

**Taiwan's Defense and Engagement Strategy**

Ming-Yen TSAI

Associate Professor, Graduate Institute of International Politics

National Chung Hsing University, TAIWAN

**Annual Conference on "Taiwan-China Cross-Strait Relations:  
What Role for the EU?"**

18-20 October 2005

European Institute for Asian Studies, Brussels

School of Oriental and African Studies, London

## I. Taiwan's Security Environment Is Marked by China's Military Threats

Taiwan's defense strategy is designed to maintain the security and prosperity of Taiwan's territory and 23 million inhabitants, in the context of a changing security environment.

The security environment facing Taiwan is marked by two major features:

- The large and growing military threats to Taiwan's security posed by an increasingly powerful China.
- The relatively weak level of political and military supports provided to Taiwan by international community.

Taiwan's assessment of a "China threat" is linked to an examination of actual Chinese military "intentions" and "capabilities".

In terms of China's military "intentions", the threat posed by China is rooted in the fact that China sees Taiwan as its territory. China has refused to renounce the use of military force against Taiwan. In 20 March 2005, China passed "Anti-Secession Law" to reserve the right to use force if "peaceful reunification" fails. It means that China will continue to use its military muscle to force Taiwan to negotiate on Beijing's terms regarding unification with the mainland.

As for China's "capabilities", PLA is making steady progress in its military modernization. The military threat posed to Taiwan by China has been increasing in recent years as a result of PLA's modernization. The principal areas where PLA is making advances involve its airpower, naval force, and missile troops. China has been acquiring modern military equipment from Russia to improve the performance of PLA's military operations. Most of PLA's new weapon systems, such as Su-27s, Su-30s, *Kilo*-class submarines, *Sovremenny*-class destroyers, and S-300 air defense systems, have been deployed along China's southeast coast adjacent to Taiwan.

China's buildup of short-range ballistic missiles (SRBM) opposite Taiwan has been more dramatic. China has so far deployed some 650-730 SRBMs targeting at Taiwan.<sup>1</sup> China is currently increasing this force at a rate of about 75-120 per year, meaning that China would have as many as 1,200 missiles by 2010.

Along with its military modernization, the PLA has started to adjust its operational theory. "Shock" and "surprise" are now considered by PLA as crucial to a successful *coercive* strategy. The pre-eminent role that "surprise"

---

<sup>1</sup> US DoD, *The Military Power of the People's Republic of China, 2005* (Washington, DC: US DoD, 2005), p.29.

and ‘pre-emption’ have in potential conflicts has been illustrated in the fundamental principles of ‘Actively Taking the Initiative’ and ‘Catching the Enemy Unprepared’ in PLA’s operational doctrine.

PLA’s force deployments have reflected its ‘intentions’ to conduct the coercive campaign against Taiwan. China’s ballistic missiles and growing naval and air power have strengthened its ‘capabilities’ to intimidate Taiwan through missile bombardment and naval and air raids or, by creating military hazards in the Strait - the vital lifeline for Taiwan’s trade-dependent economy.

Preparing for a potential conflict in the Taiwan Strait is the primary driver for China’s military modernization. Should China use force against Taiwan, its primary goal likely would be to compel a negotiated solution on terms in Beijing’s favor.

## **II. Taiwan’s Defense and Engagement Strategy aims at Preventing War**

China’s military intentions and capabilities exert a decisive influence over Taiwan’s designing for defense strategy. In order to secure Taiwan’s national security and meet the military challenges from the security environment, Taiwan’s defense strategy is designed to achieve a basic goal - *preventing war*.

The purpose of preventing war is to reduce the possibility of war in advance. To this end, Taiwan has adopted three complementary defense strategies: (I) manage potential conflict; (II) deter war; and (III) defend the homeland.

### **(I) Engagement: Managing Potential Conflict**

In order to eliminate the dangers of a war, Taiwan has put forward the approach of ‘engagement’ and sought to promote mutual understanding and increase predictability across the Strait.

Taiwan has proposed to establish cross-Strait confidence-building measures (CBMs) to manage Taiwan-China security relations and to reduce the risks of military miscalculation.

In his National Day speech on 10 October 2004, President Chen Shui-bian offered concrete suggestions to manage cross-Strait potential conflicts. They are:<sup>2</sup>

- Ending the state of hostility in the Taiwan Strait;
- Establishing cross-Strait military CBMs;

---

<sup>2</sup> “President Chen’s Address to the National Day Rally,” via Office of the President, <http://www.president.gov.tw/php-bin/prez/showenews.php4>

- Reviewing cross-Strait armament policies;
- Formulating a ‘Code of Conduct’ across the Strait.

To ease military tensions in the Strait, Taiwan has proposed to build mutual trust in the military field through security dialogue and cooperation. Taiwan’s preliminary plans have included the following three stages.<sup>3</sup>

In the near-term stage, Taiwan would try to reduce military tensions in the Taiwan Strait through such measures as:

- Expanding communication through regional and international ‘track II’;
- Promoting the exchanges of defense analysts between both sides.

In the mid-term stage, Taiwan would seek to build mutual trust with China. Concrete proposals have included:

- Developing cross-Strait cooperation on humanitarian rescue operations in the Strait;
- Building the cooperation of fighting international maritime criminal activities;
- Signing the ‘Code of Conduct’ for restricting military aircraft meeting in the air and for naval ships meeting on the Sea, so as to prevent unintentional military accidents;
- Withdrawing weapon systems aimed at each other.

In the long-term stage, Taiwan expects to sign a government-to-government peace agreement with China so as to end the state of hostility across the Strait.

## **(II) Deterrence: Avoiding War**

Guided by the concept of ‘effective deterrence’, Taiwan has sought to modernize its defense capabilities to deter enemy attacks by making them costly.

Should the situation in the Strait becomes worse, Taiwan would demonstrate its defense will, military prepare, and rapid response to deter a war. Showing defense determination and strength is to send a warning to the potential enemy if it intends to take military risks.

In order to make its deterrence credible, Taiwan’s armed forces have engaged in military transformation by refining organizational structure, force

---

<sup>3</sup> ROC Ministry of National Defense, *National Defense Report, 2004* (Taipei: ROC Ministry of National Defense, 2004), pp.74-76.

missions, and military training.

In the face of growing threats from China's air, naval, and missile modernization, Taiwan has also planned to improve its joint defense and C4ISR capabilities so as to deter potential surprise strikes from the PLA.

### **(III) Defense: Protecting the Homeland**

Once armed conflicts break out in the Strait, Taiwan would have to halt the enemy strikes outside Taiwan's homeland as possible as it can. The nature of decisive counterattacks is to deny the enemy operational capabilities and to minimize the damage to Taiwan's homeland by destroying enemy forces on the sea and in the air as much as possible.

However, China has an arsenal of more than 700 SRBMs that can strike Taiwan. Taiwan's current ability to defend itself against PLA's missile strikes remains negligible, although Taiwan is pursuing the upgrade of air defense capabilities. PLA's SRBM force could be used to soften air defenses and disrupt C4ISR systems on the island. Given current trends, PLA's missile troops will soon be able to damage severely most of Taiwan's military, political, and economic facilities.

How to withstand initial strikes and regain an operational capability quickly has become a serious challenge to Taiwan's security.

To engage with enemy strikes is the last and no-choice option to Taiwan's national defense.

## **IV. Taiwan's Self-Defense Capability and International Concerns over Cross-Strait Security Are Key Deterrents against Potential Conflicts**

Taiwan's defense strategy is defensive in nature. The building of Taiwan's defense capabilities is to meet the requirements of national security and self-defense.

As long as China does not initiate a war against Taiwan, Taiwan would not launch the first strike. However, once being attacked, Taiwan would be forced to employ tactical counterattacks so as to defend the homeland.

It should be noted that China's military modernization is gradually beginning to erode Taiwan's qualitative edge. The shift in military balance between both sides may encourage PLA's military adventurism in the Taiwan Strait.

Accordingly, apart from Taiwan's self-defense capability, the support from international community for the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait disputes is

another important factor in deterring China's military operations. International community's willingness and determination to prevent a worsening of the security environment in East Asia could have a strong deterrent effect against any military adventurism.

On the strength of Taiwan's own efforts to build a robust defense combined with international concerns over the stability in the Taiwan Strait, potential military actions could be deterred and cross-Strait security would be enhanced.