

CHINA'S CLOSING WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

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Conventional wisdom says that the People's Republic of China is, for better or worse, recovering its place as a major power on the world stage. To its citizens and leaders, many of whom regard the Middle Kingdom's decline in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a historical anomaly and its modern resurgence as a national priority, this renewed stature means a larger economic, political, and military role for China in East Asia and beyond. It also means Taiwan's return to the PRC fold, without which China's destiny will remain unrealized in the hearts and minds of most mainlanders.

Many analysts and cogent observers have already concluded that history is on China's side in the struggle over Taiwan, which Beijing considers a renegade province.

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As China's size and strength continue to grow in the Asia-Pacific region, they say, Taiwan will have little choice but to yield—on its own terms if the fledgling democracy is lucky and wise. The same China watchers quickly point to the PRC's steady military buildup and substantial, albeit uneven, economic growth as proof that today's relatively weak Beijing will in due course develop the muscle it needs either to take the twenty-three-million-strong Republic of China forcibly or pressure Taipei into accepting a Hong Kong-like arrangement. Most estimates put the inevitable day of reckoning somewhere between ten and twenty years from now, when China's military and economic engines are expected to overshadow those of most of its regional neighbors, if not Japan.

A more realistic, comprehensive examination of the pertinent trends reveals a different future. An attempted blockade and limited missile campaign—the most plausible attack scenario—would be more likely to produce China’s desired results in this decade than in the next. By 2010, the guardian United States will have strengthened its military position in the western Pacific relative to China, and a defensively stronger Taipei will have fully embraced, if not institutionalized, Taiwan’s increasingly popular “status quo” approach to cross-strait affairs, further marginalizing the idea of reunification. Added to other unmistakable trends, such an environment will make a PRC move on Taiwan exponentially riskier. The conservative defense planners in Beijing almost certainly realize this. If Chinese aggression in East Asia is to be deterred, Taiwan and the United States must also recognize and prepare for this alternate reality.

TAIWAN’S STATUS QUO CONSENSUS

Happy on average with its national identity and way of life today, Taiwan is unlikely to join voluntarily an authoritarian, economically unpredictable PRC, absent some use of force by the mainland. Never cordial neighbors, the two parties’ differences have hardened in recent years, while the Republic of China’s successful democratic experiment has tipped the domestic political scale in favor of the status quo, perhaps forever.

At the heart of this political shift is the breakdown of the pro-reunification Kuomintang, or Nationalist Party, Beijing’s best hope for a peaceful merger. Plagued by infighting and mass defections to splinter factions after half a century of uninterrupted rule, the party of the ROC’s “founding father,” Chiang Kai-shek, lost its majority in the parliament for the first time in history in December 2001, surrendering almost half its seats. Following a disappointing third-place finish in the presidential race one year earlier, the shocking loss was widely blamed on the Kuomintang leadership’s decision to remain faithful to the party’s historical, but increasingly unpopular, commitment to reunification.

The new government is led by native-born Chen Shui-ben. His Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) had made periodic assertions of defiance—such as Chen’s now-famous pronouncement to an American interviewer that “Taiwan is an independent country,” or his coy support for a national referendum on independence—each of which prompted warnings from Beijing. However, the DPP, which downplayed its independence proclivities near the end of its journey from the minority to the majority, has demonstrated no measurable interest in a serious showdown since taking power two years ago.¹ Like a plurality of Taiwan’s citizens, Taipei’s new leadership appears satisfied with the status quo, a position tantamount to independence but without the pitfalls of a formal declaration. “Status quo” is congenial to most Taiwanese voters, who no longer see

reunification as desirable, or even practical, given their growing prosperity and expanding political rights, and it has been reinforced by events in Hong Kong that have called Beijing's trustworthiness into question—including the reappointment of an unpopular chief executive and his fourteen "ministers" for a second five-year term without even the pretense of an election. With most voters in favor of maintaining the present state of affairs, the Kuomintang must accordingly water down its reunification stance in future elections if it hopes to remain competitive on the national stage. Even China's new president, Hu Jintao, has conceded (as vice president) that a majority of islanders favor maintaining the status quo, though he said that Taiwanese polls show the number of reunification advocates rising—a claim refuted by Taipei and most surveys, which put support for Chinese rule under a "one country, two system" model safely below 10 percent.²

Taiwanese public opinion on reunification is in fact surprisingly steady, though pro-status quo figures are misleadingly small. In 2001, reunification opponents—those who ultimately want independence or the status quo forever—collectively polled around 40 percent. Merger advocates, Taiwanese who favor reunification either now or later, showed only half as well, with those backing "reunification now" perennially under 5 percent.³ About one in three Taiwanese are for "maintaining the status quo to decide unification or independence in the future";⁴ but this group is probably more "status quo now" than "decision later" at heart.⁵ Polling by the official Mainland Affairs Council indicates that many Taiwanese citizens who say they want to decide the matter later actually reject the most—maybe only—plausible peaceful reunification scenario. The council demonstrated that "when Beijing's formula of 'one country, two systems' for resolving cross-strait issues is clearly spelled out (that Taiwan is a local government, subject to the rule of the Beijing government, and the ROC [Republic of China] government no longer exists"—something akin to the Hong Kong deal—70 to 74 percent of respondents rejected the measure.⁶ A separate think-tank survey shows the Taiwanese people equally united against forced reunification, with more than three-quarters of respondents willing to defend the nation if China launched an attack to take it over and only 10 percent unwilling to bear arms.⁷ At least a sizable majority of Taiwan, it reasons, opposes Beijing's demands for political merger by peaceful and violent means alike, even if most do not clamor for traditional independence.

Predictably, the voters have rewarded Taiwan's like-minded political parties. To be sure, the DPP's political fortunes might dissipate were the charismatic presidential hopeful James Soong and his People First Party to revitalize the "pan-blue" alliance—those parties that support eventual reunification—by merging with the cash-rich Kuomintang, but a DPP loss would probably be

immaterial. Besides Soong's support for "one roof" with "two seats" (an implied call for delaying reunification), public opinion is no longer a secondary consideration of Taiwanese politicians.⁸ Whoever wins the ruling seat, Taiwan's new, truly multiparty democracy promises to represent better the pro-status quo majority, a consensus that developed under the previous authoritarian regime, before the island's first lawful change of power. As one observer put it, "When the Kuomintang was in power, the authorities refused to adopt a new separate identity because it could cost them their legal basis"—that Taipei was in fact China's legitimate government—"however false it was, for ruling."⁹ Today, Taiwanese voters can freely realize a cross-strait policy that better reflects their own opinions and desires, if not necessarily those of Beijing. So far, they have done so in both of Taiwan's open presidential contests, electing closet independence-advocate Lee Teng-hui in 1996, four years before Chen's victory forced mainland leaders to consider the possibility that the runaway province might never willingly return.

BEIJING'S SOLITARY OPTION

Implicit threats of violence have failed to steer Taipei and its constituents toward serious reunification talks. In March 1996, Taiwan's first-ever presidential elections went forward despite missile tests aimed at draining support for Lee, the eventual winner with 54 percent in a field of four candidates. A year earlier, similar intimidation tactics had failed to influence the island's parliamentary elections in the PRC's imagined favor. Both times the Beijing-preferred Kuomintang party suffered losses, while public support for independence or the status quo stayed safely above 66 percent (defiantly rising one year). In each instance, Taiwanese support for reunification briefly peaked as high as 27 percent—unusually inflated numbers, but hardly the groundswell for which Beijing had apparently gambled.¹⁰ Frustrated and humiliated by such political backfires, Beijing refuses to renounce violence against Taiwan, one of its official defense white papers declaring a readiness to "adopt all drastic measures, including the use of force, to . . . achieve the great cause of reunification" if the Republic of China declares independence or drags its feet in negotiations.¹¹ Fortunately for defense planners in Washington and Taipei, Beijing's plausible military options are as narrow as its threats are vague.

The most dramatic but least feasible PRC threat is an amphibious attack with hundreds of thousands of People's Liberation Army (PLA) troops supported by ballistic missile barrages, aircraft, naval forces, and all manner of modified merchant ships. A host of analysts and government reports have poured cold water on this frequently discussed scenario, revealing China's sea and airlift shortcomings, the numerous force-concentration problems associated with Formosa

beach landings, and, not the least, Taiwan's super-hardened land defenses. Piers Wood and Charles Ferguson, for example, persuasively argue that China lacks not only the amphibious assault ships to bridge the strait with enough firepower and men but also the port capacity to employ hundreds of potentially useful civilian craft.¹² Their conclusion was shared by Admiral Dennis Blair, former commander of the U.S. Pacific forces, who not long ago reported that "the PLA is still years away from the capability to take and hold Taiwan."¹³

By comparison, a naval blockade could bring Taiwan to its knees with relative ease and minimal international protest. A sustained interruption of key sea lines of communications would be economically disastrous for the Taiwanese economy, which relies heavily on shipping for its lifeblood trade and energy needs, some two-thirds of which are fulfilled by fossil fuel imports.¹⁴ Even a temporary closure would likely prove debilitating for the import/export-dependent economy. Shortly prior to Taiwan's 1996 election, for example, all merchant marine traffic to Taiwan was halted for days after China fired several unarmed DF-15 short-range missiles toward the island's two largest ports, the closest of them falling approximately twelve miles from land. Traffic into Taiwan's northern port was similarly blocked the previous year after China lobbed six DF-15s into the strait some eighty-five miles north of the island.¹⁵

China's green-water navy could isolate Taiwan using mines, surface ships, and even state-sponsored piracy—an unconventional yet effective tool in the dangerous South China Sea. As sunken or stolen cargo raised sensitive shipping and insurance costs to prohibitive levels, a blockade strategy would almost certainly trigger price spikes overnight, causing shortages and rushes on stores soon thereafter. Chinese mines, ranging from older contact types to more modern command-activated models that lie in wait for specific acoustic signatures, could block harbor and port entrances as well as shipping lanes (though Beijing might be reluctant to permanently close those shipping lanes on which it too depends). The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) possesses submarines, aircraft, and over forty major surface ships capable of laying mines, in addition to some two hundred smaller vessels available for lesser mining roles.¹⁶ In the words of the Communist Party mouthpiece, the *People's Daily*, "Surface warship, submarine, airplane, merchant ship and even sampan can all be used to deploy mines," which then become the "dragon in water."¹⁷

There is currently little Taiwan could do in response to an aggressive undersea campaign. With at most a dozen outdated counter-mine warfare ships at hand (though it may buy some American minesweeping helicopters), Taiwan would be hard pressed to clear any sizable minefields, known or suspected.¹⁸ The ROC navy's submarine force is similarly outmatched. Its four diesel models—two dating from the 1940s—and nominal antisubmarine capabilities could not

seriously challenge China's force of seventy submarines, the best of which include four Russian-built Kilo-class boats (though two may be seriously damaged) and five nuclear-powered units of the Han class.¹⁹ Taiwan's fleet will be even less effective against the Hans' eventual replacement, the Type 093 nuclear-powered attack submarine, which will be operational sometime after 2005. Reflecting Russian influence and technology, the Type 093 will carry potent wire-guided and wake-homing "fire and forget" torpedoes as well as cruise missiles.²⁰ Beyond procurement, China's submarine training program concentrates "on concealment and ambush procedures, formation attacks, long-range deployments, minelaying and torpedo strikes against surface shipping."²¹

Taiwan is equally unprepared today for a traditional blockade by the Chinese surface fleet, which is numerically and qualitatively superior. Its newest additions, two Russian-built *Sovremenny*-class destroyers fitted with the supersonic Sunburn ship-killing cruise missiles, present an edge over anything Taiwan has sent to sea this decade. News that Russia will deliver to China by 2005 or 2006 another two *Sovremennys*, probably fitted with the even deadlier 186-mile-range Yakhont antiship cruise missile, makes a bad situation worse (if they can be put on target).²² In contrast, Taiwan's surface fleet is still based on older Harpoon-armed American ships and a handful of readiness-plagued French *La Fayette* frigates with missile defenses outclassed by both the Sunburn and the Yakhont. Though useful and capable in many other respects, Taiwan's four *Kidd*-class destroyers will not appreciably alter the surface warfare balance in the narrow strait. These ships are outranged by China's Russian-made cruise missiles and lack the means to detect them early enough to engage them with their Standard missiles. (The proposed tactic—dubbed "open-seas mobility"—for dealing with the new threat is reportedly to deploy the *Kidds* far from the strait, in the vicinity of Guam.)²³ The *Sovremenny*, with only modest 1970s-era defenses, is vulnerable to U.S. air and submarine attack, but if the ROC navy challenged a PLAN blockade alone, hostilities could not be expected to last long.²⁴

NEGOTIATIONS AT MISSILE-POINT

An effective blockade alone could lead to economic collapse and panic, but a bigger push might be required to convince a stubborn Taiwan to accept reunification. Beijing may believe that a limited but sustained ballistic missile campaign could provide the final inducement. According to a famous news story, just before the March 1996 missile tests a Pentagon official returned from China and reported to National Security Advisor Anthony Lake that he had learned that the Politburo had plans prepared for a rocket attack against Taiwan consisting of one conventional strike a day for thirty days.²⁵ The idea was presumably to make a panicked public force Taipei into an agreement favorable to the

mainland. Though the threat may have been planted, coming as it did shortly before Taiwan's presidential election, it nonetheless demonstrated China's apparent willingness to pursue reunification in such a way.

Accurate missiles would be an integral part of this strategy. Much has been said about China's missile buildup in Fujian Province opposite Taiwan, where the Second Artillery Corps is adding some fifty missiles a year to its estimated arsenal of 350 (as of July 2002) mobile short-range ballistic missiles.²⁶ Once fully integrated with satellite-aided guidance systems, as expected, these weapons will transform China's growing short-range missile stockpile from a clumsy political tool into a paralyzing military threat also capable of reliably hitting prime economic and population centers. To name targets beforehand, such as office complexes, airports, and key industrial hubs—concentrated civilian fuel reserves could be wiped out with a few ballistic missiles, according to Taiwan's defense minister—would have an immeasurable effect on morale, possibly even dissolving the island population's will and ability to resist.²⁷ China boasts plans to use the Global Positioning System (GPS) on its M-type missiles, which likely include the Dong Feng 15 (or DF-15, also known as the M-9) and another short-range rocket, the DF-11 (or M-11).²⁸ In fact, the accuracy of the DF-15—deployed in Fujian, and the missile used in the 1995 and 1996 Taiwan Strait missile tests—has already been improved with navigation data from the U.S. GPS constellation.²⁹

A large and accurate missile barrage could do incalculable damage to Taiwan's defenses and infrastructure, but saturating the island with rockets and land-attack cruise missiles—another type of weapon China is busily amassing—would probably be counterproductive. Instead of complementing a blockade strategy to bring Taipei to the bargaining table once and for all, a full-scale missile strike would likely inflame Taiwanese defiance and make the island a martyr in the eyes of potential saviors. The United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, and even the United Nations would be hard pressed to look away as China pummeled Taiwan with high-explosive warheads or worse. Taiwan is now essentially defenseless against a Chinese ballistic missile attack, but its plan to buttress a very limited Patriot II theater missile defense system with the third-generation Patriot Advanced Capability 3 (PAC-3) probably worries Beijing, which would be embarrassed were Taiwan to shoot down a missile strike during a blockade attempt.³⁰ Although hardening defense facilities would probably be the most effective countermeasure to a missile attack, successful intercepts could postpone a Taiwan collapse, affording Washington time to take action. Partly in response, Beijing has deployed longer-range missiles, like the GPS-guided DF-21, farther inland, where they can target Taiwan from a distance that makes the forthcoming PAC-3 and other "lower tier" defenses ineffective.³¹

This partial solution, or hedge, further explains Beijing's emotionally charged opposition to any deal that would bring more capable "upper tier" defenses, like the Aegis-based Navy Theater Wide System, to Taiwan.

China may see alternatives to challenging the international community. A limited missile strike—possibly coupled with debilitating special-operations attacks—could plausibly remain below the threshold of "intervention," especially if U.S. forces were preoccupied. This last point is important because China undoubtedly understands that if American help does come, it would probably not end at assistance in missile defense. Beijing appears to think that its current long-range nuclear deterrent, momentarily based on some two dozen vulnerable silo-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), is insufficient to deter the United States from exercising force in a serious cross-strait crisis. The realization probably drives not only Beijing's opposition to a U.S. national missile defense but also its own well-documented strategic modernization program, which began in earnest sometime in the early 1990s, shortly after the Soviet Union's collapse allowed China to turn its attention to Taiwan.

China likely believes its future deterrent forces, based on mobile ICBMs like the already serviceable, five-thousand-mile-range DF-31 and its longer-range DF-41 version, can discourage a preemptive nuclear attack by the United States, the secret nuclear doctrine of which reportedly lists China as "a country that could be involved in an immediate or potential [nuclear] contingency."³² Even so, these improved weapons will only level the strategic playing field between the two nuclear powers, protecting the Chinese homeland from strategic preemption and direct attack but little else. China has conveyed an implicit threat to level America's second-largest city should Washington interfere in a cross-strait war—"Americans care more about Los Angeles than they do about Taiwan," warned one Chinese general—but the United States has not shrunk in the past from its security commitments, formal or otherwise, when nuclear exchanges were possible and is unlikely to alter its engagement policies any time soon, barring a major turnabout in America's global defense strategy.³³

WIDENING THE MOAT

Political trends in the United States make it harder for Beijing to bully Taipei into resuming reunification talks, which ended abruptly in 1999 after President Lee Teng-hui, by outlining his groundbreaking "two states doctrine," challenged the "one China" understanding that Washington and Beijing had worked hard to preserve since 1978. In the spring of 2002, President George W. Bush effectively dumped "strategic ambiguity," the decades-old policy of deterring Beijing from attacking Taiwan while discouraging Taipei from recklessly moving toward independence. Administration officials have made it abundantly clear that U.S.

policy still does not support a declaration of independence, but Bush's sweeping promise to do "whatever it takes" to help defend the island—the first time an American president has made such a declaration on Chinese soil—ties U.S. and Taiwanese security closer than perhaps at any time since the early 1970s, when the island was Washington's "unsinkable aircraft carrier."³⁴

The Bush administration has drawn dramatic distinctions between its Taiwan Strait policy and that of its predecessor, referring to its own posture as one of "strategic clarity." More tangibly, after Bush's first Asian diplomatic swing U.S. officials revealed that the White House had decided to put aside the previous administration's "three noes"—no support for Taiwan's independence; no support for "two Chinas" or "one China, one Taiwan"; and no support for Taiwan's membership in international organizations that required statehood. Replacing the old framework is the "six assurances," the Ronald Reagan-era security policy that emphasized unabated arms sales to Taiwan and a hands-off approach to cross-strait negotiations. Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly brought this point home during a Florida conference speech in the presence of Taiwan's defense minister: "U.S. security policy continues to be embodied in the 'six assurances' offered to Taiwan by President Reagan. Today, as previously, we will neither seek to mediate between the PRC and Taiwan, nor will we exert pressure on Taiwan to come to the bargaining table. You can count on this."

The State Department's top East Asia official went on to underline Washington's commitment to help Taipei meet its self-defense needs: "A secure and self-confident Taiwan is a Taiwan that is more capable of engaging in political interaction and dialogue with the PRC."³⁵ Coupled with Bush's pledge to defend the island from mainland aggression, this new policy structure leaves little to the imagination, arguably reducing Taiwan's incentive to deal with an impatient, even angry, Beijing.

A change in the White House could alter this course, but parallel domestic political developments ensure extension of the current policy far beyond 2004. For instance, in 2002 a large, bipartisan group of members of the U.S. House of Representatives founded the Congressional Taiwan Caucus to bolster the keystone 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, which requires the Pentagon to sell the island enough arms to defend itself. The 113-member caucus (at last count) includes dozens of representatives from key committees, including senior lawmakers actively engaged in Washington's Taiwan and China policies. Congressional support for the Republic of China is not a passing fad; in 1999 the Taiwan Security Enhancement Act—cosponsored by an impressive seventy-seven members—passed in the House 341 to seventy, reaffirming broad support in that body for the Taiwan Relations Act. (The Senate never voted on the measure; its version of the bill stalled in the Foreign Relations Committee amid strenuous Clinton

administration appeals and warnings from Admiral Blair that it would cause grave transpacific tensions. The legislation's failure was not interpreted, however, as Senate disapproval.)

Support from the Taiwan Caucus and other key members of Congress will help sustain the arms flow that gives teeth to this new arrangement. Bush's approval of the largest defense package to Taiwan since 1992, valued at nearly six billion dollars, fell short of Taipei's request for advanced seaborne missile defenses but opened the door for the island to buy several big-ticket items, including eight diesel-electric submarines, twelve antisubmarine P-3 Orion aircraft, Sea Dragon minesweeping helicopters, and *Kidd*-class guided-missile destroyers, which are expected to prepare its Navy to operate the theater-missile-defense-capable Aegis destroyers.³⁶ These "legacy" systems, plus the subsequently approved sale of thirty Apache Longbow attack helicopters, prove that the Bush administration is making good on its promise to normalize arms sales to the island and could very well help Taiwan resist a naval blockade; their greatest benefit, however, will be more frequent and substantive military exchanges with the United States. Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz said as much at the Florida conference mentioned above, when he counseled that military improvements, not multibillion-dollar procurement deals, should be Taipei's top defense priority and that the United States is "eager to help" Taiwan improve its armed services' procurement process, training, and jointness—a shortcoming highlighted by recent war games there.³⁷ The Bush administration also wants to help civilian Taipei master its control over the military, long considered an extension of the Kuomintang.

On the world stage, U.S. diplomatic support for Taiwan has frustrated PRC efforts to check an aggressive DPP campaign to gain admittance to prominent international organizations. Though Chinese diplomats blocked Taiwan's bid for observer status in the World Health Organization—a possible precursor to full UN membership, in Beijing's eyes—the Bush administration successfully lobbied for the island's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO), albeit as a "separate customs territory," and actively advocates its entry into other international assemblies of sovereign states.

Building on this success and anxious to expand market-access measures already in place under the WTO, as well as rechannel tens of billions of dollars in "China fever" investment outflows, Chen's government enthusiastically welcomed news that a U.S. commission is carefully considering a free-trade agreement with Taiwan, the tenth-largest American export market, immediately behind China.³⁸ Movement toward a bilateral trade deal—or trilateral zone were Japan included, as Chen recommends—sends an unmistakable political message to Beijing, that in a world where trade pacts may be more important than state-to-state military treaties, an attack on Taiwan could amount to an attack

on the American economy. Still, such an arrangement could be years away, despite “fast track” trade negotiating authority and solid congressional support from heartland senators like Iowa’s Charles Grassley, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, and Max Baucus of Montana, ranking Democrat on the Finance Committee. A free trade agreement would likely boost by hundreds of millions of dollars food exports to Taiwan, the fifth-largest market for U.S. agriculture products (ahead of China), but the failure of Taiwan so far to meet its basic WTO responsibilities, such as those related to intellectual-property issues, rules out a deal any time soon.³⁹ Nevertheless, movement in this direction tells Beijing that the United States is deepening its investment in Taiwan’s well-being at more than one level.

MASTERING A MATURING PLA

Closer political and formal economic ties, added to the reopening of Washington’s arms spigot after almost ten years of drought, are steadily reducing Taiwan’s susceptibility to mainland coercion and attack. However, a growing U.S. defense presence in East Asia and improvements in the capability of Pacific forces relative to the PLA will continue to present China with its greatest impediment to a coercive reunification strategy.

Calling attention to “the possibility . . . that a military competitor with a formidable resource base will emerge in the region,” the report of the 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), the Pentagon’s primary strategic roadmap, calls for a “paradigm shift in force planning” that adds new and better military capabilities to the Pacific theater, where long distances and access challenges could prove costly in a major theater war.⁴⁰ Citing an unnamed threat, the QDR recommended that the United States add in the Pacific a second aircraft carrier battle group, up to four new surface ships, submarines with cruise missiles, and additional air bases. Indeed, the Navy has already “stood up” Submarine Squadron 15 on Guam, more than three thousand miles west of Hawaii, allowing its two *Los Angeles*-class attack submarines, the USS *San Francisco* (SSN 711) and USS *City of Corpus Christi* (SSN 705)—USS *Houston* (SSN 713) will join them in January 2004—to provide eighty-eight to 123 mission-days per year, compared to thirty-six for Pearl Harbor-based boats.⁴¹ At the same time, innovative solutions to surface-ship readiness problems, such as a tested “crew-swapping” idea intended to eliminate transit time and extend deployments without punishing sailors and their families, will provide regional combatant commanders with 270 additional days of surface combat power over a year-and-a-half period.⁴² This Asia-centric, “forward deterrence” defense policy, if fully adopted, as Bush administration officials assure the public that it will be, would improve U.S. projection options and guarantee uninterrupted carrier-battle-group presence in

the western Pacific. The latter has been dangerously absent in past regional crises, most recently when the USS *Kitty Hawk* (CV 63) left Japan for the Indian Ocean to support operations in Afghanistan. The overall result should be a further check upon Chinese ambitions.

New regional operating concepts will buttress these seaborne platforms and reduce U.S. Pacific Command's reliance on politically shaky basing agreements. Central to these plans is the Air Force's strategy of using Guam as a main operating base for tactical missions into the region from its periphery. Andersen Air Force Base is ideal for its hardened facilities and for its distance from Taiwan (nearly 1,500 nautical miles)—close enough to provide combat support over the strait using new, longer-range fighters in conjunction with air “tanker bridges,” but far enough away to limit the effectiveness of PLA missiles.⁴³ Future U.S. capability improvements will only enhance this smarter, beefed-up western Pacific presence. Better and more precise long-range air assets, including new stealth bombers and standoff munitions, will allow American pilots to challenge the PLA's maturing anti-access strategy from safer distances; planned carrier-based unmanned combat air vehicles and improved cruise missiles may be even less susceptible to Chinese defenses.⁴⁴ Under the sea and on the surface, astonishing American naval advancements, like those incorporated in the revolutionary *Virginia*-class attack submarines, continue to outpace PLAN's near-term ambitions, which China's moribund domestic arms industry has forced it to pin to foreign acquisitions.⁴⁵

Some analysts, citing exotic Israeli and Russian-made hardware, counter that high-profile acquisitions will so improve China's anti-access capabilities that defending the island could prove costly. Chinese strategy, they correctly argue, is not to defeat the American military but to put Washington out of the fight by disabling its major platforms or simply deterring intervention altogether. Richard Fisher of the Jamestown Foundation, for example, argues that the PRC is already gathering the appropriate forces to attack successfully a carrier battle group in the vicinity of Taiwan (“Sink an aircraft carrier, win the war,” goes the PLA mantra).⁴⁶ Realistically, though, supersonic ship-killing cruise missiles and other devices will only lengthen the time it takes U.S. forces to “kick down the door.” Without trivializing the deadly threat such weapons pose to American surface platforms and their crews, the U.S. ability to operate from ever-greater distances and its unmatched battlespace awareness, to say nothing of forthcoming ballistic and cruise-missile defenses, mean that Washington could spoil a Chinese blockade even if it could not prevent one.

There is consensus even in Beijing that Washington can beat the PLA in its own backyard. Dedicated students of U.S. warfighting capabilities and doctrine, Chinese officers have carefully observed as American forces have repeatedly proven their conventional superiority in diverse, hostile environments. If

Operation DESERT STORM convinced the PLA that it lags decades behind, the Serbia and Afghanistan air campaigns, with their historic rates of precision sorties, real-time targeting, and casualty-free operations, convinced the leaders of the PLA components that the capabilities and doctrine gap is growing (as must have Operation IRAQI FREEDOM as well). Several Chinese officers have warily noted how much U.S. capabilities grew in the brief seven years between the Persian Gulf War and the air campaign over Kosovo. Tellingly, two of the PLA's three competing schools of thought—"Local War under High Tech Conditions" and (especially) the "Revolution in Military Affairs"—argue that the United States is decades ahead of the PLA in military technology.⁴⁷

The gap is nowhere more evident than in China's lagging intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities, which cannot yet help China "see over the horizon," a skill the PLA must master if it hopes to employ its new antiship cruise missiles at their intended ranges. China is trying to close the divide by focusing on several other niche capabilities to exploit U.S. weaknesses, but forward-looking war games consistently prove that the narrow tactical advantages it may achieve with, say, advanced "double digit" surface-to-air missiles will be increasingly insufficient to keep American forces at bay.

NO TIME LIKE THE PRESENT

Current trends make it increasingly difficult for China to intimidate Taiwan, let alone make good on vociferous invasion threats. The United States is steadily strengthening its projection capabilities, and Washington (both the White House and Congress) is rekindling its "tropical island love affair." At the same time, Taiwan's voters have all but divorced themselves from the idea of a peaceful merger; years of mainland strong-arming and Hong Kong's record-high unemployment and political woes—including conspicuous human rights violations and a reversal of democratic gains—have largely eroded what little public support remained for sincere one-China negotiations.⁴⁸ Average Taiwanese citizens, indications are, want the status quo—probably because of the political and economic risks associated with joining the authoritarian regime, but also because most were born and raised in a self-determined Republic of China. Little is expected to change on these fronts any time soon. Washington's basic support for Taiwan is as calculated as it is bipartisan, a strategic decision based on long-term interests that cannot willingly be ceded to a would-be regional aggressor. Entrepreneurial and independent minded, today's Taiwan appears equally predisposed to de facto independence, unencumbered by some of its grandparents' lingering romantic fantasies of a China united under a Nationalist banner. Chinese foreign and defense policy is as likely to remain static, with Jiang's continued control of the People's Liberation Army through the Central Military

Commission ensuring a continuation of China's current strategy for reabsorbing Taiwan.

Indeed, China's apparent decision to forgo an amphibious invasion capability in favor of a blockade force suggests that a direct attack is not even under consideration. The Pentagon's latest assessment of Beijing's cross-strait military options says that China "likely would encounter great difficulty" conducting an amphibious invasion throughout the remainder of the decade without a major shift in national priorities.⁴⁹ A buildup of amphibious capabilities would necessarily be at the center of such a reallocation effort, but there is little discussion in Chinese strategic literature of a need to develop such capabilities and even less activity on the procurement side. In fact, despite its multiplying defense budget, the Chinese navy has demonstrated only nominal interest in acquiring the troop and cargo ships necessary for any large-scale amphibious assault.

By one academic study, China's aging amphibious assault fleet includes a mere fifty ships with full displacements of a thousand tons or more, with only ten over two thousand and none over 4,800. Moreover, these modest numbers appear to have already peaked; projections nearly halve the fleet's amphibious inventory by 2010.⁵⁰ To be sure, hundreds of smaller military and civilian craft could be launched on short notice from Chinese riversides and makeshift ports, but such small craft, even if they managed to traverse the choppy 115-mile waterway, could not transport armaments or men in sufficient numbers to breach Taiwan's vicious air and land defenses. By most informed estimates, China could get one reinforced infantry division of fifteen to twenty thousand troops to the shore, and another division of paratroopers over the island—far short of the estimated three hundred thousand troops necessary to take and hold a beachhead.⁵¹ A slightly more generous appraisal by a well-briefed congressional commission says China can move two divisions by sea at best and that its capability to insert airborne forces is limited to one of its three divisions at a time.⁵²

Meanwhile, Beijing is pouring resources into blockading tools. In addition to the fifty new short-range ballistic missiles a year opposite Taiwan, the PLA is replacing its aging liquid-fueled DF-3 intermediate-range ballistic missile with the solid-propelled, mobile DF-21.⁵³ It is also spending a large number of *yuan* on a strategic modernization project that includes the development of land-mobile ICBMs as well as a submarine-launched version, the Julang 2 "Great Wave," for the PLAN's forthcoming ballistic-missile submarine—all key elements in a survivable and, thus, more credible nuclear deterrent.

China's rapid succession of conventional purchases has been no less impressive. Beijing's \$1.6 billion agreement to take prompt delivery of at least eight more Project 636 Kilo diesel-electric submarines fitted with the Klub-S antiship cruise missile system—its 186-mile-range comparable to a carrier battle group's

defense radius—moves the PLAN's projection capabilities well beyond what its troubled Song (Type 039) program promised alone.⁵⁴ Taiwan has decided to acquire as many diesel models from a yet-undetermined source, but all of China's eight submarines are scheduled to be delivered to the PLAN before 2010, the earliest that Taiwan's first modern diesel-electric submarines are expected to reach initial operating capability.⁵⁵ With an appreciably lower price tag (five to six billion dollars) than comparable submarines the ROC navy might ultimately buy, the Kilo purchase guarantees more defense planning and spending woes for Taipei.

The PLA budget has been climbing at a double-digit rate for twelve consecutive years and will, the CIA judges, double by 2007.⁵⁶ In contrast, Taiwan's sustained recession has produced draconian defense cuts. By Taipei's own account, defense spending as a share of the total budget has been halved over the last decade, dropping from almost a third of all government spending in 1991 to an anemic 16.5 percent in 2002.⁵⁷ The spending debate in Taiwan's Legislative Yuan, heated and frequently ill informed, reveals a parliament all but unwilling to boost defense outlays. Predictably, the opposition Kuomintang and People First Party appear committed to legislative obstructionism, but even President Chen's own party cannot be counted on to fund urgent modernization and readiness projects. History suggests that Taiwan will ultimately find the wherewithal for defense programs the United States deems critical to its security (as evidenced by the tortured but ultimately successful *Kidd*-class destroyer purchase), but in the short term the Republic of China has clearly fallen behind the mainland's aggressive acquisition timetable.

The poor state of U.S. readiness in this decade might similarly add to the attractiveness of an early Chinese blockade gamble. Taiwan's combat preparedness has become notoriously bad, and U.S. readiness levels, though not yet dire, have badly suffered from a war on terrorism that will undoubtedly last through the decade.⁵⁸ A heavier special-operations and intelligence-gathering mission load since the 11 September 2001 attacks, for example, has strained the Navy's attack submarines, forcing the fleet to jeopardize their longevity and effectiveness by skimping on critical maintenance and training.⁵⁹ The global war on terrorism has increased the demand for intelligence-gathering missions by attack submarines by upward of 30 percent, and dwindling numbers will remain a problem for years to come even with more *Virginias* (at \$2.3 billion apiece).⁶⁰ Notwithstanding slightly higher procurement rates, the Department of the Navy estimates that the submarine fleet will stay flat at the 1997 QDR-recommended level of forty-five to fifty-five compared with the target of sixty-eight set by a 1999 study for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, further impeding the Navy's ability to execute blockade-busting campaigns reliably and quickly.⁶¹

The attention of the U.S. military and its civilian leadership is understandably focused on the Middle East. Emergency and supplemental spending bills are the norm today and for the foreseeable future, redirecting money to maintain high operation tempos and fill empty precision munitions bins at the expense of basic naval operating funds.⁶² The U.S. government may not be so distracted from East Asia that its vital interests there suffer, but a costly, long-term war on terrorism, like the one President Bush publicly predicts, and a drawn-out occupation of Iraq could ultimately lead to even riskier readiness gaps. Before stepping down from the Pacific Command, Admiral Blair testified that the Navy's readiness levels, while generally improved since 2001 thanks to supplemental funding, continue to suffer, particularly among aviation units and aging surveillance aircraft, which had delivered "dangerously low . . . collection rates of required intelligence information" in his domain.⁶³ The full toll may not be felt for several more years, but U.S. forces will nevertheless remain more susceptible to readiness problems than they would have under a peacetime engagement strategy.

As U.S. readiness and force structure issues entice China to act early, so might a perceived cruise missile imbalance. At present, American surface ships have no effective defense against the Sunburn and Yakhont, both of which travel at supersonic speeds and execute terminal maneuvers designed specifically by Russian companies to overcome U.S. naval defenses.⁶⁴ Currently, American surface ships rely on the Standard Missile 2 and the NATO Sea Sparrow for cruise missile defense at long ranges, and thereafter on the Phalanx Close-In Weapon System and the rolling-airframe RIM-166.⁶⁵ All of these systems would have difficulty detecting and engaging China's sea-skimming Sunburns and Yakhonts, which at Mach 2.5 are nearly three times as fast as the American Tomahawk.⁶⁶ The Navy is working to plug this vulnerability, but the prospective solution, the developing Evolved Sea Sparrow Missile—launched from the Aegis destroyers' Mark 41 Vertical Launch Systems—will take time. The Raytheon-led international effort holds considerable promise (having already been successfully tested against a supersonic target drone) but is scheduled to undergo operational testing with the U.S. Navy only in 2003 and will not yield a deployable system until 2005 at the earliest.⁶⁷ Beijing could prove unwilling to squander the military advantage it will enjoy in the meantime, at least if it can overcome its own intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance problems.

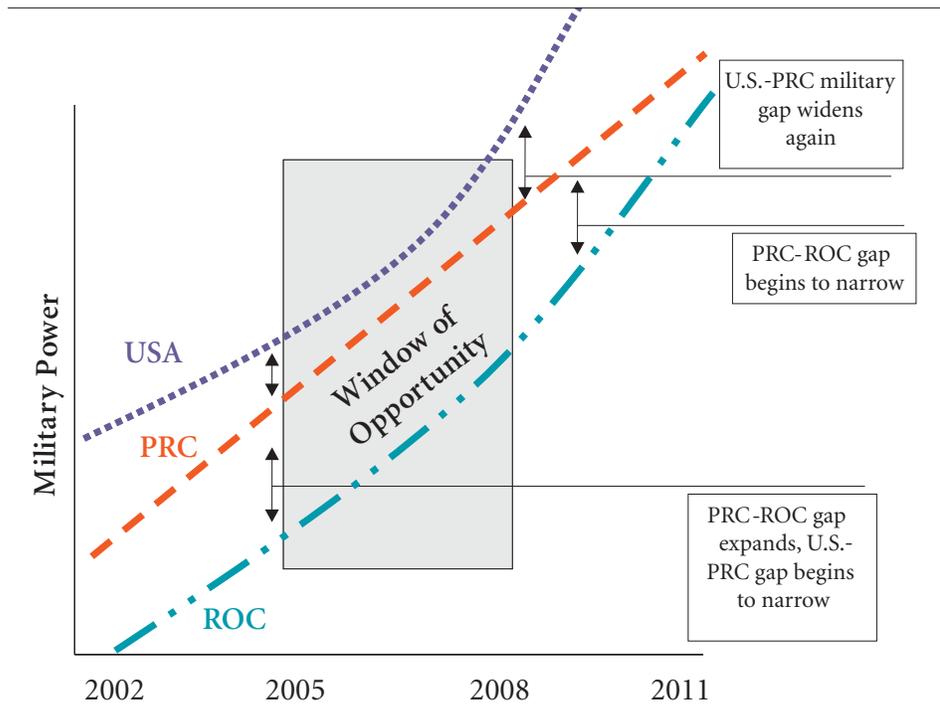
In a similar vein, Beijing might feel under pressure to act before the United States deploys a national missile defense system that might be effective against as many as a hundred incoming nuclear warheads. New strategic delivery systems are expected to give China a reliable second-strike capability by the end of the decade, but a more aggressive U.S. missile defense program, supported by

consistently higher spending, could give Beijing pause in a crisis. Optimistic estimates suggest a fully capable missile defense system might be available as early as 2008.⁶⁸

Also, the final system could be even more effective than originally envisioned, because the potential benefits for testing that come with the U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty have yet to be realized. Further complicating China's deterrence strategy is Washington's leaked intention to consider using tactical nuclear weapons in a Taiwan Strait war.⁶⁹

All of these factors conspire to improve China's offensive chances in the next decade. More specifically, as shown in the figure, China's military power will peak relative to that of Taiwan and the regional forces of the United States sometime between 2005 and 2008. In this window, improved naval and air capabilities—including ballistic and cruise missiles—will give China its best chance to effect Taiwan's acquiescence. After 2008, Taiwan's expected defensive gains and the seemingly exponential military advances of the United States will preclude a successful attack on the island.

CONCEPTUAL TIME LINE



DISCOURAGING AN ANXIOUS ADVERSARY

With all these trends warily in mind, Beijing will likely take action before its odds become too long, even without assurance of victory (see the table below). To prevent Chinese aggression, the United States should institute closer military

ties with Taiwan, more cautious dealings with the PLA, and a strengthened naval and air presence in the western Pacific, all the while taking sensible, complementary nonmilitary measures. The argument that such a “pro-Taiwan” policy will exacerbate cross-strait relations, self-fulfilling a war prophecy, is flawed; it contradicts the lessons of history and recent experiences with the PRC.

First, as recommended by the bipartisan, congressionally mandated U.S.-China Security Review Commission, the Bush administration should continue to expand its military dialogue with Taiwan.⁷⁰ These important exchanges should enhance the interoperability of Taiwan’s command and control systems for air and surface engagements, antisubmarine warfare, and eventually, theater missile defense—key elements in a Taiwan antiblockade strategy. Issues such as doctrine and force planning should also be covered, with meaningful mentorships at the highest levels. The 2003 Defense Authorization Act requires the Pentagon to report on the feasibility and advisability of conducting combined operational training with, and exchanges of general and flag officers between, the U.S. and Taiwanese forces.⁷¹ If ultimately accepted and properly executed, such an initiative could make Taiwan less dependent on the United States for its immediate security while establishing interoperability in case Washington is forced to stop a Chinese attack on the island. Given the U.S. military’s multiplying resource commitments and defense responsibilities, such a plan is morally compelling as well as strategically sensible. If President Bush means to do “whatever it takes” to help defend the island democracy, the people who live there should be as capable as they are willing to do the same alongside American forces.

Giving Taiwan the ability to defend itself also means reestablishing its slipping qualitative military edge. Taiwan has traditionally maintained a conventionally advanced, if outnumbered, defense force; however, a lopsided PRC-driven arms race fueled by destabilizing Russian and Israeli sales is quickly eroding this advantage. Added to the bargains that have brought hundreds of advanced land-attack Sukhoi fighters to China since the late 1990s, a \$1.6 billion deal with Russia to buy several dozen Su-30MKK Flanker naval fighters equipped with the X-31 supersonic antiship missile does little to allay Taiwanese fears that its maritime lifeline and the protective U.S. Navy are being targeted.⁷² These long-range multirole fighters could be particularly effective against regionally deployed aircraft carriers or eastern Taiwan’s less-defended air and naval facilities.

The robust 2001 arms package and streamlined acquisitions process for Taiwan proves that the Bush administration is committed to buttressing the islanders against attack, but more can still be done. The State Department, for example, would have done well to respond to the latest Su-30 sale by giving

Taipei direct control over its AIM-120C beyond-visual-range air-to-air missiles, which could help blunt a Sukhoi-led attack; yet the ROC air force complains it is no closer to receiving the 120 advanced missiles it bought from Raytheon over two years ago.⁷³ Apparently to avoid Chinese protests, the State Department insists on holding onto these first-line weapons unless a conflict erupts; however, test-firings of the AA-12 Adder, a Russian-made missile comparable to the AIM-120C, strongly suggest that this weapon is now operational in the Chinese air force (which has possessed the weapon since 1999).⁷⁴

2004–2010	After 2010
PRC takes delivery of at least eight Kilo 636 submarines. Taiwan has limited undersea warfare capabilities.	Taiwan takes delivery of up to four diesel submarines; has expanded undersea warfare capability.
Chinese surface warfare advantage over Taiwanese navy; potential threat to U.S.	Improved U.S. and Taiwanese ship defense systems.
Taiwan has limited ballistic missile defense.	Taiwan likely to have layered theater ballistic missile defense.
U.S. homeland vulnerable to strategic missiles.	U.S. has operational national missile defense.

The implications of the air-to-air missile imbalance should not be understated. A computer simulation–aided study by California’s RAND Corporation found that an unanswered AA-12 capability would give China an overwhelming advantage over the ROC air force. The U.S.-China Security Review Commission confirms that an Adder-armed Sukhoi fighter has an advantage over Taiwan’s Mirage 2000-5 equipped with inferior MICA missiles.⁷⁵ The AIM-120Cs are doing little to protect the ROC or deter China warehoused in the United States.

Washington is also reluctant to sell Taipei the Aegis destroyers it craves, in part because of clamorous PRC objections but mainly because the White House thinks it can thereby tease out of Beijing concessions on cross-strait security and nonproliferation matters. Using the destroyers as bargaining chips sounds diplomatically clever, but China’s frenetic missile buildup and unending missile technology transfers to states like Iran all but confirm Beijing’s unwillingness to reform its behavior.⁷⁶ The Aegis ships, then, are yielding no appreciable diplomatic leverage and might as well go to Taiwan while they can still make a positive difference.⁷⁷

The United States also needs to overhaul its military relationship with China, especially with respect to a parade of “confidence building measures” that have disproportionately benefited Beijing over the past decade. Before the White House halted military-to-military ties after the EP-3 was forced down and its

crew detained in April 2001, PLA officials attended elite American military schools and enjoyed access to sensitive facilities, platforms, and force structure information. By contrast, perfunctory U.S. visits to Chinese bases, ships, and schools yielded few real insights into PRC capabilities or thinking, largely because of Beijing's apprehension about revealing weaknesses. Drawing on its own negative experiences with what it calls "extensive" Chinese secrecy, the Pentagon has cautioned policy makers about wide knowledge gaps, conceding that "since the 1980s, U.S. military exchange delegations to China have been shown only 'showcase' units, never any advanced units or operational training or realistic exercises."⁷⁸ Similarly frustrated, the U.S.-China Security Review Commission complains that "whether in the area of threat reduction, budget discussions, or military to military exchanges, the Chinese pattern has been to absorb as much information as possible and share as little as possible."⁷⁹

The moratorium has since been lifted, but it is as yet unclear if Washington will demand equal access in the future. Military exchanges should continue, but at a slower pace, as the security commission recommends, and only if confidence-building measures and other ties are "strictly based on the principles of reciprocity, transparency, consistency, and mutual benefit."⁸⁰ Furthermore, military-to-military ties are useful only so far as they serve U.S. interests; annual Pentagon "cost-benefit analyses" would allow the White House and the Congress to judge such programs on their true merits.

Most importantly, the United States should adopt a strengthened Pacific presence and response doctrine that leaves little doubt in Beijing over Washington's will and ability to interject itself during a cross-strait crisis. This could be achieved most traditionally (and inexpensively) with better regional basing in the Pacific theater, where long distances between current bases and operating areas strain resources. Added to the Guam-based attack submarines, an additional carrier battle group homeported in Japan or Guam would ensure access to the area and make manifest the U.S. ability to defend Taiwan despite myriad global commitments. Aircraft carriers and guided-missile destroyers serve as constant reminders of U.S. power-projection capabilities, while submarines—which potential opponents must presume to be present, even if undetected—make a similar point in a subtler way.

The United States can no longer afford to leave the Taiwan Strait without an aircraft carrier nearby. As one RAND study shows, the adequacy of U.S. Air Force access near that hotspot is uncertain at best because of the distance from South Korea and Japan, and because of those states' unwillingness to avow open support for the United States should it come to the aid of Taiwan in a confrontation with China.⁸¹ New operational concepts like the Global Strike Task Force, which emphasizes expeditionary dispersed operations, would help mitigate the

Far East's "tyranny of distance."⁸² However Washington ultimately decides to expand and deepen its footprint in the western Pacific, the Pentagon should use its improved presence to affirm the readiness and willingness of the United States to counter strong-arm tactics in the area. In the face of a threatening missile test, naval exercise, or mock combined-arms invasion, forward demonstrations will clarify American stated foreign policy interests and thereby minimize misunderstandings and the risk of strategic miscalculation on both sides of the strait.

This fundamental approach to enhancing Taiwanese security is not one of military "containment," which would necessitate many more regional air bases and naval deployments as well as a dramatic expansion of relationships with nations like Vietnam and the Philippines. Neither does it preclude such nonmilitary measures as tighter dual-use export controls and attempts to curb or negate Russian, Israeli, German, and French military sales to Beijing. All such basic initiatives—military, diplomatic, and economic—pursued in tandem, would help discourage Beijing from using force to achieve its perceived destiny. They would also regularly remind Washington that peace in the Taiwan Strait is far from inevitable and deserves its uninterrupted attention. First of all, however, U.S. civilian and military leaders must dismiss the fatally flawed theory that time is on China's side in the struggle over the strait and recognize that the real danger of a PRC attack is in this decade, when Taiwan is most vulnerable, not in the next. Only then will Washington and Taipei act and plan according to a shorter, realistic time line.

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