



## For Taiwan, the Best Defense is not a Good Offense

by Michael McDevitt

A visit to Taiwan leaves two significant impressions. First, there is no question that Taiwan is a vibrant democracy. Politics are alive and well, and the trials and tribulations of leaders of both political coalitions are the stuff of front-page headlines.

The other impression is growing frustration: although Taiwan is a vibrant democracy, China is squeezing it into international irrelevancy, using its economic clout to constrain Taiwan's political space.

Frustration also has a military dimension. China's military modernization has taken off. This is especially true in the case of ballistic missiles and land-attack cruise missiles. When President Chen Shui-bien was inaugurated in 2000, China had an "anti-Taiwan" missile force of around 200. Six years later that force is almost 1,000 missiles strong. Meanwhile, China's submarine force (it has added 31 submarines over the last decade), an acute security issue for an island with virtually no natural resources, continues to grow and modernize.

These factors have caused some in Taiwan to despair about the ability of their defenses to keep pace. Not only are the numbers daunting, but the cost of anti-missile systems and anti-submarine forces is significant, and is a major political issue. Rising costs have led some Taiwanese defense intellectuals to become enamored with trying to obtain defense on the cheap. They assert it is too expensive for Taiwan to try and keep pace defensively, and the only option is to field an "offensive" deterrent.

The aphorism "the best defense is a good offense" had validity for Israel in its wars with its neighbors – at least until recently, when the Israelis discovered that, against Hezbollah, a good defense is the best defense. Unfortunately, in Taiwan this aphorism is being used as a substitute for serious strategic thinking. Today, Taiwanese strategists promote the idea that land-attack cruise missiles to launch at the Chinese mainland would be an effective deterrent. This thinking does not take into account Taiwan's specific geo-strategic circumstances.

The idea that Taiwan could deter China through the threat of punishment is absurd.

If Beijing decides to use force against Taiwan, it will have to be willing to accept the prospect of war with the United States, loss of access to the U.S. market, possible conflict with Japan, global condemnation, and likely economic sanctions. China's economic development would be dealt a crippling blow, along with the Communist Party. If China's leaders are not "deterred" from using force by these potential consequences, it does not seem plausible that the prospect of a

few Taiwanese cruise missiles landing in downtown Shanghai would make them change their minds.

Believing Taiwan can deter "through wielding unacceptable punishment" is not only a waste of resources; it is downright dangerous as it could lead to neglecting genuine defense requirements, as well as instilling a false sense of confidence in the political leadership that could lead to a serious miscalculation. And, it could lead down the conceptual slippery slope to a rationale for nuclear weapons.

The only way Taiwan can "deter" China militarily is to convince the PLA that it could never successfully seize the island. Taiwan's reality is that the PLA can "punish" it through missile attacks, something that Taiwan can mitigate through hardened defenses, but not prevent. But, the PLA cannot capture Taiwan unless it can cross the Taiwan Strait – 100 miles of open water – and seize the island.

The way to make certain that could never happen is to ensure that Taiwan never loses air superiority over the strait. Without air superiority, an amphibious operation of the magnitude necessary to seize Taiwan is not possible. Air superiority was the essential prerequisite for the invasion at Normandy in 1944, and that prerequisite remains today. So long as the Taiwan Strait remains a "moat," the island is secure from seizure.

Air superiority is within Taiwan's military and monetary reach – if the country focuses on it and the leadership is not distracted by spurious strategic sidelines.

In the "deterrence through denial" equation, Taiwan has one other decided advantage – it is a democracy. President Chen Shui-bien has correctly diagnosed democracy as Taiwan's best weapon. Taiwan is working hard to remind other Asian Pacific democracies that the community of Asian democratic nations should include Taiwan, if not officially, then at least emotionally and philosophically.

A guaranteed international outcry from democratic states should China use force could be an effective deterrent. Enhancing deterrence through admiration is a sensible approach so long as Taiwan's leadership does not put other democratic states' national interests in jeopardy by instigating a crisis that could lead to conflict.

In the meanwhile, it is time to put an end to strategy by aphorism.

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