

AMERICAN MILITARY OPTIONS IN A TAIWAN STRAIT CONFLICT

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ABSTRACT

United States-People's Republic of China relations since 1972 have varied from warm to frigid. Of most concern to U.S. policy makers and defense planners is the PRC's military buildup absent any real threat to her national interests in East Asia and her continued refusal to rule out the use of force to reunite Taiwan with the Mainland.

Under the Taiwan Relations Act, the United States is committed to insure that any reunification is by peaceful means. This paper examines several possible scenarios in which United States military force is used to back up America's commitment to Taiwan should the PRC decide on military force as the reunification option.

The paper hypothesizes that should conflict occur it will be between American-Taiwan forces, with limited Japanese support, on the one hand, and the People's Republic of China on the other. The task of insuring Taiwan's security will primarily fall on the U.S. Navy. The paper asks the questions of whether the Navy is prepared for a naval war in the Western Pacific. Does it have the right ships in the right numbers? The paper concludes that given the present downsizing of the Navy and the buildup of PRC naval forces, it is questionable whether the United States would prevail should conflict come in the early 21st century.

BIOGRAPHY

Professor Whitehurst received his Ph.D. in Economics from the University of Virginia in 1962 and completed post-doctoral work in Defense and Strategic Studies at Edinburgh University (Scotland) in 1970. While a Visiting Research Scholar in Taiwan (1988-89, 1991-92, 1997), he lectured at the Chinese Naval Academy, National Defense University, and the National Defense Management College. During World War II, Whitehurst served in the U.S. Merchant Marine. In the Korean War he served in the Merchant Marine and U.S. Army. In 1957 he received a commission in the U.S. Naval Reserve (Intelligence) where he served in the Ready Reserve until 1972. He is an Adjunct Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, Washington, D.C. and a Senior Fellow (Transportation & Defense Studies) at the Strom Thurmond Institute of Government and Public Affairs, Clemson University. He is the author of five books and 145 other publications.

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Absent the use of nuclear weapons, the outcome of a Taiwan Strait conflict will largely, if not entirely, depend on the capability of American naval forces in the Western Pacific. And if this is true, do we have the right ships, enough of the right ships, and doctrine to meet the challenge?

Two seemingly unrelated events affecting the national security of the United States occurred in the latter part of 1997. One was the inability of the United States to persuade the UN Security Council to specifically endorse the use of military force should Saddam Hussein continue to bar UN inspectors tasked with insuring the removal of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. The second event was the October visit of Jiang Zemin, President of the People's Republic of China (PRC) to the United States. While several trade agreements were signed and declarations of future cooperation proclaimed, there was no perceptible movement toward settling the contentious and decades old Taiwan issue. Like his predecessors, Jiang refused to rule out the use of force to reunite Taiwan with mainland China. For its part, the United States insisted that reunification be accomplished by peaceful means.[1] In November 1997, mainland China's position on the Taiwan issue was reinforced when PRC premier, Li Peng, warned Japanese parliamentarians not to become involved in the Taiwan issue. Li Peng's concern was that a proposed revision of the present U.S.-Japan mutual security arrangements did not define geographic limits with respect to what constituted a threat to Japanese and United States national security.

If the use of force by the People's Republic of China to bring Taiwan under mainland control is an ever present possibility, and the United States remains committed to a peaceful resolution of the issue, then the question becomes—what action(s) can the United States take in support of the Republic of China should the PRC resort to force and the rest of the world chooses to play the role of interested bystander.[2]

Assuming diplomatic initiatives to resolve the issue are tried and fail, the American response will largely depend on (1) the military action taken by the PRC, (2) the actions taken by the Republic of China on Taiwan, and (3) the military capabilities of the United States and the PRC at the time. Assuming the ROC responds unequivocally to hostile PRC actions(s), the U.S. response will primarily be determined by considerations (1) and (3) as noted above, i.e., the military option(s) chosen by the PRC and military capabilities of the contending parties, including the capabilities of ROC military forces.

Time is also a factor, that is, the time at which a U.S.-PRC confrontation takes place. It becomes important since it is unlikely that American options in a 1999-2004 time frame will be the same as those in a 2004-2020 time frame given the modernization and continuing buildup of the PRC's armed forces, particularly its navy, and the continued downsizing of U.S. military forces in general. Absent the use of nuclear weapons, the outcome of a U.S.-PRC conflict will largely, if not entirely, depend upon the capability of American naval forces in the Western Pacific.

Scenarios, beginning at the lowest rung on the escalation ladder, are described and commented on. All scenarios assume diplomatic initiatives fail to end the threat. An imperative assumption with respect to blockade scenarios is that ROC commercial links with trading partners be maintained. If this can be accomplished, i.e., the blockade broken, then a successful outcome from a U.S.-ROC point of view, is a certainty. An appropriate analogy would be the success of the West, particularly the United States, in ending the Soviet Union's blockade of Berlin in 1949. On the other hand, if the blockade is successful, time will be on the side of the PRC. No invasion of Taiwan will be necessary. In due time, the PRC-ROC "dispute" will be relegated to the back pages of the media. And once that occurs, the Republic of China on Taiwan becomes a part of history.

Scenario #1 (1999-2004) The People's Republic of China threatens to halt ships calling at Taiwan ports without prior PRC clearance.

The Republic of China begins to convoy ROC-flag ships and offers protection to foreign flag merchant ships in Taiwan waters. European Union member nations and most East Asia countries, including Australia and New Zealand, accede to the PRC demand. Japan and the United States do not comply.

The likely U.S.-Japanese response would be to convoy or otherwise protect their ships in Taiwan waters. Initially, Japan's support would be limited to logistic support for engaged American naval forces. In a 1999-2004 time frame the United States and Japan have this capability. American carriers would be positioned east of Taiwan but could, at some risk, enter the Taiwan Strait.

The likely outcome of this scenario, assuming no American or Japanese naval or merchant ship losses, would be a diplomatic compromise, but one with Taiwan's security left in doubt. There would be no clear winner.

Scenario #2 (2004-2020) The People's Republic of China threatens to halt ships calling at Taiwan ports without prior PRC clearance.

Most nations accede to the PRC demand. Of the major nations, only the United States and Japan refuse to comply. In a 2004-2020 time frame, the PRC would have the capability of sustaining a submarine threat in the waters east of Taiwan. Its air force and ballistic missile force (DF15/M9 and DF-21) would be capable of inflicting losses on hostile naval forces in the Taiwan Strait, Yellow Sea and the northern South China Sea. American carriers would operate further to the east, outside the range of PRC cruise missiles.

The U.S.-Japanese response would be to protect their merchant ships entering and clearing Taiwan ports. Anti-submarine capability would be crucial as would the ability to escort shipping. Any United States deficiencies in this capability would quickly become apparent.[3] In addition to logistics support for engaged American naval forces, Japanese naval units would be called upon to perform anti-submarine and escort duties. Mine hunters and escort capable ships would be taken from other U.S. fleets and theaters of operation.

Should the confrontation become prolonged, PRC mining of waters around Taiwan could logically be expected. Mine hunting would be tasked to Republic of China naval units. At this point it is probable that U.S. mine hunters would be based at the Taiwan ports of Keelung, Kaohsiung, and

Hualien. An American option would be to mine major mainland China ports, but one that would be vigorously opposed and condemned in the United Nations.

The likely outcome of this scenario would be ship losses much like the losses that occurred in 1941 when U.S. naval units escorted UK bound convoys part way across the North Atlantic.[4] Convoy tactics would depend on the extent of PRC-claimed territorial waters around Taiwan, in particular waters to the east of the island. A reasonable assumption is that the PRC would claim a minimum of 200 miles eastward and would interfere or attack shipping within this zone. A favorable outcome for the United States would depend upon its ability to protect shipping within this zone. Assuming this ability, time would be on the side of the U.S. and Japan. In summary, the strategies and tactics that won the “Battle of the Atlantic” in World War II would be replayed in the Western Pacific. As in the case of the 1999-2004 scenario, the confrontation would likely end in a compromise, but one that guaranteed Taiwan’s security.

Scenario #3 (1999-2004) The People’s Republic of China announces an air and sea blockade of Taiwan, including mining of Taiwan waters.

Most nations accept the blockade and end commercial intercourse with the Republic of China. The United States and Japan are the exceptions. The United States begins convoy operations in cooperation with ROC naval units. Initial Japanese support is logistical in nature for engaged U.S. naval units. The ROC provides air cover for commercial ROC air carriers entering and leaving Taiwan. The PRC threatens Japan if U.S. air bases in Japan are used in air operations over Taiwan. The American response is to give the ROC Air Force sole responsibility for air cover operations but agrees to replace ROC planes losses. American carriers provide air cover for U.S., ROC and Japanese ships and planes entering and leaving Taiwan ports and airports. The carriers also become delivery vehicles for replacing ROC fighter aircraft losses.

Should the blockade be prolonged, Japanese naval units could be expected to provide escorts for commercial shipping moving between Japan and Taiwan. In a 1999-2004 time frame the United States, Japan and the Republic of China have the capability to break a PRC air and sea blockade. As in the case of previous scenarios, ships from other fleets would augment 7th fleet capabilities. To the extent that the 5th and 6th fleets are vital to American national security interests, then to that extent would transfer of units to the 7th fleet compromise those interests.

The likely outcome of this scenario would be a Korea-type cease fire. There would be no winner or loser. Taiwan would remain free but at a very high cost to its economy. The United States would realize it might not prevail should two major naval undertakings against hostile forces occur simultaneously.

Scenario #4 (2004-2020) The People’s Republic of China announces an air and sea blockade of Taiwan, including mining of Taiwan waters.

Most nations, including those that diplomatically recognize the Republic of China, accept the blockade and sever commercial links with Taiwan. U.S.-flag shipping companies withdraw their ships from Taiwan trade. The United States initiates convoy operations to resupply ROC equipment losses. Convoys are made up of Military Sealift Command owned and chartered ships. Ships are crewed by

volunteer civil service and commercial mariners. U.S. carrier groups are moved further to the east, acknowledging PRC capability to inflict ship losses with cruise missiles. Japan reaches accommodation with the People's Republic of China when Peking guarantees "freedom of the seas" with respect to sealanes considered vital to Japan's international trade. Peking agrees to UN oversight in this respect. Japan reaffirms its mutual security treaty with the United States but backs away from any involvement that does not threaten Japanese territory. Conflict, for all intent and purpose, becomes a naval war between the United States and the People's Republic of China. American merchant and escort ship losses continue. Replacing ROC fighter aircraft losses becomes increasingly difficult as carriers move further to the east. The United States accepts PRC's proposition of one country, two systems. East Asian nations no longer view the United States as a major power in the region.

Scenario #5 (1999-2004) The People's Republic of China launches invasion of Taiwan with air and seaborne troops.

In a 1999-2004 time frame this is not considered a likely scenario, primarily because the PRC's military buildup, particularly its navy, has not reached a point where it can openly challenge, that is, can win a regional naval war with the United States, the Republic of China and Japan.

Scenario #6 (2004-2020) The People's Republic of China launches invasion of Taiwan with air and seaborne troops.

The PRC threatens to retaliate against Japan, the Hawaiian Islands and Guam if the United States interferes. Nuclear weapons are not an option nor is it a option to fight an all out war with the PRC. Peking promises political and economic freedom to the Province of Taiwan at the conclusion of hostilities. The People's Republic of China points to the continued economic success of Hong Kong under PRC rule and the political stability of this "special area." The Joint Chiefs and the National Security Advisor to the President advise that the U.S. Navy cannot win a regional naval conflict in the Western Pacific against the People's Republic of China. UN pressures the United States to accept PRC promise of regional autonomy for Taiwan. Acceptance of these conditions ends America's presence as a major power in the Western Pacific.

QUESTIONS

With respect to conflict in the Taiwan Strait there are an infinite number of scenarios with an infinite number of outcomes. What can be said with respect to the above scenarios is that a successful outcome for the United States is almost entirely dependent upon its navy. This paper raises several questions regarding our naval capability in a 1999-2004 time frame and one from 2004 onward.

*Is the present and foreseeable 7th fleet capable of insuring favorable outcomes with respect to the above scenarios and time frames described? If necessary, can sufficient forces be committed to the Western Pacific without seriously degrading naval capabilities in other parts of the world, and in particular without degrading the capabilities of the 5th and 6th fleets?

*In the above scenarios, having the capability to keep open commercial ocean trade routes and to replace ROC losses is the key to a successful outcome for the United States and its allies. Can the United States win a World War II "Battle of the North Atlantic" in the Western Pacific in the 21st century? Is convoy doctrine studied and in place or has it been assigned to naval history books?

*Aside from insuring that naval budgets are sufficient to maintain capable naval strike forces in areas of the world important to American national interests, are the right type of ships available in sufficient numbers to win a naval war with the People's Republic of China? The Persian Gulf War taught us that having an anti-mine warfare capability is very important in certain types of conflicts.

Do the naval forces of Japan, the United States, and the Republic of China have sufficient numbers of anti-mine warfare ships and planes needed to successfully counter a PRC mine blockade of Taiwan?[5] Are there a sufficient number of escort ships to secure trade routes to and from Japan and Taiwan and the United States and Taiwan?

In the above scenarios, a major responsibility for anti-mine warfare was tasked to the Republic of China. Has the ROC committed sufficient resources to this threat? Under terms of the Taiwan Relations Act, the United States has the option of selling defensive weapons to Taiwan.[6] Anti-mine warfare ships and planes are in this category.

*Has the Republic of China made provision to replace its merchant ship losses remembering that its merchant fleet will be scattered around the world at the time hostilities begin and that many would be in near-China waters? Has it considered the outright purchase and maintenance of older merchant ships in the U.S. National Defense Reserve Fleet. e.g., Victory ships capable of 16-17 knots?

*Is a relatively expensive Arleigh Burke Class guided missile destroyer (DDG), for example, a cost effective vessel for escorting convoys the final 200-1000 miles into Taiwan ports?[7] Could a less expensive ship perform equally well when the primary threat to the ROC's sea lines of communication in the foreseeable future is the submarine?

Can a case be made for acquiring a new class of escort vessels such as the Coast Guard medium endurance cutter (WMEC)? In 1998, the cost of a state of the art, guided missile destroyer is almost \$900 million.[8] In contrast, in 1987 a Coast Guard WMEC cost approximately \$30 million.[9] And should this type of vessel not be entirely acceptable as an escort, could not our naval engineering expertise make the needed modifications—even doubling the cost of the build? Or design a new, low budget escort ship?[10]

*As the People's Republic of China navy increases its capability to operate in waters east of Taiwan, successfully defending entering and departing convoys will require committing major naval combatants. Assuming some ship losses and battle damage, has the United States the combatant/commercial ship repair capability on the West coast to meet this contingency?

CONCLUSION

It can be hoped that the present policy of political engagement with the People's Republic of China will eventually lead to a more benign and less threatening regime. And that economic reform will lead to political reform. But this is a hope only and is contradicted by the PRC's massive military buildup at a time when there are no enemies in sight.[11]

Should, however, a conflict with the People's Republic of China occur, it will be a naval war. With Subic Bay gone and the ever present risk that Japan will opt out as the PRC increases its military capability, particularly guided and ballistic missile capability, the question that can fairly be asked is whether the downsizing of the Navy is not a very high risk policy decision? Or put another way. If the PRC decides to forcibly reunite Taiwan with the mainland—when will the decision be made? The answer seems abundantly clear. When PRC naval forces can challenge the United States and win a naval war in the Western Pacific. What should be American policy? Again, a simple answer. Never allow the PRC the opportunity of mounting such a challenge.

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[1]*Taiwan Relations Act* (Public Law 96-8, April 10, 1979) Section 2(b)(3).

[2]It is accepted that should the People's Republic of China resort to force against the Republic of China, the UN would debate and possibly condemn the act. Not anticipated is that the Security Council, of which the PRC is a permanent member, would authorize the use of force against the PRC or agree to sanctions.

[3]The inventory of U.S. Navy anti-mine warfare ships includes 14 mine counter measure ships (MCM) and nine coastal mine hunters (MHC) with three more under construction. The Navy is also modifying a helicopter landing ship to that of a mine counter measures command, control and support vessel. It will provide a platform for mine counter measure Sea Dragon helicopters. Additionally, the Republic of China has seven mine sweepers and nine coastal mine hunters and has tentative plans to build ten 1500 ton corvettes.

[4]Prior to America's entry into World War II, it suffered ship losses in an undeclared war in the North Atlantic. In May 1941, the U.S. merchant ship, *Robin Moor*, was torpedoed as was the neutral Egyptian freighter *Zam Zam*. In October of 1941, the American destroyer, *Reuben James*, was sunk by a German U-boat.

[5]A recent U.S. General Accounting Report (*Navy Mine Warfare*, GAO/NSIAD 96-104) noted that while MCM ships were designed for mine counter measure operations worldwide, reliability and supportability of these ships remains a problem. With respect to MHC ships, these were designed to protect U.S. coastlines and not transit ocean distances. These ships can operate at sea for only five days and must be resupplied from shore facilities.

[6]*Taiwan Relations Act*. Section 2(b)(5).

[7]The opportunity cost doctrine is an economic concept. It states that the cost of the good chosen is the cost of the good or goods that alternatively could have been acquired. The tradeoff in this case is a very expensive guided missile destroyer for a larger number of less expensive escort vessels. At a time when navy responsibilities are increasing worldwide but at a time when naval budgets are being slashed, such tradeoffs deserves consideration when new naval construction is being debated.

[8]"United States Navy," *Jane's Fighting Ships 1998-99*, p. 787. In the FY 1998 defense budget, \$3,543.6 million was approved for 4 Arleigh Burke Class guided missile destroyers (DDG 89-92). Based on this figure, a single build would cost \$886 million.

[9]A medium endurance Coast Guard cutter (WMEC) with helicopter pad, 270 feet in length, displacing 1824 tons with a range of over 10,000 miles at reduced speed, had a shipyard value of \$30.1 million in 1986. "U.S. Shipyard Contracts," *Marine Log* (January 1987), p. 69. The last cutter of this class (*Mohawk* WMEC-913) was commissioned in 1991. No other builds are underway. A high side estimate for a similar ship in 1999 should not exceed \$100 million.

[10]The concept would be the corvettes used as escorts in the North Atlantic in World War II. In this paper the model is a Coast Guard WMEC cutter of the Famous Cutter Class. It is worth noting that in 1941 Winston Churchill called for building 100 corvettes. He referred to them as “cheap and nasties” (cheap to us, nasty to the U-boat). He went on to say “These ships, being built for a particular but urgent job, will no doubt be of little value to the Navy when the job is done—but let us get the job done.”

[11]Official People’s Republic of China figures put their 1995 military budget at \$7.5 billion. Outside estimates range up to \$140 billion and some authorities estimate an annual military budget of \$200 billion by the year 2000. Whatever the figure, few disagree that large annual increases in PRC defense budgets will continue into the indefinite future.

(References: The Heritage Foundation, *U.S. and Asia Statistical Handbook 1996* and The Heritage Foundation, *Restoring American Leadership: A U.S. Foreign and Defense Policy Blueprint* (1996).