

The Likelihood of Cross-Strait Armed Conflict and Taiwan's Military and Political Readiness: An Interview with Arthur Ding

With cross-strait tensions building and aggressive Chinese posturing throughout the Asia-Pacific, many are concerned as to whether there will be an invasion of Taiwan in the near future. Those who think so can't be faulted, as the three Taiwan Strait Crises provide more evidence for an invasion than against. Even Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense, at one point, [anticipated](#) that China would be ready to invade by 2020.

To gain a better understanding of how likely it is for an armed conflict between Taiwan and China to occur, what could cause an armed conflict to erupt, the military readiness of both sides, and Taiwan's political will to defend itself, Taiwan Security Research conducted an interview with Dr. Arthur Ding, a Professor Emeritus at Taiwan's National Chengchi University (this interview has been edited for clarity and content).

Eric Rowe: Can you foresee any situations in which the PRC would invade Taiwan without the Taiwanese government declaring independence?

Arthur Ding: I would say the likelihood is very low. These days in Taiwan, we have a joke: "to buy Taiwan is much cheaper than to invade Taiwan". In Taiwanese opinion polls, over 50% say that the possibility of [the PRC] invading Taiwan is very low, even for situations just short of announcing independence. This is because China knows the consequences of taking Taiwan by force. They would need to spend more money to rebuild Taiwan [after the invasion]. I think even the Chinese leaders realize more and more that "buying Taiwan" is cheaper than taking Taiwan. "Buying Taiwan" means making Taiwan more dependent on China's economy and paying money to influence the Taiwanese people. Now that China has become the number two power, they find that there is symmetric [economic] development between Taiwan and China. They don't think that they really need to count on force; instead, as said earlier, Chinese leadership has realized it is cheaper to buy Taiwan than to invade Taiwan. Force is used for deterrence, deterring Taiwan from announcing Taiwan independence, or deterring foreign force from intervening in the Taiwan Strait as China's military capability continue to grow. But there would be potential crises. For instance, now there is no communication between Taiwan and China, the DDP government and the Beijing leadership. Any friction in the Taiwan Straits could become a crisis because there is no communication. Each side would respond for the worst-case scenario and because there is no communication, the crisis would escalate.

Eric Rowe: What steps would the PLA have to take in order to prepare for the invasion of Taiwan?

Arthur Ding: They would need to take many steps. They would [first] need to legitimize military action against Taiwan internationally. For instance, "Taiwan were to provoke" [China]. Another thing is the economic damage. Destroying Taiwan's economic structure

does not help. The worst one is probably the issue of hate. A military friend told me of how they handled Xinjiang and Tibet immediately after the [PRC] was established in 1949 and they also compared the case between Tibet in the Qing dynasty and Tibet after the [PRC] was established. They privately told me that the kind of hatred that comes from military invasions lasts for decades. I think they need to find a way to deal with the hatred. During the Cultural Revolution, [the PRC] cracked down on Tibet and Xinjiang, which caused more hatred [by the people of those regions]. There are consequences of hatred.

Eric Rowe: Does the PLA currently possess the amphibious lift capabilities required for an invasion now?

Arthur Ding: I think that depends on the scale of the amphibious operation. Previously, they had Marines, but they didn't have the transportation capability. We know that in the past decade, they've made tremendous investments in hardware. Their operating concept does not just rely on amphibious ships; [but also], for instance, helicopters. I said that [it depends on] the scale of the amphibious force, [so] down the road they will make more investments in amphibious ships.

Eric Rowe: What are the most likely operational/tactical decisions for the Taiwanese government, if war were to occur?

Arthur Ding: In the past decade or so, Taiwan has had the military doctrine known as "resolute defense", and "effective deterrence". The current DPP administration have a new doctrine, layered deterrence, but if you read these terms carefully, there's not much difference between those concepts and the doctrine of the two [KMT and DPP] administrations. The [layered defense] doctrine has three stages. The first stage is when the Chinese military starts to concentrate their forces on the opposite side of the Taiwan Straits. The second stage is when they launch the operation and their forces are crossing the Taiwan Straits. The third stage is when they land in Taiwan. So basically, the military layered deterrence announced by the DPP or KMT, they used different terms for the same concept. We follow this concept because Taiwan is a small island and China's capabilities are growing. We are more defensive because politically we can't provoke and a defensive posture is better suited to Taiwan.

Eric Rowe: You'd written in your 2011 article "Taiwan's Paradoxical Perceptions of the Chinese Military" that the 2009 QDR (Quadrennial Defense Review) stipulated that Taiwan's defense planning is guided by the defensive homeland security strategy of "Solid as Bedrock". Is that the same as the resolute defense doctrine?

Arthur Ding: From my analysis, I see them as the same.

Eric Rowe: In the article, you had also said that the government lacked an operational doctrine. Is that still the case now?

Arthur Ding: The current problem is the interpretation of military doctrine. This is a little bit difficult because of what happens in every military. Each service within the military has its own interpretation of military doctrine and this is particularly the case in Taiwan. We don't have a very authoritative [interpretation of the military doctrine] from the top down. This is one of the major problems previously, but I think now, when our resources are drawn thin, the room for each service to make its own interpretation has narrowed. Now we have to spend resources more efficiently and effectively, which results in a more authoritative interpretation from the top.

Eric Rowe: What would the Taiwanese government most likely do with regards to Kinmen (Quemoy), Matsu, and Penghu if conflict were to occur?

Arthur Ding: That's a good question. I really don't know, frankly speaking, because I don't know what our political leader would do. In Taiwan there is an internal debate. For instance, Quemoy is far away from us. How can we provide aid in an emergency? Should we take it back if it were occupied by Chinese troops? If we don't, it would hurt our morale. If we were to send forces to try to take back [Quemoy], it would exhaust our forces and resources. It would be detrimental to homeland [main island] defense.

Eric Rowe: When we were discussing operational doctrine, that [was] what I was referring to. Would Taiwan keep its operations close to home or would it do something such as attacking rocket sites and bases on the Mainland?

Arthur Ding: Again, it's a highly political decision. China is such a big country and they have so many resources and so many tools at their disposal. Should we launch cruise missiles or ballistic missiles at China's radar stations and airfields or ports? Also, how many military assets can we damage with our limited tools? That's another problem. I really don't know. I think the Chief of Staff Office needs to make an assessment. They need to determine the appropriate targets so that we aren't wasting our limited resources. We cannot build more missiles than China. Definitely true. We need to define appropriate targets and it's a political decision that is left up to our political leader. We have this kind of debate society-wide. Should we launch a preemptive strike, operationally speaking, when China starts to concentrate and we sense they are going to launch their operation? When they concentrate, we have time, but when they begin to launch the operation, should we launch preemptive attack or not? It may be considered provocative. You have seen in Taiwanese media there is a debate as to what we should do. Again the decision is up to the political leader.

Eric Rowe: Where do you see deficiencies within Taiwan's military, whether it be equipment and procurement, quality of soldiers, command structure, or training?

Arthur Ding: I'm really worried about training. Taiwan has entered an "aging society" and has about one child per family. In an Oriental society, one child is a great matter. If a single child were to pass away during military training, you can see the consequences. The family

would protest the Ministry of Defense. This wouldn't be good with regards to rigorous military training. Another problem is urbanization, resulting in less space to train. I'm also worried about whether or not our command and control system can be sustained, as China has so much new hardware to some extent the training under Xi Jinping is more vigorous than before. They have more tools at their disposal, so that with more vigorous training makes for a tough challenge.

Eric Rowe: With the formation of the Strategic Support Force, the PRC is improving its information, cyber, and electronic warfare capabilities. This could be used to disrupt Taiwanese command and control capabilities. Does the Ministry of National Defense's recently founded Communications and Electronic Force Command possess the ability to successfully defend against PLA activities? If not, what would they need to improve?

Arthur Ding: I don't have an idea of the PLA capabilities to disrupt [Taiwanese] command and control, but I would say the PLA is really working hard to penetrate Taiwanese society through the internet. In the past, the IIR [National Chengchi University – Institute of International Relations] was a government think tank, and though we aren't anymore, they [the PRC] still want to know what we are doing. They would send many fake email messages to us and when you would click, all your information would be transmitted to China. They would use this to find out who has a relationship with whom and who is working with whom. With social media, in the past decade, China has deeply penetrated [public/foreign] policy communities. They want to know what work we're doing with which government agency and our relationships, so on and so forth. Our defense leaders are rigorously implementing cybersecurity measures and procedures, but I don't know [how effective they will be].

Eric Rowe: Another concern is the PLA Rocket Force. Does the Taiwanese military possess the ability to negate or minimize the possible damage done by missile and strikes?

Arthur Ding: I would say probably. We have many hardening measures for airfields and so on and so forth and also [against] EMP bombs. We have this kind of awareness and our leaders have this kind of awareness and maybe our resources could turn this kind of awareness into a practice. The direction has been there so that we can minimize the damage from these kind of missile attacks.

Eric Rowe: So the Taiwanese military does have countermeasures to EMP weapons?

Arthur Ding: I don't know for sure. In the public media, there is much discussion of EMP bombs. If the society is having this kind of discussion, then the military will budget to address the issue.

Eric Rowe: Does Taiwan's decision to move away from a conscription military to a professional volunteer military increase or decrease its military capabilities? Why?

Arthur Ding: It's hard to say. The shift from mandatory to voluntary service reduced military awareness and the reserve military capability because in the old days, all of us had to serve two or three years. All of us had some kind of military training, but when shifting to the

voluntary system, even though now [men] still have to do four months, I feel four months is too short. It's not sufficient time to become a soldier. As we have entered the high-tech stage [of warfare], more time allows for a soldier to have more specialized training, which is good for them [with regards to] operating high-tech systems. Now the problem is that is even if we raise the military salary, not many young people want to join the military, meaning that this policy might fail. That's why these days some people ask if we should return to the mandatory system, but politically speaking, it's suicide.

Eric Rowe: With regards to defense spending, why was three percent of Taiwan's GDP considered the 'magic number' by both Ma Ying-jeou and Tsai Ing-wen?

Arthur Ding: Three percent was requested by the US side. Since 1949, Taiwan had a close relationship with the United States. Three percent was a reflection of your own determination. Three percent has become a benchmark for Western countries' defense spending. In the 80s, the US frequently requested Japan to raise their defense spending to three percent. It is an index to show Taiwan's determination.

Eric Rowe: And the US government explicitly said three percent?

Arthur Ding: Not explicitly, but they said that Taiwan was not spending enough.

Eric Rowe: The benchmark is similar to the two percent NATO defense spending [benchmark](#), though even NATO is having difficulty getting members to meet the requirements.

Arthur Ding: Yes, as some of the EU members' economies are not good right now.

Eric Rowe: By having defense capabilities that work as a plausible deterrent, Taiwan would put itself in a more advantageous position in cross-strait negotiations. With that in mind, why is there reluctance, particularly among politicians, to increase defense spending?

Arthur Ding: I would say it involves the "guns or butter" issue. In the 80s and 90s, Taiwan's economy was growing and expanding and everyone was happy. [Then] if you would increase the defense spending, no one would care. Now the economy has started shrinking and the competition between "butter" and "guns" has gotten more severe. After the year 2000, China had become smarter. Before the 1995-96 Straits Crisis, China would frequently have military exercises in the coastal provinces, in Fujian as a kind of political deterrent for Taiwan. After the year 2000, they stopped making reports about the military exercises and moved the exercises farther inland to the interior provinces so the perception [won't be that of aggression]. China does not want to provoke with these kinds of military exercises. This creates a mirror effect. People in Taiwan then say "Look! They aren't trying to provoke us anymore. Why do we need more defense spending?" Now different government agencies have been competing for funding and the current premier, former head comptroller [Lin Chuan]. I was told that [back then] he was opposed to an increase in the defense budget. He said "Where are the economic construction programs? We need those, I won't pass the defense budget." You can see the competition between different government agencies and for

those at the top, they have pressure from their electoral constituency. Because of these things, it is difficult for the Ministry of Defense to increase their budget.

Eric Rowe: Tsai spoke of increasing the defense budget and currently underway are projects such as indigenous submarine and missile development and the improvement of the Taiwanese aerospace industry. Will development of these capabilities be beneficial or would money be better spent elsewhere?

Arthur Ding: Indigenous capabilities will take a tremendous amount of resources. We know the threshold for the defense industry is extremely high. Will this kind of a program launched by President Tsai benefit Taiwan? It's ambivalent; it's both a yes and a no. It will create job opportunities. Because you want to develop indigenous capabilities, you need to hire [local] people. You need to procure more high-precision production equipment. You need to transfer more technology from the United States or other countries. It will create employment opportunities and raise manufacturing capabilities, but again, there's a ceiling there. The fundamental question is: how far do we go with indigenous development? How many resources should we invest? If the threshold is high, then the amount of resources needed will be high. Another problem is that we cannot export our military products, such as jet fighters and submarines. Because of our diplomatic relations, we cannot export [military hardware]. We cannot export our trainers, for instance. My response is mixed, but the direction of indigenous development is inevitable because of China's growth, it's become very unlikely for the United States to export things like the F-35 to Taiwan because China will protest. They would do anything they can to block [it]. That's why I say the direction of indigenous development will be inevitable, but again, the fundamental question is how far should we go? How much of our resources should we invest? How long will it take? How many years will it take to prepare for [indigenous development].

Eric Rowe: One of the key issues with the Taiwanese aerospace industry is its inability to locally produce jet engines, a problem that the PRC is also having, which resulted in the lackluster performance of the Ching-kuo Indigenous Defense Fighter. How possible is it for Taiwan to locally produce its own engines in the near future?

Arthur Ding: It depends on how advanced the jet fighter is. If it would be something on-par with the F-35, it may take up to 50 years.

Eric Rowe: There has been two conflicting messages coming out of the Ministry of National Defense, as they [announced](#) in January plans for a locally developed stealth fighter, but have also [voiced](#) interest in purchasing the V/STOL variant of the F-35 from the US. Do you see either of those panning out?

Arthur Ding: I see the purchase of the F-35 as highly unlikely within the next five to ten years. Part of the problem is that so many other countries have placed orders, like Japan and South Korea. It's quite unlikely for Taiwan's order to be put into production, but the primary concern is the political situation between China and the United States. What is left is that the indigenous development of the jet fighter, but what kind of jet fighter can we produce? Nothing too advanced. In the late 80s, Taiwan procured second-hand F-104s for spare parts.

As you can see, we had a serious interim period where we don't have [a new] jet fighter, [similar to the situation now]. How we're going to fill these interim gaps, however, I don't know.

Eric Rowe: Polls have shown that around 60% of Taiwanese think that the US would intervene on its behalf in the case of a Chinese invasion, whereas only 25% of Americans think that the US should intervene.¹ Where does Taiwanese confidence in US intervention come from?

Arthur Ding: I would first ask: how do you define intervene? There are different kinds of intervention. The US is the world leader and the supreme power in the Asia-Pacific region. And the Taiwan issue has something to do with US credibility in this region. So if China were to launch a military invasion of Taiwan, the US would need to do something. However, this does not mean the US will send troops. The US can diplomatically dissuade China. The US could provide intelligence or aid. There's room as to what the US can do for 'intervention', but they won't send troops. For our military planners, they do not count on US aid in their planning, and this is realistic. This is why we have an internal debate among politicians who ask "How long can we stand on our own? Two weeks? One week? After 3 weeks, will the US send forces to Taiwan or not? So frequently we have this kind of dialog between the Defense Minister and Legislative Yuan members.

Eric Rowe: In the case of war, how would Taiwanese citizens react? Do you think that they would be willing to hold out for a long period of time or would they press the government to surrender, assuming that the PRC's goal would be complete control over the entirety of Taiwan?

Arthur Ding: Frequently in Taiwan we debate the question "what is our guiding principal for war termination". But what does that mean? Does it mean you totally fail and that they are guiding principles for surrender? So we have this kind of debate. Should we have so called political guidance or political direction for the final stage of war. But what does that final stage of stage of war look like? Frankly, we don't know and it has become debate for the sake of debate. I really don't know how to answer to your question, but it can be imagined that if war were to erupt, the political leader will do whatever they can do to raise our morale, which would signal to China that we would fight to the end. I can say our political leader will mobilize our morale. I don't know if we will fight to the last soldier or not, but I can say total mobilization is very likely. But will we surrender immediately? We don't know. But I would say that scenario is unlikely, and if we were to surrender, why not just surrender now?

Eric Rowe: Aside from looking at the leader of Taiwan, what are some other determinants of national willpower?

¹ Taiwan National Security Survey, National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan, 2003-2015.

Arthur Ding: I would say it's a China factor. These days lots of Taiwanese complain about the Tsai administration or complained about the Ma administration and say "oh, I can make so much money in China". But is that true? I would say not. China is a very authoritarian regime and what Xi Jinping has done in the last five [years] shows that in the next five to ten years, he's going to tighten controls in China. The environment in China remains unfriendly to average people. There are people who would complain to the Taiwanese government, people who have businesses in Shanghai, but they would privately say that they don't want to live in China despite having businesses there. I would say one of the major factors of... I don't know if it's a determinant... frequently Xi Jinping has internal remarks (remark said in Chinese) you should do good in your own business in China and it will provide attraction for Taiwanese. I cannot speak for Xi Jinping, with his remarks, despite China becoming a number two world power, he still sees some kind of deficiency in China. They need to improve their [social] environment. The point where war is inevitable, one element will be how should we perceive the difference between Taiwan and China. If we really value our system and see China's system as unacceptable... I'm really worried. Look at Xi Jinping, what he has said, what he has done. He has run a hard-authoritarian regime, not soft. I think all those changes will help us [Taiwanese] develop our choice.

Eric Rowe: How would an invasion of Taiwan affect the security environment in the Asia-Pacific? Would the PRC be willing to incur the economic sanctions in order to invade Taiwan and under what circumstances? Do you foresee other regional actors balancing against the PRC as a result of an invasion of Taiwan?

Arthur Ding: I think there's a trend in China, under Xi Jinping, where China has become so arrogant. They don't care about their neighbors' responses [to Chinese foreign policy]. For instance, look at how China is dealing with South Korea and the THAAD. A [colleague] in Beijing and I had a private exchange about China's South Korea policy. My [colleague] thinks that the policy is problematic. They even made a compromise proposal [for the Chinese government], but it was rejected. Not only has China been arrogant dealing with South Korea over THAAD, but also with dealing with Singapore as well. There's a perception these days that China doesn't care about their neighboring countries responses [to their foreign policy] and frankly speaking, there's nothing [the neighboring countries] can do because China has become the number two world power and the largest trading partner of these neighboring countries and China has many tools [for economic reprisal]. Even Japan, Australian, and India tried to build a coalition of some sort and their navies have joint exercises, but without US [support], there's not much they can do. China doesn't seem to care about the "China Threat" theory anymore. During the 1995-96 Straits Crisis they did, but not so much anymore. Look at how they're handling South Korea or the ASEAN nations now.

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