

AN INTERVIEW WITH BERNARD D. COLE

China's Evolving Military Strategy against Taiwan

BY DEE WU

Published: June 4, 2018

The People's Republic of China (PRC) increased its annual defense budget by 8.1% this year, reflecting an ongoing emphasis on the modernization of its military. According to President Xi Jinping's roadmap, this defense modernization effort aims to transform the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) into a "world-class force" by 2050. China's growing ambition and presence in the Indo-Pacific pose a great challenge to the United States and its allies in the region. Taiwan is a primary target of the Chinese military threat. This can be seen from the PRC's Anti-Secession Law of 2005, which provides a legal basis for the government to use "non-peaceful means and other necessary measures" to unify Taiwan with the mainland. To better understand China's evolving military strategy and gain insight into its force planning in the Taiwan Strait, NBR spoke with Bernard D. Cole.

Since 2007, the PLA Navy and Air Force have intensified their presence in the western Pacific, including through the exercise of "circling" Taiwan. What signal does this new exercise send?

At the strategic level, China's military policy has largely remained consistent since the 1950s. The PRC is choosing to use military pressure against Taiwan whenever it thinks such an approach will advance its own policies, which of course involve the end result of realizing the hope for reunification.

If we look back at previous crises in the Taiwan Strait, starting from 1949, China's current actions are at the lower end on the scale of coercion tactics. The time of greatest Chinese military pressure was in the early 1950s when the PRC attempted to invade various islands held by Taiwan, such as through the attacks on Dachen Islands. Other notable incidents were the artillery attacks against Taiwan's outlying islands, including Kinmen and Matsu in the 1950s, as well as the firing of missiles both north and south of Taiwan in 1996. Slightly lower on the coercion scale would be the series of amphibious exercises that the PLA conducted in the early 2000s off the Chinese coast, mirroring an attack on Taiwan. This incident served as

a clear message to Taipei that the PLA was training and preparing to launch an amphibious invasion.

Today, we see what is perhaps a more subtle form of military pressure. The PRC performs around-the-island flights led by H-6 bombers, has unilaterally set new air routes through the Taiwan Strait, and established an air defense identification zone in the East China Sea.

Looking back at the past 75 years, Beijing has utilized a wide range of military actions in an attempt to indicate its seriousness to Taipei and back up its threat of force. China has never said that it would renounce the use of military

BERNARD D. COLE is an expert on Sino-U.S. relations and maritime strategy. He was a Professor at the U.S. National War College in Washington, D.C., and previously served in the U.S. Navy for 30 years as a surface warfare officer. He is the author of eight books, including *China's Quest for Great Power: Ships, Oil, and Foreign Policy* (2016) and *Taiwan's Security: History and Prospects* (2006), and holds a PhD in History from Auburn University. The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. government.

force against Taiwan. In contemporary engagements with Taipei, Beijing has indicated its disapproval, and possibly fear, of the Democratic Progressive Party government. Today, it appears that the PRC is more prone to use military pressure, or what we call the “military instrument of statecraft,” against Taiwan.

In recent years, the PLA has sought to increase its transport capacity by building larger amphibious landing platforms, including the Type 071 landing platform dock and Type 075 landing platform helicopter. How do these new platforms advance China’s amphibious invasion capabilities?

Launching an amphibious assault on Taiwan would be very difficult. If we are talking about the use of landing craft similar to what was used in the classic World War II-type amphibious assault, then there is only one relatively small area in the northwestern part of the island that is suitable for such an operation. Taiwan’s military force is aware of this vulnerability and has installed significant defenses along that stretch of coastline. Despite building more landing platform docks and landing platform helicopters, China still does not have enough of those platforms in conjunction with other amphibious ships to launch a major attack against the island. Traditionally, amphibious warfare doctrine holds that an assault force must be five times the size of the defending force. While the PLA has enough troops, it does not have anywhere near the number of amphibious ships that would be required to transport these troops across the strait.

If cross-strait relations were to significantly sour and a crisis occur, I would anticipate that China would launch a far more diverse campaign. While it would certainly use amphibious ships if possible, the campaign would perhaps involve sending container ships to Keelung and Kaohsiung, with PLA forces secretly stowed aboard. Operations might also involve the 15th Airborne Corps of the PLA. In other words, China would not simply conduct a classic amphibious assault—that would not succeed.

Several public sources have indicated that the PLA is reforming and expanding its marine corps. How should we

assess these changes to the role of the PLA Marine Corps in light of a Taiwan invasion scenario?

As a result of the recent reorganization, the PLA Marine Corps is in a period of expansion. There is evidence that at least a third brigade has been added, and the addition of a fourth and fifth brigade has been mentioned. One thing that we have seen is that the PLA Marine Corps seems to be tending more and more to the capabilities of special operations forces. It is not clear that the entire marine corps is being dedicated to those sorts of operations, but there is some evidence of that when we look at the attachments that have participated in counterpiracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden. The divide between the PLA’s three amphibious divisions and the PLA Marine Corps is not really all that clear to me.

It is important to bear in mind that the primary mission of the PLA Marine Corps remains the seizure of land features in the South China Sea rather than invading Taiwan. However, if we saw a marine corps brigade assigned to the Eastern Theater Command, this might indicate new objectives. One should also keep in mind that the PLA Ground Force has two amphibious training divisions, which target Taiwan. From Taipei’s perspective, planning for an invasion scenario should focus not only on the PLA Marine Corps but also on PLA forces based in the Eastern Theater Command that specialize in amphibious operations.

There is a debate in Taiwan’s navy about the preference for large ships such as destroyers or small ships such as missile corvettes. Given the PLA’s advantages and disadvantages in an invasion scenario, what strategy should Taiwan pursue?

Fifteen years ago, I was frequently asked to evaluate the balance of military forces across the strait. More recently, when I am asked that question, my response is that there is no balance of military forces. The PLA is overwhelmingly superior to Taiwan in numbers and capabilities. Therefore, I think the best strategy for Taiwan, whether in terms of operations or platforms, is to shift the emphasis to smaller missile-armed forces, as well as defensive and offensive cyber capabilities. If we look at Taiwan’s navy, which has rather large and capable former U.S. Kidd-class guided missile

destroyers, the value of possessing such vessels in a defensive scenario—the only viable scenario for the island’s defense—is not as great as possessing numerous missile boats.

In 2016, some U.S. defense experts encouraged Taiwan to increase its missile forces rather than rely on fighter jets to defend the island. Do you agree with this proposal? Is there a better alternative to offset China’s increasing air power?

I agree with this concept. Unless the situation has changed radically in the last few years, Taiwan’s most pressing air defense problem is the lack of pilots and other military personnel. It is therefore a better option for Taiwan to increase its missile forces. I believe that Taiwan has already shifted its emphasis to missile defense from manned aircraft.

Another option to offset China’s growing air power is to increase sensor analysis and integration. The entire sensor system should include sonar, electronic warfare, and electronic monitoring (both passive and active), all integrated through computers to provide a single coherent picture of the battlefield in space as well as sub-space. If I were in Taiwan’s position, I would certainly want to maximize radar and sonar coverage throughout the surrounding seas.

In addition to the strategy of asymmetrical warfare recommended by the U.S. government, what other measures can Taiwan take to improve its capabilities to defend against a PLA invasion?

There is no simple answer, but one important issue that Taipei should address is an increase to its

defense budget—not so much for material costs but for personnel costs. The biggest problem Taiwan faces today is a lack of military personnel. When the United States ended conscription in 1973, the military’s pay doubled. In contrast, Taiwan’s military pay since 2002 has only increased approximately 30%. In other words, given Taiwan’s healthy economy, military pay is not high enough to attract the necessary personnel.

To develop a viable defense against a PLA invasion, Taiwan needs to establish a continuous defense posture west from the Penghu Islands all the way to the eastern part of the main island. With China’s aircraft carrier, the possibility of air attacks from the east has increased. Currently, there are only a few squadrons of missile boats in the Penghu Islands, and it would be very difficult to defend against a PLA attack. As discussed earlier, the best way for Taiwan to increase its defense capabilities is through enhanced missile defense, both surface-to-air and surface-to-surface missile forces, as well as sensor systems. Defense of the eastern side of the island is more difficult given Taiwan’s geography. I do not have knowledge of the missile forces and sensor packages that exist looking east, but they should be fairly robust. Taiwan is in the unenviable position of needing to establish and maintain an effective 360-degree defense. ♦

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THE NATIONAL BUREAU of ASIAN RESEARCH

1414 NE 42ND STREET, SUITE 300
SEATTLE, WA 98105 • 206-632-7370

1819 L STREET NW, NINTH FLOOR
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20036 • 202-347-9767

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