

The Geostrategic Significance of the Outer Islands Perimeter:

The Case of Taiwan

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Warships and warplanes of the so called People’s Liberation Army (i.e., the Armed Forces of the People’s Republic of China), have been conducting military activities, in large numbers, around Taiwan as part of a long-running intimidation tactic applied by Beijing against the island republic.

Facing the increasing Threat, the fighter pilots and ship captains of the Republic of China’s Armed Forces are being put to the test like never before. Reasonably, public opinion tends to focus on them.

But what about the less visible, but no less important, soldiers and marines who stand watch on Taiwan’s outer islands? What role do these forward deployed forces play in Taiwan’s national defence policy and national military strategy? Are these remote island outposts worth defending? And if yes, why?

Such questions have been posed by senior analyst *Ian Easton* in a remarkable article of his published in Taiwan’s most influential daily newspaper in English language, “*Taipei Times*”, two years ago (July 31, 2023).

Easton answered the questions himself, with that dose of humor which is so typical for Anglos: it starts with the three “Gs.!” Read guns, guards, and gates. Visit any military base, or similar highly secure facility and you will easily see that the three “Gs” are of paramount importance for the physical protection of any military, or analogous facility worldwide.

Often, the - visible - guard of such facilities is but a limited one. Often, you will only see a few guards on duty at each gate. Does this mean that they could be overrun by a larger and determined group of men? Of course. Does it follow, then, that the area (military base, or else) is not actually secure? Of course not. Anyone who has ever been familiar with military affairs knows that, worldwide, perimeter guards are backstopped by larger units who will flood onto the scene the moment an alarm is triggered.

Taiwan’s national defence lay-out follows the same basic principle. The outer islands of Kinmen, Matsu, and Dongyin are located approximately 190km (100 nautical miles) west of the shores of Taiwan. Each island cluster is like a gate, and a pretty heavy one, and an observation post at the same time, monitoring the maritime routes and the sea lanes into and out of southeastern China’s natural harbours, bays, and ports — the very places, in other words, where PLA troops would need to assemble and load aboard ships before an assault on the island republic.

Taken as a whole, the offshore islands represent a first class defence perimeter of critical importance, giving Taiwan warning time, tactical flexibility, and strategic depth. But like any first line of defence, it is far from impregnable. In the supreme emergency, the elite units stationed on these islands and rocks are expected to fight independently, without resupply from the national headquarters. Their mission is clear: to defend their territory by their own means and hold out for as long as possible — while doing as much damage to the Enemy as possible — thereby buying time for the national headquarters to prepare for effectively resisting the coming invasion.

A few of the island citadels have remarkable fire-power, including long-range air defence missiles, anti-ship missiles, and land attack missiles – among them the *Ray-Ting 2000 (Thunderbolt 2000)*, a wheeled multiple-launch rocket system.

In the case of invasion, batteries of missiles and rocket artillery of the Republic of China's Armed Forces could shred the People's Liberation Army staging areas around mainland China's southernmost coastal provinces Xiamen and Fuzhou, which are the closest launch pads for a PLA amphibious task-force setting off to invade Taiwan. For their part, the defenders of the island republic hide their big guns inside labyrinths of deep tunnels and hardened bunkers, so they can still fight despite initial intense bombardment.

Dr. Toshi Yoshihara, author of the book *Mao's Army Goes to Sea: The Island Campaigns and the Founding of China's Navy*, observes that Taiwan's outlying islands have an outsized influence on the thinking of mainland Chinese war planners. Yoshihara points out that the PLA considers its armies' offshore operations "*the seedlings of Chinese naval doctrine.*"

In PLA's military textbooks (see *Informatized Joint Operations and Taiwan Strait Military Geography*) Taiwan's outer perimeter is portrayed as a "dagger" pointed at the "throat" of any invasion force. As long as Taipei exercises sovereignty over these islands, the Taiwanese Air Force could launch devastating surprise attacks on any fleets the PLA assembled at the southernmost coastal areas of the mainland, sinking valuable amphibious ships and drowning storm troops into the Taiwan Strait before they even had a chance to start their mission.

Military historians as well as researchers who are familiar with the history of the successive Taiwan Strait Crises know that, once upon a time, the outer islands had been home to over 100,000 Taiwanese soldiers – in the 1950s per instance, when the population of Communist China was starving to death whereas Nationalist China, as we then knew Taiwan, was undertaking preparations for an invasion in the mainland, aiming at overthrowing *Mao Tse-tung's* régime, but, alas, she was let down by Washington.

Nonetheless, due to some mistaken strategic and political choices made by certain Taiwanese administrations since the early 1990s, the outer islands have been demined and *demilitarized*. As a result, the local garrisons of the islands have been reduced to a total of less than 5,000.

That being the case, President *Xi Jinping* and Beijing's ruling state and party elite may be flirting with the idea of launching a PLA sudden and overwhelming attack, not with the purpose of seizing Taiwan, but the outer islands instead.

There are several signs of that: PLA's conduct of frequent amphibious drills close to the islands, drones hovering over ROCAF facilities, even an attempt to cause an internet black-out on the islands, and so on and so forth.

It has become the common belief of many Western generals, admirals, and senior intelligence officers that there is a high possibility of a Taiwan invasion by the year 2027. Under such circumstances, substantially and drastically bolstering Taiwan's outer islands defence is the best way for Beijing's ruling elite to be convinced to not proceed with a strike on the islands, but to preserve the long peace that has benefitted peoples on both sides of the Strait.

With good reason therefore, the current Administration led by President *Lai Ching-te*, who succeeded President *Tsai Ing-wen* last year – both Presidents coming from the Democratic Progressive Party/DPP – keeps making considerable efforts to increase Taiwan's defence capabilities.