



CHINA MARITIME STUDIES INSTITUTE
CENTER FOR NAVAL WARFARE STUDIES
U.S. NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
686 CUSHING ROAD
NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND 02841



QUICK LOOK REPORT

“LARGE-SCALE AMPHIBIOUS WARFARE IN CHINESE MILITARY STRATEGY”

BACKGROUND

From 4–6 May 2021 CMSI held a virtual academic conference on the topic of large-scale PLA amphibious warfare (i.e., a Taiwan invasion scenario). The event was unclassified. The roughly 160 attendees were all U.S. citizens. Participants included experts from government, academia, and U.S.-based think tanks. Panel topics included 1) Historical Cases Informing Chinese Amphibious Warfare, 2) The Joint Amphibious Force, 3) Enablers of Amphibious Warfare, 4) Pre-Assault Conditions, 5) Scenario Factors, and 6) Implications. *This summary does not represent the views of any one individual participant, or assessments of the U.S. government.*

KEY FINDINGS

- China has a political strategy for unification with Taiwan, with an important but subordinate military component.
- Xi and the CCP seek to resolve the “Taiwan problem” on terms they could call “reunification.”
 - Beijing continues to prefer long-term progress by non-war means, such as military, economic, and political coercion.
- **China keeps strengthening relevant capabilities.**
 - Lacking the geographic and policy constraints facing Washington, Beijing has long emphasized missiles.
 - The PLA is developing both the sensors and shooters (surface-to-air missiles, advanced fighter aircraft, etc.) needed to vie for air superiority over the Taiwan Strait.
 - **With probably the world’s most potent at-scale mine delivery capability, China appears to vastly exceed the U.S., Japan, and Taiwan.** It has also invested heavily in MCM capabilities.
 - The PLA is developing new technologies (e.g., UAVs) to support a potential invasion force.
- **China retains many weaknesses.**
 - Despite sweeping reforms, **PLA jointness—essential to success in a Taiwan invasion—suffers persistent limitations, including apparent lack of joint training among special operations communities.**
 - Despite dramatic expansion since 2017, the **PLAN Marine Corps does not seem to be optimizing itself for a traditional amphibious landing against Taiwan.**
 - Operations to protect China’s expanding overseas interests appear to be a major focus of its development.
 - **PLA helicopter forces suffer enduring limitations, particularly in overall readiness; and in operational capacity under combat conditions, including air-ground integration.**
- Taiwan’s natural geographic defenses (Strait, weather, tides, currents, mudflats, coastal terrain) offer formidable protection, despite a mounting China-Taiwan military imbalance.

AREAS OF CONSENSUS

- Lacking in major modern-era successes of its own (beyond its seizure of Hainan and Yijiangshan Islands, etc.), the PLA has carefully studied foreign experiences with amphibious operations and incorporated relevant lessons.

- A cross-Strait invasion remains tremendously difficult and risky for the PLA, despite a growing military imbalance across the Strait.
- China has clearly attempted to emulate and incorporate major “gold standards” of U.S. doctrine, terminology, and forces.
- China recognizes sea and air control as prerequisites for a successful invasion.
- **China is pursuing comprehensive capabilities through incorporation of all possible forces, including a major emphasis on Maritime Militia and civilian logistics.**
- The PLA is attempting to boost the realism of its amphibious training/exercises.
- **The PLA currently lacks the required amphibious lift, logistics, and materiel for a robust cross-Strait invasion and shows no urgency to achieve it.**
 - China is building large amphibious vessels, but these appear to be designed to support overseas operations, not a cross-Strait invasion *per se*.
 - China has not yet built the large numbers of LSTs and LSMs that would support a conventional invasion of Taiwan.
 - Indeed, its inventory of those more essential, “expendable” vessels is arguably smaller than it was a decade ago.
 - **Thus, a major invasion today would require heavy reliance on civilian assets.**
- The PRC is unlikely to achieve a major element of surprise.

AREAS OF DEBATE

- Whether the PLA might preemptively threaten strikes against—or seizure of—offshore islands (Kinmen, Matsu, Pratas, Penghu Islands) as **a means of coercion short of attempting to invade Taiwan’s main island?**
- Extent to which the PRC would have to exploit a **limited number of predictable landing points on Taiwan’s main island, where Taiwan could prepare for defense prior to conflict?**
- Whether the PLA seeks to **prioritize large-scale beach landings or seizure of Taiwanese ports to facilitate invasion?**
 - Citing PLA textbooks, one presenter argued that major ports are the key/priority.
 - Several presenters contended strongly that the PLA will likely be unable to successfully conduct a large-scale cross-Strait invasion until it masters what the U.S. military terms Joint Logistics Over-the-Shore (JLOTS).
- Whether Beijing could **effectively use civilian assets to support a cross-Strait invasion?**
 - Most participants concluded that current ability is inadequate.
 - One presenter argued strongly that Maritime Militia forces might operate mobilized civilian shipping as a “just-good-enough” logistical backbone.

IMPLICATIONS

- The PLA has achieved tremendous progress in developing many of the capabilities needed for a cross-Strait invasion. The threat posed to Taiwan is grave.
- Nevertheless, the inherent challenges and risks remain sufficiently high for Xi and the CCP that **Taipei, Washington, and Tokyo can continue to deter—or, in a worst case, frustrate—an invasion.**
- **Key PRC sensors are far less numerous than key PRC shooters, and hence a better single-point-failure target for limited U.S. and allied fires.**
- **Taiwan must redouble its efforts to build A2/AD “porcupine” capabilities grounded in its natural defenses.**
- U.S. planners must consider the possibility of the PRC improvising in just-good-enough-for-long-enough fashion to attempt to pursue basic political objectives, particularly if events or trendlines “force” Xi’s hand.