2023)

to a military invasion solution to resolve the cross-strait impasse²⁰. China's multi-decade military modernization has further restrained Taiwan's previously held technological and geographical advantages, underpinned by its 2004 National Defence white paper's commitment towards "*enhancing the development of its operational strength with priority given to the Navy, Air Force and Second Artillery Force, and strengthen its comprehensive deterrence and war fighting capabilities*"²¹. Since then, Beijing has replenished its military stock with advanced surface warships, short and long-range ballistic missiles with advanced warheads, tactical fighter aircrafts and nuclear-powered submarines along with land-attack cruise missiles²².

While most analysts maintain that China's military tactics are aimed at deterring Taiwanese independence rather than coercing reunification, perhaps amplified by its projected paranoia over deepening USA-Taiwan ties and its stated objectives of undermining the western liberal international political order, such projections however have ensured that possibilities of invasion have not been overlooked. In terms of relative size and power, China appears as a hegemonic behemoth compared to the small island administration, with the latter's standing armed forces numbering 163,000 (with 1.6 million reserve armed personnel) dwarfed in size by the People's Liberation Army's numerical strength of 2,035,000 active military personnel²³. According to the Taiwanese National Defence Report of 2023, the PRC's annual military budget is 12 times greater than that of the Taiwanese administration²⁴. The PLA navy, considered the largest navy in the world with over 350 warships, is believed to be the primary military instrument geared for the task

²⁰ (Lostumbo 2023)

²¹ (China's National Defense in 2004 n.d.)

²² (Murray 2008)

²³ (Gatopoulos 2022)

²⁴ (ROC National Defense Report 2023)

of reunification²⁵. China's maritime defence strategies, originally defined by military doctrines of "war under modern conditions" across a range of defensive capabilities to protect its island chains, have gradually transformed into offensive operations, prompted by greater strategic interest in the question of Taiwan and other maritime territorial claims²⁶. Military buildups of nuclear-powered aircraft carriers and ultra-fast hypersonic weapons designed to track and hit enemy offensives at a hypersonic speed have been in tandem with the steady procurement of indigenously developed stealth fighter aircrafts (J-16s and J-20s) and expansion of air bases proximate to Taiwan (namely, the Longtian airbase in Fujian province), allowing for ease of sortie operations²⁷.

²⁵ (Shelbourne 2023)

²⁶ (Rahman 2001)

²⁷ (Gatopoulos 2022)

		China	Taiwan (Reference)
Total military forces		Approx. 2.2 million troops	Approx. 220,000 troops
Ground forces	Group troops	Approx. 1.15 million troops	Approx. 130,000 troops
	Tanks, etc.	Type-99/A, Type-98/A, Type-96/A, Type-88A/B and others Approx. 7,400 vehicles	M-60A, M-48A/H and others Approx. 1,200 vehicles
Maritime forces	Warships	Approx. 740 vessels / 1,630,000 tons	Approx. 390 vessels / 210,000 tons
	Aircraft carriers, destroyers, and frigates	Approx. 80 vessels	Approx. 20 vessels
	Submarines	Approx. 60 vessels	4 vessels
	Marines	Approx. 10,000 troops	Approx. 10,000 troops
Air forces	Combat aircraft	Approx. 2,720 aircraft	Approx. 510 aircraft
	Modern fighters aircraft	J-10 x 346 Su-27/J-10 x 329 Su-30 x 97 J-15 x 13 J-16 x 2 (under tests) J-20 x 2 (under tests) (Fourth-/fifth-generation fighters (total): 789)	Mirage 2000 x 56 F-16 x 144 Ching-kuo x 128 (Fourth-generation fighters (total): 328)
Reference	Population	Approx. 1.38 billion	Approx. 23 million
	Term of service	2 years	1 year

Fig. 2²⁸

What was earlier termed by Robert Pape as ‘coercion by punishment’ - the Chinese strategy of subduing the Taiwanese population by restricting their scope of exercising international sovereignty - now warrants reconsideration as China continues developing its capabilities of ‘reaching’ Taiwan with armaments of deadly precision²⁹. This has prompted Taiwan to compensate for its growing disparities by expanding its weaponry reserve stocks, bolstering its private sector

²⁸ The Military Balance 2017 (as derived from CSIS China and Taiwan report, 2019)

²⁹ (Murray 2008)

industrial base, and improving its joint operations and crisis response capabilities³⁰. What defines Taiwan's response to the existential threat placed by China is an asymmetric system of warfare, capitalising on its punishing topography and the deployment of short-range, mobile, defensive military systems, making invasion a costly strategy for China while giving Taipei's foreign allies a substantial period of time to gather forces and intervene in favour of the latter³¹.

In a series of simulation exercises conducted by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies analysing the direct impact of a full-fledged invasive campaign involving the full military might of the PLA's land, air and navy capabilities, scholars have come to the conclusion that Taiwan's defeat would represent a 'pyrrhic victory' for China at the cost of its economic and diplomatic grandiose in the global stage³². Crossing the 128 km distance separating Taiwan and mainland China at the narrowest point between the two by an invasive force represents phase one, while initiating amphibious invasive campaigns as outlined by its Joint Island Landing Campaign which would rely on "coordinated, interlocking campaigns for logistics, air, and naval support, and electronic warfare"³³. In the event of a protracted conflict, China would further seek to deploy its air forces to degrade Taiwan's air defence systems through air and naval blockade operations to constrain the island's defensive response capabilities. Employment of cyberwarfare and nuclear tactics would further advance the PLA's objectives of circumventing coastline defences, giving way to a launching pad for military personnel to invade the territory and seize crucial military infrastructures, effectively debilitating the security armada of the island³⁴.

³⁰ (Cordesman, Burke and Molot 2019)

³¹ (Hale 2023)

³² (Blanchette and DiPippo 2023)

³³ (Cordesman, Burke and Molot 2019)

³⁴ (Cordesman, Burke and Molot 2019)

The success of such a complex military operation, however, is excessively reliant on uninterrupted and streamlined military support facilitated by rapid buildup of forces and sustained supply lines, the entirety of which assumes a successful landing operation without international intervention³⁵. Landing itself is preceded by extreme risk exposure to detection by Taiwan's early warning radar systems and consequent damage inflicted by its anti-ship and anti-aircraft missiles. Taiwan's armed forces, although being outnumbered, nevertheless remain well trained in combative stances while undergoing modernization under President Tsai Ing-Wen's 'All-Out Defence Mobilization Agency' which has expanded conscription for young men aged between 18 and 36 from four months to one year³⁶. Taiwan's military procurement patterns have witnessed a steady growth, with \$1.55 billion worth of munitions being ordered in 2023 alone to replenish its existing stock of USA made Patriot air defence systems, drones, anti-tank munitions systems, Paladin Medium Self-Propelled Howitzer artillery systems, AIM-9X Sidewinder air-to-air missiles, Stinger surface-to-air missiles, MK-48 Mod6 Advanced Technology heavyweight torpedoes, AGM-154C JSOW air-to-ground missiles as well as field communication equipment and training packages, and spare parts for F-16, C-130 and F-5 air defence systems³⁷. While it has addressed its defensive military demands through direct procurement from allies, Taiwan has commenced its program of indigenous development of offensive weaponry spearheaded by R&D operations undertaken at the Chung Shan Institute of Science and Technology, which has enabled it to develop Indigenous Defence Fighters for air to air and air to ground combat³⁸. Its domestic submarine programme has

³⁵ (Hale 2023)

³⁶ (ROC National Defense Report 2023)

³⁷ (Hale 2023)

³⁸ (Yen 1999)

prompted it to acquire technology from countries such as the USA, United Kingdom, Australia, to name a few.

Scholar Eric Chan of the Global Taiwan Institute has further commented on the ‘unforgiving’ topography of Taiwan with mountainous terrains and ridges, densely populated urban areas and a limited number of accessible beaches for successful amphibious landings³⁹. Taiwan has further bolstered its cybersecurity infrastructure in the event of a Chinese invasion in the form of a new cyber training agency with the primary objective of blocking cyber-attacks launched from the mainland⁴⁰.

The Role of Strategic International Alliances

In a cross-strait conflict context, Taiwan’s self-defence capabilities, while substantial, must not ignore the crucial role that its allies would play. The USA in particular has maintained its pledge of coming to the aid of Taiwan in a conflict scenario, demonstrated by the 2023 National Defence Authorization Act which allocates \$10 billion over a period of five years for financing Taiwan’s weapons procurement needs extending beyond traditional military sales⁴¹. The island itself is home to 32 USA air bases and 20,000 marines hosting a wide range of early warning aircrafts and long-range fighter jets which pose sufficient deterrents to Chinese ambitions of invasion⁴². The US Seventh Fleet housed in Yokosuka in Japan, the largest fleet based outside of continental United States, substantially curtails the time period traditionally required for preparing an interventionary

³⁹ (Hale 2023)

⁴⁰ (Cordesman, Burke and Molot 2019)

⁴¹ (Liao 2023)

⁴² (Gatopoulos 2022)

fleet, with cruise missile submarines such as the USS Ohio and fighter squadrons capable of launching numerous missile attacks to decapitate Chinese advances⁴³.

In the recent past, Japan has expressed dismayed concerns over aggressive Chinese nationalist rhetoric and backed Taiwan's claims of being a democratic country. Japan has, on several occasions, displayed its willingness to employ its impressive weapons cache including F-35B stealth fighter jets, radar equipped naval vessels and missiles⁴⁴. Beijing's actions have further prompted it to pursue military cooperation with fellow status-quo powers of the Indo-Pacific region and fortify its southernmost islands such as Ishigaka which it believes are most susceptible to a military encroachment after an invasive takeover of Taiwan⁴⁵.

What China Stands to Lose

A Chinese standpoint on prevention of a full-scale war has peaked scholarly intrigue. While the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war has tempted analysts to pre-empt an 'all or nothing' style of conflict unfolding in the Indo-Pacific theatre, China's role as a prominent economic leader coupled with the USA and its ally's articulated determination in coming to Taiwan's rescue presents a much more complicated situation and a consequential near-total fracturing of geopolitical, social and economic relations across the globe. A report published by the Centre for Security and International Studies explicitly states:

⁴³ (Gatopoulos 2022)

⁴⁴ (Gatopoulos 2022)

⁴⁵ (Gatopoulos 2022)

“A conflict over Taiwan would devastate the global economy, but the costs would be especially high for China”⁴⁶.

In a 2016 study conducted by RAND Corporation, it was predicted that a year-long conflict between the two economic power hubs of USA and China would reduce the former’s GDP by 5-10 percent, while China’s GDP is expected to plunge by 25-35 percent⁴⁷. Amidst decelerating growth rates in its manufacturing sectors and a crisis-laden real estate sector, a diversion of treasury funds towards war efforts and maintenance of military supply lines would further cripple an already sluggish economy. Furthermore, based on the intensity of direct confrontation between the two major powers, the imposition of economic sanctions by the West would prompt massive capital flight and sell-off of Chinese assets in a risk avoidance move by MNCs⁴⁸. Chinese trade disruptions, in turn, would spell gloom for global supply chains with world trade believed to shrink by 3 percent of global GDP⁴⁹.

Even in case of a successful seizure of Taiwan, the resulting international backlash would impose significant political, diplomatic and economic obstacles for the Chinese politburo, thoroughly isolating the Red Dragon from prominent multilateral platforms deemed crucial for elevating the status of its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative and dashing hopes of a Chinese epicentered global growth momentum. China’s periphery would become increasingly hostile, with military aggrandisement expected to surge as leading democracies such as Japan, South Korea, India, Australia and even Vietnam and Philippines would seek to bandwagon against heightening

⁴⁶ (Blanchette and DiPippo 2023)

⁴⁷ (Gompert, Cevallos and Garafola 2016)

⁴⁸ (Blanchette and DiPippo 2023)

⁴⁹ (Blanchette and DiPippo 2023)

hostility in the region. Integration on Beijing's terms would require mounting efforts towards placating a hostile Taiwanese population by investing in state-building efforts, which is sure to invite criticism from its own population as its fiscal system crumbles under pressures of overburdening and cause great fissures in the Chinese dream of 'national rejuvenation'⁵⁰

The Taiwanese Defense Strategy of Asymmetry

With possibilities of a Chinese invasion approaching its apex, the defence decisions adopted by the Taiwanese political leadership makes the upcoming 2024 elections a defining feature of Taiwan's sovereign legacy. Beijing's incessant salami-slicing tactics across the South China Sea region as part of its 'Grey Zone' campaign defies the USA's and Taiwanese expectations of deterrence while engaging with Taiwan below the thresholds of minimum war. In fact, in recent years, China has expanded its operational zone from the South-western region of Taiwan's ADIZ, the crossroads between the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea to the airspace and waters surrounding Taiwan⁵¹. Taiwanese strategists believe that this falls in line with the Chinese approach of 'winning without fighting' as the PLA continues tightening the noose around Taiwan's defence mechanism, one encroachment after the other, to eventually cripple its security systems⁵². In a National Defence Situation Special Report by Lee Jyun-yi, an expert on grey zone conflicts at the Institute for National Defence and Security Research, he states that the defence ministry is *"not that worried that the grey zone movements are leading up to a full-scale war, but rather sees them as an attempt to slowly change the status quo in the Taiwan Strait"*⁵³. The PLA's military

⁵⁰ (Bremmer 2023)

⁵¹ (Rahman 2001)

⁵² (Hille and Sevastopulo 2023)

⁵³ (Jyun-Yi 2023)

handbook, meanwhile, defines such military operations as policies of protecting “national security and development interests that do not directly lead to war” and “operations to safeguard sovereignty and national interests”⁵⁴.

Whether a prelude to full-scale military conflict or not, it has nevertheless sparked concerns of an imminent blockade of Taiwan (precursored by Chinese large scale blockade exercises carried out in 2022 as retaliation against US Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan) in what Michael Mazzar, a security expert at Rand, describes as a “*pattern... designed to set up a theatre for general conflict*”⁵⁵. While the Biden administration’s National Security Strategy, in the context of the Taiwan strait, has outlined its goal to “*prevent competitors from altering the status quo in ways that harm (our) vital interests while hovering below the threshold of armed conflict*”, Washington’s employment of deterrence efforts remain myopically focused on full-scale invasion, a strategy whose impotency is unfolding in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict⁵⁶. In survey polls, the Taiwanese population has also expressed wariness over American willingness to intervene directly even as it reduces crucial military deployments in the Indo-Pacific (for instance, military bombers in Guam) in favour of rotating forces in the region⁵⁷. Sheu Jyh-shyang, a contributing author to the INDSR National Defence Situation Report, maintains that the US’s purely transactional relation with Ukraine as a mere munitions supplier has been “noticed by China” and sets a concerning precedent for other subsidiary allies such as Taiwan⁵⁸.

⁵⁴ (Hille and Sevastopulo 2023)

⁵⁵ (Mazzar 2020)

⁵⁶ (Hille and Sevastopulo 2023)

⁵⁷ (Hille and Sevastopulo 2023)

⁵⁸ (Jyun-Yi 2023)

In response to the escalating crisis, the ROC's National Defence Report (NDR) of 2023 outlines a defence blueprint underpinned by three cornerstone initiatives:

- A military force realignment plan to strengthen all-out defence
- Refinement of reserve reform
- A special budget for enhancing naval and air combat power⁵⁹.

The most notable aspect of the Report characterises,

“A military strategic thinking of ‘resolute defence and multi-domain deterrence’ to extend defence depth outward and construct a whole-of-society defence structure and national resilience”⁶⁰.

Foundational to this is an ‘innovative and asymmetric mindset’ aimed at building force protection resilience, integrating complete defence capacity, enhancing operational sustainability and securitising critical infrastructures⁶¹. The rationale behind such a strategy is buttressed by the very perception of what counts as a threat. The NDR section which defines what counts as a threat to Taiwanese interests peculiarly does not identify an invasion as a threat, but rather emphasises the threat of coercion to combat what it terms ‘military intimidation’⁶². In response to such threat perceptions, the NDR prioritises multi-domain deterrence sustained by asymmetric thinking. This involves using a coordinated multilayered defence system for its chain of islands to detect Chinese fleets, using tactics of guerrilla warfare by arming the local populace, attacking supply chains and

⁵⁹ (ROC National Defense Report 2023)

⁶⁰ (ROC National Defense Report 2023)

⁶¹ (ROC National Defense Report 2023)

⁶² (Lostumbo 2023)

making use of geographical terrains in order to “*increase risks of multi-facet failure*” and deter the enemy power⁶³. The integration of air defences with joint homeland military capabilities will, in turn, neutralise the forces of the invasive power.

History has been replete with instances of asymmetric warfare utilised as a strategy by smaller powers to overcome the superior military capabilities of enemy forces. In his article titled ‘Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars’, Andrew Mack advances a theory on relative power imbalances and how the weak stand a chance to win despite the odds through the introduction of notions of ‘relative resolve and interest’. In essence, power asymmetry is inversely proportional to interest asymmetry, such that strong actors with a relatively greater upper hand in the power scale tend to be more politically vulnerable and less resolute of their actions, while weaker powers are less politically vulnerable with greater resolution⁶⁴. Mack applies this logic to the unexpected defeat suffered by US interventionary forces in Vietnam fuelled by popular discontent amongst the American populace. Ironically, asymmetric warfare was used as a strategy for driving the Chiang Kai-shek government out of mainland China in 1949 by Mao Zedong through counter strategies and assorted tactics favouring the terms set by weaker powers⁶⁵.

Taiwan’s Overall Defense Concept: A Porcupine Baring its Quills

⁶³ (Cordesman, Burke and Molot 2019)

⁶⁴ (Arreguín-Toft 2001)

⁶⁵ (Hale 2023)

Within Taiwanese military culture, the ‘porcupine strategy’ gained widespread popularity after first being introduced by the then Chief of Staff of Taiwanese military forces General Lee Hsi-Ming in 2017⁶⁶. In layman’s terms, while the genial nature of a porcupine makes it susceptible to becoming easy prey, in reality its quills can ward off predators twice its size and render the possibilities of defeating the porcupine nullified⁶⁷. As codified in the Overall Defence Concept, it marked a formal shift away from past military doctrines emphasising ‘deep strike capabilities and destruction of adversaries’ to one oriented towards a more defensive and cost-effective approach which denies the PLA from taking over Taiwan⁶⁸. In what it defines as a ‘deterrence by denial’ strategy, it represents a policy of holistically integrating aspects of asymmetry within all strata of military conduct including ‘training, force structure, command and control, and logistics’ underpinned by growing recognition of the resource imbalance prevalent across cross-strait relations⁶⁹.

The ODC approach to military strategizing is defined by two constitutive elements which delineates the components and strategies necessary to execute defence operations during an invasion.

Force Buildup

⁶⁶ (Fann and Bursi 2023)

⁶⁷ (Gregson and Dotson 2023)

⁶⁸ (J. Li 2023)

⁶⁹ (Mazzar, Understanding Deterrence 2018)

Scholars Lee Hsi-Min and Eric Lee identify three central tenets of force buildup which include force preservation, conventional capabilities and asymmetric capabilities. By redefining the very goals of war to one of foiling the PLA's military missions rather than taking over the mainland, its weaponry also requisites a shift towards enhanced strike-back capabilities underlined by the principles of 'mobility, camouflage, concealment, deception, electronic jamming, operational redundancy, rapid repair and blast mitigation'⁷⁰.

Amidst steadily intensifying grey-zone campaigns, Taiwanese military plans must account for conventional weapon systems specifically in the case of safeguarding far flung littoral areas such as the Hainan and Pratas islands which have frequently been the subject of Chinese infiltrative beach landing exercises⁷¹. Their effectiveness in policing maritime and air zone defences act as strong deterrents while boosting public confidence in the military and promoting international support for Taiwan's case. The procurement of fighter jets for its air forces alongside Abrams tanks for the army and cheap but highly lethal missile assault boats for the navy satisfies such conventional requirements.

Asymmetric 'smart weapons', on the other hand, assume non-conventional capabilities with the objective of exploiting the enemy's vulnerabilities and maintaining operational resilience. While weapons systems and their operational concepts are largely derivative of their contextual usage, asymmetry in military undertakings stand on the pillar of mobility, agility, precision and hostility aimed at denying territorial accession to the enemy⁷². In what Lt. Gen. Wallace Gregson terms as a 'precision strike regime', an asymmetric military operation "*combines pervasive,*

⁷⁰ (Hsi-min and Lee 2020)

⁷¹ (Sands 2019)

⁷² (Hsi-min and Lee 2020)

ubiquitous surveillance with highspeed weapons accurate at distance” and is best exemplified by the acquisition of unmanned aerial vehicles, harpoon coastal defence systems, man-portable air defence systems (MANPADS) including artillery rocket systems and miniature missile assault boats⁷³.

Concept of Operations

The ODC’s concept of operations rests on the three pillars of force protection, decisive battle in the littoral zone and destruction of enemy forces during amphibious invasive missions at the landing beaches. Force protection entails preserving the stability of defence systems against bombardments, blockades and other invasive tactics aimed at paralysing Taiwan’s capacity to retaliate⁷⁴. According to scholar William Murray, rather than seeking costly offensive machineries which China’s armada continues to outnumber and outmanoeuvres, Taiwan should

“Harden key facilities and build redundancies into critical infrastructure and processes so that it could absorb and survive a long-range precision bombardment”⁷⁵.

This involves enhancing Taiwan’s critical infrastructure and stockpile of critical supplies to provide for the basic needs of citizens while allowing for delays for foreign intervention. Murray terms this as a ‘less destabilising means of defence’ involving elements of mobility, camouflage, concealment, deception, dispersion, rapid repair and blast mitigation.

⁷³ (Gregson and Dotson 2023)

⁷⁴ (Hsi-min and Lee 2020)

⁷⁵ (Murray 2008)

The NDR further makes reference to plans of acquiring ‘mobile, small, portable, and AI-enabled’ weapon systems in order to “*build upon established littoral and coastal defence and counter-offence capabilities*”. In view of the fact that Taiwan possesses optimal advantages in a littoral conflict setting, a coordinated execution of UAVs, missile assault boats and air defence systems in tandem with strategic harnessing of coastal obstacles including geographic terrains, urban environment and buildings and critical military infrastructures creates for a layered in-depth security apparatus⁷⁶.

In the most likely scenario of an amphibious landing of PLA forces, the Taiwan strait becomes a contentious buffer zone separating Taiwanese civilians from encroaching entities. However, the process of transiting thousands of troops and heavy machinery across the strait would present an opportune moment for Taiwanese forces to deploy sea mines and fast-attack craft boats, further aided by offensive ‘mobile, long-range, precision’ sea-tolerant high performance naval vessels and mobile anti-ship missile launchers to hinder the enemy’s advancement⁷⁷. Additionally, the NDR 2023 recognises the crucial role of reserve forces in conducting localised and decentralised urban guerrilla warfare, capitalising on civilian assets to assimilate under the banner of a ‘territorial defence force’⁷⁸. The government, under President Tsai Ing-wen, has extended mandatory military service and improved military training of civilians to partake in drone surveillance exercises, provide logistics support and aid in post-conflict disaster scenarios guided by the motto of “*ready to mobilise and ready to fight*”⁷⁹.

⁷⁶ (ROC National Defense Report 2023)

⁷⁷ (Ghaedi 2022)

⁷⁸ (Hsi-min and Lee 2020)

⁷⁹ (ROC National Defense Report 2023)

Conclusion

In August of 2023, the China Central Television state broadcaster released an eight-part docu-series titled ‘Chasing Dreams’ as part of the PLA’s 96th anniversary demonstrating the army’s military preparedness and ability to attack Taiwan as part of its nationalist rhetoric of clamping down on pro-independence manifestos in Taiwan⁸⁰. A RAND report analysing cross-strait relations further explains how Beijing’s attempts at demonstrating its military might have been concomitant with decreased diplomatic efforts, particularly since the election of President Tsai Ing-wen in 2016 and the consequent implementation of economic sanctions⁸¹. Additionally, assessments of Chinese military modernisation and subsequent invasion of Taiwan by 2027 are further strengthened in light of claims made by the U.S. FBI Director Christopher Wray in 2022, when he referred to China’s implementation of defensive and insulative economic measures as a ‘clue’ on its economic preparedness in the face of western sanctions⁸².

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war remains a stark reminder that while outright warfare remains a distant possibility, it is not completely inconceivable. The disruptions caused to global supply chains in the ongoing war would be paltry in contrast to a confrontation with China, making punitive action against China a costly affair for most nations. The gradual incline in transactions conducted via the Renminbi as opposed to US dollar further guarantees a steady stream of export-import distribution networks particularly from its smaller ASEAN neighbours and economically dependent African and Latin American countries⁸³. Any Taiwanese counter measures against

⁸⁰ (Associated Press 2023)

⁸¹ (Lostumbo 2023)

⁸² (Birgbauer 2022)

⁸³ (Birgbauer 2022)

China must also account for the United States's 'strategically ambiguous' position vis-a-vis Taiwan, which is governed by the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act and maintains an opaque position which fails to provide concrete security commitments⁸⁴.

In a commentary by Raymond Kuo, Taiwan's abandonment of an asymmetric defence policy in recent years has reportedly prompted division between the two 'all-weather allies' and raised questions over the seriousness of Taiwanese military commitments⁸⁵. According to Michael Hunzeker:

*"Taiwan has shelved its asymmetric defence strategy in favour of high-tech capabilities that will at best fail to defend the island against China and at worst serve to strengthen China's resolve to retake what it views as a renegade province"*⁸⁶.

According to analysts, the US backed defence policy of asymmetry has been cast aside in all but name as Taiwan tilts towards operational weapons planning systems focusing on a "*relatively small number of high-tech, high-value capabilities — platforms that will quickly be destroyed in the opening salvo of a China-Taiwan war*"⁸⁷. Such alleged 'fickleness' has catalysed opinions in favour of US disengagement with the Taiwan issue, with analysts such as Doug Bandow contending that:

⁸⁴ (Kuo 2023)

⁸⁵ (Kuo, THE COUNTER-INTUITIVE SENSIBILITY OF TAIWAN'S NEW DEFENSE STRATEGY 2021)

⁸⁶ (Hunzeker 2021)

⁸⁷ (Kuo, THE COUNTER-INTUITIVE SENSIBILITY OF TAIWAN'S NEW DEFENSE STRATEGY 2021)

“Countries whose people are unwilling to take serious steps to defend themselves have no claim to the lives and wealth of Americans”⁸⁸.

Asymmetric defence, however, presumes US intervention and reduces Taiwan’s ability to counter Chinese provocations on its own terms - all in the hopes that foreign allies *might* show up in its defence. As Hunzeker comments:

“Asking the Taiwanese people to prepare for a long and bloody war of attrition — one that might become a fool’s errand if the United States ultimately decides to stay on the sidelines — is a tall order”⁸⁹.

What analysts such as John Dotson instead recommend is a ‘honey badger’ strategy - advocating a more proactively dynamic strategy capable of halting Chinese attacks before they make landfall through an amalgamation of offensive and defensive capabilities available⁹⁰. Such a theory applauds the tactical procurement of fighter aircrafts and missile submarines to counter the PLA air force and navy as an effective approach to minimising casualty rates of its ground forces. From a holistic approach moreover, Taiwanese military strategy needs to amplify its scale and scope beyond a narrow approach of arming itself to the teeth. Its military infrastructure remains plagued with unprofessionalism and a sense of defeatism while its training policies fail to reflect modern standards⁹¹. This requires a rigorous boost in combat readiness and a thorough implementation of military reform while adopting best practices through frequent joint military exercise exchanges with foreign troops.

⁸⁸ (Bandow 2021)

⁸⁹ (Hunzeker 2021)

⁹⁰ (Gregson and Dotson 2023)

⁹¹ (Liao 2023)

Central to such practices is the infusion of a sense of Taiwanese identity which can dispel vestiges of Chinese nationalism propounded by ideologies of the Kuomintang. So far, a China-laden rhetoric has allowed Beijing to recruit an estimated 5000 spies since 2020 from Taiwan, while the latter's Military Intelligence Bureau has failed to dispatch operatives or recruit spies from the mainland in the last decade⁹². Integrating an offensive intelligence operations culture can provide a much-needed upper hand to Taiwan in the intelligence battlefield.

While it remains difficult to presume the sequence of how cross-strait tensions play out, the Taiwanese dilemma of defining a concrete military strategy represents a critical challenge for Taiwanese and American policymakers. Any military stratagem further necessitates a political game plan which can counter Beijing's bellicose rhetoric of 'national rejuvenation' and secure international support for its cause. This further warrants an understanding of Taiwan's sovereign claims and the broader desideratum of regional order in the South China Sea beyond that of the United States's mounting appetite for great power rivalry where Taiwan becomes a mere chess piece in the Indo-Pacific chessboard⁹³. Taiwan now faces a monumental junction in its history as it manoeuvres a tightrope while navigating domestic and regional interests to ensure the best possible outcome for its own security.

⁹² (Liao 2023)

⁹³ (Glaser 2021)

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