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# What if . . . "China Attacks Taiwan!"

RICHARD L. RUSSELL

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"The Lacedaemonians gave sentence that the peace was broken and that war was to be made, not so much for the words of the confederates as for fear the Athenian greatness should still increase. For they saw that a great part of Greece was fallen already into their hands."

-- Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*

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"Attack when they are unprepared, make your move when they do not expect it."

"So a military force is established by deception, mobilized by gain, and adapted by division and combination."

-- Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

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In surveying the landscape of international politics, the Taiwan Strait stands out as an area with grave potential for seismic instability. Beijing argues that Taiwan remains a province of China, while Taiwan steadily establishes de facto independence and contemplates the formal announcement of national autonomy. Such a declaration would cross China's political "red line" and push Beijing to the use of force. The United States, meanwhile, clings to a policy of "strategic ambiguity," recognizing only one China, with diplomatic ties to Beijing and withholding diplomatic recognition from Taiwan. The United States argues that any Chinese military aggression against Taiwan would be a serious threat to American interests, but so far has stopped short of extending formal security guarantees to Taiwan, fearing that such agreements would embolden Taiwan to formally declare independence and trigger a conflict with China. The Bush Administration does appear to be edging toward a more assertive position in support of Taiwan than was the case during the Clinton era, however. President Bush in April 2001 publicly stated that the United States would do "whatever it took" to defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese attack.[1]

Despite the intractable political dilemma, many commentators and observers dismiss the potential for a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. They argue that China's public comments on reserving the right to use force to cut the Gordian knot amounts to little more than bluff and bluster because China will lack the military means to attack and occupy Taiwan for at least ten years. This confident assessment lends itself to the United States resting comfortably on its current policy position of strategic ambiguity and dismissing the potential for a military conflagration in the Taiwan Strait that could bring American and Chinese forces into direct combat.

What if the prescience of these analysts is less than perfect? This article constructs a devil's advocate analysis to weigh against the analyses that see little prospect for major Chinese military action against Taiwan. It suggests that the Chinese could use strategic surprise to compensate for shortcomings in military capabilities and orchestrate a successful military campaign to take control of Taiwan. The Chinese could do so by readily deceiving outside observers about the scope of their sealift and airlift capabilities, which would fundamentally undermine the linchpin assumptions of sanguine analyses about Chinese force projection capabilities. The Chinese also could use massive barrages of surface-to-surface missiles armed with weapons of mass destruction to profoundly disrupt Taiwan's air

force, air defenses, and other measures to counter Chinese amphibious and airborne assaults in a coordinated campaign to occupy Taiwan. What the Chinese military lacks in technological sophistication could be compensated for in military mass, contrary to the assertions of the optimists.

This sort of devil's advocate analysis has significant implications for US policy. American policymakers can better protect national interests if policy and military options are thought through long before the outbreak of a cross-Strait conflict than if they wait and are caught off-guard by a Chinese surprise attack.

### **Surprise Attack and Deception**

Surprise attack is the use of military force against an unsuspecting and ill-prepared adversary. The aim of surprise attack is to strike before an adversary is able to bring his defenses to full strength and to deny him the ability to marshal the resources needed for counterattack.

Surprise attack is a particularly attractive strategy for a nation-state that needs to compensate for military inadequacies or shortcomings. Clausewitz said of surprise that "whenever it is achieved on a grand scale, it confuses the enemy and lowers his morale; many examples, great and small, show how this in turn multiplies the results." [2] Surprise acts as a force multiplier that enhances the military effectiveness of a potentially handicapped aggressor. As Michael Handel explained of the value of strategic surprise, "In compensating for the weaker position of the attacker, it will act as a force multiplier that may drastically reverse the ratio of forces in the attacker's favor." [3] Although Handel used force ratios as a measure of capabilities, another measure is the technological sophistication of weapon systems. A nation-state might turn to surprise attack to multiply the combat effectiveness of its arms that are technologically inferior to those of its adversary.

Deception operations go hand-in-hand with surprise attack. In many instances, surprise attack is facilitated by deception operations designed to mislead an adversary's intelligence collection and analysis. Handel defined deception as "the deliberate and subtle dissemination of misleading information to an intelligence service by its adversaries." [4] In his book *Intelligence Power in Peace and War*, Michael Herman elaborates:

Deception works by making false evidence--false reports through agents, false documents, bogus radio traffic, deceptive displays--available for foreign intelligence collection. Successful deception is usually designed to fit in with and magnify its target's own preconceptions. Its ideal is to make the victim deceive himself, while minimizing the amount of genuine information that has to be given to build up source credibility. [5]

Deception operations will deny an adversary an unambiguous warning or indication of impending war. Without unambiguous warning, nation-states may be reluctant to shift to a wartime footing, thereby presenting an aggressor with a window of opportunity to levy the first blow in combat and exploit momentum in the conflict's initial stages.

Nation-states have repeatedly defeated the best efforts by modern intelligence organizations to clearly perceive the political-military intentions and capabilities of adversaries before the onset of combat. The history of warfare, littered as it is with examples of surprise attack and their enabling deception operations, attests to this stubborn reality. Cases of surprise attack by an adversary--and of intelligence failure on the part of the victim--include the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, the North Korean attack on South Korea and the subsequent intervention of China, and the 1973 Middle East war.

The reasons for one's vulnerability to surprise attack and intelligence failure are many. As Ernest May concluded from an exhaustive study of intelligence assessment before the world wars, intelligence agencies are

. . . vulnerable to willful deception and perhaps even more to self-deception. They are vulnerable in the first place because they follow an almost unavoidable rule of trying to fit the evidence they have into some coherent, rational whole. . . . They are vulnerable in the second place because, partly perhaps from awareness of the power of prejudice and preconception, they have a preference for data which are quantifiable and therefore appear comparatively objective. . . . And thirdly they are vulnerable to deception because, after having to judge hard issues, they are prone to look for confirming rather than disconfirming

evidence.[6]

Abraham Ben-Zvi similarly concluded from a review of surprise attacks that states fall victim to their own preconceived notions of their adversaries: "Oblivious to the asymmetry of motivation that existed between the parties to the conflict, they remained aloof to the possibility that their opponent, while militarily weaker, might be willing to accept greater costs and risks than expected." [7] Richard Betts observes that in many cases "hesitancy in communication and disbelief on the part of leaders were reinforced by deceptive enemy maneuvers that cast doubt on the data." [8]

With such a long historical record of surprise attack and enabling deception operations in warfare, one wonders how potential victims can avoid these calamities. One way is to apply a devil's advocate analysis to a conflict-prone situation. The goal of a devil's advocate analysis, as Robert Jervis observes, is to increase the chances that policymakers "will consider alternative explanations of specific bits of data and think more carefully about the beliefs and images that underlie their policies." [9] Jervis wisely adds that "those who listen to the arguments are in a good position to learn what perspectives they are rejecting, what evidence they should examine more closely, and what assumptions need further thought. As a result, fewer important questions will be overlooked because everyone agrees on the answer." [10]

### **Conventional Wisdom: China Lacks the Military Means**

As perceived by the West, the Chinese military is impressive in size, but underwhelming in technological sophistication. The Chinese have an active force military of about 2,470,000 personnel, with some 7,060 main battle tanks, 4,800 infantry fighting vehicles and armored personnel carriers, 65 submarines, 20 destroyers, and 3,520 combat aircraft. The Chinese military dwarfs the size of Taiwan's armed forces with its 370,000 active-duty troops, about 750 main battle tanks, 1,175 infantry fighting vehicles and armored personnel carriers, 4 submarines, 12 destroyers, and 668 combat aircraft. [11] The bulk of China's order-of-battle, however, consists of obsolescent Soviet-styled and Soviet-built equipment. Even the most modern Chinese weapons are inferior one-for-one with the Western-built equipment supplied to Taiwan. China's 50 Su-27 aircraft, for example, could be countered by Taiwan's F-16s and Mirage 2000s. Taiwanese pilots are also better trained than their Chinese counterparts; they receive double the flight hours per year for training. [12]

Outside observers also assume that they have a good handle on the size and scope of the Chinese ballistic missile program. Respected estimates of Chinese tactical ballistic missile inventories are at about 240 ballistic missiles, including 200 CSS-6/M-9 missiles with a range of 600km and 40 CSS-7/M-11 with a range of 120-300km, [13] both of which are capable of hitting Taiwan from the mainland. Many observers envision the use of Chinese ballistic missile strikes as a means to harass Taiwan and scare off foreign vessels from visiting Taiwan's ports or to raise havoc with the Taiwanese stock market, but they neglect the notion of integrating ballistic missile capabilities into a major Chinese military campaign to overrun Taiwanese defenses and occupy the island. In this vein, for example, Denny Roy argues that "although presently incapable of capturing Taiwan by invading it, China could seriously harass and undermine its economic well-being through operations short of invasion." [14]

Most significantly, many observers judge that Chinese military lift capabilities are too limited to project the forces needed for a successful invasion of the island. Michael O'Hanlon, for example, assesses that China's 70 or so amphibious ships could move no more than 10,000 to 15,000 troops with their equipment, including some 400 armored vehicles, while another 6,000 troops could be moved by airlift. [15] The well-respected International Institute for Strategic Studies estimates that "it would take approximately 800-1,000 large landing craft nearly two weeks to transport the required 30 infantry divisions to Taiwan. At present the Chinese Navy could move one, or perhaps two divisions." [16]

Outside observers judge that Chinese sealift and airlift are so limited that there is no near-term threat to Taiwan of Chinese invasion. O'Hanlon, for example, confidently assesses that China will pose no substantial threat to Taiwan for at least ten years. [17] Roy asserts that for at least ten to 15 years, "The physical conquest of Taiwan will remain a daunting prospect." [18] David Shambaugh argues that China "remains at least five to seven years away from having the necessary capability to mount a full blockade and amphibious attack against the island (both of which would

necessitate air dominance and sea-denial capability)."[19]

## **Thinking and Fighting Unconventionally**

Conventional wisdom also assumes that any near-term Chinese attempt to invade Taiwan would be an irrational act because China needs much more time to procure and deploy more technologically sophisticated weapon systems. This assumption overlooks the political and historical wisdom revealed by Richard Betts in observing, "The probability of armed conflict depends not only on the actual dangers of war to the attacker, but also on the perceived dangers of peace." [20] Beijing does not have the combat power needed to replicate a US Marine Corps-style amphibious assault on Taiwan, but Chinese leaders may fear that they will never have sufficient time to develop such capabilities. Time is eroding Chinese interests by allowing Taipei the luxury of strengthening its economic and political linkages to the world while improving its military qualitatively with modern and technologically sophisticated weapon systems from the West, particularly from the United States.[21]

Counter-intuitively, the bolstering of Taiwanese military capabilities may be decreasing Taiwanese security. As Betts explains, "Defenders may assume erroneously that their military strength inhibits the enemy, not recognizing that consciousness of weakness may impel him to compensate with audacity in order to redress the balance." [22] Beijing may be feeling pressure to move militarily sooner rather than later, worrying that the gap between Taiwanese and Chinese military capabilities and Taiwan's integration into the world at large will only grow with time, particularly if Taiwan receives protection under a US theater ballistic missile defense system.[23]

A devil's advocate analysis assumes that under these conditions, Chinese civilian authorities have tasked or will soon task military planners to be prepared to execute a military campaign to conquer Taiwan. In anticipation of the order, the Chinese military may have had in place a prolonged, sustained, and clandestine effort to bolster those military assets needed to project power across the Strait. The Chinese--particularly with the recent publication of the Chinese military White Paper--have encouraged the West to believe that Beijing is increasing its military transparency to the outside world.[24] What the outside world knows of Chinese military assets, however, may be just the tip of the iceberg.

The Chinese undoubtedly are aware that outside observers look to Chinese inventories of sealift and airlift assets to gauge China's ability to launch an invasion across the Strait. With this in mind, the Chinese could conceive of and execute a deception campaign to reassure outside observers that their estimates of China's sealift and airlift assets are on the mark, while the Chinese military clandestinely acquires and exercises the lift assets needed to increase their capabilities to send sizable forces across the Strait.

There is evidence that the Chinese place a high priority on surprise and the enabling features of denial and deception in their military planning. Mark Burles and Abram Shulsky judge from reviewing the history of the Chinese use of force that "a key characteristic of Chinese use of force in actual conflict has been the importance of the element of surprise." [25] According to the US Department of Defense, a 1993 Chinese National Defense University treatise also suggests that the Chinese military recognizes the value of conducting deception operations, especially in a crisis involving Taiwan, to create ambiguity about Chinese intentions and to force Taiwan's political and military leadership to misallocate resources. The Chinese report argues that deception is intended to induce the enemy to reach erroneous conclusions about the activities and objectives and adds that camouflage and deception can disperse the enemy's troops, waste their firepower, and disrupt high-technology weapons.[26]

Additionally, the Chinese see surprise as a way to overcome more technologically sophisticated adversaries. As Michael Pillsbury's impressive research reveals, a theme that exists in Chinese strategic writings is "the requirement for 'the inferior' to preemptively strike the 'superior' in order to paralyze his nerve centers and block his logistics. Chinese military books and articles on US weaknesses date back at least to the Gulf War in 1991 and continue to appear, drawing on analysis of that conflict." [27]

The manufacture of air- and sealift assets presents no formidable technological obstacle to the Chinese, a fact that eludes the conventional wisdom. The Chinese have the indigenous capability to manufacture both aircraft and ships capable of ferrying troops across the Strait.[28] The Chinese are also fully able to take active measures to ensure that clandestinely procured air- and sealift assets go undetected by the West. A US Department of Defense report observes

that "the Chinese are proficient at using camouflage, terrain masking, underground facilities, decoys, and other forms of denial and deception to conceal military activity and inhibit timely warning." [29] The Chinese political objective of reunifying Taiwan to the mainland should be more than sufficient incentive to devote the economic resources needed to support such a clandestine effort to build and hide substantial military lift assets.

With little difficulty, China could increase the production lines of their transport aircraft and keep the additional aircraft in warehouses and underground shelters to hide them from overhead satellite detection. Chinese conscripts could receive jump training over a sustained period without detection by the outside world. Such efforts could substantially increase the number of troops that China could send over the Strait for airdrops on Taiwan.

Likewise, the Chinese could undertake clandestine efforts to build up their sealift capacities. The manufacture of sea-going barges is hardly a technological achievement beyond their grasp. They could undertake efforts to substantially augment their sealift assets while taking care to keep the naval assets under massive nettings in isolated harbors away from main naval bases that attract the most attention from prying Western eyes.

The Chinese could also be increasing their production of ballistic missiles well beyond the scope assumed by the West. The importance that the Chinese attach to ballistic missiles in compensating for the inadequacies of their air force was evident in the 1996 Taiwan Strait crisis. Ballistic missile batteries--which were nearly impossible for the United States to detect in the open desert during the 1991 Gulf War--could easily be concealed in the rugged terrain along the extensive Chinese coastline.

### **China's Campaign**

What might a campaign against Taiwan that uses these clandestinely developed military capabilities look like? The Chinese could seek to lull the Taiwanese and the Americans into a sense of political security to lessen the military preparations to defend the island. The Chinese might engage in a steady stream of diplomatic activity to portray an image of satisfaction with the status quo and a heavy political commitment to nurturing the political dialogue with Taiwan. As Handel observed from his study of strategic surprise, "The attacker takes care to maintain a facade of routine diplomacy, lulling diplomats of the intended victim into suppressing the military warning signals through optimistic political interpretations." [30] Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, for example, undertook such activities to lull the Israelis into a sense of security prior to the outset of the 1973 Middle East war. Similarly, the Chinese could surround cross-Strait visits and talks with great fanfare and publicly claim that these endeavors herald a new foundation for cross-Strait relations. In such an environment, few statesmen on Taiwan or in the United States would be calling for increased military vigilance.

In such a political atmosphere, the "routine" exercising of Chinese naval assets and increased air, air defense, and ground force activity might attract no exceptional attention. The Chinese have made Taiwan and the United States accustomed to seeing large-scale annual exercises over a period of several years. Increased Chinese military activity could be perceived by the outside world as normal. Politicians, moreover, could caution against any increased alert posture of Taiwanese and US forces, worrying that such measures would undermine the warming political and diplomatic activity the Chinese had demonstrated. In this hypothetical scenario, however, these military exercises would represent the movement of the Chinese military to a wartime footing and the foundation for a massive military assault on Taiwan.

The Chinese might judge that the initial stages of their military campaign should concentrate on Taiwan's center of gravity in its command, control, communications, computers, and intelligence system. The operational concept would be to destroy the Taiwanese military's central nervous system and cause the air, naval, and ground force limbs to go limp. The Chinese could fire massive "bolt out of the blue" surface-to-surface missile barrages to saturate areas in which critical Taiwanese civilian and military infrastructure is located. Barrages of hundreds of missiles would be required to compensate for missile inaccuracies. Targeted facilities could include service and command headquarters, civilian and military residences and offices, and government facilities. The Chinese might aim at toppling buildings to trap and kill as many civilian and military leaders as possible in one fell swoop. [31] Such missile barrages would represent a military effort to "decapitate" Taiwan's leadership and significantly erode Taiwan's ability to orchestrate defenses against the unfolding Chinese campaign.

The Chinese might be more willing than their Western counterparts to integrate the use of weapons of mass destruction into their surprise attack to magnify the psychological blow against their victim. China's leaders might reason that an ambitious military campaign against Taiwan in and of itself would make Beijing an international outcast, and therefore the use of weapons of mass destruction would only marginally contribute to its ouster from the international community. The Chinese might argue that the use of weapons of mass destruction in combat would set no international precedent because they were used against a renegade province in an "internal affair," not in an international conflict. In addition, the Chinese are less adverse than many in the West to using brutal violence against their own citizens for political objectives--particularly if they challenge the authority of the state--as evident in the 1989 Chinese crackdown on student protesters in Tiananmen Square.

China could fire a handful of ballistic missiles armed with tactical nuclear warheads to increase the odds of killing Taiwanese civilian and military leaders. Some research suggests that the Chinese see military utility in the battlefield use of nuclear weapons. For example, Alastair Johnston observes that "in contrast to US proponents of the assured-destruction concept of deterrence, most of the Chinese strategists who write on nuclear questions explicitly reject the notion that nuclear weapons have overturned Clausewitz's axiom that warfare is the continuation of politics." [32] Johnston suggests that "the predominant view appears to be that the nuclear revolution does not by itself eliminate the possibility that states (including China) can use nuclear weapons in wartime for achievable political ends." [33] One can speculate that the Chinese might integrate the use of tactical nuclear weapons delivered by ballistic missiles into the battle plan for taking Taiwan rather than adopt the Western conception of nuclear weapons as weapons of deterrence and last resort.

Ballistic missile warheads also might be loaded with a variety of persistent and non-persistent chemical agents to incapacitate Taiwan's air and air defense forces on the ground in order to gain air superiority. The Chinese could lob persistent chemical warheads on Taiwan's surface-to-air missile sites to impede Taiwanese air defense crews from operating their systems. Less-persistent agents could be fired on Taiwan's main air bases to impede Taiwan's efforts to get pilots and their aircraft airborne. These efforts would give the technologically inferior Chinese air force a window of opportunity to make sorties with conventional munitions against air and air defense force installations as well as against naval and ground forces.

The Chinese fighter aircraft could also exploit this opportunity to escort Chinese transport aircraft ferrying airborne troops across the Taiwan Strait. Chinese airborne drops could concentrate on Taiwan's main and secondary air force operating bases. Airborne drops could be timed to coincide with the evaporation of the non-persistent chemical agents targeted against the airbases. These troops would secure the perimeters around the intact runways to enable larger, troop-carrying aircraft--perhaps even Chinese commercial aircraft seconded to the military--to land and rapidly reinforce the lightly armed airborne soldiers. [34]

China possesses airborne forces that could serve as the seedbed for nurturing more substantial airborne and airmobile forces than currently suspected by the outside world. According to the US Department of Defense, China's 15th Airborne Army consists of three airborne divisions, each with about 10,000 troops. [35] And since the 1991 Gulf War, China has been devoting considerably more resources to the development of special operations forces. [36] As China downsizes its huge conscript military, it is focusing greater attention on more readily dispatched combat troops. China has about 14 divisions designated as "rapid reaction" units. These are combined-arms units capable of deploying without significant train-up or reserve augmentation. [37] Chinese airborne troops dispatched in an initial wave could secure Taiwanese airbases for the ferrying--in both Chinese military transport and commercial aircraft--of such "rapid reaction" airmobile troops.

While Taiwan's military would be struggling to recover from ballistic missile strikes, tactical nuclear weapon detonations, chemical strikes, and airborne assaults, the Chinese would be mounting amphibious assaults against Taiwan's beaches. The amphibious landings could occur relatively soon after the ballistic missile barrages if most of China's overt naval capabilities had debarked from China's main ports, ostensibly for routine training exercises in the Strait, before the missile strikes began. China's clandestine amphibious assault equipment would sail from covert ports only after the commencement of the ballistic missile barrages. The limited coastlines and the Taiwanese military's long anticipation of these avenues of Chinese approach would make these landings extremely difficult for China's troops, but the Chinese might eventually overcome the island defenses with their sheer mass and the attrition of Taiwan's

defenders. The amphibious assaults in this scenario, however, would be primarily intended by Beijing as diversionary attacks to draw Taiwanese ground forces away from counterattack operations at Taiwan's air bases, where the Chinese would insert the lion's share of their ground attack forces into Taiwan.

In other words, instead of mounting an amphibious assault on Taiwan as assumed by most conventional analyses of Chinese military capabilities, Beijing could choose to mount a coup de main. As described by Edward Luttwak, in a coup de main, "bodies of troops large enough to suppress opposition quickly are simultaneously placed directly on each target . . . and the enemy is prevented from any serious resistance by the sheer magnitude of the attack and also by the fact that its headquarters and commanders are attacked at the very onset." [38] A multidimensional coup de main would stand in marked operational contrast to a seaborne and laborious amphibious operation, which Taiwanese forces are best prepared to defend against. In an article in *The National Interest*, James Lilly and Carl Ford observe that "China's General Staff seems to have recognized that its threats of a blockade, an air war, or an amphibious assault have become less and less credible, because such time-consuming operations would provide outsiders an opportunity to weigh in on Taiwan's side." [39] Such a conclusion would press Chinese military planners to design war plans for an airborne coup de main launched with strategic surprise.

After gaining multiple footholds on Taiwan--principally at airbases and reinforcing forces there with air-ferried troops--Chinese "rapid reaction" forces could move out from these de facto garrisons to secure ground lines of communication throughout the island. They would have the momentum against Taiwanese ground forces, which would be in wide disarray because of the decimated Taiwanese command structure. Chinese rapid reaction forces would operate with air support provided by China's air force on the mainland and would press the attack quickly to consolidate control on the island before the United States could intervene with carrier airpower.

After consolidating its ground forces on Taiwan, China's most formidable challenge would be to withstand international condemnation and the imposition of economic sanctions against the Chinese mainland and Taiwan. The Chinese would have to be prepared for weathering a US-imposed blockade. In that regard, they might rely on hundreds of small vessels for cross-Strait resupply operations to complicate the US Navy efforts. Beijing might calculate that it could infiltrate enough supplies through the US blockade to sustain its forces long enough on Taiwan for a political campaign to undercut international sanctions by publicly showing that the Taiwanese people suffer more than the Chinese military from the shortage of goods coming in from abroad. The Chinese also could hold out the prospect of renewing international investment and business in Taiwan after the blockade and sanctions are lifted, to increase domestic political pressure on the United States and the West to accept China's occupation of Taiwan as a fait accompli. China's leaders probably would calculate that they could withstand international isolation in the near to medium terms, but that China's gigantic consumer market would lead Western businesses to compel their governments over the longer run to lift or ease international sanctions.

### **"Improbable" Is Not "Impossible"**

Is such a scenario plausible? A first glance, it might not appear so. If one pauses to ponder cases of strategic surprise in military history, however, one is less likely to dismiss this scenario as pure fantasy. The idea that the Japanese would be foolhardy enough to consider an attack on superior American forces in the Pacific was conventional wisdom right up until Pearl Harbor in 1941. In 1950, American policymakers dismissed the notion of Chinese military intervention on the Korean Peninsula until American forces crossed the Yalu River. Israeli intelligence was adamant that Egyptian forces would be unable to wage war against Israel until they could achieve air superiority right up until Egyptian ground forces crossed the Suez Canal in 1973. [40] Holding these historical examples of strategic surprise in the forefront of one's thoughts induces a sense of caution and humility about the limits of foresight in knowing the prospects for war.

Sanguine assessments of China's cross-Strait capabilities contain a heavy dose of ethnocentric bias and "mirror imaging." [41] They assume that a Chinese military campaign against Taiwan would require the operational and technological sophistication of a US-planned and executed campaign. These assessments further assume that until the Chinese can reach a military parity with US forces, Beijing will judge that a campaign to occupy Taiwan lies beyond its reach. The Chinese, however, are likely to approach the military challenge with a fundamentally different strategic mindset. Chinese military planners may not have the luxury of indefinitely postponing plans against Taiwan, and they

would have to craft a strategy to match Chinese military means.

While a US-planned and executed campaign would seek to hold casualties to a minimum, the Chinese would be less concerned about losing soldiers. They have the largest population of any country and would have the men to replace fallen soldiers with ease. The Chinese amply demonstrated their willingness to throw soldiers into battle and sustain heavy casualties in the Korean War. They struck the advancing US Eighth Army with some 180,000 troops in 18 divisions, and the Chinese suffered about 960,000 battle casualties during the entire war.[42]

The Chinese also could afford a substantial attrition of military arms and equipment. The Chinese military is largely obsolescent and will have to be replaced and redesigned for the coming century. Instead of letting the military materiel simply decay, Beijing might calculate that it would be a more prudent use of national resources to expend the arms and equipment in combat for the noble cause of reuniting the renegade province of Taiwan to the mainland.

The tendency in the West is to assume that large standing militaries with a conscripted rank-and-file have gone the way of the dinosaur. The 1990-91 Gulf War against Iraq strongly suggests that a smaller, professional, and technologically sophisticated force will have greater combat effectiveness against a larger, mass-conscript military. As Eliot Cohen has noted, "At long last, after a reign of almost two centuries, the age of the mass military manned by short-service conscripts and equipped with the products of high-volume military manufacturing is coming to an end." [43] Nevertheless, it would be a grave mistake to conclude that old-style mass militaries have no combat potential.

Military effectiveness is in no small measure dependent upon time, circumstance, and strategy. The Chinese strategy best fitted to its capabilities would be to launch an assault on Taiwan with little regard for casualties or equipment to inflict massive casualties on Taiwanese forces and overwhelm their more modern forces with mass. The Chinese strategy would more resemble a butcher's meat cleaver than a surgeon's scalpel.

### **Challenges to American Statecraft**

This analysis of a hypothetical attack highlights formidable challenges facing American statecraft in Asia in the coming years. Simply sitting back and blindly assuming the status quo in the Taiwan Strait will go on in perpetuity would not be the basis for prudent statecraft. Policymakers must think ahead against contingencies and fashion policies to mitigate the circumstances that could lead to a conflict. Failing that, they must develop options for getting out a conflict with national interests intact. Policymakers must assume for the basis of contingency planning that a Chinese attack against Taiwan takes Washington by surprise. As Betts prudently warns, intelligence failures--and by extension, surprise attacks--"are not only inevitable, they are natural." [44] Rather than risk being swept away by the crush of cascading events in the midst of a crisis, it is preferable to have policy options in hand before a crisis in order to be better able to channel it into desired directions if it happens.

Policymakers must ask, How are we to reduce the incentives and chances of a Chinese military assault on Taiwan? The policy of strategic ambiguity has worked well in the past, in part by keeping both China and Taiwan guessing as to whether or not the United States would militarily intervene to stop Chinese military aggression against Taiwan. Strategic ambiguity may have induced caution in the Chinese leadership about the wisdom of resorting to the military option for dealing with Taiwan as well as bridled Taiwanese enthusiasm for publicly declaring their independence, fearing that without a US security guarantee the Chinese would retaliate militarily.

The American policy of strategic ambiguity may be unsustainable, however.[45] The Chinese are increasingly concerned by the steady march of Taiwan toward de facto independence while frustrated that negotiations for reunification are going nowhere. Moreover, both the Chinese and the Taiwanese--in the aftermath of the 1996 Taiwan crisis and reinforced by President Bush's remarks in April 2001--probably have concluded that the United States would indeed come to Taiwan's rescue in the event of a cross-Strait conflict. As Chas. Freeman has written in *Foreign Affairs*, "China's leaders have always said they would go to war to prevent the permanent division of China. They now believe that they are likely to have to do so." [46] Robert Ross similarly wrote that after the 1996 crisis, "Chinese policymakers must now assume that regardless of the source of a future crisis, including a formal Taiwan declaration of sovereign independence, the United States will almost certainly intervene militarily against Chinese use of force." [47] From Taipei's perspective, this sense of security coupled with growing Taiwanese nationalism will increase

Taiwan's incentive for declaring independence.

Some observers argue that the United States should abandon strategic ambiguity and squarely commit to lending direct military assistance to Taiwan in the event of a Chinese assault. They judge that a public pledge to directly defend Taiwan would bolster the deterrent against a Chinese military move and reduce the chances for war, a view that receives a sympathetic hearing from key Bush Administration officials. As Richard Betts and Thomas Christensen prudently warn, however, "Before being deterred, Beijing would have to weigh the costs of inaction against action. The perceived cost of inaction against Taiwanese independence is very high." [48] The Chinese might not be any more deterred from militarily facing the United States than President Lincoln would have been had the British and the French sided with the South in the American Civil War. Beijing probably would conclude that it had more vital interests at stake in the conflict than the United States and would be more willing to run commensurate risks in settling the conflict once and for all. As a Chinese military officer put it, "The Taiwan issue involves the territorial integrity and national sovereignty of China. It is our vital security interest to prevent Taiwan from drifting toward independence. In contrast, the future of Taiwan does not involve US vital interests." [49]

Beijing might calculate that a surprise attack--one including the use of chemical and tactical nuclear weapons--would catch the United States off-balance and compel Washington to rethink the wisdom of American military intervention given the risks that Beijing is willing to run to achieve its national interests. [50] The Chinese remember the nuclear threats that the United States used during crises over Quemoy and Matsu in the 1950s. Beijing has made thinly veiled threats that it now has nuclear weapons that will deny the United States similar coercive ability in any future crisis. During a 1995 visit to China by a former high-ranking Defense Department official, the Chinese military's deputy chief of staff said that China was prepared to sacrifice millions of people in a nuclear exchange to defend its interests in preventing Taiwan's independence. He implied that Chinese nuclear capabilities would hold in check the United States' nuclear power: "You will not sacrifice Los Angeles to protect Taiwan." [51] The detonation of a few tactical nuclear weapons in a campaign against Taiwan would dramatically underscore that danger.

In the event of a real cross-Strait attack, the Chinese imperative would be to strike Taiwan fast and hard. Beijing would want to avoid a US military buildup in the region--similar to that dispatched in the 1996 crisis--and lessen the prospects of an early US intervention that could prevent Chinese forces from gaining footholds on Taiwan. The use of tactical nuclear weapons and chemical munitions might work to delay a US response even more than the initial shock of a bold cross-Strait attack.

The scenario is not impossible. The Chinese might want to resort to force in the near to medium terms before Taiwan has time to strengthen its defenses under US tutelage. In short, storm clouds are gathering in Asia, and war over the Taiwan Strait could come sooner rather than later. Only if we consider the possibility can we prudently prepare to discourage it or to deal with it.

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## NOTES

The author is grateful to Richard Betts, Eliot Cohen, and several additional reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions on drafts of this article.

1. Steven Mufson, "President Pledges Defense of Taiwan," *The Washington Post*, 26 April 2001, p. A1. For an excellent discussion of the US dilemma in the Taiwan Strait, see Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, "China-Taiwan: US Debates and Policy Choices," *Survival*, 40 (Winter 1998-99), 150-67.

2. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1986), p. 198.

3. Michael I. Handel, "Intelligence and the Problem of Strategic Surprise," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 7 (September 1984), 229-30.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 236.

5. Michael Herman, *Intelligence Power in Peace and War* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996), p. 170.
6. Ernest R. May, "Capabilities and Proclivities," in *Knowing One's Enemies: Intelligence Assessment before the Two World Wars*, ed. Ernest R. May (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1984), pp. 537-38.
7. Abraham Ben-Zvi, "Hindsight and Foresight: A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of Surprise Attacks," *World Politics*, 28 (April 1976), 394.
8. Richard K. Betts, "Analysis, War, and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures Are Inevitable," *World Politics*, 31 (October 1978), 63.
9. Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1976), p. 416.
10. Ibid.
11. International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), "Taiwan's Military: Assessing Strengths and Weaknesses," *Strategic Comments*, 6 (May 2000); and IISS, *The Military Balance, 2000-2001* (London: Oxford Univ. Press for IISS, 2000), pp. 194-97.
12. IISS, "Taiwan's Military: Assessing Strengths and Weaknesses."
13. IISS, *The Military Balance, 2000-2001*, p. 194.
14. Denny Roy, "Tensions in the Taiwan Strait," *Survival*, 42 (Spring 2000), 77.
15. Michael O'Hanlon, "Why China Cannot Conquer Taiwan," *International Security*, 25 (Fall 2000), 62.
16. IISS, "Taiwan's Military: Assessing Strengths and Weaknesses."
17. O'Hanlon, p. 53.
18. Roy, p. 85.
19. David Shambaugh, "Sino-American Strategic Relations: From Partners to Competitors," *Survival*, 42 (Spring 2000), 102. For another pessimistic assessment of the prospects for a successful Chinese invasion of Taiwan through 2005, see David A. Shlapak, David T. Orletsky, and Barry A. Wilson, *Dire Strait? Military Aspects of the China-Taiwan Confrontation and Options for U.S. Policy* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2000).
20. Richard K. Betts, *Surprise Attack: Lessons for Defense Planning* (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 1982), p. 128.
21. Some scholars argue that Taiwan's military in the longer run will not be able to keep pace with China's military modernization efforts. See David Shambaugh, "A Matter of Time: Taiwan's Eroding Military Advantage," *Washington Quarterly*, 23 (Spring 2000), 119-33; and Thomas E. Ricks, "Taiwan Seen Vulnerable to Attack: Pentagon Study Says Isolation Keeps Defense Weak," *The Washington Post*, 31 March 2000, p. A1. The point here is that notwithstanding the facts on the ground on Taiwan, China may judge that Taipei in the coming years stands to gain even greater infusions of Western military technology--particularly national missile defenses--than has been the case to date.
22. Betts, *Surprise Attack*, p. 129.
23. For a discussion of the destabilizing effects of a theater missile defense system, see Thomas J. Christensen, "China, the U.S.-Japan Alliance, and the Security Dilemma in East Asia," *International Security*, 23 (Spring 1999), 49-80.
24. See Philip P. Pan, "China Offers More Detail on Military Operations," *The Washington Post*, 18 October 2000, p. A18.

25. Mark Burles and Abram N. Shulsky, *Patterns in China's Use of Force: Evidence from History and Doctrinal Writings* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2000), p. 5. For a fascinating account of the limits of the outside world's knowledge of how Chinese military and intelligence officials think, see David Shambaugh, "China's Military Views the World: Ambivalent Security," *International Security*, 24 (Winter 1999-2000), 52-79.
26. US Department of Defense, Report to Congress, Pursuant to the FY99 Appropriations Bill, "The Security Situation in the Taiwan Strait," p. 11, internet, [http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/twstrait\\_02261999.html](http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/twstrait_02261999.html).
27. Michael Pillsbury, *China Debates the Future Security Environment* (Washington: National Defense Univ. Press, 2000), p. 77.
28. For background on the variety of sealift assets in Chinese inventories known to the outside world, see *Jane's Fighting Ships, 2000-2001* (Alexandria, Va.: Jane's Information Group, 2000), pp. 136-42. For background on the variety of known transport aircraft in Chinese inventories, see *Jane's All the World's Aircraft, 2000-2001* (Alexandria, Va.: Jane's Information Group, 2000), pp. 78-79, 84-87. These surveys clearly show that the manufacture of sealift and airlift capabilities is well within the grasp of the Chinese.
29. US Department of Defense, Report to Congress, Pursuant to the FY2000 National Defense Authorization Act, "Annual Report on the Military Power of the People's Republic of China," p. 19, internet, <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Jun2000/china06222000.htm>.
30. Handel, p. 260.
31. The Chinese also could use a variety of covert means to supplement the ballistic missile attacks to take down Taiwan's command, control, communications, computers, and intelligence mechanisms. Clandestine agents could wage "cyber warfare" and conduct assassinations and sabotage operations against key figures and communications nodes.
32. Alastair Iain Johnston, "China's New 'Old Thinking': The Concept of Limited Deterrence," in *East Asian Security*, ed. Michael E. Brown, Sean M. Lynn-Jones, and Steven E. Miller (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), p. 196.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 197.
34. The Chinese have some 425 transport aircraft, including 14 Il76 and six Boeing 737-200 (IISS, *The Military Balance, 2000-2001*, p. 197). These aircraft could be modified to accommodate airborne troops and augment clandestinely procured military aircraft capabilities.
35. US Department of Defense, "The Security Situation in the Taiwan Strait," p. 6.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
37. US Department of Defense, "Annual Report on the Military Power of the People's Republic of China," p. 18.
38. Edward N. Luttwak, *The Pentagon and the Art of War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), p. 56.
39. James Lilley and Carl Ford, "China's Military: A Second Opinion," *The National Interest*, No. 57 (Fall 1999), p. 76. This article was a critical response to Bates Gill and Michael O'Hanlon's "China's Hollow Military," *The National Interest*, No. 56 (Summer 1999), in which the authors argued that the Chinese military poses no serious threat to the US military.
40. For a thoughtful treatment of the intelligence failure in the 1973 war, see Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch, *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), pp. 95-131.
41. For an insightful treatment of the dangers posed by "mirror imaging" to strategic intelligence analysis, see Eliot Cohen's essay in *Intelligence Requirements for the 1990s: Collection, Analysis, Counterintelligence and Covert Action*, ed. Roy Godson (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1989), pp. 71-96.

42. R. Ernest Dupuy and Trevor N. Dupuy, *Encyclopedia of Military History: From 3500 B.C. to Present* (4th ed.; New York: HarperCollins, 1993), pp. 1359, 1365.
43. Eliot A. Cohen, "A Revolution in Warfare," *Foreign Affairs*, 75 (March/April 1996), 47.
44. Betts, "Analysis, War, and Decision," p. 88.
45. For an articulate argument on this score, see Eliot A. Cohen, "'One China' Policy is Obsolete," *The Wall Street Journal*, 21 March 2000, p. A26.
46. Chas. W. Freeman, Jr., "Preventing War in the Taiwan Strait: Restraining Taiwan--and Beijing," *Foreign Affairs*, 77 (July/August 1998), 7.
47. Robert S. Ross, "The 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait Confrontation: Coercion, Credibility, and the Use of Force," *International Security*, 25 (Fall 2000), 119. For a case study of the crisis, see Richard L. Russell, "The 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis: The U.S. and China at the Precipice of War?" Pew Case in International Affairs, No. 231 (Washington: Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, Georgetown University, 2000). For an insightful analysis of the episode, see Andrew Scobell, "Show of Force: Chinese Soldiers, Statesmen, and the 1995-96 Taiwan Strait Crisis," *Political Science Quarterly*, 115 (Summer 2000), 227-46.
48. Richard K. Betts and Thomas J. Christensen, "China: Getting the Questions Right," *The National Interest*, No. 62 (Winter 2000/01), p. 26.
49. A People's Liberation Army senior colonel in 1997 quoted in John Wilson Lewis and Xue Litai, "China's Search for a Modern Air Force," *International Security*, 24 (Summer 1999), 92-93. For an interesting discussion of Chinese perceptions of the US willingness to fight over Taiwan, see Thomas J. Christensen, "Posing Problems without Catching Up: China's Rise and Challenges for U.S. Security Policy," *International Security*, 25 (Spring 2001), 17-20.
50. As Richard Betts observes, "For all the upsurge of attention in the national security establishment to the prospect of conflict with China, there has been remarkably little discussion of the role of nuclear weapons in a Sino-American collision." See his "The New Threat of Mass Destruction," *Foreign Affairs*, 77 (January/February 1998), 34.
51. James Mann, "Between China and the U.S.," *The Washington Post*, 10 January 1999, p. C2. For an account of the crises over Quemoy and Matsu, see McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices About the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), pp. 273-86.

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