

# Taiwan Can't Wait

## What America Must Do To Prevent a Successful Chinese Invasion

By Mike Gallagher

In March 2021, Admiral Philip S. Davidson, then the commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, informed Congress that China could invade Taiwan within the next six years. In October, Taiwanese Defense Minister Chiu Kuo-cheng gave an even shorter timeline, asserting that China would be capable of a “full-scale invasion” by 2025. And in Foreign Affairs last summer, Oriana Skylar Mastro, an expert on the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), warned that “there have been disturbing signals that Beijing is reconsidering its peaceful approach and contemplating armed unification.”

Despite the growing warnings, the U.S. Department of Defense is inadequately prepared for a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. Consider the U.S. Navy, the service with the most critical role in the Indo-Pacific. The Trump administration’s plan for naval modernization, Battle Force 2045, was based on the assumption that the navy could wait until the mid-2040s to reach its optimal size. Under President Joe Biden, even that plan has been shelved, with the navy now significantly stepping back from its long-held goal of maintaining a fleet of 355 ships. And expected cuts in next year’s defense budget will likely further shrink the size of the fleet.

Meanwhile, U.S. and allied bases in the Pacific have not been upgraded. Congress has not yet funded a badly needed air and missile defense system on Guam, which houses an air and naval base that would be on the frontlines of any conflict over Taiwan. And at bases across the region, stockpiles of precision-guided munitions are insufficient to support a prolonged conflict.

At present, the United States is on track to lose a war over Taiwan. Yet it is not too late to change course. With the targeted redirection of existing and readily obtainable military resources, effective planning, and the leveraging of crucial alliances, the United States has the capacity to prevent and, if necessary, to win a war over Taiwan as soon as the middle of this decade. Rather than betting on the restraint of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) or on technology that will not be ready for more than a decade, Congress and the executive branch must implement a new Pacific defense strategy now. As my colleague on the House Armed Services Committee, Democratic Representative Elaine Luria of Virginia, has argued, instead of Battle Force 2045, the United States needs Battle Force 2025.

### A CRUCIAL LINE OF DEFENSE

Although the Taiwan Strait may seem far from the United States, the Indo-Pacific, which would be the broader theater of any conflict with China, is home to numerous U.S. territories and possessions. These include American Samoa, Guam, and the Northern Mariana Islands plus a number of other small islands and atolls under U.S. control. Together with allied countries in the region such as Australia and Japan, these U.S. holdings constitute a crucial line of defense against China and provide the United States with the ability to more effectively deny the PLA the capacity to operate across broad swaths of the Pacific in wartime. In theory, the U.S. territories and possessions should play a critical role in supplementing the current posture of U.S. forces in

the region, which are largely concentrated in a small number of hubs in Alaska, Hawaii, Japan, and Korea.

Despite their strategic importance, however, Washington has not effectively employed these Pacific footholds. In many of them, there is no U.S. military infrastructure at all. The Pentagon should immediately review how these islands could contribute to the defense of the Pacific and undertake any environmental remediation and construction required for optimal use by U.S. forces. If there is a piece of land in the Pacific under the American flag, it needs to be able to host small teams of Marines equipped with ground-based missiles, maintain expeditionary airfields, and support advanced surveillance and reconnaissance systems. It should also be able to serve as a logistics hub for naval, air, or other U.S. military operations. In addition expanding and spreading military resources around the region will also make it more difficult for the PLA to counter U.S. forces in any conflict by incorporating dispersal and deception into the profile of the United States' Indo-Pacific Command.

Washington should also immediately take steps to strengthen ties with the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Republic of Palau—the three Pacific island countries that maintain alliances with the United States under a Compact of Free Association. With each of these countries, the United States should seek to permanently extend respective agreements and to establish new U.S. bases in exchange for expanded economic assistance.

Defending Guam, which is just 1,700 miles from Taiwan, is particularly important. It has a deep-water port, munitions and fuel stores, and a critical airfield, and it is home to more than 150,000 U.S. citizens. Yet at present, the island is vulnerable to strikes by a new generation of Chinese cruise and ballistic missiles, including one that defense experts have called the “Guam Killer.” For years, Indo-Pacific Command's top request to Congress has been to fund a state-of-the-art air and missile defense for Guam known as the “Guam Defense System.” But building up the island's strategic defenses should also include expanded runway repair and air control capabilities, reinforced facilities for ammunition storage and command-and-control centers, and new security systems to prevent espionage or sabotage operations.

The Pentagon must also enhance its joint base arrangements with U.S. allies. The United States should work with the United Kingdom, for example, to upgrade the base on the Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia by adding missile defense capabilities that would allow it to better contribute to a Taiwan conflict and act as a hub for a long-range bomber and surveillance presence in the “Indo” part of the Indo-Pacific. Building on the recent AUKUS agreement with Australia and the United Kingdom, the Pentagon should bolster its cooperation with the Royal Australian Air Force at Base Darwin and Base Tindal in Australia's Northern Territory. These bases should stockpile munitions to serve U.S. forces operating in the region. And Washington should also seek expanded access in the Philippines, including at Subic Bay. Situated just a few hundred miles from Taiwan across the Luzon Strait, the Philippines would be an essential U.S. partner in any potential conflict. Although the administration of President Rodrigo Duterte seems unlikely to embrace hosting U.S. missiles on Philippine territory, negotiating with Duterte's successor should top the U.S. government's Indo-Pacific priority list.

Finally, the United States should expand Japan's air defenses by upgrading systems on the USS Shiloh, the USS Vella Gulf, and the USS Monterey—all cruisers with ballistic missile defense capabilities that are scheduled for retirement in fiscal year 2022. Given the high costs of

a full modernization, a more economical option might be to provide them with limited upgrades that allow the ships to provide air defense protection while remaining in port in Japan.

## **HARNESSING THE HARDWARE WE HAVE**

Upgrading bases will do much to provide the foundation of a stronger U.S. presence in the Pacific, but it will not be sufficient to give the United States a military edge in a conflict with China over Taiwan. If a conflict breaks out in the next few years, the United States will go to war with the military it has today, not the one defense planners and technologists envision for tomorrow. As such, Washington cannot afford to retire or cut critical conventional equipment and weapons in the hope that unproven future technologies will replace them. It will need to make the most of the military hardware it already has.

In its May 2021 budget, the navy proposed retiring 15 ships, including seven cruisers, and buying only eight. But some of the ships slated for retirement could instead play a critical role by providing air defense for carrier strike groups. With modest updates, some of the cruisers could also serve as stationary air defense assets in Guam or Japan. The United States could augment these ships by purchasing and positioning vertical launch system missile cells independently ashore or on moored platforms to add air defense capacity.

The United States also has an opportunity to upgrade its conventional missile arsenal in the Pacific. In recent years, the PLA has developed a growing arsenal of “anti-access/area-denial” technologies, including long-range missiles and sensors designed to prevent U.S. and allied forces from operating across broad swaths of the Pacific in the event of a conflict. The Trump administration’s 2019 withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, however, has created an opportunity to counter these efforts with relatively inexpensive conventional ground-launched missiles. One promising way to do this is through what the defense expert Thomas Karako has called “containerized launchers,” in which missiles and launchers are camouflaged in cargo containers for easy dispersion and concealment.

The Pentagon should also focus on buying and modifying weapons systems that enhance the military’s ability to see or strike Chinese forces. A good example is the P-8 Poseidon antisubmarine aircraft, which the navy plans to stop buying. As the aviation journalist Tyler Rogoway has argued, with modest adjustments, the P-8 could serve as an affordable aircraft for delivering a wide array of weapons, including Long Range Anti-Ship Missiles. In addition, the Pentagon should make greater use of existing sonar systems such as the Transformational Reliable Acoustic Path System, which can passively detect submarine activity from the ocean floor along critical passageways such as the Luzon Strait.

Another relatively simple step would be to acquire “bolt-on” sonar surveillance kits for leased commercial vessels, which could deploy to the South China Sea to augment the U.S. Navy’s limited fleet of submarine-detecting oceanic surveillance ships. The Pentagon should also buy specially equipped MQ-9B unmanned aircraft to deploy and monitor antisubmarine sonobuoy fields—a task currently performed by P-8s—which would allow the military’s P-8s to focus on deploying weapons against submarines or enemy ships. The United States can also complicate the PLA’s antisubmarine strategy by deploying more unmanned underwater vehicles as decoy submarines.

The Pentagon will need to plan ahead in order to avoid the bottlenecks in munitions production that have emerged in some recent conflicts. For example, during the 2011 NATO

campaign against the Libyan dictator Muammar al-Qaddafi, European militaries ran low on precision-guided munitions. On any given missile system, roughly 30 percent of the material requires lead times on restocking that may run beyond a year. To shorten this timeline, the Defense Department could use the Defense Production Act to direct industry to prioritize the delivery of materials for defense contracts. But a more simple approach would be to place advanced orders on long-lead items, such as propellants and explosives, and stockpile them until they are needed. The Pentagon could start by purchasing two extra sets of long-lead components for every set of missiles it orders. This would allow the Defense Department to call on two years' worth of inventory of long-lead material within one year of deciding to access its surge stockpile.

Even with more materials, though, persistently small orders, driven by budgetary pressures, have made the munitions supply chain brittle. The Pentagon should require companies to model maximum production rates to see where supply chain failures may occur and use Defense Production Act funds to help manufacturers build surge capacity. Although they may sit dormant during peacetime, these additional assembly lines could make a difference in a protracted war. Congress should also draft "break glass in case of Taiwan emergency" authorities that allow industry to bypass test processes that can add to the delay in fielding munitions.

## **AN END TO AMBIGUITY**

The only short war for Taiwan would be a quick Chinese victory. Consequently, U.S. defense planners must prepare both Taiwanese and U.S. forces for a long war. For close to two decades, U.S. national security leaders have been advising their Taiwanese counterparts to focus on acquiring low-cost "asymmetric" defenses, such as antiship missiles, mobile air defense systems, mines, and unmanned aircraft rather than on far more costly submarines, tanks, and fighter jets. Washington needs to help Taipei invest in more of these asymmetric weapons, which will maximize the difficulty of an amphibious invasion. The United States can start by offering up to \$3 billion annually in military financing, assistance that should be made contingent on Taiwan increasing its own limited defense budget and investment in these types of capabilities.

At the same time, the United States must significantly step up its training of Taiwanese military forces. Building on recent media reports that special operations forces and Marines have been training partner forces in Taiwan, the Pentagon should expand that mission to both enhance the capabilities of Taiwanese forces and send an unmistakable signal to China. It should also regularly send senior U.S. military leaders to Taiwan—not only to engage with their Taiwanese counterparts but also to observe the country's military preparedness and gain a firsthand understanding of the topography in which any future invasion is likely to play out. Washington should also expand National Guard partnerships with Taiwanese forces and send battalion- or brigade-sized units to the island in regular rotations, as the National Guard does with dozens of other partner nations.

Most important, the Pentagon should build new operational planning structures for the defense of Taiwan that include both Australia and Japan. To do this, it should reestablish Joint Task Force 519, which provided mobile command and control for crisis response in Northeast Asia, under Indo-Pacific Command to lead contingency planning in the region. It also should reestablish U.S.-Taiwan Defense Command, the bilateral military command that was created in the mid-1950s to defend against a possible mainland invasion and that was in operation until the U.S. recognition of the People's Republic of China in 1979.

Such an explicit U.S. defense commitment to Taiwan will require a shift in U.S. policy, but it would open the door to more effective military-to-military cooperation. In earlier decades, U.S. policymakers could rely on the long-standing policy of strategic ambiguity with China about Taiwan, a policy that ostensibly discouraged China from interfering in Taiwan and dissuaded Taiwan from taking unilateral action to disrupt the status quo. Today, however, it is Beijing that is poised to take unilateral action in the Taiwan Strait, and strategic silence from Washington encourages such intentions by creating doubts about the strength of U.S. resolve to defend the island.

Although an unambiguous U.S. commitment to defend Taiwan may itself be insufficient to deter a PLA invasion, it would at the very least reduce the odds of war through Chinese miscalculation. Congress can take the lead on this front by passing the Taiwan Invasion Prevention Act. First introduced in 2020, the bill would not only end the policy of strategic ambiguity but also provide a standing authorization for use of military force to defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese invasion.

## **A FULCRUM OF THE FREE WORLD**

For the United States, acting swiftly to build Battle Force 2025 will not be easy. The Pentagon is inclined to inertia. Left to its own devices, it will tend to limit itself to making marginal improvements under existing constraints. Fortunately, though, Congress has a say. Charged with a constitutional obligation to provide for the common defense, members of Congress can inject a sense of urgency into the Department of Defense before it is too late. Doing so will require difficult tradeoffs and public support. Naturally, many Americans will wonder why it is worth making defense commitments that could draw the United States into a new war—let alone a war with a nuclear-armed adversary to defend a small and distant nation. Political leaders in both parties need a good answer to this legitimate concern. The answer has at least three parts.

First, by allowing the PLA to take control of Taiwan, the United States would be giving China a new way to wage economic warfare on Americans, as well as people in Europe and many other parts of the world. As the linchpin of the production of semiconductors, Taiwan plays a crucial role in the global digital economy. Taiwanese semiconductors today power tens of millions of consumer devices, vehicles, and high-end military systems. Over the past three decades, as American semiconductor companies have eliminated capital-intensive production facilities known as fabs, U.S. reliance on Taiwan for its new and emerging technologies has become ever greater. And since mainland China already hosts a growing number of fabs, it could acquire a dangerous monopoly of the world's semiconductor supply. According to an analysis for the U.S. Air Force Office of Commercial and Economic Analysis by Rick Switzer, a former Air Force senior foreign policy advisor, if China conquered Taiwan, it would control nearly 80 percent of global semiconductor production. This would allow the CCP to use the supply of semiconductors to gain coercive leverage over any company, nation, or military that criticizes its human rights abuses, its predatory economic practices, or its destruction of the environment or that otherwise challenges its power and reach.

Second, the reality of Taiwan's geographic position in the Pacific means that what happens there will not stay there. The island lies at the fulcrum of the so-called first island chain off the Asian mainland, islands that include both Japan and the Philippines. Like a World War I trench, this geography forms a critical defense perimeter that in the event of war could help prevent

Chinese forces from attempting a more expansive campaign that could threaten Hawaii, Guam, and Australia. Moreover, Japan and the Philippines are U.S. allies. If Taiwan were to fall, U.S. defense obligations to Japan and the Philippines would continue, but their execution would become far more difficult. Failing to defend Taiwan would threaten Washington's most important allies in Asia as well as its own territory in the Pacific, including more than 1.5 million Americans in Hawaii and Guam.

Third, if the United States fails to stand with its democratic allies when they are threatened by an authoritarian adversary, then it will seriously undermine its own credibility and influence. Failing to defend an existing democracy from the world's foremost authoritarian power would lead to the end of the United States' superpower status and the corresponding guarantees of prosperity, freedom, and human rights that have come with it. The CCP is pursuing a global strategy to displace the United States as the leader of the international system, replacing the U.S.-led liberal order with one that favors CCP client states and authoritarian values. If the United States abandons Taiwan, a prosperous democracy of 24 million people, Beijing would be able to seize upon this failure to promote the "inevitability" of the Chinese model. In the near term, it could allow China to Finlandize neighboring states—forcing them into a position of accommodating Chinese power to avoid being the target of Chinese aggression. In the long term, China could use its expanding reach to undermine democracy worldwide.

Such a fate is not inevitable, but until now, the United States has made it more likely by taking a complacent approach to the defense of Taiwan. By building Battle Force 2025, the United States and its allies can deter and if necessary defeat a Chinese invasion in the near term without disrupting the United States' long-term defense investments and without depending on magical future technologies or budgetary miracles. Armed with a sense of urgency, the United States can defend Taiwan and, in the process, defend the free world.

MIKE GALLAGHER is a Republican United States Representative from Wisconsin and a member of the House Armed Services Committee.