



Ships and aircraft from U.S. Navy, Royal Navy, Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force, and Royal Australian Navy, led by USS *Carl Vinson*, HMS *Queen Elizabeth*, and JS *Kaga*, transit in formation during Maritime Partnership Exercise 2021, October 17, 2021, in Bay of Bengal (U.S. Navy/Haydn N. Smith)

Defending Taiwan in an Expanded Competitive Space

By Joel Wuthnow

Taiwan's defense has always been precarious, and the dangers are only likely to grow as China's power increases.¹ Chinese economic inducement since the 1990s has done little to persuade Taiwan's citizens to embrace China's vision of a "one country, two system" model for cross-strait relations, prospects that are even lower with China's recent steps to erode political freedoms in Hong Kong. To deter Taiwan independence and to pressure Taiwan's leaders to accept Beijing's

proposals, China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) has amassed significant forces across the Taiwan Strait, including more than 600 short-range ballistic missiles opposite the island.² Taiwan's will to resist Chinese pressure depends, in part, on the speed and efficacy of U.S. intervention in a conflict. China's military has thus built an arsenal of long-range missiles and supporting capabilities to try to keep the United States out of the fight.

China's basic advantages in any Taiwan scenario include a high level of political will—reunification is a "core interest" for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which aspires to resolve the problem on its own terms by the centennial

of the People's Republic of China in 2049—and a local military balance that pits a regional heavyweight against a small island with few diplomatic allies and limited resources. Taiwan's proximity to the mainland and the "tyranny of distance" facing an attempt to surge U.S. forces across the Western Pacific are liabilities for the defense.

Much can still be done to address the threat head-on, but a prudent U.S. approach should also consider ways of shifting the competition to areas where China is at a disadvantage. Multiple pressures on the PLA, driven by China's unfavorable geostrategic environment, provide the basis for a competitive strategy. In peacetime, the United States

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Security Forces Airmen assigned to 28th Security Forces Squadron from Ellsworth Air Force Base, South Dakota, patrol near Air Force B-1B Lancer taxiway at Andersen Air Force Base, Guam, in support of Bomber Task Force mission, December 26, 2020 (U.S. Air Force/Tristan Day)

should create headaches for the PLA in other areas bordering China by increasing military assistance and training to China's other rivals. This approach would leverage the demand that many states have for better capabilities to resist Chinese coercion and play to preexisting Chinese concerns about threats suddenly appearing in secondary theaters. A PLA that is simultaneously having to counter many different challenges will be less able to focus on Taiwan.

Looking at Taiwan's defense through a competitive strategy lens also suggests different options for confronting the PLA in wartime. China's military structure is built on the notion that the PLA must be prepared to fight in many theaters at once. By necessity, it contains a centralized command and control and logistics system designed to manage and reallocate forces in a war. Targeting those critical links would complicate Chinese decision-making, reduce the PLA's capacity to mass forces, and support U.S. and Taiwan operations in the main theater. To limit escalation risks, those operations should

rely, wherever possible, on nonkinetic means. Ensuring Taiwan's defense is no easy feat but will be easier with operations that defray China's local advantages and keep the PLA off balance.

A New Lens for an Old Problem

Most discussions on improving Taiwan's defenses focus on two issues. First is modernizing Taiwan's military and equipping it with the means of resisting Chinese aggression. This is the subject of Taiwan's "overall defense concept," which focuses on asymmetric weapons such as sea mines and coastal defense cruise missiles needed to blunt an invasion.³ Taiwan's limited ability to weather a Chinese offensive even with advanced equipment has led to a second focus: preserving a credible U.S. intervention capability so that the United States would be able to meet its obligations under the Taiwan Relations Act to "maintain the capacity" to resist China's use of force (acknowledging that any military intervention would ultimately be a political decision).⁴ In recent years,

all the services have rolled out revised operational concepts designed to allow U.S. forces to operate within China's antiaccess/area-denial envelope, such as using stealthier ships more, reducing reliance on large bases, operating more from austere airstrips, and exploiting long-duration unmanned technology.

Both approaches are helpful in instilling doubt in the Chinese leadership about the PLA's prospects in an amphibious invasion. Nevertheless, a problem for the defense is that China has built large advantages in most categories of conventional power across the Taiwan Strait—in submarines, for instance, the ratio is 34 Chinese submarines assigned to the relevant theaters versus 2 for Taiwan—forcing Taipei to rely on U.S. intervention to ensure its ability to resist a blockade and successive waves of amphibious and airborne assaults. Yet this is a gamble, if one credits reports that wargames consistently show U.S. forces losing to China, due in part to China's impressive counter-intervention capabilities and in part to the vast distances

that U.S. forces need to traverse. Some concepts of intervention also envision extensive strikes on the mainland, which would carry a high risk of retributive Chinese strikes on U.S. targets, such as military bases in Japan or Guam.⁵

Given those limitations, more thought is needed on how to move the competition to different playing fields where China has fewer advantages (reflecting the logic of the “competitive strategies” approach pioneered by Andrew Marshall in the early 1970s).⁶ Adopting this philosophy, the 2018 National Defense Strategy encourages U.S. policies that “expand the competitive space, seizing the initiative to challenge our competitors where we possess advantages and they lack strength.”⁷ U.S. doctrine has emphasized a related point: that adversary decisionmaking should be complicated by presenting it with “multiple dilemmas,” overwhelming its capacity to reach timely decisions on the use of force.⁸ Both tenets encourage U.S. strategists to think creatively about our adversary’s constraints while taking a more holistic view of our own comparative strengths.

The PLA’s Fundamental Dilemma

The basis of a competitive strategy is the tension in Chinese military strategy between preparing for a war with Taiwan and fulfilling the dizzying array of other requirements with finite resources.⁹ A war with Taiwan has been the PLA’s top planning scenario since the early 1990s. The rise of a new generation of Kuomintang leaders who had less interest in a political union with the mainland, combined with a Taiwan electorate largely opposed to unification, meant that the PLA needed to prepare to seize and occupy the island. This led to investments in short-range ballistic missiles, submarines, and amphibious capabilities, as well as training in what used to be called the Nanjing Military Region, recently rebranded as the Eastern Theater Command, focused on capturing offshore islands. The possibility of U.S. intervention, underscored by the involvement of two U.S. aircraft

carriers in the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis, sparked an emphasis on developing long-range antiship missiles and other capabilities to forestall U.S. intervention in a conflict.

The PLA could not, however, fully commit to preparations for a war with Taiwan and the United States. The crux of the problem is a highly unfavorable geostrategic environment. Within China itself, the western third of the country is occupied by ethnic Uighurs and Tibetans who have their own dreams of independence. Regionally, China shares land borders with 14 countries and maritime borders with an additional 7, including states that are either unstable, such as North Korea and Afghanistan, or that have territorial disputes with China, including Japan, India, the Philippines, and Vietnam.¹⁰ Defending China’s long borders and dissuading other countries from asserting their sovereignty claims put competing demands on China’s finite military resources. U.S. military presence and the specter of U.S. involvement in conflicts ranging from Korea to the South China Sea also mean that the PLA must prepare for high-end conflicts outside the Taiwan Strait.

An additional problem, from the PLA’s perspective, is the fear that China’s rivals—both within the region and domestic forces opposed to Chinese Communist Party rule—could take advantage of a war with Taiwan to challenge the regime or seize Chinese territory. Chinese strategists write of the possibility of a “chain reaction” of wars cascading across China’s frontiers. Such concerns are not new. Mao himself reputedly warned the PLA not to overlook problems outside the main theater. Indeed, Chinese historians note that none of the wars that China fought during the Cold War was in an area then designated as the “main strategic direction.”¹¹ In the PLA’s jargon, the military should not overemphasize the main strategic direction (the southeast coast; and the Taiwan Strait, in particular); it also needs to prepare for combat in other theaters.¹²

Combined, these competing concerns mean that the PLA has needed to generate capabilities less relevant to island

landings, widely disperse its resources across the country (including allocating advanced fighters and other modern capabilities to other regions), balance the three naval fleets, and develop plans and train for a variety of contingencies.¹³ The theater command system itself, as noted below, is optimized for smaller border clashes and not a single major conflict of the sort that would be prosecuted on Taiwan. Compounding the problem is the PLA’s personnel system in which officers spend most of their careers in a single theater and are thus less fungible across different contingencies than, for instance, their American peers who frequently rotate to new assignments.

The June 2020 escalation with Indian troops along the disputed Himalayan border illustrates the countervailing pressures on PLA resources and attention.¹⁴ The area is what the PLA refers to as a “secondary strategic direction,” where the threats facing China are less intense than in the main strategic direction, but still require significant forces to deter or defeat a rival. To counter India and perform other missions such as defending China’s Central Asian borders and deterring uprisings in ethnic majority regions, the PLA has allocated roughly a quarter of its ground forces to the Western Theater Command and the Tibet and Xinjiang military districts, complemented by eight fighter/ground attack brigades and four missile brigades.¹⁵ These forces train for missions such as counterterrorism and high-altitude warfare and against the capabilities of particular adversaries that have little bearing on the operations China would conduct in a war with Taiwan.

Concerns about flare-ups in other regions and a broad distribution of capabilities have not prevented the military balance across the strait from shifting gradually in China’s favor. PLA capabilities have regularly been used to intimidate Taiwan’s leaders—for instance, by a steady rhythm of H-6 bomber flights around the island—and are sufficient for a range of cross-strait operations, including missile bombardments and a blockade.¹⁶ Moreover, there are some circumstances in which Beijing might accept a high degree of risk to its

other interests to launch a war against Taiwan. For instance, a Taiwanese declaration of independence could generate a high degree of domestic pressure on the CCP to act. However, Taiwanese leaders have been careful to avoid such provocations, meaning that the likeliest scenario for China would be a calculated war of choice.¹⁷ Yet competing considerations reduce China's ability to mass its forces in wartime and make the task of Taiwan's defense more manageable for Taipei and Washington.

A Chain of Porcupines

China's force planning dilemma provides options for thinking differently about Taiwan's defense prior to and during a conflict initiated by Beijing. Applying a competitive strategies approach, U.S. defense strategy in peacetime should aim to reduce China's ability to focus on Taiwan by maximizing the range and complexity of challenges facing the PLA in other theaters. This requires, in part, that the United States maintain a strong presence at many points along China's periphery, voice support for the defense of allies, and conduct high-end exercises with China's other rivals. Such activities, which are central to the current Indo-Pacific strategy, play into Chinese concerns about encirclement and add to the pressure to divide up resources among many theaters.¹⁸

Expanding security cooperation with other states would enhance those effects. Using Michael Beckley's twist of a phrase coined by William S. Murray, an explicit goal of U.S. strategy should be to ring China with "prickly porcupines" by supplying other states with the military tools necessary to resist coercion.¹⁹ Providing additional training and advanced weapons and equipment, like antiship missiles, to states such as Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia, would serve their interests in maintaining sovereignty while also ramping up the challenges the PLA Navy, Marines, and Air Force would have to counter outside the Taiwan Strait. By pursuing their own ends, these countries could indirectly contribute to Taiwan's defense without

requiring them to be actively involved in cross-strait affairs.

From this perspective, expanded security cooperation with states far from China's southeast coast is particularly useful. India is a prime example. Upgrading defense ties with New Delhi has been a goal of the last few U.S. administrations, pursued most recently through renewed efforts to expand defense industry cooperation; approval of \$3 billion in arms sales, including high-end items like air defense radars, MK 54 torpedoes, and Harpoon missiles; an agreement on the sharing of military intelligence; and combat-focused exercises in the Indian Ocean featuring India and Japan. Further arms sales and other assistance would not only serve India's interest in countering Chinese coercion, which has been piqued because of the 2020 border crisis, but also draw PLA resources away from the Taiwan Strait.

As Andrew Marshall explained regarding the Soviet Union, competitive strategies should also leverage bureaucratic fissures in the target country. Relevant here are China's tendency to carve up the budgetary pie with as many "winners" as possible, contestation between different parts of the PLA for scarce resources, and the lack of a strong central mechanism to adjudicate bureaucratic disputes. Increasing threats from smaller rivals in the South China Sea would not only take up time and capacity for the Southern Theater Command but also provide an argument for that theater to demand resources, which might otherwise go to the Eastern Theater Command. Deepening defense cooperation with India, for instance, would serve as a powerful rationale for the Western Theater Command to argue for more resources.

Selling more advanced arms to China's other neighbors in a bid to take pressure off Taiwan would probably not dissuade China from using force—any decision to use force assumes a high risk and cost tolerance and would be undertaken only in exigent circumstances. But it does encourage the PLA to spread out its limited resources, which ultimately works in favor of Taiwan's defense.

Critical Targets

U.S. strategy could also try to move the competition in new directions during a conflict. Such moves are typically discussed under the label of "horizontal escalation," involving attacks on an adversary's interests in a secondary theater.²⁰ In a Taiwan scenario, it is tempting to imagine U.S. forces leveraging their maneuverability to pose problems that tie up PLA resources elsewhere. However, opening a second front would be difficult because of the near certainty that India or other countries in the region would stay out of the conflict and the likelihood that U.S. leaders, attuned to the costs of a wider regional conflagration, would also try to avoid a larger war. As the congressionally mandated National Defense Strategy Commission argued, "It is unlikely that the United States could force its adversary to back down by applying pressure—military or otherwise—in secondary areas."²¹

In an indirect way, however, China's geostrategic circumstances give the United States additional warfighting options that do not rely on kinetic strikes or futile diversions. The starting point is that the PLA has adopted an organizational structure attuned to many small conflicts, and not to a single large contingency. This preference for smaller contingencies is reflected in the PLA's theater command system (which replaced the former military regions as part of the broad restructuring of the military that began in late 2015).²² The Eastern Theater Command lacks all the capabilities that would be necessary to execute a war: amphibious and airborne units are based in adjacent theaters and space and cyber assets are under the Strategic Support Force. Countering U.S. intervention would require long-range missiles that are likely under the direct control of the Central Military Commission. In addition to mobilizing reinforcements, frontline commanders may have to request ammunition and equipment based in other theaters if major losses are sustained at the war's outset.

The limitations of China's theater command structure mean the war would

be centrally managed, most likely by the Joint Staff Department in Beijing. Logistics operations would rely on a distributed network of depots controlled by the Joint Logistic Support Force in Wuhan.²³ Then, rather than focusing mainly on the Taiwan Strait, U.S. operations should try to sever the command and control and logistics networks critical to Beijing's ability to manage the war (while preserving critical U.S. networks that would be targeted by the PLA). Such operations would leverage what one RAND study deems potential Chinese weaknesses in cyber defense,²⁴ and may benefit from recent investments, such as the U.S. Army's creation of information operations detachments within its multidomain task force concept, which include both cyber and electronic warfare capabilities.²⁵ Even if the PLA is able to reconstitute those systems, the disruption could frustrate China's decisionmaking process and buy valuable time for U.S. forces to intervene, without the need for kinetic strikes. An added virtue is that this

approach exploits a PLA organizational culture that emphasizes centralization, in contrast to the U.S. "mission command" philosophy of empowering commanders to implement approved policy aims without precise direction and intensive management oversight.

Generating those effects would also benefit from information operations that try to exploit cleavages in Chinese civil-military relations. During a conflict, the PLA would likely argue that it is fully capable of managing the conflict while adequately defending China's security in secondary theaters. However, civilian leaders, prone to years of PLA dissembling and obfuscation, would approach those assurances with at least some skepticism.²⁶ Information operations that raise questions about the PLA's competence—such as misinformation suggesting that key systems may not be completely reliable—would exacerbate those doubts and potentially lead to additional delays as problems are investigated. This would create new opportunities

for U.S. forces to seize the initiative and sustain a higher decision tempo than PLA leadership can operate within.

Conclusion

Taiwan benefits from regional disturbances, such as the recent clash with India, in direct and indirect ways. The possibility of a conflict with other rivals forces China's constrained resources to be broadly dispersed and its troops trained and equipped for diverse scenarios. Such contingencies have also produced a theater structure not well suited to a war. These are systemic weaknesses for the PLA that could be leveraged to shift the competition to areas beyond the Taiwan Strait, rendering the task of countering Chinese operations in the main theater more manageable. Playing to existing concerns among Chinese strategists, U.S. alliances could be deepened to overextend PLA assets, while critical links in the PLA's command structure could be targeted in a conflict



Sailor stands spy radar system control watch aboard USS *Barry* during routine transit of Taiwan Strait, September 17, 2021 (U.S. Navy/Justin Stack)

to reduce its capacity to mass force. Success depends on prudent stewardship of U.S. defense relations and smart investments, including greater resources for U.S. Cyber Command to pursue electronic warfare capabilities.²⁷

This approach, however, comes with a key caveat: U.S. assistance to Taiwan itself should remain focused on vital areas, such as capabilities necessary to thwart an invasion.²⁸ Flashy upgrades in U.S.-Taiwan defense cooperation envisioned in recent U.S. legislation, such as high-level visits or port calls, would spark the ire of the Chinese public and shine a spotlight on problems in the Taiwan Strait, reducing attention to the Himalayas, the East China Sea, or the Korean Peninsula. Such activities, though intended to deter Chinese adventurism, could paradoxically make it more likely. JFQ

Notes

¹ For a longer version of this assessment, see Joel Wuthnow, *System Overload: Can China's Military Be Distracted in a War Over Taiwan?* China Strategic Perspectives No. 15 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, June 2020), available at <<https://inss.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/2232448/system-overload-can-chinas-military-be-distracted-in-a-war-over-taiwan/>>.

² *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020), 166.

³ For a summary, see Drew Thompson, "Hope on the Horizon: Taiwan's Radical New Defense Concept," *War on the Rocks*, October 2, 2018, available at <<https://warontherocks.com/2018/10/hope-on-the-horizon-taiwans-radical-new-defense-concept/>>.

⁴ Specifically, the Taiwan Relations Act states that U.S. policy is to "maintain the capacity of the United States to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of the people on Taiwan." See U.S. Congress, *Taiwan Relations Act*, Public Law 96-8, 22 U.S.C. 3301 et seq., 96th Cong., 1st sess., January 1, 1979, available at <<https://www.ait.org.tw/our-relationship/policy-history/key-u-s-foreign-policy-documents-region/taiwan-relations-act/>>.

⁵ Kathy Gilsinan, "How the U.S. Could Lose a War with China," *The Atlantic*, July 25, 2019, available at <<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/07/china-us-war/594793/>>.

⁶ Andrew W. Marshall, *Long-Term Competition with the Soviets: A Framework for Strategic Analysis*, R-862-PR (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1972). For a recent discussion, see Thomas G. Mahnken, ed., *Competitive Strategies for the 21st Century: Theory, History, and Practice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

⁷ *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2018), 4.

⁸ Terrence J. O'Shaughnessy, Matthew D. Strohmeier, and Christopher D. Forrest, "Strategic Shaping: Expanding the Competitive Space," *Joint Force Quarterly* 90 (3rd Quarter 2018), 10–15.

⁹ For instance, the growth of China's official defense spending has slowed in recent years. The 2020 budget was approximately \$178 billion, though experts believe the true number is somewhat higher. U.S. defense spending in 2020 was approximately \$722 billion, which was needed to support global obligations. See Yew Lun Tian, "China Defence Spending Rise at Three-Decade Low, Still to Grow 6.6%," Reuters, May 21, 2020, available at <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-parliament-defence/china-defence-spending-rise-at-three-decade-low-still-to-grow-6-6-idINKBN22Y081>>.

¹⁰ For a broad overview, see Andrew J. Nathan and Andrew Scobell, *China's Search for Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

¹¹ For instance, during the Korean War, the main strategic direction was in the southeast; during the 1979 border war, it was in the north.

¹² Wuthnow, *System Overload*, 8–11.

¹³ See Andrew Scobell et al., eds., *The People's Liberation Army and Contingency Planning in China* (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2015).

¹⁴ M. Taylor Fravel, "China's Sovereignty Obsession," *Foreign Affairs*, June 26, 2020, available at <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-06-26/chinas-sovereignty-obsession>>.

¹⁵ Frank O'Donnell and Alexander K. Bollfrass, *The Strategic Postures of China and India: A Visual Guide* (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, March 2020), available at <<https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/strategic-postures-china-and-india-visual-guide>>.

¹⁶ Derek Grossman et al., *China's Long-Range Bomber Flights: Drivers and Implications*, RR-2567-AF (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2018).

¹⁷ Most recently, Tsai Ing-wen has lowered the barriers to an independence referendum but "strategically left out plebiscites on constitutional change," including on sovereignty issues. See J. Michael Cole, "Now Is Not the Time for a Referendum of Taiwanese

Independence," *The National Interest*, February 19, 2019, available at <<https://nationalinterest.org/feature/now-not-time-referendum-taiwanese-independence-45037>>.

¹⁸ Joel Wuthnow, *Just Another Paper Tiger? Chinese Perspectives on the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy*, INSS Strategic Forum No. 305 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, June 2020).

¹⁹ Michael Beckley, "The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia," *International Security* 42, no. 2 (Fall 2017), 117; William S. Murray, "Revisiting Taiwan's Defense Strategy," *Naval War College Review* 61, no. 3 (Summer 2008), 2–27.

²⁰ Michael Fitzsimmons, "Horizontal Escalation: An Asymmetric Approach to Russian Aggression?" *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2019), 95–133.

²¹ *Providing for the Common Defense: The Assessment and Recommendations of the National Defense Strategy Commission* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2018), available at <<https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2018-11/providing-for-the-common-defense.pdf>>.

²² See Phillip C. Saunders et al., eds., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms* (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2019).

²³ The Joint Logistic Support Force was central to the PLA's COVID-19 response in the city of Wuhan in early 2020. See Joel Wuthnow, "Responding to the Epidemic in Wuhan: Insights into Chinese Military Logistics," *China Brief* 20, no. 7 (April 13, 2020), available at <<https://jamestown.org/program/responding-to-the-epidemic-in-wuhan-insights-into-chinese-military-logistics/>>.

²⁴ Eric Heginbotham et al., *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power 1996–2017* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2015), 266–268.

²⁵ Sean Kimmons, "Army to Build Three Multi-Domain Task Forces Using Lessons from Pilot," U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, October 15, 2019, available at <<https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/1989387/army-to-build-three-multi-domain-task-forces-using-lessons-from-pilot/>>.

²⁶ On problems in civil-military relations, see Phillip C. Saunders and Joel Wuthnow, "Large and in Charge: Civil-Military Relations Under Xi Jinping," in *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, Saunders et al., 519–555.

²⁷ Mark Pomerleau, "Does Cyber Command Need More Electronic Warfare Tools?" *Fifth Domain*, May 21, 2019, available at <<https://www.fifthdomain.com/dod/2019/05/21/does-cyber-command-need-more-electronic-warfare-tools/>>.

²⁸ Such a strategy complements Taiwan's "overall defense concept," which focuses primarily on ways to counter a prospective Chinese invasion. For a discussion, see Thompson, "Hope on the Horizon."