China's War on Taiwan Won't Start in Taiwan

by Phillip Orchard - August 21, 2020

China is beginning to feel more restless about Taiwan – and a convergence of internal pressures in China, along with the belief in Beijing that Washington is too concerned with its own issues to stomach the costs of coming to Taipei's defense, gives China reason to consider moving on Taiwan sooner rather than later.

Politically, Taiwan's independence is a scar on the Communist Party's narrative of national rejuvenation. Making a bold move on Taiwan might be a fine way to stoke nationalist support and distract from **the fallout of the coronavirus**. Tactically, Beijing's efforts to pull Taiwan back into the fold, through measures like economic coercion and political interference operations, **have backfired** , as support for Taiwanese independence, declared or de facto, is gradually building on the island. And if there was any hope of convincing Taipei that a "one country, two systems"-style arrangement was still feasible, that went out the window on June 30, when **Beijing imposed a sweeping national security law on Hong Kong**.

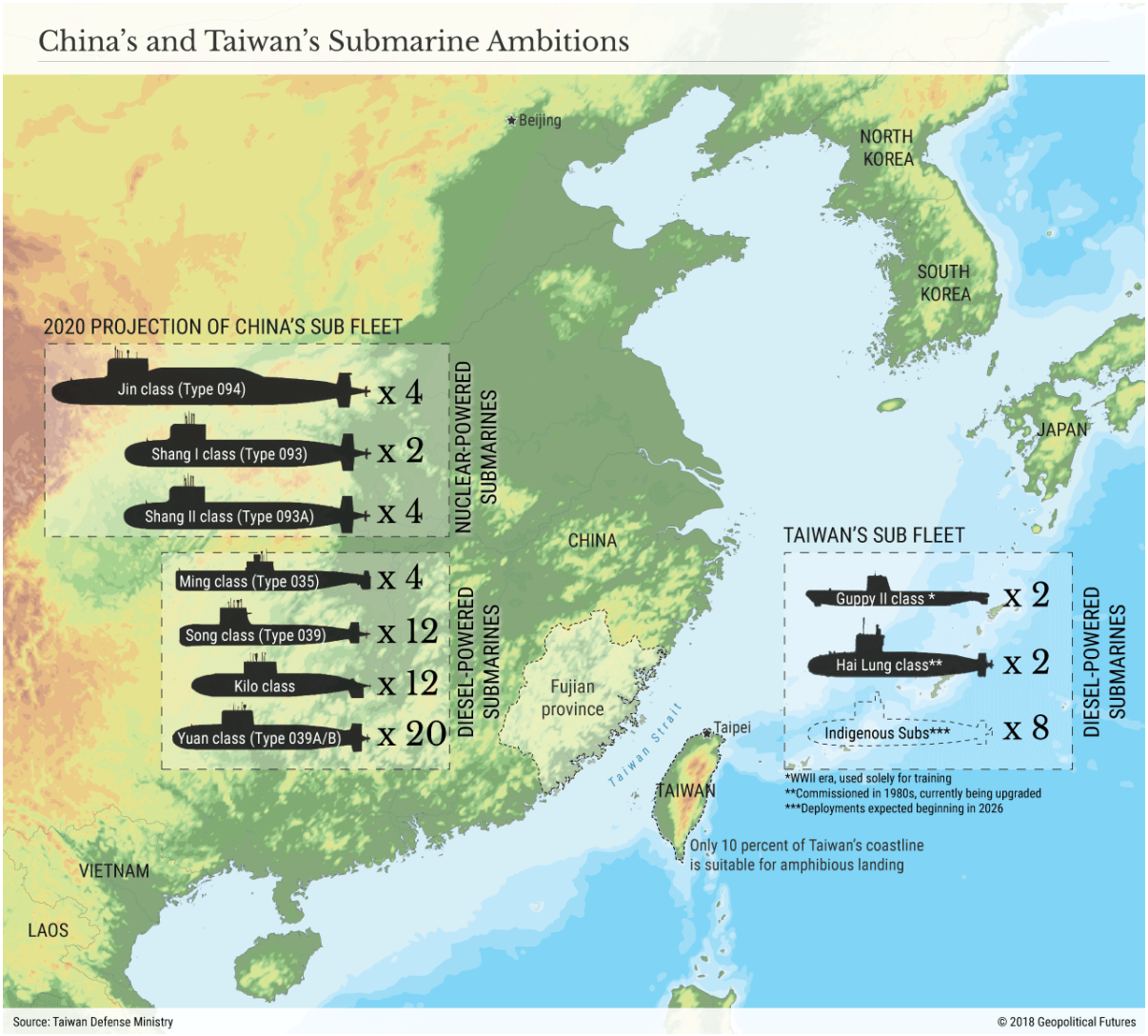
Meanwhile, U.S. efforts to starve Chinese giants like Huawei of microchips make controlling Taiwan – which **has a near stranglehold on the world's most advanced chipmaking equipment** – a solution to **China's technological dependence on rival powers**. Strategically, it sees the U.S. becoming less and less inclined to continue pretending that Taiwan is, in reality if not in formal diplomatic status, a sovereign state – **one whose geographic location would make it an invaluable part of the U.S. military strategy** for containing China.

But Beijing has an inescapable problem: It's still a long way from being able to invade and hold Taiwan – at least not without incurring costs it could not stomach. Still, it needs to do something to reverse Taiwan's outward drift. And what it can do is manufacture a crisis on Taiwan's periphery – one intended to make Taipei conclude that reunification by force is a matter of when, not if, and that it might just find itself without any friends in the fight when it comes.

Beijing's Strategy Falls Short

The military imbalance between China and Taiwan is growing rapidly in Beijing's favor. But invading and occupying Taiwan will remain extraordinarily difficult for decades to come – even if the U.S. and its allies remained on the sideline. It doesn't matter how many troops, arms and supplies the

People's Liberation Army can amass on the shores of Fujian province across the Taiwan Strait. To invade Taiwan, China would need the bulk of its forces to get into boats and make an eight-hour voyage into the teeth of Taiwanese firepower coming from well-entrenched, well-supplied onshore positions. Taiwan has about 130,000 well-armed troops (plus 1.5 million in reserve) and thousands of armored fighting vehicles and camouflaged, self-propelled artillery pieces. Only 10 percent of Taiwan's coastline is suitable for an amphibious landing, and even taken by surprise, Taiwan could amass its forces at the landing zones, even under a missile barrage from Fujian, and exact high rates of attrition on the Chinese. Moreover, the PLA has zero experience with amphibious operations in a modern combat environment. Amphibious war requires extraordinarily complex coordination between air, land and sea forces. An enormous number of things would have to go right for China to succeed, and the political risks of failure would be sky-high. That's to say nothing of the headaches involved in occupying the island itself.



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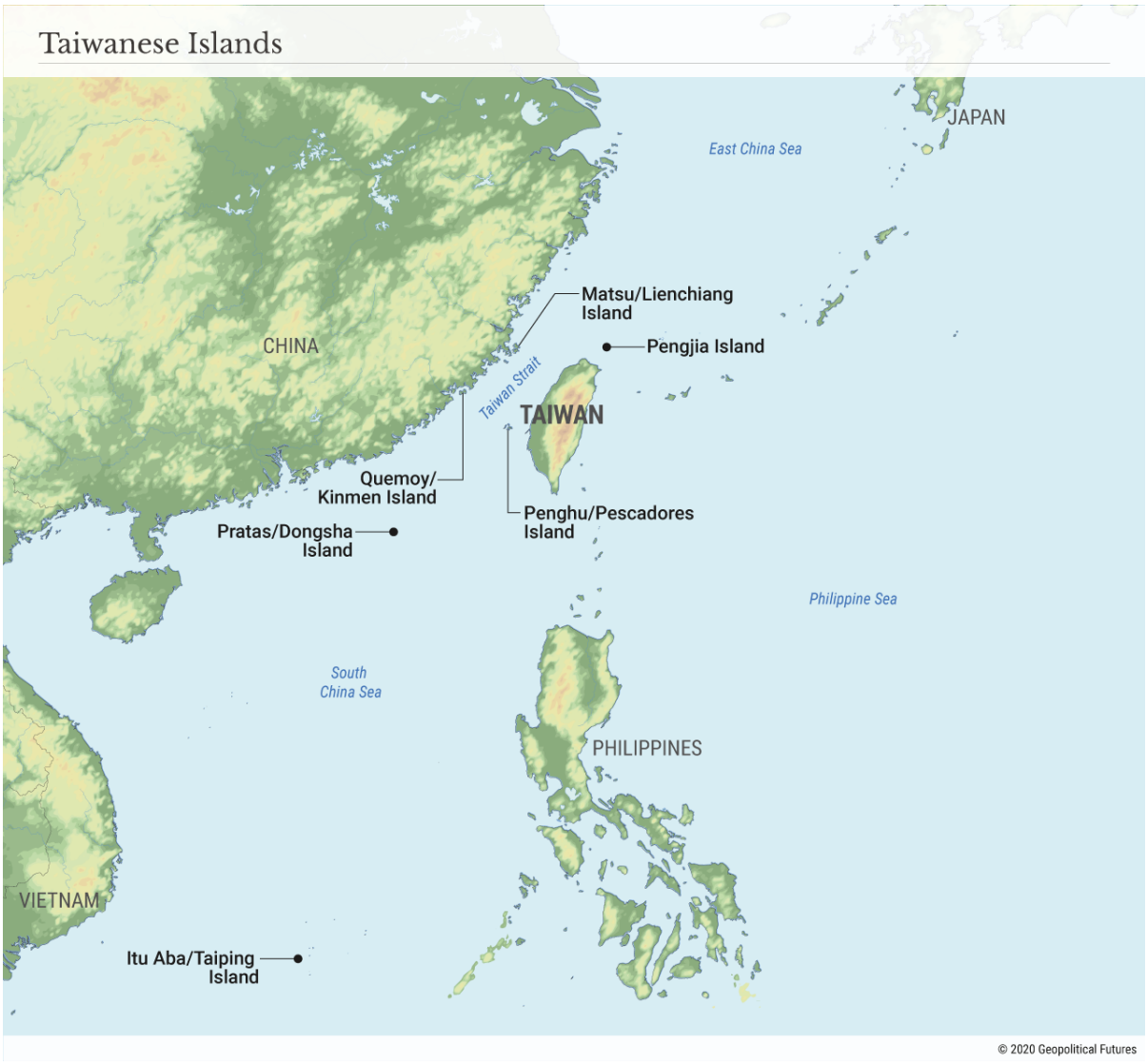
Beijing's strategy toward Taiwan the past decade has thus relied on tools like political operations, economic coercion and diplomatic isolation. The overriding goal has been to make it easier for Taipei to one day decide that peaceful reunification is in its own best interest. For Taipei to reach this conclusion, though, it still needs to believe that China is willing to take matters into its own hands and impose reunification by force – especially since China's soft power tools have evidently been failing.

Short of an invasion, China does have a number of options. Indeed, we'd expect it to exhaust these even in a scenario where it was truly willing to incur the risks of trying to occupy Taiwan. For example, if an all-out conflict with Taiwan erupted – by, say, a declaration of independence from

Taiwan – China wouldn't start with an amphibious landing. Rather, it would attempt to shock Taipei into a negotiated solution by seizing the Taiwan-controlled Quemoy and Matsu islands just off the Fujian coast, launching an escalating series of missile strikes on Taiwan proper, imposing a suffocating blockade, and so on.



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In either case, it would be difficult to prevent matters from escalating toward all-out war. It would likely rally much of the world to Taiwan's side, doing untold damage to Chinese economic interests and diplomatic initiatives further afield that are arguably far more important than retaking Taiwan. And China can't be sure that the U.S. and partners like Japan would stay on the sidelines. So don't

expect Beijing to make dramatic moves unless it is extremely confident in its ability to win, or it is simply too desperate not to.

Better Options?

Instead, expect Beijing to look for moves that simultaneously A) make Taiwan feel alone against a foe whose military threats are not mere bluffs, B) please nationalists back home, C) carry a low risk of provoking the U.S. and friends into coming to Taiwan's defense, and D) allow itself to back down without appearing to back down if the moves begin to backfire.

There are two ways to do this. One is to impose a much more limited, selective blockade. It could start intercepting Taiwanese cargo ships, claiming that they're carrying some sort of contraband or cooking up some other sort of rationale. No one would believe Beijing's claims, but it wouldn't matter. No one is going to come to Taiwan's defense in that situation either way. And it would be unlikely to lead to war with Taiwan itself. If the diplomatic backlash became too intense, or if Taipei signaled a willingness to talk, Beijing could claim success and back down whenever it saw fit.

Far more likely is the scenario that Beijing appears to be actively prepping for: Taking one of Taiwan's lightly defended far-flung islands in the South or East China sea.

Over the past few months, PLA forces have upped the scale and tempo of exercises in both the South and East China sea, while massing amphibious forces just across the Taiwan Strait. Both the timing – the latest coming as U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar became the senior-most U.S. official to visit Taiwan in decades – and the locations on Taiwan's northern and southern flanks have been conspicuous. In May, Japanese media reported that PLA troops were planning to conduct a major drill simulating an amphibious landing of a Taiwanese island. In response, Taiwan rushed a contingent of some 200 marines to Pratas Island, located some 275 miles (440 kilometers) to the south in the South China Sea. It's also reportedly deploying surveillance dirigibles to the Pratas and Pengjia Islet north of Taiwan. And, after proposing a hefty increase in defense spending, it revealed that it had entered talks with the U.S. on purchasing sea mines, aerial drones and longer-range anti-ship missiles.

For Beijing, the islands are an ideal target for a number of reasons. They have at least some strategic value, given their location amid critical shipping lanes, particularly in the Bashi Channel. The Pratas or Itu Aba could be useful, if only marginally so, in expanding the range of Chinese bombers and anti-ship missiles. More important, they would deepen China's regional superiority in information operations (i.e. its communications, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities). If

nothing else, they would function as missile sponges in a conflict, expanding the target set for the U.S. at a time when the U.S. would be fighting with limited reserves of ammo.

Meanwhile, Chinese strategists are constantly bemoaning the fact that Chinese forces have minimal experience, particularly with amphibious operations. This is deeply problematic given that China also wants the disputed, **Japan-controlled Senkakus** (ironically, also vigorously claimed by Taipei) and needs to be prepared for a scenario in which it needs to retake an island from the U.S. or a rival claimant state in the Spratlys or Paracels. Perhaps most important, since the U.S. is highly unlikely to go to war over a remote island well within China's anti-ship missile umbrella, taking the islands could deepen doubts in Taipei and other regional capitals about U.S. willingness to shed blood on their behalf.

Still, this, too, would carry numerous risks for China. It would mean abandoning any remaining hope of winning over Taiwan largely through soft power, while compelling Taipei to strike back with its own considerable **economic leverage**. It would also raise the political costs in Taipei of pursuing a cross-strait strategy of engagement, while fanning the flames of independence forces on the island. Moreover, there's always a risk that the operation could result in an embarrassing failure that President Xi Jinping couldn't tolerate. Nobody really knows just how much China's naval, air force and missile buildups match quantity with quality, and there's quite a bit of evidence that Chinese forces would still **struggle to project power far from Chinese shores**. There's a case to be made that the PLA is better off playing pufferfish than risking exposure as a paper tiger.

The biggest risk, of course, is the international backlash it would likely generate – particularly if an actual military engagement is involved. Taiwan's deployment of 200 marines to the Pratas wasn't meant as a way to forcefully block a Chinese landing, just to function as a tripwire and raise the political stakes of China going forward with it. It's one thing, in other words, for China to just claim squatters' rights on an uninhabited reef. It's quite another to start stacking bodies. While China's inherent maritime disadvantages may be its biggest strategic vulnerability, this only becomes a problem if Beijing gives the U.S. and other powers a reason to exploit it.

Far more pressing and far more existential for the Communist Party is still its internal economic fragility. At a time when U.S. economic pressure is only intensifying, and with its aggressive moves elsewhere starting to turn other major economic powers against it as well, it would seem to have good reason to refrain from making matters worse for itself by launching a kinetic operation of marginal benefit against a foe whose stellar COVID-19 management has suddenly made it a diplomatic darling.

And yet, such concerns haven't deterred China **elsewhere in the South China Sea**, nor in **Hong Kong**, nor in **the Himalayas**, nor with **Australia**, nor **anywhere else that has alienated Western business partners it needs**. Time and again, Beijing appears to be declaring that it's willing to bear the costs of pursuing what it has deemed critical political interests at home and strategic imperatives abroad. Paradoxically, the more U.S. economic pressure and political opposition in Taiwan mounts, the less China may have to lose by staying the course. Though China is unlikely to pick a "practice fight" over Itu Aba or the Pratas in the near future, the chances of it are certainly rising. Best of luck to those 200 Taiwanese marines.

Author: Phillip Orchard
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