

Predicting When Communist China Will Make Its Move on Taiwan



Commentary

The window for deterring a communist Chinese [invasion](#) of [Taiwan](#) is rapidly closing, and concrete actions are needed now.

The ongoing Russo-Ukrainian has sparked a great deal of speculation about Taiwan's future. Without question, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) are drawing various conclusions about the world's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and perhaps how the lessons learned might accelerate Beijing's long-cherished goal to "fully integrate" Taiwan into mainland

[China.](#)

Over time, most countries have acknowledged the essence of the misguided "One China" policy manifested in the [Shanghai Communiqué](#) agreed to by the United States and China in February 1972: "The United States acknowledges that all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China."

This policy has essentially cast Taiwan adrift in a diplomatic sea of communist Chinese sharks, as Beijing persistently seeks to isolate and minimize any independent actions by Taipei. For example, in 2018, [El Salvador dropped Taiwan](#) in favor of diplomatic relations with Beijing. As a result of the relentless CCP pressure, the number of nations that recognize Taiwan's independence has dwindled to just 14.

Cynical observers—especially those of the pro-CCP persuasion—speculate that it is only a matter of time until the Beijing regime seeks to force its [national security law](#) on the Taiwanese. The legal and administrative processes now being used to absorb Hong Kong under that law will be augmented by the use of military force, if necessary, in the case of Taiwan.



Attendees from various forces march next to a banner supporting the new national security law at the end of a flag-raising ceremony to mark the 23rd anniversary of Hong Kong's handover from Britain, in Hong Kong, on July 1, 2020. (Anthony Wallace/AFP via Getty Images)

Other observers speculate on a range of possibilities. [One such report](#) in The New York Times on March 24 reflects the uncertainty of many about what China may or may not do: "Mr. Xi could see Mr. Putin's invasion of Ukraine as a parallel to military action he could take to seize Taiwan. At the same time, the harsh economic sanctions imposed on Russia by the United States and its European and Asian allies and the fierce resistance of Ukrainians to the Russian military could serve as deterrents." Will he, or won't he?

Would economic sanctions really deter China from a cross-strait invasion? Perhaps.

However, the aphorism that "[might makes right](#)" is probably consistent with CCP leader Xi Jinping's strategic thinking regarding Taiwan: people who have power can do what they want because no one can stop them. And Xi has overseen a shocking buildup of Chinese military capabilities over the last decade.

The PLA force buildup to accomplish a cross-channel invasion has been underway for years. For example, China is building an unknown number of 45,000-ton Type 075 landing helicopter dock (U.S. designation "LHD") ships capable of launching helicopters, landing craft, amphibious assault vehicles, and hovercraft. These ships will augment the eight 25,000-ton Type 071 amphibious transport dock (LPD) ships already in service, which can carry 800 troops, two transport helicopters, two standard landing craft on davits, and four hovercraft.

While these ships are insufficient to conduct a full-scale amphibious invasion of Taiwan, their lift capacity could be readily augmented by dual-use commercial ships already at sea, including numerous ferries, barges, and roll-on/roll-off ships.

This capability was demonstrated last year as reported [here](#): "[A] mobilization and amphibious exercise was held off the coast of Guangdong Province in mid-July, involving the 2nd Combined Arms Brigade of the 71st Group Army, as well as the 6 Brigade of the PLAN Marine Corps (PLANMC)." The Chinese merchant marine supported the exercise by providing two large ferries and other cargo vessels.

Furthermore, with the number of hulls surpassing the U.S. Navy, the PLA Navy (PLAN) now has 360 battle force ships in its inventory. As projected by the Office of Naval Intelligence and reported by CNN, that

[number will increase](#) to over 400 ships by 2025. The PLAN has two aircraft carriers in service, with a third—the [modern Type 003](#)—expected to enter service later this year.

Of even greater concern to military planners has been the rapid buildup of Chinese missile capabilities. According to the Center for Strategic and International Security's Missile Defense Project, "China has the most active and diverse missile development program in the world."

Missiles presently in the Chinese inventory are depicted in a graphic from CSIS [here](#).

The Chinese military buildup has been accompanied by an increasingly assertive posture vis-à-vis Taiwan and the United States, and various countries in East and South Asia. New Chinese ships and aircraft that enter service are regularly deployed in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea to showcase their capabilities and intimidate Taiwan and other countries in the region.



Chinese J-15 fighter jets being launched from the deck of the Liaoning aircraft carrier during military drills in the South China Sea on Jan. 2, 2017.

(STR/AFP via Getty Images)

For example, the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) has initiated patrols in the South China Sea with the [newest variant of the J-20 stealth fighter](#). And there is [much speculation](#) about the imminent unveiling of the PLAAF's new H-20 stealth strategic bomber, which is similar to the United States' B-2 Spirit and is projected to have a combat radius of 5,000 miles.

Beijing has also embarked on a rapid campaign to modernize and deploy land-based intercontinental nuclear ballistic [missiles](#) (ICBMs) in Inner Mongolia, as well as to deploy a modern strategic ballistic missile-equipped submarine force. That includes modernization of the missile technology through the development and deployment of solid-fuel

missiles and space-based hypersonic glide vehicles capable of delivering nuclear payloads.

An article in The Wall Street Journal [on April 9](#) liberally quotes anonymous sources ("people with knowledge of the Chinese leadership's thinking") to speculate on China's nuclear use policy: "The people close to the Chinese leadership said Beijing is committed to not using nuclear weapons first. China plans to maintain an arsenal no larger than necessary to ensure China's security interests, they said, adding that the Chinese military believes its nuclear weapons are too outdated to present an effective deterrent against a potential U.S. nuclear strike."

It should be noted that China is not a signatory to any nuclear weapons limitation treaties and [continues to resist bilateral nuclear arms talks with the United States](#). Any speculation on Chinese nuclear intentions is just that: guesswork. Given the example of China's push for conventional military supremacy (it already has the largest navy and the largest inventory of anti-ship cruise missiles in the world), and given the discovery of hundreds of ballistic missile silos in Inner Mongolia, it is not out of the question to predict that Beijing is aiming for nuclear supremacy, not just parity.

Those "anonymous sources" of the Journal quoted above may simply be sprinkling fairy dust on the CCP's nuclear ambitions and intentions. China's nuclear parity with the United States could be the final precursor for a cross-strait invasion of Taiwan.

Or "nuclear parity-plus," as reported [here](#) by the Washington Examiner: "Beijing is building nearly 300 new ICBM silos. If those land-based silos are outfitted with the most modern Chinese ICBM, which are capable of

carrying five to 10 nukes per missile warhead, China could match—if not exceed—the United States’ and Russia’s land-based, operational nuclear arsenal.”

Add the new H-20 stealth strategic bomber and the new [Type 094 strategic ballistic missile submarine](#). The Chinese will have modernized all three legs of their nuclear triad, with the space-based hypersonic glide vehicle delivery system providing an added wrinkle. It’s just a question of numbers at this point, and the Chinese have the propensity to out-produce their rivals in all things, including the military.

What is the timeframe of communist China’s “nuclear parity-plus” vis-à-vis the United States?

Within the next decade. And that could be the CCP’s ace in the hole to compel Taiwan to peacefully accept the “Hong Kong solution.”

Some Final Thoughts

What might be on Xi’s checklist for deciding when to “absorb Taiwan”?

Here are a few items that indeed made the list:

- Cross-channel invasion capability (sufficient amphibious lift capacity, logistics support, and combined arms training): almost there.
- Overwhelming military superiority in the region: almost there.
- Insufficient Taiwanese (and allied) military deterrence capabilities: achieved at present.
- Disarray among potential Taiwanese allies: achieved, but cooperation is building.
- A weak, feckless, and compromised U.S. leadership: achieved.

The final check-in-the-box is nuclear “parity-plus” (supremacy, by another name) to thwart any serious U.S. military response to a cross-strait invasion. That day is approaching within the next decade, and the window for real deterrence of a cross-channel invasion of Taiwan is dwindling rapidly.

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