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In My View

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IN MY VIEW

“THE MYTH OF AN ISOLATED SCENARIO”

Sir:

In his “Revisiting Taiwan’s Defense Strategy,” in the Summer 2008 issue of Naval War College Review, Professor William Murray argues that in a complete surprise scenario, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) could launch a long-range precision bombardment to quickly cripple or destroy the Republic of China (ROC) navy and air force; the subsequent invasion and blockade by the PLA could then neutralize the island republic’s resistance on the ground and achieve success before the United States could intervene. Accordingly, Murray suggested that Taiwan should not heavily invest in its navy and air force because neither is likely to survive such a surprise attack; rather, it should adopt a “porcupine strategy” and “concentrate on development of a professional standing army armed with mobile, short-range, defensive weapons.” He believes that such a policy would enable Taiwan to resist the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC’s) offense for weeks or even months and allow the United States time to deliberate whether intervention is warranted.

The article hinges upon the scenario of a “complete surprise.” In reality, however, this scenario is selectively isolated and hardly tenable. First of all, in an envisioned campaign across the Taiwan Strait, the PLA would never base its invasion on guided missiles alone. Before it launches a long-range precision bombardment with its overwhelming guided missiles, the PLA will conduct an access-denial strategy in advance, deploying its numerous submarines between the first and the second island chains so as to prevent the intervention of the U.S. Navy. At the same time, the PLA will assemble a huge number of combat troops of the three services along the southeast coast for subsequent invasion and blockade. At this juncture, the numerous advanced spy and reconnaissance satellites of the United States will come into play and prove themselves. Although the PLA has antisatellite missiles, it is impossible for the PLA to eliminate all such U.S. satellites instantaneously. That is, the deployment of numerous
submarines and the assembly of vast numbers of PLA combat troops will definitely be picked up by the U.S. satellites, which will then provide strategic and tactical warnings to the United States and Taiwan. A Western proverb goes as follows: forewarned is forearmed. Once alerted, the United States and Taiwan will respond accordingly. Consequently, there is no room for a “complete surprise” to occur across the Taiwan Strait realistically. In short, a critical but implicit assumption of the “complete surprise” scenario—the PLA conducts vital deployment without being detected—is untenable at all. This makes the article fundamentally flawed.

The argument that neither the Taiwan navy and air force is likely to survive such a long-range precision bombardment is also seriously flawed. At present, the ROC navy has two operational Dutch-built submarines. If the ROC acquired the additional eight submarines which the Bush administration has promised to sell to Taiwan in 2001, its navy would have altogether ten operational submarines. As prescribed by naval routine, at least three or four submarines would be cruising under the sea. All ten would be ready for combat once the PLA’s critical deployment was detected. These submarines cruising under the sea stand the best chance to survive a dozen waves of saturation missiles attack by the PLA and would be immediately ready for lethal revenge attacks. Their counterattack might neutralize more than a third of the invading amphibious troops during the shore-to-shore maneuver stage and force the PLA to abort its invasion.

Even though the PLA may still conduct a blockade against Taiwan, the fact that the island sits on the chokepoint of quite a few vital sea-lanes may trigger international intervention right away. The international pressure may well soon exceed the level Beijing could withstand. A prolonged blockade will prove an invitation to international intervention and may end up in failure. In short, the coherence of the scenario from a long-range precision bombardment to blockade is fragile.

The so-called porcupine strategy puts emphasis on the conservation of army forces rather than the building up of the navy and the air force of the ROC. This strategy might lead to a disastrous result. When in power, both the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and the Kuomintang (KMT) have claimed that Taiwan is a maritime nation. Hence the ROC is meant to be a sea power. As shown by the example of the United States, the U.K., and Japan, a sea power has to prioritize the buildup of its navy and air force. Otherwise, it is giving up the struggle for sea and air control. As an island republic, Taiwan would be vulnerable to external threat without a strong navy and air force. Neglecting to build up its navy and air force would invite PLA invasion.

If the PLA chose to invade Taiwan, it would very likely adopt an “access denial” strategy against the U.S. beforehand. That is, before invading Taiwan, the
PLA could establish a line, or even a double line, of defense, composed of submarines, between the first and the second island chains. If the PLA succeeds in taking Taiwan, how long would it take the U.S. to break through the formidable line(s) of defense to come to the rescue of Taiwan? If the PLA heavily reinforced its combat troops and consolidated its anti-U.S. defenses right after taking Taiwan, the breakthrough and rescue operations of the United States would be further delayed. The longer the delay, the heavier the casualties for the United States and the dimmer the chance of success. Facing the grim prospect of a miserable war, heavy casualties, and prolonged confrontation with the formidable PRC, will the U.S. Congress approve the dispatch of its soldiers to sacrifice their lives for Taiwan, already in the firm grip of the PLA? Probably very few would be optimistic about the answer.

If, then, the ROC government adopts the “porcupine strategy” and ignores the buildup of its navy and air force, the PLA might be lured to take up an access-denial strategy against the U.S. and launch a surprise attack against the island simultaneously. Whatever the result of the PLA attack would be, it would be a disaster for Taiwan. This kind advice from a friend might lead to catastrophe. The ROC government has to be careful with the “porcupine strategy.”

Professor Murray argues that facing the overwhelming military threat from the PLA, Taiwan must rethink and redesign an asymmetrical defense strategy to deny the PRC’s strategic objectives. There is more than one option in terms of asymmetric defense strategy. Stressing the conservation of army combat power is one option. Putting emphasis on the buildup of the navy and air force in a way that yields strategic deterrence capacity, tenacious survival ability, and lethal revenge capability could be another. An asymmetric army can make it hard for the PLA to swallow the island, while an asymmetric navy and air force may dissuade it from launching a surprise attack in the first place. It is not difficult to tell which is superior.

Confronting the overwhelming superiority, and likelihood, of surprise attack from the PLA, the ROC military should aim to promote survivability, revenge capability, strategic deterrence, and asymmetric-warfare capabilities. In terms of tangible options, the decision makers in Taipei and Washington, D.C., have to abandon tribalism and answer the following question honestly: In a scenario close to a complete surprise, is there any war-fighting platform that possesses survivability, revenge capability, strategic deterrence, and asymmetric-warfare capabilities superior to those of submarines? Actually, if the ROC has acquired substantial submarines, the high survivability and fatal revenge capability of submarines alone might dissuade the PLA from invading Taiwan in the first place.
The “porcupine strategy” urges that the combat-power-conservation measures of the army be consolidated so that Taiwan can resist PLA invasion long enough for America to come to the rescue. The strategy serves the interests of the United States. The argument expects the ROC to hold on and defend the critical strategic point of the first island chain for the U.S. However, the ROC is not a vassal state of America; rather, it is an independent maritime nation. It has its own national goals to accomplish, including safeguarding the territorial integrity and maritime resources of the Senkaku Islands and the islands in the South China Sea.

Many of the Asia-Pacific nations are pursuing naval buildup programs. The ROC has territorial disputes with some of these nations. Such disputes involve conventional security threats, and military power still plays a significant role for resolution. Taiwan has to face the solemn issue of safeguarding the territorial integrity and maritime resources with military power, if necessary. The ROC simply cannot entrust the mission to any other country. As other Asia-Pacific nations pursue military buildups, if we do not, shall we take the mindset of a protectorate and look to the U.S. or some other big brother for protection? Such mentality is dangerous and irresponsible. As an independent island republic, Taiwan has to rely on its navy and air force to ensure the integrity of its territorial sovereignty and maritime resources.

“Revisiting Taiwan’s Defense Strategy” shows concern about the security of Taiwan. The scenario and suggestions it offers serve to help the ROC review its vulnerability and look for ways for improvements; therefore, the writing as a whole merits approbation from Taiwan. However, the paper is fundamentally flawed. The basic assumption of the scenario of complete surprise is untenable; the coherence of the scenario is fragile. The article has been, in effect, developed in the interests of the U.S. and subconsciously treats the ROC as a vassal state and a protectorate of America, which contradicts our commitment to Taiwan as a sovereign maritime nation. The suggestions given by the article may further deprive Taiwan of its aspiration to become a sea power. The ROC military, on the one hand, appreciates the paper’s concern but, on the other hand, is cautious about its suggestions.

WEN-LUNG LAURENCE LIN
National Defense University, Taiwan
Sir:

William S. Murray wrote an intriguing, thoughtful article arguing that both Taipei and Washington needed to reexamine the island’s approach to defending against an attack from the People’s Republic of China. Entitled “Revisiting Taiwan’s Defense Strategy,” Mr. Murray’s article contends that the pace and scope of China’s military modernization—with its rapid introduction of precise short-range ballistic missiles, advanced submarines, surface ships, aircraft and surface-to-air missiles—has “fundamentally altered” the cross-strait security environment by eroding Taiwan’s strategic depth and geographic advantage.

Mr. Murray concludes that Taiwan should forgo purchasing advanced military systems from the U.S. and stop developing its own offensive counterstrike capabilities. Taiwan instead should adopt a “porcupine strategy” by hardening its civil-military infrastructure and strengthening the Taiwan army to such an extent that Taipei would deny Beijing all of its strategic objectives in attacking the island. In short, he believes that this new strategy would show “demonstrable Taiwanese resilience[,] would diminish Beijing’s prior confidence in success, strengthen cross-strait deterrence, and reduce the risk of the United States being dragged into a conflict with China.”

Professor Murray’s analysis of the relative PRC and Taiwan military capabilities and strategies during a full-scale conflict is largely sound. However, his conclusion that Taiwan is doing enough but just “not doing the right things” misses some important strategic considerations. The right thing for Taipei to do now is to ensure that its defense policy is free from partisan politics and that Taiwan fully utilizes its acquired weapon systems toward a viable defense against Beijing’s threats.

Taiwan’s acquisition of the recently announced $6.4 billion package (which includes Harpoon missiles, PAC-3 missiles and firing units, AH-64D Apache helicopters, and upgrades for Taiwan’s E-2 early warning aircraft) will serve as another step toward maintaining a capable and resilient defense force. Moreover, Taiwan’s purchase is also an important symbol of Taipei’s resolve to resist Beijing’s coercion—a far more powerful symbol than Taiwan deploying offensive missiles or “hardening” alone. Despite limitations at the higher end of the escalation ladder, Taiwan’s military capabilities play a central role in preventing Beijing from intimidating the island (via force demonstrations, forward exercises, sea-lane disruptions, etc.) so as to force Taipei to negotiate under duress. By Taiwan’s maintaining a modestly sized but potent force equipped with advanced weaponry, its military will have the capacity to confront these intimidations successfully and confidently. Faced with this resistance, Beijing will then
need to either deescalate the situation or make the risky, costly choice China does not want to make: full-scale war.

In the face of overwhelming Chinese force, however, a strong Taiwan military is a necessary—but not sufficient—requirement for the island’s defense. Regardless of how “hardened” Taiwan becomes, it is unlikely that Taipei could resist a prolonged, full-scale assault alone—a point Murray readily concedes. What complicates Beijing’s calculus—and therefore prevents China from undertaking such a gambit—is the risk of failure, a hazard made far greater by the prospect of U.S. intervention that reinforces the island’s will to resist. Therefore, Washington’s promise to keep Taiwan safe from attack and intimidation by, in part, providing it appropriate defense articles and services is indispensable for maintaining security and stability across the Taiwan Strait. The sale of defense systems like PAC-3 and AH-64D Apache helicopters is a significant, tangible, and responsible demonstration of Washington’s long-standing commitment to Taipei, succinctly enunciated in President Bush’s pledge to “do whatever it takes to defend Taiwan.”

Professor Murray is correct that it is important for the U.S. and Taiwan to reevaluate periodically the direction of their defense policies to ensure that they are consistent with the changing security environment. His prescription that Taiwan’s leaders should work to reduce its critical vulnerabilities is a sound one. Making improvements in Taiwan’s civil-military infrastructure is especially important for an island prone to periodic natural disasters. So too is improving the Taiwan army’s sustainability, training, and force protection.

Now, however, is not the time for Taiwan to abandon the primary features of its current defense strategy in favor of Professor Murray’s “porcupine strategy”—a radical form of Taiwan’s previous “resolute defense, effective deterrence” doctrine. Instead, Taipei should look to develop all of its armed services in ways that accentuate the geographic advantages the island continues to enjoy despite Beijing’s improved capacity to coerce and intimidate. These may include a more robust use of sophisticated decoys, wider use of alternative runways and basing, or employing more redundant and joint logistics infrastructure as Mr. Murray suggests. Nevertheless, these efforts should complement Taipei’s current strategy, not replace it.

With the announcement now made in Washington, the hard part begins for Taipei. It is incumbent on Taiwan’s authorities to provide the sufficient funding to procure the $6.4 billion package in the near term and to prepare its forces to employ them effectively over the long term. Taiwan’s political parties now need to cooperate on their defensive needs and avoid politicizing defense policy. A clear, long-range defense strategy that transcends party politics would best serve the island’s security in the long term. Failing to do so will undermine
Washington and Taipei’s efforts to maintain cross-strait security and stability as Beijing continues its rapid military modernization unabated.

MICHAEL CASSIDY
Analyst, U.S. Department of Defense

Professor Murray replies:

In his summary of my argument, and repeatedly in his subsequent analysis, Captain Lin claims that I advocate the negligence of Taiwan’s air force and navy, and the buildup of its army in their place. This is incorrect. The complete sentence from which he quoted (italicized portion) reads: “Rather than relying on its navy and air force (neither of which is likely to survive such an attack) to destroy an invasion force, Taiwan should concentrate on development of a professional standing army armed with mobile, short-range, defensive weapons.” Maritime powers, as Captain Lin rightly observes, have real needs for the capabilities an air force and navy can provide. Taiwan is no exception. I don’t, however, think it is prudent to count on either Taiwan’s navy or air force to apply combat power effectively after being subjected to a surprise bombardment. Consequently, it would seem logical (and not parochial) to rely more heavily on a fully professional, properly equipped and trained army as an effective counter-invasion force. This does not mandate or constitute a recommendation for the diminishment or disestablishment of either the Taiwan navy or air force, but it does suggest the need to rethink the missions they should be configured to perform.

Mr. Cassidy wrote that I feel “Taiwan should forgo purchasing advanced military systems from the U.S.” This is a misleading oversimplification of my argument. I contend instead that weapons systems offered by the United States should be unambiguously defensive; that they should be able to survive an initial bombardment by large numbers of precision munitions; and that they should directly assist in either defeating an invasion or preserving Taipei’s ability to prevent Beijing from obtaining control over the island’s airspace and adjacent waters. Weapons that satisfy these criteria can be simple or advanced, but there are undeniable advantages to relatively simple weapons systems if they are used in a manner that achieves a set of coherent strategic objectives.
Captain Lin bases a significant portion of his counterarguments on the assumption that Taiwan will receive strategic and tactical warning. I agree that Taiwan should be able to discern strategic warning. Intelligence specialists can better assess than I whether China can launch barrages of missiles against Taiwan without providing unambiguous indicators of imminent attack. Nonetheless, I would imagine the benefits of being able to do so are readily apparent to the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), and that China’s military has trained to be able to do just that. I think it is also reasonable to assume that Beijing’s operational plans are designed and sequenced to minimize the likelihood of providing Taipei tactical warning. The alternative seems like a poor planning assumption and ignores the PLA’s history of achieving tactical surprise. I’ll also observe that Taiwan’s runways and other valuable fixed facilities and weapons systems remain vulnerable regardless of the amount or type of warning received.

Captain Lin argues that Taiwan’s potential future submarines will survive a Chinese bombardment and deter or defeat an invasion. I agree that correctly positioned submarines could probably sink several invading amphibious ships near Chinese ports of departure or as they transit to an invasion beach. Yet even a fortuitously positioned four-knot submarine will have limited attack opportunities against a fleet of twelve-knot amphibious ships and escorts. I do not understand how Taiwan could ensure these opportunities unless several of Taipei’s submarines continuously patrolled in the very shallow waters near likely landing beaches or immediately outside the similarly shallow waters of Chinese ships’ home ports (which would likely be defensively mined). Captain Lin wrote that Taiwan could maintain three or four submarines in such positions, but this assertion represents a very high submarine force operations tempo. Such a high OPTEMPO would likely require an even larger inventory of submarines than that to which Taiwan currently aspires. Regardless, China could defeat such a concept of operations by building more amphibious ships than Taiwan’s submarines could be expected to sink.

Mr. Cassidy notes that Taiwan’s weapons systems are important symbols of Taipei’s resolve and that those systems would help the island resist coercion in scenarios less severe than the existentially threatening example I posited. I agree. Yet I remain concerned that many of Taiwan’s showcase weapons systems could be destroyed or rendered unusable by an initial Chinese salvo of conventional missiles. Symbolism based on vulnerable weapons systems is not a feature of an effective deterrent and does little to lend stability to a crisis. For these reasons I must disagree with Mr. Cassidy’s assertion that “Now . . . is not the time for Taiwan to abandon the primary features of its current defense strategy.” On the contrary, I think Taiwan should, as a matter of urgency, honestly and openly
debate its strategic options and determine how to reestablish a stable deterrence. The United States should actively contribute to this debate.

Mr. Cassidy recommends that Taipei should ensure that its defense policy is freed from partisan politics. I wonder if this is possible (since it doesn’t appear to be in other democracies), yet I take his point. Taiwan’s defenses and defensive strategy largely stagnated during the tumultuous years of the Chen administration, partly due to partisan politics. Simultaneously, China aggressively modernized its military and fundamentally altered how it could apply coercive force against Taiwan and against any intervening forces. This created a worrisome and deepening imbalance in what had been a relatively stable situation. I believe there is a compelling need to reevaluate and reconsider what constitutes an effective defense strategy for Taiwan and how the United States should best support it. Toward that end, I have offered the ideas in the “porcupine strategy,” and I maintain that they make sense, both for Taiwan and for the United States.

Finally, I am gratified by Captain Lin’s statement that my paper “Revisiting Taiwan’s Defense Strategy” offers the potential to help Taiwan in some way. I am sure he, Mr. Cassidy, and I would agree that continued deterrence across the Strait is in everyone’s interest, even though we don’t yet agree on how that deterrence can best be maintained.

WILLIAM S. MURRAY

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