

Taiwan as Donbas?: Subversion and Insurrection vs. Full Scale Invasion

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The possibility of China launching a full-scale assault on Taiwan is the hot topic these days. The outgoing and incoming USINDOPACOM commanders recently warned the U.S. Congress that such an attack could come by 2027 or sooner.

These gentlemen have access to the “intel” and tend to be on the cautious side when speaking publicly, so one is inclined to take them at their words.

Their warnings conjure up images of an Iwo Jima sort of amphibious assault on Taiwan backed by missile barrages and aerial bombardment. But consider the possibility of something a bit stealthier, akin to Vladimir Putin’s 2014 seizure and occupation of Ukraine’s eastern Donbas region.

Putin said he wasn’t behind the revolt against the Ukrainian government in the Donbas. Rather, it was just local militias and citizens unhappy with Ukrainian oppression. As for the military men in unmarked uniforms and speaking Russian? Just “little green men” from parts unknown. The heavy weapons, tanks, and armored vehicles? Who could say?

When going after Donbas, Putin had a couple of big advantages.

First, geography. Russia shares a border with Ukraine, and that makes subversion, logistical support, and coordinating operations much easier.

Second, the local population had a degree of affinity for Russia. Donbas is economically depressed with many old style Soviet miners who received heavy subsidies until the break up of the Soviet Union, at which time the government couldn’t even pay salaries to military officers or government employees. It really was a terrible time. Many Donbas residents dream of a return to the good old days when they were respected and rewarded as great Soviet workers, with medals and a salary to prove it.

So Putin had something to work with in Donbas. He was also apparently planning to drive on to Kyiv (Ukraine’s capital) and had plenty of Fifth Columnists in place. The biggest surprise was that Putin couldn’t take the capital. The drive to Kyiv bogged down in Donbas as the initially disorganized Ukrainians

coalesced enough to defend ground. Nonetheless, the Ukrainian government no longer controls the Donbas region, nor the Crimea, which Putin had seized in similar fashion a couple months before going after the rest of Ukraine.

China's prospects for its own 'Donbas' – taking Formosa, Taiwan's main island

The country of Taiwan consists of the main island, Formosa - which hosts the capital Taipei - and a number of offshore islands. Formosa is around 112 miles across the Taiwan Strait from the Chinese coast (Key West is about 100 miles from Cuba). Formosa is mountainous and large, close to 14,000 square miles (Hawai'i Big Island is around 4,000 square miles).

The background

Over the years, there has been substantial Chinese subversion throughout Taiwan, including many pro-China politicians, usually belonging to the Kuomintang (KMT). Some were pro-unification, others were playing their cards close to their chests but not necessarily opposed to helping Beijing.

In fact, the KMT Ma Ying-jeou administration (2008-2016) often seemed overly close to the People's Republic of China (PRC), raising questions about whether Ma was really interested in defending Taiwan. Some observers claimed that Ma was engineering Taiwan's annexation by China.

Pro-Chinese influence was not just at the top levels during the Ma era. Rather, it was (and still is) rife in academia, and found at local levels in religious groups, community organizations, and a range of "united front" organizations. And Taiwanese business and industrial interests were (and remain) deeply invested in the mainland and making money. Taiwan's media

still had (and has) a number of newspapers and broadcast outlets that are decidedly pro-PRC.

During the Ma administration era there was a widespread sense, even among younger people, facing a weak economy and limited prospects, that Taiwan's future was with the mainland.

Taiwan had no shortage of Chinese spies too, as Taiwanese officials will tell you. It is still a problem. Taiwan's counter-intelligence agencies regularly collar Taiwanese officials, and even retired and active military officers for spying for China – and that is just the ones who have been caught.

So if the PRC and Xi Jinping had played their hand better a few years ago, they just might have softened up Taiwan to the point that the Chinese could have had an opening for a "Donbas."

But Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) couldn't restrain themselves.

As one expert on China described it:

Xi's predecessors had the right idea - entice a good woman into a bad marriage. Lavish her with praise, treat her kindly, dote on her and never criticize.

Buy her gifts, meet the family (encourage student exchanges and make it easy for Taiwanese to live and work in China) where you ask and value their opinions without trying to impose your views on them. Let them come to you. Tie her to you financially with a joint investment. Buy a home together.

That is a long process and Xi grew tired of the long courting ritual.

Xi is trying to grab the woman of his desire by her wrist and drag her into the car. Her neighbors are watching – even if they are not entirely sure to call the police on the unspeakable cad.

Today

One fairly reckons the PRC already has a substantial “Fifth Column” in place on Formosa. It has had many decades to get things in order and moving people across the Strait has always been easy. For many years there have been regular shipping and commercial flights.

Moreover, besides moving people, moving “things” - weapons, ammunition, equipment, and other gear – isn’t difficult either. Well-established smuggling routes exist between Taiwan and the mainland and have operated for years. Taiwan has powerful and extensive organized crime networks (generally considered pro-PRC) that are deeply involved in this business. And one of Taiwan’s major ports has long been rumored to be a very “friendly” place for moving things in and out.

So one should expect the “Fifth Column” to spring into action in support of an assault on Formosa, conducting assassinations and launching attacks on key targets throughout the island. Seizing ports and airfields through which People’s Liberation Army (PLA) forces might flow is not unthinkable. Even 100 agents with AK-47’s shooting people over a wide area would cause plenty of distraction for Taiwan’s defenders.

Beijing would no doubt characterize the actions as

“suppressing the splittist uprising,” claiming that Taipei was moving for independence, a PRC “red-line.” Or the Chinese might say they were “supporting the liberation movement” of “patriotic Taiwanese demanding unification” with the mainland.

Keep in mind that setting up a “Fifth Column” of saboteurs, spies, agents, and special forces operatives throughout the nation and society is one thing. But breaking down Taiwan government control by the Fifth columnists, including disguised Chinese Ministry of State Security and PLA personnel with the clout to control Taiwanese territory is another. Taiwan is neither Seattle nor Portland.

Could the Fifth Columnists form the basis of guerrilla bands operating in Taiwan’s mountainous interior? Perhaps. But unless this was done as a very short-term part of a soon to come full-scale assault, the guerillas’ prospects would be dim.

Taiwan’s mountains are a tough place to sustain oneself. And there is the problem that Chinese from outside and even most Taiwanese from “inside,” would be on unfamiliar territory belonging to aboriginal tribes. Indeed, the Taiwan Marines Corps’ and Taiwan Army’s well-trained reconnaissance units draw heavily from mountain-born aborigines. These troops would give “freedom fighters” a nasty lesson and might enjoy the practice.

Also, generally speaking, within the public at large, younger people now more strongly oppose the idea of Taiwan coming under PRC control. Older people are considered less opposed – and in some cases even in favor. But, being older, their numbers are shrinking as time passes.

Meanwhile, pro-China politicians still exist, of course, but these days they are a proportionately smaller part

of Taiwan's political world. The other part of the body politic, those who favor "independence" or at least the "status quo" and who want nothing to do with the PRC – generally represented by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) – seem to be ascendant, for now. The DPP has won the last two presidential elections.

Even within the KMT there is a noticeable shift towards alignment with the DPP on the "unification" issue. This is not everyone, however, and some politicians no doubt are aiming to preserve their political maneuverability. With "changed circumstance" they might change their minds and align with Beijing.

So, at the moment, you can forget about a long-term, slow-moving occupation of Formosa of the Donbas sort. Beijing has neither the geographic nor the population advantage Moscow had. There is no part of Formosa where local affinity for the PRC and opposition to the Taiwanese state are such that they create a "no-go" zone. And the Taiwanese government's writ extends from one end of the island to the other and is backed up by a still powerful military and law enforcement resources.

At most, with considerable effort, Beijing might possibly establish a very short-term control of a very small area (say, a port or two or some airfields) to support a larger, immediate assault against the rest of Formosa.

As another expert on Chinese political warfare against Taiwan put it:

"Donbas" as a model for Taiwan would be right now extremely difficult for the PRC to pull off. This is because of the "geography" of course, (but) also because of the sharp tilt of public

opinion in Taiwan against the PRC since the "Fall of Hong Kong." The generational shift (younger people against "unification," older people "less against") has been going on for some time, but it kicked into high gear as the Hong Kong police began smashing heads, and then the PRC abandoned any pretense at "One Country, Two Systems."

The expert added:

Even though pro-PRC Taiwanese have reportedly started paramilitary organizations to fight the ROC government and a number of United Front organizations are likely supporting sleeper agents and SOF (special operations force) cells in Taiwan, it is hard for me to conceive they would get much popular support.

Not now, but maybe later?

At present, Beijing would be hard-pressed to pull off a "Donbas" of its own in Formosa, at least in the sense of being able to seize by proxy (and with some PLA or Ministry of State Security [MSS] operators) some part of the island and wrest it from Taiwan government control over the long term.

But this does not mean Taipei should relax.

Taiwan has other, much smaller islands that are substantially closer to the Chinese coast than they are to Formosa. The PRC could probably seize some of these as they are isolated and hard for the Taiwan military to successfully defend. And on Kinmen and Matsu, the small island groups very close to

the Chinese mainland, there is some local affinity and historical ties to the PRC found nowhere else in Taiwan's territory.

So, with a little imagination, the PRC might concoct a provocation and/or an excuse to make a move – i.e. declaring that local residents asked us to come, or blow up a few Chinese fishing boats and claim the Taiwan military sunk them, or if a convenient storm comes through go in for “humanitarian assistance.”

But seize an offshore island or two, with or without bloodshed, and Beijing has given notice that it's coming for the rest of Taiwan, and the war has begun. This will concentrate minds in Taipei, Tokyo, Washington and the region, and might stiffen spines. It could also lead to economic and financial sanctions against the PRC, in addition to skyrocketing shipping insurance rates.

And the PLA would still have another 90 miles of water to cross to reach Formosa, the ultimate objective.

Maybe later?

Politics and public sentiment are fickle things. One expects ongoing and possibly intensifying PRC efforts to “soften up” Taiwan by creating economic turmoil and psychological intimidation. The goal: to create a public sense of hopelessness and fear that Taiwan has no outside support and to weaken Taiwan's military and the public's will to resist.

Already as part of this effort, Chinese military aircraft and naval forces are gradually expanding their presence around Taiwan. One expects they will keep squeezing, and eventually maritime militia and regular fishing fleets will also “swarm” Taiwan. In some respects this would be a “Donbas at sea.”

And maybe at some point, the Chinese put people

ashore, and warn the Taiwan government to stand clear. If, somehow, it is a more pliant, or even a pro-PRC government in power, they might acquiesce.

The political warfare expert mentioned earlier considered this possibility and noted:

Could the CCP create conditions under which a coalition of pro-PRC government officials, the KMT, Pan-Red (pro-PRC) academics, business leaders, and UFWD (“United Front”) organizations call on the PRC to enter Taiwan under the guise of humanitarian assistance or some other ruse?

It is possible, especially if the PRC inflicts debilitating economic stress on Taiwan in conjunction with much more sophisticated (political warfare) operations and military incursions into Taiwan's space. But (for now) as Taiwan tightens the legislation it needs to fight PRC political warfare, it would be quite difficult for the PRC front group to gain much traction before the leaders were arrested and the public righteously vented its anger at them.

Another expert on such matters added:

...the worst...threat might be the insider one. What if in 2024 or 2028 (or 2032, etc.) the Taiwanese vote a CCP-puppet into office? They almost did just that in 2020. Were it not for the ugly business in Hong Kong, [pro-Beijing KMT candidate for President] Han Kuo-yu might have won. [Han was, in

fact, elected mayor of Kaohsiung in 2018 due to heavy PRC support and effective Chinese-run media warfare operations]. Today there are several leading KMT and independent political leaders in Taiwan that could win in the future. If they do, Taiwan's fate is probably sealed forever.

Another weak point that could be exploited by the PRC is that Taiwan's military is underfunded, and its service members are poorly paid and treated, leading to morale, recruitment and retention issues. While deeply caring about their country and very willing to fight, they may not be fully able to do so due to the lack of support. Taiwan needs to ensure its military is in proper order: funded, manned, equipped, and trained. And it needs to immediately fix its shambolic reserve and civil defense systems.

But perhaps the decisive issue as Beijing contemplates or actually attempts a Donbas is: will Taiwan be left to fend for itself?

Will the United States be there if the times comes?

As is often the case when considering Taiwan's prospects and its defense, things track back to Washington.

Remove the possibility of American support and intervention and the PRC would see itself as having a "green light" to go after Taiwan, no matter how bloody it got. For now, however, it seems as though the Americans are committed, and Taiwan sees itself as having some chance of staying free.

Responding to a Taiwan "Donbas" is easier for the United States than was the Ukrainian version.

Donbas and Ukraine were unfamiliar to most of the U.S. foreign policy crowd. Taiwan is not. Also, the mechanics of responding to the Donbas (and Crimea) takeovers were difficult. In Taiwan's case, the U.S. has bases nearby in Japan and a long history of operating in the region, and once upon a time with Taiwan's military. Not so in Ukraine and Eastern Europe.

But does anyone care to bet on the future?

A thoroughly distracted, disinterested, frightened USA – and with a weakened military – would change the dynamic considerably. The PRC would be more willing to coerce Taiwan, ruin its economy, terrorize and demoralize the public, while beefing up its Fifth Column and sympathizers and using them to cause trouble.

It's hard to imagine Chinese communists ever being welcomed in Taiwan with open arms, and no amount of "struggle sessions" will ever convince the Taiwanese of the joys and benefits of Marxism and Xi Jinping Thought.

But if the Americans decide they can't be bothered with Taiwan, or it's just too hard, the Japanese and others will likely follow suit, and then a Formosa Donbas becomes possible.



This report was produced by the Center for Security Policy, a nonprofit, nonpartisan 501(c)(3) institution focusing on national security policy issues.

It was made possible by generous contributions from the Center for Security Policy's supporters. All views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).

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