Why 2024 Is a Good Year for China to Attack American Forces

By

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Military planners in the US appear biased toward a scenario that allows for multiple moves in a game called "Defend Taiwan from a Chinese Invasion." In this game, there is a tendency to focus on a drawn-out slog over a Chinese invasion of the island. Such a back-and-forth tit-for-tat contingency is in no one's interest and least of all China's.

For Americans, there must be a greater sense of urgency and realization of critical vulnerabilities that can include one or both potential realities. First, consider that a 2024 Chinese attack on Taiwan is feasible. Second, plan for the defense of Taiwan without the benefit of assets in Okinawa and Guam. There is a significant possibility both may prove true.

China has the confidence and believes it can control both conventional and nuclear escalation. China's "no first-use" policy only exists in name only. China made it very clear, in state-run television, that it would use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear Japan. That is, if Japan became involved in the domestic affairs of China during a Chinese invasion of Taiwan (which the Chinese Communist Party sees as a domestic affair), then China may strike Japan with nuclear weapons. This would include Okinawa.

China has the capability and will to gain the advantage in the Asia-Pacific and Taiwan relatively quickly. It is said that amateurs think strategy and generals think logistics. If this is true, understanding China's perspective is instructive.
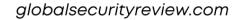
First, China will not let Taiwan become the operational center of attention because that is where American attention is focused in wargaming and tabletop exercises (TTX) played in the United States. China, if it acts as expected, will not strike Taiwan, but elsewhere—only later taking Taiwan.

Imagine Taiwan as held between the thumb and finger of the US. Struggle to pry it loose and fail. Cut off the thumb and finger and Taiwan is released. The thumb is American forces on Okinawa and the finger is the US presence on Guam.

Okinawa is home to Kadena Air Base which hosts the 18th Wing, the Air Force's largest combat air wing. The Kadena's strategic importance is underscored by its array of advanced fighter aircraft, aerial refueling capabilities, and reconnaissance aircraft. It serves as a critical hub for air operations in the Pacific, offering rapid response capabilities for various regional contingencies. Okinawa is also home to the III Marine Expeditionary Force (III MEF). The US Navy has several facilities in Okinawa, including White Beach Naval Facility, which supports naval operations in the region.

Guam hosts significant American military assets, including Andersen Air Force Base and Naval Base. With Guam and Okinawa out, the US still has assets in Tokyo, the Philippines, Australia, and, further out, is Diego Garcia, and even further away is Hawaii.

To operationally execute a surprise attack on Okinawa and Guam, China could employ a stratagem beginning with a deliberate maritime provocation: a scenario where a less costly Chinese asset, such as a $20 million LY-132 warship, engages provocatively with a more valuable US asset, akin to a $2 billion Aegis destroyer. This mirrors past incidents in the South China Sea involving near-collisions, notably between a Chinese LY132 and the USS *Chung-Hoon* on June 4, 2023. In

such a scenario, the Chinese vessel could aggressively maneuver across the bow of the US destroyer in internationally disputed waters, compelling the US ship to decelerate.

In the event of an actual collision, China could construe this as a hostile action by the US in what it claims as its sovereign territory. Leveraging this pretext for a counterstrike, China's arsenal includes advanced military capabilities for rapid engagement against Okinawa and Guam. In September 2015, the DF-26 nicknamed the "Guam Killer," which can carry conventional or nuclear warheads, was publicly revealed. Eight years later, China has added the DF-ZF hypersonic glide vehicle, the DF-27 missile, and 094-class ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs), capable of delivering a nuclear strike.

The DF-27, a medium-range ballistic missile, augments China's offensive reach, particularly in regional conflicts. Its range, speed, and accuracy render it a formidable threat to critical American positions in the Indo-Pacific, including military bases and naval forces. The DF-27 is designed to enhance China's ability to hold targets at risk beyond the second island chain and possesses a high probability of penetrating American ballistic missile defenses. The newest weapon in the Chinese hypersonic inventory, the DF-27, with its range, speed, and ability to maneuver in flight, is a potent "carrier killer." Additionally, it can hit targets as far as Hawaii. Using these capabilities China has the option to hit American forces in the first two island chains fast and furiously.

Some may argue that Japan tried something similar in 1941—only to fail. Then, the United States had industrial capacity to quickly build and overpower Japan. Today, the industrial and labor capacity exists in China, not the US. Most importantly, after years of neglecting American nuclear capabilities while China worked toward perfecting their own, the Chinese now have greater regional nuclear capability than the United States. Retaliating for nuclear strikes on Okinawa and/or Guam would prove pyric because the only option is to strike the Chinese mainland. That would put American cities and populations at risk of annihilation.

Returning to the point of this article, 2024 is a good year to attack American forces in the Indo-Pacific for five reasons. First, the US is distracted by the upcoming presidential election. Second, the US is stretched thin with contingencies in Europe and the Middle East. Third, experts and leaders are myopically looking for a cross-strait conflict, rather than the conflict discussed above. Fourth, the US is busy trying to play catch up and strengthen its integrated deterrence with allies. China has the advantage and would prove unwise to give the United States time to prepare. Fifth, the US has more to lose than China in a nuclear conflict. The risk/reward calculation looks better for China than the US in 2024 and beyond.

Thus, 2024 is a good year for a Chinese attack on American military forces in the Indo-Pacific. It is time Americans wake up to the fact that the threat is already here and not somewhere in the future.

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