

Correspondence

Will East Asia Balance against Beijing?

Travis Sharp and
John Speed Meyers
Michael Beckley

To the Editors (Travis Sharp and John Speed Meyers write):

In his recent article, Michael Beckley argues that the military balance in East Asia has stabilized because “China’s neighbors can check Chinese maritime expansion.”¹ He argues that even Taiwan, the neighbor most imperiled by Chinese military power, can repel, perhaps singlehandedly, a Chinese invasion. We disagree for three reasons.

First, Beckley writes that “Taiwan probably would have some notice” of a Chinese invasion (p. 85). But if China concealed its intentions through deception, a core tenet of its doctrine, Taiwan could have little warning time to mobilize its reserves.² China could, for example, stage a large-scale naval exercise in the Bohai Sea, or it could test a new weapons system on the mainland, shifting attention and intelligence assets away from the Taiwan Strait. China might also use an exercise to conceal its massing of men and matériel. And although Beckley suggests that Taiwanese spies would detect China’s plans (p. 85), he overlooks the more general problem of turning tactical warning into effective military preparation. Richard Betts’s *Surprise Attack: Lessons for Defense Planning* suggests that political leaders often distrust or react to tactical warning too slowly.³ According to Betts, this phenomenon unfolded in World War II, the Korean War, the Six-Day War, the October War, and the invasion of Czechoslovakia. Furthermore, if the Allies could mislead Germany about the location of the D-Day invasion, despite German spies infiltrating Allied decisionmaking councils, then China could potentially mislead Taiwan about an invasion’s timing.⁴

Second, Beckley argues that Taiwan could withstand Chinese missile and air attacks

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1. Michael Beckley, “The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia: How China’s Neighbors Can Check Chinese Naval Expansion,” *International Security*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (Fall 2017), pp. 78–119, at p. 116, doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00294. Further references to this article appear parenthetically in the text.

2. James C. Mulvenon et al., *Chinese Responses to U.S. Military Transformation and Implications for the Department of Defense* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2006), pp. 49–53.

3. Richard K. Betts, *Surprise Attack: Lessons for Defense Planning* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1982), p. 4.

4. Mary Kathryn Barbier, “Deception and the Planning of D-Day,” in John Buckley, ed., *The Normandy Campaign, 1944: Sixty Years On* (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 170–183.

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if it deployed its navy, dispersed aircraft to three dozen airfields, repaired damaged runways, and destroyed incoming missiles and aircraft (pp. 85–86). Those countermeasures could be insufficient, however. Putting ships to sea would not shield them from China's anti-ship missiles. Taiwanese aircraft operating from dispersed airbases would lose economies of scale, worsening Taiwan's firepower deficit.⁵ Second-wave Chinese missile attacks could target Taiwan's runway repair teams, effectively neutralizing Taiwan's ability to launch aircraft. Beckley trumpets Taiwanese air defenses without mentioning that his source material deemed Taiwan's air defense prospects "grim indeed," barring major investments in surface-to-air missile systems.⁶ Beckley also cites the Iraqi air force's perseverance in the 1990–91 Gulf War as cause for optimism, but suggesting that "most of" the Iraqi air force survived strains credulity (p. 86). Of 729 Iraqi fixed-wing combat aircraft, 254 were destroyed on the ground and 32 in the air while 121 fled to Iran.⁷ Losing more than 50 percent of its combat planes could cripple Taiwan's defensive plans.

Third, Beckley claims that Chinese attackers cannot outnumber Taiwanese defenders at any landing zone or reinforce it faster than Taiwanese troops arrive (p. 87). He exaggerates Taiwan's manpower advantage, however, by presenting force-to-space calculations that treat its 150,000 active and 1.5 million reserve troops interchangeably (ibid.). Taiwan's reserves are not as plentiful, capable, or fungible as Beckley suggests. Taiwan's own plans assume that 20 percent of its reservists would not muster on time.⁸ Those arriving punctually would not be combat ready.⁹ Most would need up to a week at the firing range relearning how to operate their weapons. Once certified, they would perform basic defensive tasks in limited geographic sectors, often near their hometowns. They would not usually redeploy between sectors as a fungible asset. If Chinese deception reduced Taiwan's warning time, the pool of ready reservists would shrink proportionally. Taiwan's twenty-two reserve infantry brigades rated "C-level," the second-lowest readiness tier (just above officer trainees), perform coastal defense missions essential to outnumbering and out-reinforcing the PLA.¹⁰ Should those brigades fall understrength, fail to coordinate with their active-duty counterparts, or suffer heavy losses against crack PLA troops, China might seize and reinforce a lodgment faster than expected.

In sum, Beckley's assumptions are excessively optimistic. Tactical warning could be hard to achieve and even harder to convert into serious military preparations.

5. Alan J. Vick, *Air Base Attacks and Defensive Counters: Historical Lessons and Future Challenges* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2015), pp. 54–56.

6. Michael J. Lostumbo et al., *Air Defense Options for Taiwan: An Assessment of Relative Costs and Operational Benefits* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2016), p. xii.

7. Daniel L. Haulman, "What Happened to the Iraqi Air Force?" (Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala.: Air Force Historical Research Agency, October 19, 2015), pp. 3–4.

8. Ian Easton, *The Chinese Invasion Threat: Taiwan's Defense and American Strategy in Asia* (Manchester, U.K.: Camphor, 2017), p. 203.

9. Michael A. Hunzeker and Alexander Lanoszka, *A Question of Time: Enhancing Taiwan's Conventional Deterrence Posture* (Arlington, Va.: Center for Security Policy Studies, Schar School of Policy and Government, George Mason University, 2018), pp. 95–96.

10. Ian Easton et al., *Transformation of Taiwan's Reserve Force* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2017), pp. 14, 21.

Taiwanese defense forces might not survive an initial Chinese onslaught. Finally, Taiwanese reserve forces might not be as potent as Beckley believes. Thus, without significant U.S. intervention, a Chinese invasion of Taiwan has better odds of succeeding than Beckley claims.

—Travis Sharp
Washington, D.C.

—John Speed Meyers
Santa Monica, California

Michael Beckley Replies:

I am grateful to Travis Sharp and John Speed Myers for their thoughtful response to my article, which argues that most of China's neighbors can check Chinese maritime expansion near their homelands.¹ Sharp and Speed disagree and suggest that China could invade Taiwan.

I address their specific points below. Before doing so, however, it is important to remember that an amphibious assault on a developed nation's homeland is the most difficult mission in warfare. There has been only one successful case in modern history (the Allied invasion of Italy in 1943).² All other successful amphibious assaults were against overstretched forces defending hastily dug positions on foreign or contested territory with small arms. If China invaded Taiwan today, it would be attacking massed forces defending fortified positions on home soil with precision-guided munitions. China is unlikely to beat the historical odds, given that its military is riddled with corruption; bogged down by homeland security missions; and lacks sufficient amphibious forces, combined arms training, and combat experience.³ Even if Sharp and Speed are right about Taiwan's shortcomings, therefore, they would still be wrong in implying that China can conquer Taiwan.

As it turns out, they are mostly wrong about their specific claims, too. For starters, Sharp and Speed assert that China could distract Taiwan with a military exercise and then suddenly invade the island. They never explain, however, how China could conceal its invasion preparations, which would take weeks, if not months, and involve thousands, if not millions, of Chinese troops; why Taiwan's early warning system, which is one of the best in the world and is supplemented by U.S. and Japanese intelligence, cannot monitor Chinese exercises and invasion preparations simultaneously; or why Taiwan would fail to translate early warning into effective action, given that it has spent decades preparing for this exact contingency. All of Sharp and Speed's examples of successful surprise attack occurred more than forty-five years ago, and the vic-

1. Michael Beckley, "The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia: How China's Neighbors Can Check Chinese Naval Expansion," *International Security*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (Fall 2017), pp. 78–119, at p. 116, doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00294.

2. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014), pp. 114–125.

3. Michael Beckley, *Unrivaled: Why American Will Remain the World's Sole Superpower* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2018), pp. 62–71.

tims lacked Taiwan's modern constellation of satellites, radars, sensors, and spies; detailed response plan; decades of training; and robust system of fortifications, supply dumps, and booby traps.

Sharp and Speed claim that China could wipe out Taiwan's air force and navy with air and missile strikes, but Taiwan has thousands of surface-to-air missile batteries and dozens of hardened bunkers, emergency ports, and runways to protect its forces; China has never successfully launched more than ten ballistic missiles simultaneously, far less than the hundreds of coordinated air and missile strikes it would need to annihilate Taiwan's forces; and the U.S. experience bombing Iraq in 1991 shows that even forty-two days of relentless pounding may be insufficient to destroy a modern air force. More important, Sharp and Speed concede that many of Taiwan's mobile missile launchers, artillery, and minelayers would likely survive a Chinese bombardment and could inflict devastating losses on Chinese transport craft, thereby foiling an invasion even without significant air or naval forces.

Sharp and Speed argue that Taiwan's C-level reserve forces cannot mobilize fast enough to prevent China from seizing a beachhead. Yet their main source concludes that 97 percent of Taiwan's local reserve brigades can mobilize in less than twenty-four hours.⁴ Even without these reserves, Taiwan would enjoy numerical preponderance, because its army has 130,000 active-duty soldiers plus nine brigades of A-level reserve units on alert at all times whereas China could land, at most, only 26,000 troops on Taiwan's shores on the first day of a war. There are only fourteen locations on Taiwan that can support amphibious landings.⁵ Taiwan's forces are based near these locations and could mass quickly to meet the Chinese invaders.

In sum, China would have its hands full trying to conquer Taiwan. Thus, the United States would need only to tip the scales of the battle, a mission that could be accomplished in numerous ways without exposing U.S. surface ships or non-stealth aircraft to China's most formidable antiaccess/area-denial forces or risking nuclear escalation by launching massive strikes on the Chinese mainland.

—Michael Beckley
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4. Ian Easton, *The Chinese Invasion Threat: Taiwan's Defense and American Strategy in Asia* (Manchester, U.K.: Camphor, 2017), pp. 195–234.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 143–194.

ERRATUM: In table 1 on page 155 of Costantino Pischedda's summer 2018 article, "Wars within Wars: Why Windows of Opportunity and Vulnerability Cause Inter-rebel Fighting in Internal Conflicts," the "x" across from the entry "Coexistence ELF-EDU, 1976–78" should have been a check mark.