

The United States and Cross-Strait Military Balance

Su Chi,

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As a new crisis in the Taiwan Strait looms larger every day, many people in Taiwan continue to bask in the fond memories of 1996 when two U.S. carrier groups came to its rescue. The hard reality today, however, is that the U.S. may still be more than willing to save Taiwan, it is less than capable to do so.

The U.S. military power was at its apex during the entire decade of the 1990s. The Soviet Union had just collapsed, and the People's Republic of China had yet to launch its military modernization. The annual defense budget of the U.S. was equivalent to the sum total of the next nine countries. In 1993, the United States tried to board a Chinese cargo ship Yinhe during its voyage in the Indian Ocean for inspection of chemical weapons materials. Yinhe resisted for 33 days before it finally complied. In 1994, the Kitty Hawk carrier group tracked and had a 70-hour faceoff with a Chinese nuclear submarine in the Yellow Sea, simulating multiple attacks. In 1996 the Taiwan Strait Crisis ended in China's embarrassment. In 1999, U.S. fighter jets even blew up the Chinese embassy in the former Yugoslavia, injuring several people. The U.S. apologized and disciplined a handful of officials.

After suffering this string of setbacks, Beijing finally decided to push forward its military modernization.

At this time, the all too confident U.S. made a few major decisions that many came to regret deeply today.

First, the U.S. fell into the quagmires of Afghanistan and Iraq. The *Washington Post*, which conducted secret interviews with 400 "insiders" last year, exposed that past Presidents and top government officials knew all along that the U.S. was unlikely to win the war in Afghanistan, but they unanimously concealed the circumstances from the American people.

Consequently, the U.S. depleted its finances at a rate of \$1 billion per week for nearly 20 years.

Second, in the wake of the global financial tsunami, the U.S. decided in 2011 to cut the defense budget by \$1 trillion over 10 years. This slash, the sharpest since the Korean War, led to a massive defense brain drain and slower military buildup. According to the Heritage Foundation, U.S. aircraft carriers today are pushing limits of their life expectancy (with a life expectancy of 50 years, now 28 years old on average), and fighter jets are generally aging (programed life span of 30 years, now 28 years old on average). The active-duty end strength of the army, air force, and navy in 2016 have fell to the lowest level since World War II. In addition, the so-called “military-industrial complex” no longer wields as decisive power as before. The total R &D expenditures of the top five defense firms, such as Lockheed-Martin, are less than one tenth of that of the top hi-tech companies, like Amazon. To make matters worse, the five private companies often refuse to cooperate with the U.S. military.

Third, 30-year invincibility has left the American military in the comfort zone long enough to fall behind the needs of the time. The U.S. armed forces, supposedly the most combat experienced in the world, has only been fighting terrorism in the Middle East. Its aircraft carriers concerned themselves only with long-range strikes with zero fear and little preparation for counterattacks. The obvious facts that China has been practicing its Taiwan scenarios, and improving its “carrier killer” missiles to such a degree that they are now capable of finding, evading countermeasures, and striking precisely the U.S. carriers seem to have not unnerved the U.S. military and prompted it into reconsidering warfighting methods and weapon systems. Only the series of defeats in wargames finally brought the Pentagon to new realization.

RAND Corporation sounded the alarm as early as 2015. Fourteen (14) experts simulated the conflict in the Taiwan Strait and found that by 2017 the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) could gain an advantage in the first few weeks of war. The experts suggested that if anything were to happen in the Strait, it behooves the U.S. aircraft carriers to stay safe far away from Taiwan.

In November 2018, the National Defense Strategy Commission, authorized by Congress and chaired by 12 VIPs, consulted 75 U.S. political, military and intelligence officials and representatives of the United Kingdom, France, Japan, and Australia, and reached the conclusion that “Americans would face a decisive military defeat” in the Taiwan Strait. And “it seems unlikely that the U.S. could force its adversary to back down by applying pressure – military or otherwise – in secondary areas.”

In June 2019, former Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work revealed for the first time that in recent years, the U.S. suffered defeat in every US/China wargames. However, he didn't indicate the number of wargames. By September, the *New York Times* revealed the number - 18 times. Since then, this has become the most oft-cited source in almost all related articles and news sources.

In November of the same year, the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, also authorized by Congress, released its annual report, nearly 600 pages long. This commission invited 77 civilian experts and held eight public hearings to conclude that the military balance of the U.S. and China in the Taiwan Strait has been decisively in favor of China and that “Beijing could decide to initiate military conflict even if it calculated the United States would intervene due to its confidence it would be able to effectively deter or defeat intervening U.S. military forces.”

In early September this year, the Department of Defense released an annual report on the Chinese military power. It mentioned for the first time that the United States trails behind China in three areas: shipbuilding, land-based conventional ballistic and cruise missiles, and integrated air defense systems. All three are essential to China's Taiwan scenario and the implication is all too clear.

Numerous other articles and books paint the same brutal reality. Some worry that if the U.S. military took the long trek for Taiwan, it may repeat the same disastrous consequences of the Tsarist fleet in the Russo-Japanese War. Others say that America might replicate the Cuban Missile Crisis, except that it would be the U.S. beating a retreat this time. Still others who were confident in defending Taiwan a few years back now openly retract that position.

In sum, the vast majority of American experts today agree that if China were to use force against Taiwan, the U.S. could only watch Taiwan helplessly and post-facto come to deliberate whether and how to flip the *fait accompli*. With the U.S. willing but incapable to save Taiwan, it is hardly any solace to us at all.

Evidence being so overwhelming, why Taiwan continues to play such a dangerous game? Why can't Taiwan learn to be more prudent and sophisticated like Japan and South Korea?

The author, chairman of the Taipei Forum, formerly served as secretary-general of the National Security Council, Republic of China (Taiwan) Government, from 2008 to 2010.