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Chinese Territorial Ambitions and Potential
Implications for the U.S.

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INTENT

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Chinese Territorial Ambitions and Potential Implications for the U.S.

Introduction

From 1839-1949 China underwent what its own history describes as “a century of humiliation” in which it was repeatedly invaded by European, American, and Japanese troops. These nations eventually succeeded in their efforts to carve a piece of China away for their own empires or ensuring foreign control over Chinese economic affairs. During this period, the routing of Chinese forces was attributed to the vast technological disparity between the Western militaries and Chinese troops. Ever since, the Chinese people have vowed to never again endure such humiliation. Understanding this historical perspective is essential because it informs China’s current foreign policy. China’s aggression regarding periphery territories it claims sovereignty over spawns from the feeling of having such territory stolen from China in the first place. China’s goals of modernizing its military to equal that of the United States by 2035 are driven by the legacy of being defeated by smaller but more advanced European militaries. This legacy has propelled China to embark on a long campaign to retain its dominance over the Western Pacific and to push out Western or Japanese forces that threaten the consolidation of what was formerly the Chinese empire. ^{1,2}

Short-term Chinese Territorial Ambitions

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) views the consolidation of authority over territories immediately on its periphery as the first steps of its long-term designs over the Western Pacific. Such territory includes Tibet, Xinxiang, Hong Kong, the Spratly Islands, Taiwan, the Senkaku Islands, and the Ladakh region of the Himalayas. In the past decade, the CCP has aggressively expanded its hold on the regions of Xinxiang and Tibet, reinforced its claim to nearly the whole of the South China Sea using the latent threat of military force, and more recently has asserted its authority over Hong Kong. Such actions are not moments of individual repression but rather a consistent trend that will continue in the future. ^{2,3}

Should the progression of the CCP’s actions remain consistent, the next flashpoint will likely be Taiwan. This is so because the Senkaku Islands and Ladakh region are disputed between the rival powers of Japan and India respectfully. Any attempt to use military force to control such territory would surely ignite war with either nation. As a result, China is more likely to attempt to incorporate Taiwan next, which is more in line with its recent intra-territorial aggression. In a diplomatic sense, a hostile People’s Liberation Army (PLA) takeover of Taiwan could be more easily framed as a legitimate response if a hypothetical confrontation or incident between Taiwanese and Chinese forces were used as a pretext. Furthermore, while the United States has promised to come to Taiwan’s aid in the event of a (PLA) invasion, such assistance is never a guarantee as the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 does not explicitly offer American intervention in a conflict between the Republic of China (ROC) and the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Indeed, any U.S. military response to Chinese aggression in Taiwan runs the risk of igniting a full-



scale Sino-American war, an outcome that neither party desires. Because of such factors, it is assessed that the next point of friction involving Chinese aggression will be Taiwan.^{3, 4}

This understanding has a profound impact on the importance of American military installations in the Western Pacific. The PLA is well aware the main threat to a successful invasion of Taiwan stems from American air and naval power centered in Guam and deployed from installations across mainland Japan, Okinawa, the Marianas, and on the Korean Peninsula. The results of multiple U.S. Department of Defense wargames have demonstrated the significance of such installations as well, noting that the rapid deployment of U.S. forces from Guam and surrounding forward operating bases is essential to disrupting an amphibious assault on Taiwan before the PLA can overwhelm ROC forces. As a result, the PLA is almost certain to employ a preemptive strike on U.S. installations or units in the immediate region (i.e. naval units in the SCS, Philippine Sea, etc). It is essential to note that the purpose of such action would be to deter, delay, or destroy a U.S. response in support of Taiwan.^{1, 3}

Low Intensity Conflict

In the event of a future Chinese military assault on Taiwan, Beijing is far more likely to employ intentionally non-lethal attacks on U.S. military installations in the Western Pacific. The aim of such low intensity strikes would be to cripple U.S. military hardware to deter or delay a response from the U.S. military, rather than destroy such installations entirely. If executed successfully, such a non-traditional preemptive strike would accomplish the PLA's goal of preventing a U.S. intervention in the opening stages of their invasion of Taiwan without guaranteeing that the U.S. will seek to challenge China in a wholesale war in the Western Pacific region. An end state to this scenario, results in a Chinese military takeover of Taiwan, a non-existent U.S. military intervention in the Western Pacific, and the future of a Sino-American conflict being relegated to the realm of low intensity warfare.^{1, 3, 4}

In terms of the mechanics of how the PLA would execute a low intensity preemptive strike, they have three main options, and series of Electromagnetic Pulse (EMP) strikes, an overwhelming cyber-attack, or both. Due to several factors surrounding the possible use of China's current EMP weaponry, it is reasonable to expect the CCP will favor a cyber-attack as it is a capacity China currently possesses in force. The PLA, having studied the mechanics of U.S. military victories since 1991, understands the U.S. reliance on a constant flow of information in a command and control environment. The Chinese feel that if this intense stream of intelligence and communications is disrupted, much of the competitive edge that U.S. forces wield in conventional engagements would be diminished. Furthermore, PLA doctrine emphasizes that cyber-attacks are a low risk means of deterring American intervention, as they are designed to be non-lethal in nature. Despite the more permanent and effective nature of EMP strikes against American military hardware, a massive cyber-attack stands a reasonable chance of being successful. A further level of risk mitigation lies within China's development of civilian cyber militias, a proxy force of Chinese citizens that while non-members of the PLA's Strategic Support Force, are very much affiliated with the CCP. Such surrogate militias would offer Beijing a thinly veiled yet strategically useful buffer in the event of a Chinese cyberwarfare campaign against U.S. military assets in the Pacific.^{5, 6, 3, 7, 8, 9, 10}



With regards to the specifics of how Chinese cyber-attacks would be carried out, it is essential to note the period before a hypothetical attack is launched will see China subtly probing U.S. cyber defenses, a common tactic PLA cyber units are known to employ. Moving into the execution phase, the most probable main targets will originally be United States Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) communication nodes, command and control hubs, and intelligence processing centers to prevent U.S. forces from launching a coordinated intervention to a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. It is likely that an especially sophisticated attack would include a barrage of false intelligence and mobilization orders, to informatively isolate American commands and spread disinformation. Such cyber-attacks will be coupled with strong diplomatic messaging warning against American assistance and possible attacks against Continental United States (CONUS) cyber infrastructure. It is worthy to note the end state of a Chinese cyber campaign against U.S. INDOPACOM infrastructure includes a mottled or non-existent U.S. response to a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, and the erosion of the will of the United States to intervene on Taiwan's behalf, thus relegating the conflict to retaliatory cyber strikes.^{5, 3, 7, 8}

At the present time, EMP strikes are the less likely option due to the PLA's still unfinished development of an EMP pulsar device that can be fitted onto a missile. In order to affect devastating EMP pulses over U.S. military bases, the PLA would be relegated to detonating low-yield nuclear weapons in the atmosphere above American bases. While this tactic would be effective at crippling U.S. communications and military hardware, even the non-lethal use of nuclear weapons is an improbable action due to the political ramifications of employing nuclear weapons preemptively and the unpredictable nature of an American response.^{6, 9, 10}

High Intensity Conflict

The possibility of the PLA choosing to employ a high intensity strike to destroy U.S. military bases in the Western Pacific is possible but unlikely due to the CCP's reluctance to engage the U.S. in a full-scale conflict across the Pacific. This trepidation is made plain by Beijing's broad course of military modernization, set to be complete in 2035. The PLA soberly understands that it is merely a regional power at the time being, as thus it would be foolish to risk all its progress towards modernization on the fate of a premature war with the United States. Nevertheless, it would be similarly imprudent to rule out any scenario in which the PLA would preemptively employ lethal weaponry against the U.S. military, and thus such a hypothetical situation is worth examining.^{1, 3}

Speaking with regards to the nature of a high intensity Chinese strike, the possibility of Chinese airstrikes are unlikely given the present disparity between the quality and quantity of fifth-generation fighters in the PLA Air Force's (PLAAF) inventory when compared to that of the U.S. military. This then leaves the PLAAF with slim odds of evading U.S. detection or being able to overwhelm U.S. air defenses with superior force. Similarly, a Chinese Naval strike is also unlikely at the present time due to the PLA Navy's (PLAN) limited capability to launch land-attack missiles. Additionally, the PLAN would likely be wary of deploying an extensive portion of its fleet to launch preemptive strikes against U.S. bases, as doing so would force Chinese ships to spread out across the Western Pacific to position themselves for attacks on individual American bases. As a result of such strategic considerations, the PLAN and PLAAF likely view Taiwan, not



the American bases, as their main focus and will center the bulk of China's air and naval assets around the complex amphibious assault.^{3, 11}

Because of these strategic considerations, the PLA would likely choose to employ its growing arsenal of intermediate-range ballistic missiles as its main means of destroying U.S. installations in the Western Pacific. This tactic has been telegraphed through China's pouring of extensive resources into rapidly upgrading, testing, and fielding the DF-26 Intermediate-range ballistic missile (IRBM) "Guam killer" in recent years. The PLA views the DF-26 and its variants as a broad solution for reducing the threat of American Naval and Air power, given its applicability to striking warships, air bases, missile defense batteries, and so on. The key for DF-26 strikes to be successful is volume. The PLA understands that THAAD batteries and SM-3 equipped warships would likely be able to intercept Chinese IRBM's and thus the PLA can be expected to launch them in large salvos in an attempt to overwhelm U.S. air defenses with sheer numbers.^{12, 2}

Mixed Intensity Conflict

While Beijing has a series of options with regards to deterring, delaying, or destroying the deployment of American military units from bases in the Western Pacific, it is worth exploring the possibility that the CCP may attempt to employ multiple types of force to provide layers of redundancy. Such a scenario might include a massive cyber-attack, an immediate intelligence assessment as to its effect on the U.S. Military's ability to deploy, followed by EMP pulses or DF-26 strikes as necessary. On the other hand, it is entirely possible that the PLA may use both of its low intensity options, for instance they may elect to strike Guam with a single EMP pulse and save the remainder of U.S. military installations for cyber-attacks. Because Guam is a U.S. territory, the Chinese can limit the collateral damage that EMP strikes would have on countries hosting U.S. bases and thus avoid dragging U.S. allies such as Japan and South Korea into the conflict. Furthermore, since Guam is the central node of American military power in the Western Pacific, in the event that Chinese cyber-attacks against surrounding INDOPACOM bases are unsuccessful, the Chinese will still have dealt a major blow to a possible American military intervention in Taiwan.^{5, 6, 11, 8, 12, 9, 2, 10}

Conclusion

An understanding of the CCP's short term territorial goals and recent consolidation of power in outlying territories points towards Taiwan as the next target of Chinese aggression. In recent years, China has been drifting further away from its previous aims of peacefully reintegrating the two countries, this possibility seeming impossibly remote in the wake of the abolishment of Hong Kong's autonomy and the mass internment of Uighur dissidents in Xinxiang. In the near future the only means for China to reacquire the ROC is through military force. As a result of such Chinese ambitions, American military installations in the Western Pacific will undoubtedly be targets for preemptive strike.³

While the aforementioned analysis is rather predictable, a real dilemma presents itself when considering what form a Chinese preemptive strike will take. A logical course of action would point to low-intensity cyber-attacks, yet technological advancements by the PLA in the realm of EMP weapons or IRBM's could very well shift the scales towards a mixed intensity strike. Such



developments can rightfully be viewed as waypoints on the path towards an eventual PLA invasion of Taiwan. Additionally, the probing of American cyber defenses and a series of diplomatic escalations between the PRC and the ROC can be considered more imminent warning signs of Chinese aggression.^{5, 6, 8, 12, 9, 2, 10}

In truth, it is a matter of when, not if an attempted PLA takeover of Taiwan will take place. The CCP's options, while diverse, are all fundamentally efforts to degrade the American will to fight on behalf of Taiwan. The PLA's preemptive actions will be carefully designed to inflict minimal geo-political fallout as a means of avoiding a full-scale Sino-American war. It is worthy to note that while the terms of the preemptive strike, subsequent invasion of Taiwan, and possibly the nature of a possible U.S. intervention will be dictated by the Chinese, the Chinese will only be able to influence, not control the American resolve to militarily confront the Chinese military.³

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