China's Dilemma: Overlord, Sea Lion, or Dieppe

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Ongoing tensions in Europe[i] and the increasing rise in Chinese hard power[ii] have fueled significant speculation about a sudden "two front"[iii] problem potentially confronting the free world. The theory holds that were Russia to commence a renewed military campaign in Ukraine, China could then launch a successful amphibious blitz attack on Taiwan, while the world was distracted and preoccupied. This is a questionable assumption, and to consider it seriously requires the analyst to ignore volumes of military history. This paper's goal is to rebut such speculative musings, and review some of the realities such a Chinese operation would face.

Taiwan is a large island, almost 14,000 square miles in area and with varying terrain, separated by an 80 mile wide channel from mainland China. Its western side is dominated by a gentle plain, while the east is more rugged with mountainous peaks topping out at 13,000 feet above sea level. The island is home to 23.85 million people, the bulk of whom live in several major urban centers on the north and west sides of the island.

Any attempt by China to seize the island will require it to deploy masses of troops and equipment across the Taiwan Strait and land them in combat ready condition. Large scale, over-the-beach amphibious invasions are a 20th Century method of landing troops on hostile shores. In order to achieve success, four general criteria must be met. The attacker must establish and maintain air supremacy over the area of operations. The attacker must maintain naval supremacy around the target land mass. The attacker must be able to deliver sufficient assault forces to the target landing zones such that they will remain combat effective after absorbing potentially substantial initial casualties[1] and be capable of establishing a defensive position from which to break out, after follow on units arrive to reinforce them. Finally, the attacker must have a sufficient logistics train and specialized naval units and aircraft to meet the supply and reinforcement needs of their assault force from the time it first makes contact with the enemy, until combat operations cease.

Unfortunately for China, any such operation against Taiwan would be forced to use this 20th century framework against modern technology and without many of the 20th century advantages that made this form of warfare successful in the first place. Modern command, control, and communications equipment greatly enhance information flow and flexibility, factors that benefit both sides. But a modern integrated air defense network will be a big advantage for Taiwan, as it is difficult to destroy, especially difficult to suppress quickly, and poses a significant danger to aircraft and long range missiles. Perhaps most daunting for any Chinese seaborne assault are the modern precision guided anti-ship missiles and similar long range standoff weapons[2] that they will face. While such weapons pose a lethal danger to the invader's naval units, they also allow the assault force to destroy strongpoints and C3I centers on Taiwan with precision strikes. But given the protracted vulnerability of China's relatively slow invasion fleet as it crosses the 80 mile wide straits, the availability of modern precision guided munitions likely favors the defenders.

If such a modern invasion were to be conducted, it would require several operational phases to be conducted successfully. The air war would begin the operation, in conjunction with a long range

[1] At Tarawa the US Marines lost 60% of their amphibious tractors (Wright 2000, 40) while their second and third assault waves took debilitating casualties (Spector 1985, 264)

[2] Taiwan and the US both operate a myriad of these standoff systems. (Missile Threat: Missiles of the World, CSIS.org)

missile bombardment of the island. Embarkation of the invasion force and the crossing of the straits of Taiwan would follow. Next would come the amphibious landing, in conjunction with or immediately after a likely airborne/air assault landing against strategic targets inland. Finally, the Chinese would need to sustain this force once it was ashore and reinforce it so that it could begin large scale offensive operations and breakout of its beachheads. These phases are sequential and carry increased risk of catastrophic defeat as the operation progresses.

Forces Comparison:

To understand the following assessment, some knowledge of the comparative strengths of the Chinese and Taiwanese militaries is necessary. Unsurprisingly, China outclasses Taiwan in virtually every category[iv]. Taiwanese ground troops number around 90,000, China's are over 1 million[v]. China fields 3,800 aircraft, Taiwan can deploy 560.[vi]. The Chinese navy currently fields over 300 warships, Taiwan boasts 86[vii], and the disparity only increases when naval tonnage is compared – China fields several major combatants, including air craft carriers, while the largest Taiwanese naval unit is a destroyer.

Neither of their militaries boast modern combat experience. While this will impact both sides, as the invader faces the more complex challenges, it will be most detrimental to the Chinese. Taiwan must engage in a fairly standard defensive action, complicated only by terrain and the assault method of the invaders. China must succeed in a large amphibious / airborne assault, one of the most difficult combined arms operations ever devised. It will require tight coordination between all its services, against modern defenses, and under unprecedented conditions. Real proficiency in such operations requires numerous opposed landings in which to work out doctrinal and operational flaws, build up institutional knowledge and experience, and perfect your tactics. China will be forced to get it right on the first try, with no previous experience or room for error. This would be like a team full of enthusiastic rookies going directly from training camp scrimmages to the Super Bowl, with no regular season in between.

China is further hampered by deficiencies in the kinds of capabilities that were traditionally essential for victory when conducting amphibious landings in the 20th century. Massive numbers of ships, aircraft, and troops, coupled with a robust supply chain were a staple of successful Allied amphibious landings in World War II. Facing a Taiwan operation, China does not yet have the sufficient naval or air assets, nor can it yet effectively transport enough troops onto the beach simultaneously or support them once ashore out of its own resources.

Modern reconnaissance capabilities via satellites and other platforms will negate the critical element of surprise, so often relied on by invading forces. Taiwan and its allies will be able to watch events unfold in near-real time. Gone are the days of a surprise landing at Normandy instead of the Pas-de-Calais, or the attacks on Guadalcanal and Saipan that caught the Japanese High Command completely off-guard. With modern technology, Taiwan will see it coming.

Firepower kills, and nowhere is it more necessary than to support and protect a vulnerable amphibious landing force. Unfortunately, the modern invader cannot count on the big gun naval units that have traditionally filled this role. The early lessons of World War II taught the US the necessity of saturating enemy beach and inland defenses for days or weeks ahead with the enormous tonnages of explosive shells from literally dozens of cruisers and battleships[viii]. These vessels were perfectly suited to the task of providing effective continuous, mobile fire support to the landing force. With their current

capabilities, the Chinese will have to rely primarily on aircraft and long range missiles[3] for fire support for their ground units and to break up Taiwanese defenses. These will have neither the loiter capability, munitions load, nor volume of fire of previous century warships. While their accuracy is excellent, especially in the case of precision stand off weapons, whether that accuracy from the limited numbers of these weapons available will have a comparable effect in continuously suppressing defenses, as did the massed barrages from large caliber naval guns in World War II, is an open question. It's interesting to note that in the late 20th Century, when the dawning era of precision guided munitions briefly over lapped with the last of the era of big gun naval units, US commanders in Operation Desert Storm did not hesitate to call on the 16 inch guns of the last two operational Iowa class battleships (USS Missouri and Wisconsin) to drop their 1900 lb. shells on Iraqi defenses. US ground forces appreciated that decision; the Iraqis did not.

Finally, and critically, previous amphibious landings were supported by immense logistics chains. Hundreds of support ships and specialized landing craft were required to sustain even a handful of divisions on hostile shores. Taiwan has approximately 90,000 personnel in its ground combat units. The normal preferred ratio of attacker to defender is 3 to 1, and in the case of especially dangerous operations like amphibious invasions, cautious planners advocate 4 to 1. This would require China to deploy some 300-400,000 men in its assault force. For comparison, the Allies deployed 100,000 men to North Africa during Operation Torch in 1942, they used a fleet of over 400 vessels to transport and escort the invasion force[ix]. Two years later and much more experienced, during the Normany landings across the English Chanel, the Allies would employ almost 5,000 landing ships and assault craft, protected by 289 warships, and 277 minesweepers to deploy 130,000 men[x]. China lacks sufficient sealift to attempt an invasion with force parity to the defenders, let alone the recommended force superiority.

Phases of Invasion:

The Air War: In order to conduct a successful amphibious invasion, China must establish an air supremacy cordon over the landing zones at a minimum, and ideally around the entire operational area to a distance beyond the effective range of air launched anti-ship missiles. To achieve this, it will not only have to defeat the Taiwanese Air Force, but also reduce ground based air defenses on the island. This will not be easy.

Precise numbers of Taiwanese air defense systems are closely guarded; however Taipei appears to be in the process of further modernizing the mainstay of its air defense[xi]. Publicly available information indicates Taiwan may have dozens of Patriot and I-HAWK systems already in place, supplemented by mobile short-range air defense (SHORAD) systems in the form of hundreds of individual AVENGER firing platforms[xii][4]. This is in addition to man portable air defense missiles like Stinger (MANPADS) and some naval based air defense capability[xiii]. This combination represents a significantly dense and dangerous integrated air defense network. Failure to achieve air supremacy, would render subsequent phases of the invasion unacceptably hazardous.

Given the force disparity and the vulnerability of Taiwanese ground installations to sustained long range missile fire, it is probable that China could reduce Taiwan's Air Force and defenses, given enough time *and left alone to do so*. Unfortunately for China, it is unlikely the Taiwanese will be forced to defend their island alone. The United State and Japan have both guaranteed Taiwanese sovereignty,

[3] China has significant capability in this area and is steadily expanding it. (Chan 2019), (DoD 2021, 163), (Missile Threat: Missiles of China)

[4] Assuming standard US battery configurations for all platforms.

and there is a significant possibility other regional powers like South Korea or Australia would be drawn into the conflict around the time the air campaign commences. In effect the Chinese Air Force could be forced to engage the air assets of three or more nations simultaneously. The proximity of allied bases, like Kadena AFB on Okinawa and other bases in the region with aerial refueling, will give allied warplanes the ability to assist Taiwan from their home fields.

This leaves China with a dilemma: attempt to limit the fight geographically to Taiwanese territory and adjoining waters in order to attrit both Taiwanese and any committed allied assets, without escalating the action beyond Taiwan itself or initiate a three sided (minimum) conflict and commit to simultaneous regional strikes against Taiwan and its allies, with the resulting dilution of Chinese combat power. The former scenario forces China to fight a potentially protracted Battle of Britain style campaign against multiple adversaries with peer level (or better) technology and superior numbers of aircraft[xivxv]. The latter scenario would likely include anti-satellite strikes on allied recon assets to avoid real time tracking of Chinese invasion forces in the assembly, embarkation, crossing, and landing phases. Critically, it also risks catastrophic escalation into a nuclear exchange or attacks on the Chinese mainland by allied forces, who would be blinded and unsure of Chinese strategic intentions.

Winning the air battle against the combined regional air assets of Taiwan, the US and Japan will be very difficult and unlikely for China. The allied forces will engage with their own long range air and standoff missile assets and significantly attrit Chinese 4th generation aircraft. Modern missile doctrines that use bombers for mass missile transport to the combat zone and then hand off control of those munitions after launch to networked 5th generation fighters will be a significant airborne force multiplier. Add to that sophisticated and battle tested American C3I capabilities and the prospect for an easy Chinese air victory diminishes swiftly. This is unacceptable to Chinese plans. The Chinese Air Force *must* win the air war with minimal losses if they are to remain viable for their critical role in supporting the landings and ground combat to follow. When the German Air Force was fought to a tactical draw with heavy losses in the Battle of Britain, their Operation *Sea Lion* invasion was cancelled, giving the British a strategic victory. So too, if Chinese air assets are significantly degraded in the opening round of the campaign, the invasion of Taiwan fails before it begins.

Ground Force Embarkation and Crossing: The marshalling and transport phase of any amphibious operation is critical, and it has not functionally changed since the Second World War. It requires the concentration of assault forces, logistics assets, and naval transport forces in their ports of embarkation. Sufficient troops and support assets, and the shipping to carry them, must be concentrated for a successful assault over the beach, then transported to their target. The Chinese Navy and Air Force will bear the responsibility of safeguarding these assets from their points of departure, until they reach Taiwan, some 80 miles across the straits.

Unfortunately for China, modern technology will negate one of the classic elements of a successful naval invasion: surprise. Reconnaissance satellites will detect the lengthy gathering and loading processes that assault and support forces must conduct in port, then track the ships' movements towards Taiwan. Not only will the Taiwanese military have advanced notice of the impending invasion when this process begins, they will be able to concentrate against the specific landing zones.

Worse still, the ability to locate the marshalling invasion fleet will allow defenders using modern long range anti-ship weapons[xvixvii] to engage it before it leaves port, and to severely punish it as it crosses the 80+ miles of the Straits of Taiwan. Significant quantities of air, sea, and ground launched

anti-ship missiles are in the inventories of every power likely to oppose a Chinese attack and they can be launched from every conceivable platform available, from submarines to fighter jets. An amphibious assault force transiting to the target area while under intense, constant, precision fire has never been attempted in history.

Chinese forces must attempt their Operation *Sea Lion* while under sustained fire from the time they begin embarkation to the completion of the operation. They will be forced to do so against a forewarned enemy, given time to concentrate his forces to best defensive effect. This combination of reconnaissance and a vastly increased engagement envelope will strip away every traditional advantage of the assault forces transiting to their target.

Airborne Drop/Air Assault: In an effort to achieve surprise and deliver increased ground forces to Taiwan, it is likely the Chinese will attempt an airborne or heliborne (air assault) landing in conjunction with the amphibious invasion. Large scale airborne operations have never been attempted in the face of a functioning modern, layered air defense network. So in order for the Chinese to be successful in this, the Taiwanese air defenses must be destroyed in the air war phase, allowing the Chinese to be able to insert these troops in their proper locations as a cohesive assault force. Unfortunately, Chinese airlift capacity is sufficient only for moving a single brigade sized element (5,000+ troops[xviii]) at a time, a fairly small force that will be vulnerable as it lands and collects itself after the airdrop. This will require it to land in a lightly defended area, negating some of the shock value of its presence and hampering its ability to swiftly assault strategic objectives.

While some analysts, citing a larger airlift/heliborne capability indicated by Chinese and Russian sources, infer the possibility of an exclusively full airborne/heliborne assault, this strains credulity[xix]. Their theory relies on Taiwan defending itself alone, the complete destruction of all (or the vast majority) of Taiwanese defenses from long range saturation fire and air strikes, and the ability to land these forces without taking massive losses in aircraft. Large transport aircraft are required to come in low and slow on predictable flight paths to allow their airborne troops to conduct a safe drop from a physical standpoint. This is the ideal situation for them to be slaughtered by dispersed, highly mobile SHORAD units like AVENGER – which would likely survive even an overwhelmingly effective initial bombardment in sufficient numbers. Heliborne forces face similar concerns from both surviving SHORAD units, MANPADS and general ground fire. Moreover the progressive attrition of airframes degrades subsequent airlift capability on which supplies and reinforcements would depend.

A smaller airborne/air assault force runs the risk of being destroyed in detail, or heavily engaged and pinned down before it can be concentrated. Modern reconnaissance capabilities will allow the rapid pinpointing of drop zones/landing zones and allow defenders to swiftly engage. Such an operation has never been attempted against a defender with modern air defense weapons and late generation aircraft, both of which could inflict heavy losses. Such a small unit will not be able to absorb heavy casualties in its deployment phase and still remain a viable force. The potential for unchecked airborne forces to do significant damage if allowed to go unengaged for any significant length of time would force Taiwanese troops to react to it, and potentially weaken defenses elsewhere. However the size of the force capable of being dropped will critically hamper its potential impact.

Amphibious Landing: The process of landing amphibious assault troops onto a hostile beach remains largely unchanged since World War II. Amphibious transports must deposit ground forces onto their correct landing beach in sufficient numbers to breach the local defenses, establish a defensive

perimeter to allow follow-on forces to land unmolested and to do all this in the face of potentially significant casualties. Naval and air assets must provide sufficient fire support to soften the local defenses and then protect the troops ashore. Lastly naval assets must maintain station off the beach to provide and protect an uninterrupted flow of logistics and reinforcements to allow the units ashore to accumulate enough combat power to commence offensive operations and initiate a breakout.

Unfortunately, limited Chinese capability and modern military evolutions will hamper all of these tasks. China's 57 amphibious transports can only move about of 25,000 troops[xx] across the strait and get them ashore in a single lift. This is a tiny number of troops by historical standards, especially relative to the garrison of Taiwan. Modern naval designs have removed the massive naval guns previous amphibious operations relied on. Air support and long range missile fire will likely be used to supplement for this deficiency, but their effectiveness is suspect. China's plan actually relies on civilian shipping to makeup the shortfall in military amphibious transport for logistics and troop transport needs and this will require the initial assault forces to capture a port almost immediately to ensure their own survival.

The initial air and seaborne assault forces will be required to capture intact one of Taiwan's port facilities, all of which are in urban areas and all of which can be heavily reinforced once the target of the assault force becomes clear from satellite or other reconnaissance sources. History shows naval ports can be easily defended, or quickly wrecked if necessary, and taking one intact in the initial invasion phase will be extremely difficult (See Naples, Cherbourg, the Brittany ports, the Scheldt Estuary, Operations *Reservist* and *Terminal* in North Africa). The ability of Taiwanese forces to mine the area alone could force extensive naval clearing operations before a port could become operational.

All of this will take place while the naval element of the assault force is under sustained air and sea launched missile fire, even assuming ground based batteries have been suppressed. The longer this operation takes, the more casualties the Chinese air, naval and ground forces will be forced to absorb and the lower their combat and logistics power will become. If operations become extended, the ground element could be forced into a Gallipoli or Dieppe retreat, while naval units are forced to abandon them or execute a recovery operation under fire and with troops in close contact. A nightmare scenario for any military, let alone an inexperienced one.

Sustainment and Breakout: Assuming the initial invasion force is sufficient to establish a lodgment capable of being supplied and reinforced, the Chinese then have several tasks. First it will have to supply and reinforce this initial force in order to build up its combat power for a breakout. The invader must be able to deploy large numbers of specialized assault and landing craft for this purpose.

But China has several key deficiencies that will hamper it in this phase. It does not have the specialized naval craft to supply the logistics needs of its assault force across the beach and its reliance on civilian shipping to make up the difference is problematic, absent intact port facilities. Moreover, civilian craft used for the logistics and reinforcement function will be more vulnerable to any air and missile strikes.

China's 450 strike aircraft (less cumulative losses) will be unlikely to provide sufficient fire support to adequately protect the beachhead, forcing it to rely more heavily on whatever organic armor or artillery units it can land in the initial assault. A successful invader must deploy massed fire support assets capable of both targeting enemy formations and interdicting their movement to prevent concentration against the landing. It's not clear that China will be able to bring this level of force to bear following the air and naval attrition likely to occur in the earlier phases of a conflict with Taiwan and its

allies. It seems unlikely that China will be able to protect its assault force sufficiently, or supply and reinforce it swiftly enough to avoid defeat on land or unacceptable losses at sea.

Conclusion:

An amphibious landing on a defended beach is the most complex and dangerous operation that an army can undertake. It requires extensive logistical and combined services capability and coordination, at a level of proficiency that can only be achieved through rigorous, large scale training and repeated real world experience under actual combat conditions. Add an associated mass airborne/air mobile assault and the complexity level goes through the roof. This method of warfare hasn't been attempted on the scale needed for a successful seizure of Taiwan in almost 77 years. No military in the world possesses the institutional memory of how to do this and none can claim any real organizational proficiency in it, not on this scale.

21st century technology employed in the context of this 20th century operational model will favor the defense. Improved reconnaissance capability, precision standoff weapons, integrated air defenses, and modern aircraft all increase the danger to an invader in excess of what those same capabilities can inflict on the defender. While Taiwan may suffer massive damage, it won't sink. China must be able to absorb potentially heavy casualties and still project sufficient combat power to overwhelm the Taiwanese.

Moreover the 20th century weapons that previously made large scale amphibious warfare successful in the face of often very heavy casualties are not currently available to the Chinese: hordes of specialized amphibious craft, massed naval artillery, and effective defenses against the standoff weapons of the day. China currently lacks the first, doesn't have a viable substitute for the second, and no military yet fully understands the defensive requirements for surviving mass attacks by modern stand-off missile strikes.

For China to successfully invade Taiwan, everything must go right and it must go right with minimal losses. Taiwan's allies must abandon it so that China can bring all its military power to bear on Taiwan alone and defeat it swiftly.

But if America and Japan stand by their commitments, then the Chinese path to victory becomes very uncertain. China's naval forces won't be allowed to cross the straits and deliver their troops unmolested. It becomes highly unlikely that China's invasion forces will land and capture a viable, undamaged port to service them with little trouble and few casualties. Then China must be able to supply and reinforce this beachhead, while naval assets transit back and forth from the mainland, without coming under serious attack. This is only possible if they achieve total air and naval supremacy. They won't.

Overlord isn't a possibility for China. They don't have the assets or the experience. While in fairness, they are not confronting either the Atlantic Wall or the Wehrmacht behind it, they likely will be confronting the combined regional resources of Taiwan, Japan and the US. The realistic best case scenario for China in an attempted invasion is that of the Battle of Britain/Operation *Sea Lion*. The air campaign fails, and no actual amphibious operation is even mounted. Significantly worse would be the Chinese Navy takes serious losses in the crossing, such that it is forced to abort any planned landing before it takes place. Airborne forces would likely be destroyed in detail if already deployed. Catastrophe looks more like Dieppe. The landings take place and supporting naval assets are either compelled to withdraw under sustained fire and mounting casualties, or they are forced to retrieve the

assault forces after they fail to capture a port capable of facilitating sustainment and reinforcement functions.

It's hard to imagine a realistic scenario of a conventional invasion of Taiwan by China which results in the capture of the island from its defenders, assuming Taiwan's allies stand with her.

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