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Taiwan's Defense Strategy Doesn't Make Military Sense

But It Does Make Political Sense

By Tanner Greer

Taiwan is approaching an ominous deadline. For decades, the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party have declared that China's "great national rejuvenation" must be accomplished by the year 2049. National rejuvenation, the party insists, includes a Taiwan governed by the same powers and principles that now reign across the Taiwan Strait. Beijing would prefer to accomplish this through the free assent of the Taiwanese people. If they do not give it, party leadership has made clear that it is willing to decide the matter with military force.

For many years, this seemed like an empty threat. Traditionally, Taiwan offset Chinese manpower with superior technology and training. But over the last 15 years, the Chinese military has implemented the most ambitious modernization program the world has seen since the 1930s. China's navy has, in the words of one U.S. defense analyst, "metamorphosized from a coastal-defense force composed of largely obsolescent Soviet-era technologies into a modern naval service" with its own carrier wings, guided missile destroyers, and amphibious transport capacity needed to storm enemy beaches. Its air force now has more fourth-generation fighter jets than Taiwan has military aircraft. And its specialized missile force has more than 1,000 short-range ballistic missiles to lob at Taiwanese runways, command centers, and fuel depots in the first hours of a war. Chinese naval squadrons and fighter aircraft now boldly circle Taiwan, while Taiwanese intelligence and security systems are the targets of an estimated 10,000 cyberattacks per month. For the first time since the 1950s, China's threats to invade Taiwan are frighteningly credible. The countdown to 2049 is ticking.

Still, a Chinese assault on Taiwan would be incredibly risky. It would require the largest amphibious invasion in human history, and because of the island's unforgiving geography, the Taiwanese would only need to defend a few select beachheads. Modern military technology favors the defender, who can use cheap precision munitions to destroy an aggressor's more expensive amphibious assault ships, capital ships, and aircraft.

In light of these advantages, a broad consensus has emerged among U.S. defense analysts who have visited the island: Taiwan can successfully deter a Chinese invasion—but only if it radically retools its military. Instead of allocating its limited defense budget on expensive equipment such as stealth fighters, tanks or submarines, the Taiwanese military should invest in cheap, expendable, mass-produced weapons systems that can be easily moved, disguised, and deployed against an amphibious invasion force. In practical terms, this means a navy composed of missile patrol boats, mine-laying ships, small semi-submersibles, and underwater drones; an air defense component reliant on mobile surface-to-air missile batteries; ground forces armed to the teeth with aerial drones, land mines, and antiship and antiarmor guided missiles; a reserve force and civilian population fluent in guerilla tactics; and an industrial policy focused on developing breakthroughs in missile and drone technologies.

This sort of "anti-access" military would not be able to defend Taiwanese territorial claims in the South China Sea or clear the sky of Chinese fighters. But in the event of a Chinese invasion, it would be able prolong the fighting long enough for Taiwan's allies to intervene. More important, it might deter China from launching an invasion in the first place.

In the eyes of many U.S. defense analysts, Taiwanese leaders face what should be an easy choice: They can ensure their nation's survival through the mass production or procurement of low-cost, low-profile armaments. Or they can continue to waste their resources on what the analysts Colin Carroll and Rebecca Friedman Lissner have called "'prestige' capabilities ... with no tangible benefit in deterrence or war."

The question is: Why don't the Taiwanese see things the same way?

THE VALUE OF SYMBOLISM

On June 6, Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense announced a $2.25 billion arms purchase from the United States. The package was broken down into two parts: $250 million for a consignment of Stinger missiles, and $2 billion for 108 main battle tanks. The first part of the package fits well enough within a distributed "anti-access" defense posture. The second purchase does not.

Taiwan is a piebald of jungle-covered mountains, muddy rice paddies, and densely populated urban cores—terrain that frustrates tank maneuver. The most likely use for tanks like these would be in formation near beaches for counter-landing operations, where they would be extremely vulnerable to attack from the air. As Chinese commanders would never land an invasion force unless they first secure air superiority, these tanks will never amount to anything more than 108 very expensive sitting ducks.

The purchase fits a longstanding Taiwanese pattern: prioritizing high-prestige platforms over people. The Ministry of National Defense has cut military pensions and failed to pay volunteer soldiers a competitive wage or provide them with necessary benefits, and it doesn't have enough bullets on hand for conscripts to practice riflery more than a few times in their entire course of duty.

Yet in addition to buying the tanks, President Tsai Ing-wen's administration has promised to find $8 billion—equivalent to 70 percent of Taiwan's 2019 military budget—to purchase 66 new F-16 fighter jets (even though in the event of a conflict with China most of these would be destroyed by PLA missiles while still on their runways). The Taiwanese navy also regularly promotes plans for an indigenously constructed helicopter carrier and Aegis-style destroyer. Billions have been poured into developing indigenous jet engines and fighters. Most disastrous of all, around one-tenth of the defense budget has been earmarked for the development of Taiwan's indigenous submarine program. According to the wildly optimistic government projections, the very first of these submarines will be seaworthy in 2025. Only a few more could be built before the decade's close, at an estimated $1 billion per ship.

From a tactical perspective, this procurement strategy is irrational. On this, U.S. analysts agree: by building their military around expensive, high-tech military machines, the Taiwanese are committing themselves to an arms race they do not have the means to win. But there is a different lens through which to view these purchases, one that few U.S. observers consider in their analyses. Within the context of Taiwan's hyper-partisan political and media environment, Taiwanese leaders' defense priorities make a perverse sort of sense.

The Taiwanese are isolated on the international stage, not officially recognized by any of their most critical economic and defense partners, and constantly subjected to a crippling Chinese propaganda campaign designed to undermine public confidence in Taiwan's diplomatic standing and military strength. As a result, any international incident—anything that could be seen to diminish Taiwan's position in the world—is an opportunity to score political points against the party in power.

Consider Taiwan's competition with China for official diplomatic recognition. Whether small countries officially recognize Taiwan has no material effect on the country's economy or security. The impact is psychological and political. When El Salvador severed ties with Taipei in 2018 and transferred recognition to Beijing, a spokesperson for the Kuomintang (KMT), the main opposition party in Taiwan, accused the ruling Democratic Progressive Party of cultivating disaster: "The DPP must take full responsibility for Taiwan's isolation and apologize to our people," the spokesperson thundered. "I would like to personally ask Tsai Ing-wen: Just where is it you are leading the Republic of China to?"

Military mistakes trigger similar media firestorms. One scandal began in 2016, when an antiship missile was accidentally launched at a Taiwanese fishing boat, killing its captain. Within a day, KMT spokesmen were calling the incident a "national security crisis" and demanding that Tsai cancel her planned trip to the United States. Tsai shifted the blame downward, accusing the military of "utter contempt of discipline and a complete lack of competency." The subsequent media bonanza followed the normal Taiwanese pattern, with forced apologies up and down the Taiwanese chain of command providing fodder for days of outrage on Taiwanese television.

This is the context in which Taiwanese procurement strategy must be understood. Taiwanese leaders have a powerful political incentive to raise Taiwan's stature on the international stage and publicly resist Chinese attempts to cut it away from its allies. Similarly, they are incentivized to show that under their leadership, the Taiwanese military remains a world-class fighting force. Purchasing fancy military equipment makes little strategic sense, but it accomplishes both of these objectives.

In an anonymous interview, one DPP official told me why he believed the purchase of the tanks was so important: "The purchase is a signal that the DPP can lead on defense. It will give the people more confidence that we are not being outclassed by the Chinese. And most important, that Tsai's good relationship with the Americans is the reason for that." A senior official interviewed by a Center for Security Policy Studies research team justified Taiwanese requests for F-35 fighter jets, rather than less expensive drones, with similar logic: "You can't create a hero pilot of a UAV." The CSPS team concluded that for most of the Taiwanese officials they interviewed, "buying advanced aircraft from the United States was at least as much about assuring the public as it was about improving war-fighting capability."

This is especially important given Taiwan's lack of a formal alliance with the United States. For Taiwanese leaders, weapons sales are one of the few metrics available to judge the U.S. commitment to their cause. Taiwanese leaders can trumpet their purchase of American-made weapons systems as something their party has done to raise Taiwan's international stature. A tank or fighter jet is prized not for its practical utility but its symbolic value.

SOUNDING THE ALARM

Taiwan's defense purchases should alarm American leaders. The United States' ambiguous commitment to Taiwan's defense is making the actual defense of Taiwan less tenable. Two decades ago, when the threat of a Chinese invasion could be deterred by sending a U.S. aircraft carrier through the Taiwan Strait, a mostly symbolic military relationship between the two countries was a sufficient way to keep the peace. This is no longer true. The PLA has grown strong enough that neither Taiwan nor the United States can afford to have the Taiwanese military devote another decade to suboptimal arm purchases. If the United States wants to increase the defensive power of Taiwan's armed forces, then Washington must find other ways to give the Taiwanese leaders the symbolic victories they seek from arms packages.

The easiest way to do this would be to channel the Taiwanese desires for prestige away from procurement and toward military training. The U.S. Department of Defense should establish joint military exercises with the Taiwanese air force, army, and navy. These exercises should be regular, well publicized, and at least initially, held on U.S. soil. An easy way to start would be to invite the Taiwanese navy to participate formally in the Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC), a multinational naval warfare exercise that takes place in and around the Hawaiian Islands. Taiwanese observers have previously been allowed to attend, but only as plainclothes observers. With more than 20 member states participating in RIMPAC, formal Taiwanese representation would be the sort of diplomatic coup Taiwanese politicians sorely need.

Joint exercises would also empower reformers inside the Taiwanese military who wish to move toward a more resilient defense posture. This summer, Estonian and Polish resistance units were invited to the U.S. Army's Ridge Runner Irregular War Training Activity, held annually in West Virginia, to train in insurgent tactics alongside Green Berets. If Taiwan is invited to the next round, the prestige of working openly with U.S. Special Forces might give reformers the boost they need to begin training Taiwanese soldiers and civilian reservists on the same skills at home.

Anything the United States does to strengthen Taiwan's defense will frustrate Chinese war planners. Their anger will likely spill over into other aspects of the Sino-U.S. relationship. If the United States' commitment to Taiwanese liberty is judged important enough to risk Chinese ire, then Washington should ensure that its support actually strengthens Taiwan's defense. A Taiwan whose leaders must rely on the symbolism of arms packages to bolster their image in the eyes of their people is a Taiwan that, if push comes to shove, will be unable to defend itself