

Conflict in the Taiwan Strait: Shifting of Military Imbalance and the Strategy of Public Opinion Warfare

The Economist's cover story from 1 May 2021 called Taiwan “the most dangerous place on earth,” raising concerns over a potential conflict between the United States and mainland China over the island and calling both superpowers to avoid war.¹ Peace or war across the Taiwan Strait is a serious issue as the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is determined to secure sovereignty over Taiwan while the latter adamant that its own future must be decided not by the PRC or any other power but the Taiwanese people. Recently, U.S. Speaker of House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan (2 August 2022) further elevated tensions in the Taiwan Strait.

In order to assess the risk of war in the Taiwan Strait, several key variables need to be considered, for instance, the role of structural features (geographic, socio-economic, diplomatic, military), role of history and ideology, role of the political system, role of individual leaders, the role of third parties, and one-off events. It is a combination of these factors and variables that is most likely decisive in shaping the future of cross-strait relations.

This article will discuss a key regional trend that may show important implications for stability across the Taiwan Strait, namely the shifting of military balance. Moreover, it will refer to the concept of public opinion warfare and connect it to the Taiwan Strait discussion.

Before discussing the shifting of military balance and the concept of public opinion warfare, it is reasonable to first summarize the basic positions of each side on key aspects in the conflict:

	People’s Republic of China (PRC)	Republic of China (ROC)
Roots of the conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taiwan reverted to China when Japanese occupation ended in 1945. • The PRC government is the only legitimate government of China since 1949. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ROC government was transferred to Taiwan in 1949. • The ROC claims territorial control over Taiwan, Jinmen, Matsu, and Penghu.
Present status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The PRC government claims sole representative authority (the one-China principle). • Recognition of the one-China principle is the prerequisite for all negotiations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taiwan has been governed as a territory separate from the PRC since 1949. • The ROC constitution is the basis for all exchanges with the PRC. • The Taipei government’s policy vis-à-vis the mainland is “No

¹ “The most dangerous place on Earth.” *The Economist*, May 1, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2021/05/01/the-most-dangerous-place-on-earth> (accessed August 2, 2022).

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthening of political, economic, cultural, and social cooperation will create better conditions for achieving peaceful reunification. 	<p>unification, no independence, no use of force.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The ROC aims to uphold the status quo in the Taiwan Strait while pursuing common interests.
Solution to the conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Complete reunification of China is an irresistible historical process Reunification will be based on the “one country, two systems” formula. Moves toward independence are the result of manipulation by nonrepresentative secessionist forces. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Final settlement of the bilateral relationship hinges on the mainland’s moving toward greater freedom, democracy, and equitable wealth. The wording “one country, two system” implies the subordination of Taiwan. Any decision on future relations must be based on free and democratic elections.

Table 1: Comparison of Chinese and Taiwanese fundamental positions.

Source: Heilmann and Schmidt, *China’s Foreign Political and Economic Relations*, 131.

The military power across the Taiwan Strait has been described as shifting and becoming increasingly unbalanced. Looking specifically at China’s military capabilities, there is a significant growth under President Xi Jinping’s watch, with China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) continuing its rapid military modernization by massively expanding its budget, implementing a variety of military reforms to modernize its forces, acquiring many advanced weapons systems, and improving its training and doctrine. Moreover, the numbers of ground force personnel, maritime capabilities, air capabilities, missile and rocket capabilities show how the military power of balance is firmly moving in favor of the PRC and shifting in ways that are problematic for Taiwan’s defense (see figure 1). Taiwan is embarking on its own military modernization, but the data shows that China’s advantage is only growing.

The new white paper entitled “The Taiwan Question and China’s Reunification in the New Era” maintains China’s preference for “peaceful reunification,” which is identified as the “first choice of the CPC [Communist Party of China] and the Chinese government.” However, the paper reiterates that China “will not renounce the use of force, and [will] reserve the option of taking all necessary measures” in pursuing the goal of unification. This reflects the unwillingness of the PRC leadership to abandon the military option. It does attempt to reassure readers on that point by pledging that the “use of force would be the last resort taken under compelling circumstances.”²

² The Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council and The State Council Information Office. “The Taiwan Question and China’s Reunification in the New Era.” *Xinhua*, August 10, 2022. Retrieved from https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/202208/10/content_WS62f34f46c6d02e533532f0ac.html (accessed August 16, 2022).

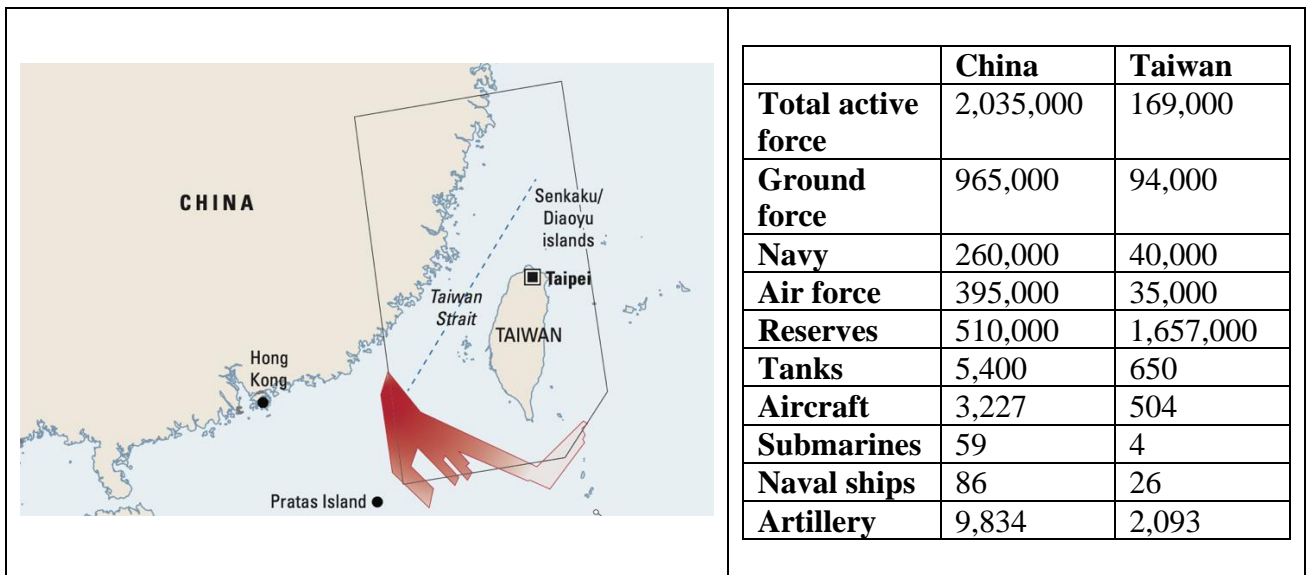


Fig. 1: Military strength in the Taiwan Strait.
 Source: IISS, *The Military Balance 2022*.

Last year, Taiwan’s Minister of National Defense Chiu Kuo-cheng (邱國正) pointed out that China will be militarily capable of launching a full-scale invasion of Taiwan by 2025. He described the current situation across the Taiwan Strait as “really the grimmest I have seen in more than 40 years of military service.”³ Even so, the likelihood of China forcefully taking Taiwan remains unclear, and experts differ. On the one hand, China has accelerated military modernization to reach the centennial goal of army building by 2027. Furthermore, the Chinese military has increased pressure on Taiwan over the past years. This is reflected by the number of Chinese military aircraft entering the island’s Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ). The largest number of aircraft China has sent in a single day was 56 on 4 October 2021.⁴ These kind of operations fit within the definition of the gray zone as the “intense political, economic, informational, and military competition more fervent in nature than normal steady-state diplomacy, yet short of war,” representing the actions between peace and war on the conflict continuum.⁵ On the other hand, some experts believe that China has little intention to take Taiwan by force, and that the capability to do so remains a goal rather than a reality. In his article “Taiwan in the next decade: no war, but much tension,” former British diplomat Charles Parton has

³ Helen Davidson. “China could mount full-scale invasion by 2025, Taiwan defence minister says.” *The Guardian*, October 6, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/oct/06/biden-says-he-and-chinas-xi-have-agreed-to-abide-by-taiwan-agreement> (accessed August 3, 2022).

⁴ Agence France-Presse (AFP). “Taiwan scrambles jets after China makes largest incursion into air defence zone since January.” *The Guardian*, May 31, 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/31/taiwan-scrambles-jets-after-china-makes-largest-incursion-into-air-defence-zone-since-january> (accessed August 3, 2022).

⁵ Charity S. Jacobs and Kathleen M. Carley. “Taiwan: China’s Gray Zone Doctrine in Action.” *Small Wars Journal*, February 11, 2022. Retrieved from <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/taiwan-chinas-gray-zone-doctrine-action> (accessed August 3, 2022).

outlined several reasons why forceful unification is too great a risk, one of them being that the PLA may not have the capability:

“Despite receiving large numbers of modern ships, planes and armaments in recent years, the PLA is far from a modernized force. This is recognized by CCP leaders, who talk of achieving military modernization by 2035 and building a world-class army by 2050. Seaborne and airborne invasions are difficult operations requiring a high level of coordination between different services, an area where the PLA lacks experience.”⁶

Parton further argues that the CCP’s overall strategy is to break the will of the Taiwanese people by convincing them of the inevitability and irresistibility of Taiwan’s unification with mainland China. Shows of military power by aircraft carriers, incursions by warplanes, and training for invasions have the purpose of reinforcing this belief, to wear down Taiwan’s military defences and to erode the will to resist. Other aims are associated with propaganda for the CCP’s domestic audience, in order to underline the (undoubted) progress and modernization which the PRC and the PLA have made; and to contribute to further improvement in military training and capability. Meanwhile, the echoing and dissemination of the CCP’s narratives and propaganda about the possibility of forceful unification only gives a boost to their effect and potentially weakens Taiwan’s ability to resist.⁷ It can be argued that this is part of the so-called public opinion warfare (*yulun zhan* 舆论战) strategy, which is central to the Chinese conception of political warfare (*zhengzhi zhan* 政治战). According to Chinese analysts, public opinion warfare, also termed “media warfare” or “consensus warfare”, targets audience through information derived and propagated by mass information channels, including the Internet, social media, television, radio, newspapers, movies, and other forms of media. It seeks to shape both external and internal opinions in order to gain support towards an end goal. Seen as a powerful element of “information warfare” (*xinxihua zhanzheng* 信息化战争), it can reach every part of society, thus it has an especially wide impact.⁸ In the broader context, this reflects the CCP’s efforts to maintain control over information which is required to influence society. Especially in the era of the so-called *informationization*, the CCP strives to control various forms of news media.

When it comes to assessing the Taiwan strait conflict, the current debate would most likely first consider the military balance and whether the PLA has the weapons and capabilities to attack Taiwan.

⁶ Charles Parton. “Taiwan in the next decade: no war, but much tension.” In: *Geopolitics Programme*, No. GPE01, May 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/research/taiwan-in-the-next-decade-no-war-but-much-tension/> (accessed August 3, 2022).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Academy of Military Sciences Operations Theory and Regulations Research Department and Informationalized Operations Theory Research Office. *Informationalized Operations Theory Study Guide* (Beijing: AMS Press, November 2005), 405. And Liu Gaoping, *Study Volume on Public Opinion Warfare* (Beijing: NDU Press, 2005), 16-17.

However, by doing so we would miss half the picture and half of the PRC's strategy for Taiwan, which includes the use of public opinion warfare to psychologically demoralize Taiwan and make conquest easier or even better, to have Taiwan surrender without a fight. Public opinion warfare is utilized to shape the Taiwanese public and decisionmakers' perceptions and opinions on the issue of unification and to shift perception of the overall balance of strength, while also targeting the domestic population and third parties states and organizations.

According to a study authored by Taiwanese researchers that was published in the *Journal of Global Security* in July 2022, China's cognitive warfare which refers to activities designed to control others' mental states and behaviors (a phenomenon that is often entangled with notions such as information warfare and cyberspace warfare), is becoming more diverse, expanding from efforts to influence via mostly personal bilateral exchanges to web-based propaganda. According to Hung-Tzu-wei (洪子偉), associate research fellow at the Academia Sinica, China has been conducting more cognitive operations, which is considered to include using public opinion and psychological means, towards internet users. Moreover, the study divides China's cognitive warfare against Taiwan into four main categories: (1) military intimidation (e.g. flying military airplanes into Taiwan's ADIZ or crossing the median line of the Taiwan Strait); (2) influence via bilateral exchange (e.g. offering additional seats for Taiwanese students at Peking University and Tsinghua University); (3) religious interference (e.g. using Taiwan's local religion of Mazuism as a tool to strengthen its cultural and political connection with Taiwan); and (4) disinformation and content farms on the internet.⁹

It is also interesting to point out that the saying "the first to sound grabs people, the first to enter establishes dominance (*xian sheng duoren, xianru weizhu* 先声夺人, 先入为主) has been repeatedly emphasized by Chinese analysts. Essentially, it reflects the goal of defining the terms of the debate and parameters of coverage. By presenting one's message first, the PLA expects to shape everyone else's views. This will allow the CCP to underscore the justice and necessity of its operations, better display national strength, exhibit the superiority of its forces, and shake the opponent's will to resist.¹⁰

Looking solely at military capabilities is not enough to get a full picture of the PRC's strategy against Taiwan and to assess the possibility of conflict in the Taiwan Strait. While shifting military

⁹ Tzu-Chieh Hung and Tzu-Wei Hung. "How China's Cognitive Warfare Works: A Frontline Perspective of Taiwan's Anti-Disinformation Wars." In: *Journal of Global Security*, 7.4 (December 2022). Retrieved from <https://academic.oup.com/jogss/article/7/4/ogac016/6647447> (accessed August 16, 2022).

¹⁰ Dean Cheng. *Cyber Dragons: Inside China's Information Warfare and Cyber Operations* (California, USA: Praeger, 2017), 50-51.

power of balance and rising tensions will very likely be the main variables until 2025, it is also important to understand China's strategy of public opinion warfare and its impacts on the current Taiwan Strait situation.

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