

China's Top Five War Plans

By: Ian Easton

On December 31, 2015, the People's Republic of China (PRC, or China) began a sweeping military reorganization and reform program. The stated objective of this program was to produce a "joint force" capable of fighting and winning China's future wars. This development raised a number of intriguing questions. What compelled the occupants of the Zhongnanhai leadership compound in Beijing to gamble on a sudden, and potentially destabilizing, shake-up of the armed wing of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)? What wars do Xi Jinping and the CCP elite envision fighting? Assuming reforms are successful, how might Chinese military power be used in future joint operations?

To understand what may be driving China's military reorganization and reform campaign, we must first understand the nature of the PRC's war plans. Planners in Beijing appear to make decisions regarding China's overall military buildup and armaments program based on a limited number of future conflict scenarios.

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¹ Of many examples, see Academy of Military Sciences' Strategic Research Department, *Science of Military Strategy* [战略学] (Beijing: Academy of Military Sciences, 2013), pp. 198-199; and Liu Haijiang and Li Zhiyuan (eds.), *Research on Joint Tactical Thought* [联合战术思想研究] (Beijing, Lantian Press, 2012), p. 156.

² In addition to the sources cited above, see also Cao Zhengrong, Sun Jianjun, and Sun Longhai (eds.), *Research on Joint Operations in Border Areas* [边境地

区联合作战研究] (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2014).

According to the writings of People's Liberation Army (PLA) strategists and military theorists, Beijing's foremost objective is preparing to conquer the Republic of China (ROC, or Taiwan), while deterring, delaying, or destroying U.S. military actions to assist in the defense of the island. This is something authoritative Chinese military writings refer to as China's "Main Strategic Direction (主要战略方向)."¹ PLA writings available to us indicate that military conflicts around China's land borders represent secondary, but still important, planning scenarios. In particular, Chinese military writings describe the India border as a flashpoint and paint India as a dangerous future enemy.²

PLA sources indicate that Chinese military strategists focus on five major conflict scenarios. Potential war plans constructed around these scenarios would require varying degrees of joint-capable military forces. Generally referred to in the Chinese literature as joint campaigns (联合战役) or joint operations (联合作战), it seems likely that these imagined future wars drive China's military buildup to a significant degree.³ According to sources in

区联合作战研究] (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2014).

³ See Cao Zhengrong, Sun Longhai, and Yang Yin (eds.), *Informatized Army Operations* [信息化陆军作战] (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2014), pp. 109-314; Yuan Wenxian (ed.), *Course Book on Joint Campaigns and Information Operations* [联合战役信息作战教程] (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2009), pp. 271-326; and Cao Zhengrong, Wu Runbo, and

hand, the PLA's main joint operations are as follows:

- (1) Joint Firepower Strike Operations against Taiwan (大型岛屿联合火力突击作战).⁴
- (2) Joint Blockade Operations against Taiwan (大型岛屿联合封锁作战).
- (3) Joint Attack Operations against Taiwan (大型岛屿联合进攻作战).⁵
- (4) Joint Anti-Air Raid Operations (联合反空袭作战).⁶
- (5) Joint Border Area Operations (边境地区联合作战).

Chinese military literature suggests these joint operations could be related and interlocking, or they could be conducted independently, depending on Beijing's strategic intentions, the severity of the situation, and external circumstances over which China might have little control. It is anticipated that joint operations would include supporting actions conducted by a single service or branch of the military. For example, during a joint attack operation against Taiwan, PLA ground forces

could be called on to carry-out air assault operations against offshore islands like Kinmen (近岸岛屿机降突击作战) and attack operations against cities like Taipei (岛上城市进攻作战). Such operations might require minimal coordination with naval or air force elements.⁷

The PLA's nightmare scenario appears to be one in which it would be called upon to conduct all five joint operations in a two-front war against the United States and Taiwan in the East, and India in the South.⁸ In this scenario, available Chinese military sources envision the PLA first launching a joint firepower strike against Taiwan and then conducting a short-duration, high-intensity joint blockade of the island. When the ROC military was judged as having been sufficiently weakened, the PLA would launch a joint attack operation and make amphibious landings. Once major beachheads were secured, intense urban and mountain warfare operations in the island's depths would follow.

According to the assumptions seen in PLA writings, at some undefined moment, the

Sun Jianjun (eds.), *Informatized Joint Operations* [信息化联合作战] (Beijing: Liberation Army Press, 2008), pp. 145-323.

⁴ While the direct translation of 大型岛屿 is simply "a large island or islands," it is clear from PLA texts that they are referring specifically to Taiwan and not an abstraction or large islands in general. It might therefore be risky to assume that the PLA would use the exact same planning assumptions for notional operations against Luzon, Okinawa, or Guam.

⁵ This is also sometimes referred to as Joint Landing Operations against Taiwan (大型岛屿联合登岛作战).

⁶ Note that some PLA writings, such as *Informatized Joint Operations*, refer to this as "Joint Coastal Area Defense Operations" (*Binhai Diqu Lianhe Fangwei*

Zuozhan). It is also sometimes called "Counter-Intervention Operations."

⁷ See Zhang Zhiwei, and Huang Chuanxian (eds), *Research on Operational Theory of Army Aviation* [陆军航空兵作战理论研究] (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2014), pp. 164-202; and Hu Guoqiao (ed.), *Research on Army Aviation Tactics* [陆军航空兵战术研究] (Beijing: PLA General Staff Department Army Aviation Department, 2013), pp. 92-96. For more details on service centric campaigns, see Zhang Yuliang (ed.) *Science of Campaigns* [战役学] (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2007), pp. 333-602.

⁸ See Cao Zhengrong, Sun Longhai, and Yang Yin, pp. 115, 258-259; Liu Haijiang and Li Zhiyuan, p. 156; and Cao Zhengrong, Wu Runbo, and Sun Jianjun, pp. 267-268.

United States could intervene and launch cruise missile strikes and air raids on Chinese forces in the Taiwan Strait and along the PRC coast. These American attacks could force the Chinese to fight a joint anti-air raid operation. In addition, it is assumed that the Indian military and/or Tibetan freedom fighters might at this moment attack across the volatile Himalayan border, forcing the Chinese to simultaneously fight a joint border area operation. PLA writings demonstrate some concern that Japan, Australia, and certain Southeast Asian countries might also side against China in a major Taiwan Strait war scenario, but available sources dedicate little attention to this possibility.⁹

The following will briefly outline how Chinese military writings envision the manner in which each of the PLA's five joint operations might, in theory, play out.

Joint Firepower Strike Operations against Taiwan

In this scenario, the PLA would employ missile and air strikes against Taiwan with the aim of suppressing and destroying targets on the island. Carefully-selected Taiwanese military, political, and economic targets would be hit. Strikes could suppress Taiwan's defensive capabilities, and, in theory, weaken morale and the will to resist CCP demands.



⁹ Ibid.

If Beijing's political objectives were limited to punishing Taiwan's government for some perceived provocation, it seems probable that Chinese military operations would be prolonged, but intermittent, and characterized by low intensity attacks, followed by pauses allowing for potential political negotiations. If Beijing's political objective was to quickly and finally conquer Taiwan, strike operations would be far more intense. They could be expected to be concentrated in a short timeframe, as a prelude to invasion, with no pauses other than those required for moving, reloading, and repairing equipment.¹⁰

Joint Blockade Operations against Taiwan

In this scenario, the PLA would use a range of offensive capabilities to sever Taiwan's connections to the outside world, including electronic and cyber attacks, missile and air strikes, naval surface and subsurface raids, and offensive mine warfare. Chinese military writings view such attacks as necessary for obtaining information control (信息权), air control (制空权), and sea control (制海权). These attacks are intended to knock-out Taiwan's communications, isolating the island and weakening its defense capabilities and war making potential. As was the case above, if Beijing's political objectives were limited to punishing Taiwan's government for some perceived provocation, it seems probable that

¹⁰ See Wang Yongping (ed.), *Space Information Support Operations* [空间信息支援作战] (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2014), p. 145. See also Yuan

military operations would be prolonged, but intermittent and characterized by low intensity attacks, followed by pauses allowing for potential political negotiations. If Beijing's political objective was to quickly and finally conquer Taiwan, blockade operations would be far more intense. They could be expected to be concentrated in a short timeframe as a prelude to the coming invasion.¹¹

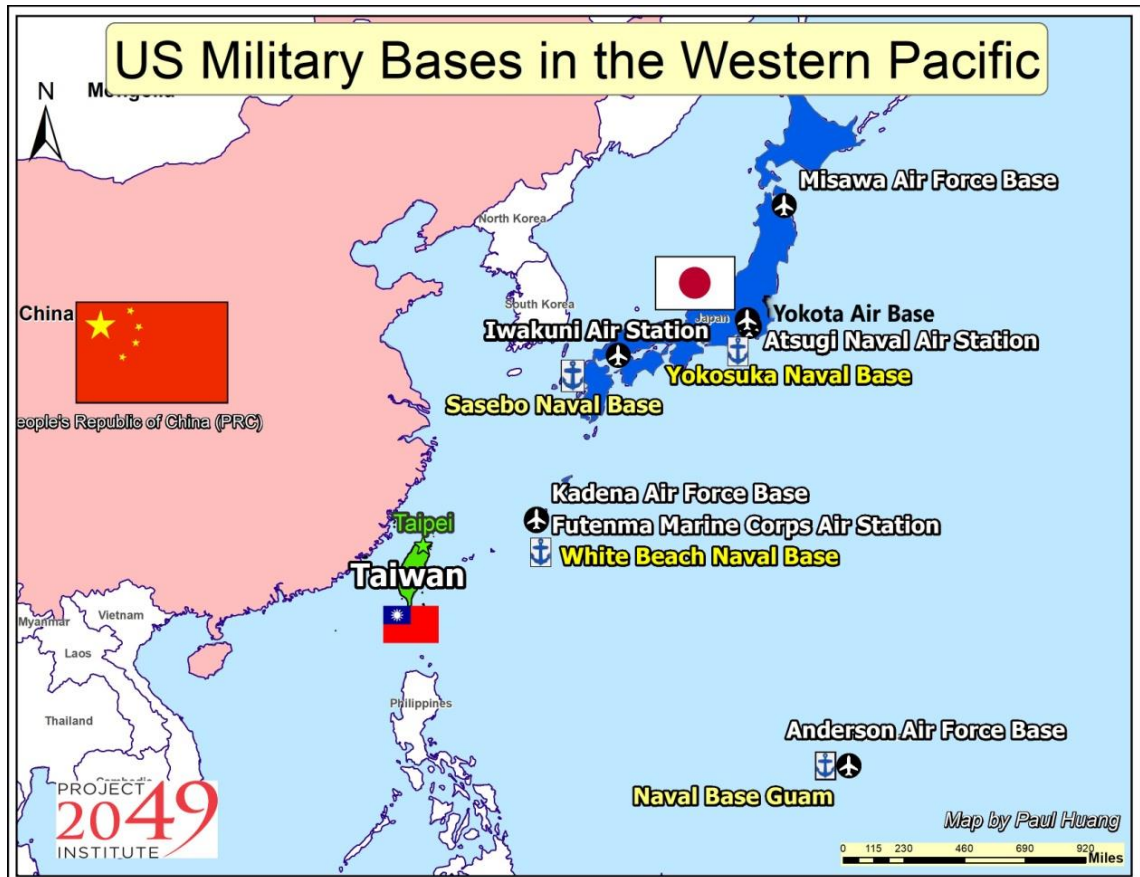
Joint Attack Operations against Taiwan

In this scenario, the PLA would launch an all-out amphibious operation after what it judged to be successful strike and blockade operations. In theory, China could also attempt a bolt-out-of-the-blue or zero warning invasion. However, for a range of practical reasons, it seems probable that the PLA would, at a minimum, first seek to seize localized control over the electromagnetic, air, and sea domains in the Taiwan Strait. Chinese forces would next isolate and/or assault Taiwanese islands in the Strait (Kinmen, Wuqiu, Matsu, Dongyin, and Penghus).

The PLA could then make amphibious and airborne assaults against the main island of Taiwan to seize and secure beaches, ports, and airfields along the coast. Once Taiwanese counterattacks had been destroyed, the Chinese military could build-up landing zones and reinforce their lodgments. Specially-trained mechanized units, supported by attack helicopters and air assault forces, would plunge

Wenxian, pp. 271-278; and Cao Zhengrong, Wu Runbo, and Sun Jianjun, pp. 164-185.

¹¹ See Wang Yongping, p. 168. See also Yuan Wenxian, pp. 279-288; and Cao Zhengrong, Wu Runbo, and Sun Jianjun, pp. 145-163.



into Taiwan's depths, seeking to encircle and force the surrender of Taipei and other major cities. If organized military resistance collapsed and the ROC government fell, Taiwan could be cleared of guerillas and pacified. The PLA could institute martial law, while fortifying coastal areas ahead of potential American counter-landings.¹²

Joint Anti-Air Raid Operation

These operations would notionally occur when Chinese authorities viewed attacks on American

forces as essential to the success of their operations against Taiwan. In this scenario, China would use military force to carry out offensive operations against American units deployed near the PRC coast and in the Western Pacific. Chinese air assets, supported by army, navy, and rocket force units, would be employed and work in tandem with armed police and militia units in China's civil air defense system. The PLA would strike U.S. military bases to disrupt perceived U.S. air raid plans, while protecting critical Chinese military units engaged in operations against Taiwan. The

¹² See Wang Yongping, p. 190. See also Xu Lisheng and Wang Tiaoyong (eds.), *Research on Port Landing Operations* [港口登陆作战研究] (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2015), pp. 16-271; Cao Zhengrong, Sun Longhai, and Yang Yin, pp. 109-215; Huang Bingyue, Wu Shaofeng, and Shou Zhichao (eds.),

Research on Command Systems for Amphibious Fleet Operations [两栖作战编队指挥体系研究] (Beijing: Academy of Military Sciences Press, 2013), pp. 3-134; Liu Haijiang and Li Zhiyuan, pp. 140-155; Yuan Wenxian, pp. 289-301; and Cao Zhengrong, Wu Runbo, and Sun Jianjun, pp. 186-235.

overriding strategic objective would be to protect the regime in Beijing while securing Taiwan's capitulation.¹³

Joint Border Area Defense Operation

These operations would notionally occur in the event that claimed Chinese territory was violated or occupied by the Indian military and/or attacked by Tibetan freedom fighters. In this scenario, the PLA would seek to counter Indian electronic and cyber attacks, air and missile strikes, and ground assaults. Chinese units would be expected to defend critical positions and then counterattack. The CCP's overall objective would be to destroy India's battle plan, retake any territory that had been lost in the conflict, and return to the previous status quo along the border.¹⁴ The PLA would seek to avoid escalation and keep it to a low-to-medium intensity fight. If the Chinese side was successful, envisioned operations would be shorter and less bloody than those directed at Taiwan, and possibly, American forces.¹⁵

¹³ See Wang Yongping, p. 235. See also Yuan Wenxian, pp.314-326; Cao Zhengrong, Wu Runbo, and Sun Jianjun, pp. 236-262; and Zhang Yuliang, pp. 312-330.

¹⁴ See Wang Yongping, p. 215. See also Cao Zhengrong, Sun Longhai, and Yang Yin, pp. 216-314; Liu Haijiang and Li Zhiyuan, pp. 156-168; Yuan Wenxian, pp. 302-313; and Cao Zhengrong, Wu Runbo, and Sun Jianjun, pp. 263-323.

¹⁵ See Cao Zhengrong, Sun Longhai, and Yang Yin, pp. 258-259; and Liu Haijiang and Li Zhiyuan, p.163.

¹⁶ For example, a military campaign against Vietnam or the Philippines in the South China Sea has traditionally been regarded as possible, but less stressful. Chinese writings on this scenario are sparse, perhaps in reflection

Implications

It is likely that the Chinese military has developed joint war plans for operations other than the five described above. However, the limited evidence available to us at the current time neither proves it, nor details what other imagined conflicts might entail.¹⁶ Available sources support a belief that these five are the main drivers of China's military reforms and buildup, and they will continue to shape the way Chinese authorities, including Xi Jinping, invest their time and energies in the national security arena.

CCP propaganda seeks to convince audiences that China is a peaceful and defense-oriented country. This message does not accord with reality. Understanding China's military buildup means understanding that the PRC is preparing for a dangerous war of aggression against Taiwan, and, by way of extension, the United States and its allies. Not satisfied with its current borders, China seeks to expand outward at the expense of its neighbors. The more "joint-capable" the PLA becomes, the more likely it will be that this seemingly improbable event could actually come to pass.

of its comparatively low-level of planning priority and the perceived weakness of imagined local enemies. Indeed, the few PLA writings available express the view that a military campaign against Vietnam or the Philippines would represent a relatively easy, low-to-medium scale conflict. They do not appear to envision this as a trigger for all-out great power conflict with the United States, although they do seem to anticipate and plan for some escalation. See Zhu Hui (ed.), *Research on Strategic Air Force Problems* [空军战略问题研究] (Beijing: Lantian Press, 2014), p. 264; and Zhang Yuliang (ed.), *Science of Campaigns* [战役学] (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2007), pp. 503-506.

While many leading thinkers have come to believe that the South China Sea is the 21st century's foremost flashpoint, PLA writings show that China's military buildup is aimed mainly at fighting in the Taiwan Strait and Western Pacific. In response, the U.S. government should lift self-imposed restrictions on political, defense, and security interactions with Taiwan and move to integrate the island's military into its regional defense architecture. At the same time, front-line American combat assets in the Indo-Pacific should be strengthened, with their capabilities tailored for countering China's war plans. It is crucial that the U.S. maintains a favorable balance of power and arrests unfavorable trends.