

CRS Report for Congress

Received through the CRS Web

Taiwan's Defense: Assessing The U.S. Department of Defense Report, "The Security Situation in the Taiwan Strait"

Robert Sutter
Senior Specialist
Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Trade Division

Summary

The 106th Congress is being called on to consider legislation on U.S. support for Taiwan's military defense needs, based in part on a congressionally-mandated U.S. Defense Department (DoD) report released in February 1999 on "The Security Situation in the Taiwan Strait." To respond to a number of inquiries, CRS has prepared this brief analysis of the 28-page DoD report. The DoD report provides an authoritative and straight-forward review of the status and short term outlook of military forces on the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Taiwan sides of the Taiwan Strait. It concludes that the "dynamic equilibrium" has not changed in the last 20 years. On the other hand, although the DoD report has language that can be interpreted to support no change in U.S. military support for Taiwan, much of the report's discussion suggests that Taiwan's defensive edge may be eroding as it faces increased PRC ballistic and cruise missile and air defense capabilities and an increased ability to carry out a naval blockade against Taiwan. This CRS report will not be updated. For coverage of Taiwan issues, see the discussion and selected readings in *Taiwan*, CRS Issue Brief 98034. For a photocopy of the DoD report, please call the Inquiry Section at 7-.... and ask for LRS99-1975.

Introduction

The 106th Congress is being called on to consider legislation on U.S. support for Taiwan's military defense needs. The Department of Defense (DoD) released a congressionally-mandated unclassified report in February 1999 on "The Security Situation in the Taiwan Strait." H.Con.Res. 56 (passed House March 23, 1999) and S.Con.Res. 17 (passed Senate April 12, 1999) refer to the Defense Department report in urging greater U.S. support for Taiwan's defense against a military buildup by the People's Republic of China (PRC) opposite Taiwan. S. 693 (introduced March 24, 1999) also refers to the findings of the Department of Defense report in laying out many specific steps to be taken

by the U.S. government in order to shore up Taiwan's security in the face of the PRC military buildup.¹

CRS has been asked by Members and staff for a brief analysis of the lengthy (about 28 pages single spaced) Defense Department report. This CRS report provides an assessment noting some of the strengths of the DoD report while discussing at greater length four areas of perceived limitation or shortcoming that are relevant to current congressional concerns. Those interested in obtaining a photocopy of the DoD report may call the Inquiry Section at 7-.... and ask for LRS99-1975.

Strengths of the Department of Defense Report

The DoD report provides an authoritative, comprehensive, and straight forward review of the status and short term outlook of military forces on the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Taiwan sides of the Taiwan Strait.² It looks in considerable detail at salient weapon systems and other military hardware on both sides. It also pays close attention to the two sides' efforts in upgrading "software," such as information and electronic warfare; and it discusses strengths and weaknesses in the military leadership, education, training, and morale of the fighting forces on both sides.

Against this backdrop, it examines the broader defense strategy and war planning of the PRC and Taiwan and reviews in particular how the PRC might use its military forces to carry out operations against Taiwan. Four specific options for the PRC are noted; blockade; missile strikes; air superiority; and amphibious invasion. The report explains why the likelihood of such operations is not high now, given the October 1998 resumption of high-level dialogue across the Strait and efforts by both sides to avoid provocative military exercises or other activity in the Strait following the crisis caused by the PRC provocative military exercises there in 1995 and 1996.³

Limitations and Perceived Shortcomings of the Department of Defense Report

Some of the following issues relate to the report's limited scope, defined by congressional mandate. The report does not address several policy issues as well as seemingly relevant military issues outside its original scope. Additionally, some observers would challenge the findings and conclusions of the report from other perspectives.

1. *The report treats the cross Strait military balance narrowly.* It does not, for example, discuss how a conflict in the area could involve other powers, notably the United States and Japan. Many analysts believe the United States would become involved in a

¹ For a review of recent legislation on Taiwan, and U.S. arms sales to Taiwan based on the Taiwan Relations Act (PL 96-8) and three U.S.-PRC communiques dealing with Taiwan, see *Taiwan*, CRS Issue Brief 98034 (updated regularly). There is also a classified version of the DoD report which presumably is available from the Defense Department for those with appropriate clearances.

² The status of Taiwan's military is often overlooked by nongovernment western specialists.

³ For background, see also *Taiwan: Recent Developments and U.S. Policy Choices*. CRS Issue Brief 98034 (updated regularly).

conflict in the Taiwan Strait, and PRC military planning for a Taiwan contingency reportedly assumes the United States would be involved.⁴ U.S. interest in peace and stability in East Asia and the western Pacific is repeatedly noted as a basic pillar of American policy in the region. The deployment of 100,000 U.S. forces in the region is justified by this interest.⁵ Moreover, the Taiwan Relations Act codified U.S. interest in stability in the Taiwan area and noted that the United States would view with “grave concern” possible disruptions there.⁶ Meanwhile, the Japanese government, the main U.S. ally in Asia, shares U.S. interest in regional stability. It eschews any explicit statements about the security situation around Taiwan, though its interest in this neighboring area is thought to be very keen.⁷

2. *The report focuses narrowly on PRC military options to use force against Taiwan.* It tends to treat these options (i.e. blockade, missile strikes, air superiority, and amphibious invasion) separately. Many other specialists judge that Beijing’s approach to using force--if carried out--would be much more sophisticated and multifaceted, integrating numerous political as well as military options.⁸ Thus, they see the prime PRC goal in these circumstances as *intimidation* of Taiwan’s political leaders. They believe the PRC might use force in order to coerce the Taiwan leadership to come to terms on Taiwan’s reunification with the mainland acceptable to the PRC. The use of force could follow a sliding scale of escalating military pressure, or perhaps involve all areas (i.e. blockade, air superiority, missile attack, amphibious invasion) at once, and presumably would be combined with political overtures to Taiwan for a settlement on PRC terms and diplomatic and other international moves designed to keep the United States and other powers out of the conflict. The PRC leadership is not seen as likely to use military force to destroy Taiwan; rather it is thought that it might use military force in ways that do the least damage to Taiwan and PRC interests in order to get Taiwan leaders to give in to PRC demands over reunification and other sensitive issues.

Military pressure against Taiwan could include:

- low-level intimidation (military exercises, weapons displays, confrontations at sea or in the air, and various kinds of covert subversion);
- naval blockade or interdiction efforts, amphibious invasion of off shore islands;
- a limited missile and/or air attack against Taiwanese territory or strategic targets;
- a full scale attack.

⁴ See among others Hans Binnendijk and Ronald Montaperto, *Strategic Trends in China*, Washington, National Defense University Press, 1998.

⁵ See, *The United States Security Strategy for the East Asia-Pacific Region*, Department of Defense East Asia Strategy Report 1998.

⁶ Section 2, Public Law 96-8.

⁷ Bonnie Glaser and Banning Garrett, “Chinese Apprehensions About the Revitalization of the U.S.-Japan Alliance,” *Asian Survey*, 37:4 (April 1997): 383-402.

⁸ See among others Michael Swaine, “The Military Challenge to Taiwan,” Institute of International Strategic Studies/China Council of Advanced Policy Studies Conference, June-July 1998; and Tai Ming Cheung, *China’s Military Agenda towards Taiwan*, China Council of Advanced Policy Studies Paper No.24, November 1998.

As a result, these specialists tend to see the key variables in this situation as the PRC leadership's willingness to escalate the use of force; their effectiveness in keeping the United States and other powers from intervening in the conflict; and the Taiwan government leadership and people's willingness to continue to resist rising PRC pressure. These critical variables are not examined in this report.

3. *The report can be interpreted in different ways regarding U.S. military support for Taiwan.*⁹ Those U.S. policy makers in Congress and the Administration who are cautious about giving greater U.S. military support for Taiwan may read the report's introduction, which notes that "the security situation in the Taiwan strait remains calm with no threat of imminent hostilities,"¹⁰ as indicating no remedial action by the United States as far as added military support for Taiwan is required. To counter the opposing view that China's rising military power poses growing threats to Taiwan requiring greater U.S. military support for the island, these policy makers could cite the first paragraph of the conclusion of the report, which states "the dynamic equilibrium of (PRC and Taiwan) forces in the Taiwan Strait has not changed dramatically over the last two decades."¹¹

Some U.S. policy advocates argue that even if there is a growing PRC military threat to Taiwan, the appropriate U.S. response is not to add U.S. military support for Taiwan.¹² They believe that it is in the U.S. best interests to try to calm the cross strait situation by persuading and even pressuring the two sides to ease tensions, establish confidence building measures, and move toward accommodation. They judge that more U.S. military support for Taiwan has the added disadvantage of exacerbating U.S.-PRC relations over this sensitive question, raising the prospect of renewed confrontation in the Taiwan Strait--something they seek to avoid.

On the other hand, the bulk of the findings in the report when considered against the backdrop of past assessments of the military balance in the Taiwan Strait¹³ can be read by U.S. policy makers in Congress and the Administration who favor greater U.S. military support for Taiwan as buttressing their position. They could make several major points:

- **changed strategic environment.** The main strategic obstacle to a possible PRC use of military force against Taiwan in the later 1970s and early 1980s was the Soviet Union. PRC leaders were focused on the strategic danger posed by the USSR, its active fleet in the western Pacific, its alliance relationships with Vietnam and India, and its bases in Vietnam. Any use of force against Taiwan would not only have diverted Chinese military resources needed to confront the Soviet threat, but also would have provided the USSR with an opportunity to make gains elsewhere along China's periphery if the PRC were distracted in Taiwan. Since the end of the Cold

⁹ The debate on U.S. military support for Taiwan is reviewed in *Taiwan* CRS Issue Brief 98034 op. cit.; see also Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, "China-Taiwan: US Debates and Policy Choices," *Survival*, 40:4 (Winter 1998-1999) p. 150-167.

¹⁰ DoD report, p. 1.

¹¹ DoD report, p. 25.

¹² See among others, Tucker, "China-Taiwan," op. cit.

¹³ See among others, *Taiwan: One Year After United States-China Normalization*, U.S. Congress, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Print, 96th Congress, 2d session, June 1980.

War, the Chinese military has been free to redirect its attention and now devotes priority to contingencies regarding Taiwan. Unlike the 1970s and early 1980s, it faces no major military threat along its periphery.¹⁴

- **ballistic/cruise missile threat.** The report reviews in considerable detail the growth in numbers and improvement in accuracy of PRC ballistic and cruise missiles for possible use against Taiwan.¹⁵ Beijing had much less capability in the 1970s and 1980s. The report also makes clear that Taiwan's ability to defend against this kind of threat has not kept pace with PRC advances, posing a major strategic vulnerability for Taiwan. This vulnerability affects Taiwan's need to maintain air superiority in order to thwart a blockade and fend off an amphibious invasion (see discussion below).
- **air superiority.** The report makes clear that Taiwan's air superiority vis-a-vis PRC forces is eroding. In the 1970s and 1980s, PLA air forces were so backward that Beijing chose not to use them in its World War I style military attack against Vietnam in 1979 (using mainly artillery and infantry). Taiwan air forces had markedly superior air-to-air missiles and over-the-horizon radars to compete with antiquated PRC fighters that had to rely on line-of-sight engagement. Although Taiwan fighters were outnumbered, it was assumed by U.S. specialists that they would be able to pick off incoming PRC fighters before they got close enough for engagement and quickly return to base to refit and fight again. In this way, air superiority would be maintained, allowing Taiwan aircraft the ability to counter a PRC blockade or amphibious invasion.¹⁶

The DoD report makes clear that Taiwan no longer has the advantage in air to air missiles. Meanwhile, the increased accuracy of ballistic and cruise missiles means that PRC forces could destroy Taiwan airfields, making it harder and perhaps impossible for the very capable but outnumbered Taiwan jet fighters to resupply and fight again. Losing air superiority would mean that Taiwan would not be able to use its air force to counter a PRC blockade and/or amphibious invasion.

- **blockade.** Taiwan's air superiority and PRC backwardness persuaded U.S. analysts in the 1970s and 1980s that Beijing would not be able to execute a successful military blockade of Taiwan.¹⁷ In particular, it was thought by analysts at that time that interdicting shipments to the eastern part of the island would be particularly difficult for PRC forces. In contrast, the current DoD report states that "Taiwan's military forces probably would not be able to keep the island's key ports and sea lines of

¹⁴ See among others, Paul Godwin, "Force and Diplomacy: China Prepares for the Twenty-First Century," in Samuel Kim (ed.) *China and the World*, Westview Press, Boulder, CO. 1998, p. 171-192.

¹⁵ It does not treat some Taiwan short range ballistic missiles, the *Ching Feng* and *Tien Chi*.

¹⁶ See discussion in *Taiwan: One Year After United States-China Normalization*, op.cit. P.117-170.

¹⁷ Ibid., p 152-153.

communications (SLOCs) open in the face of concerted Chinese military action. Taiwan's small surface fleet and four submarines are numerically insufficient..."¹⁸

To keep pace with growing PRC military advances in the post Cold War security environment that allows Beijing to focus primary military attention on Taiwan contingencies, these U.S. advocates of greater military support for Taiwan could conclude:

- The U.S. needs to press the PRC to curb its military buildup focused on Taiwan contingencies or face U.S. countermeasures to redress the balance in the Taiwan Strait.
- Countermeasures could include providing more advanced air-to-air missiles for Taiwan fighters; support for stronger Taiwan defenses against growing cruise and ballistic missile threats from the PRC; and support for the Taiwan efforts to thwart a PRC blockade (e.g. better anti-submarine aircraft; submarines for Taiwan's navy).

Of course, as noted above, other U.S. policy advocates would draw different implications for U.S. policy. They may see a growing PRC military threat to Taiwan as requiring stronger U.S. efforts to try to calm the cross strait situation by persuading and pressuring the two sides to ease tensions, establish confidence building measures, and move toward accommodation. From their perspective, more U.S. military support for Taiwan could have the added disadvantage of exacerbating U.S.-PRC relations over this sensitive question, raising the prospect of renewed confrontation in the Taiwan Strait--something they seek to avoid.

4. *Conditions for PRC use of force.* The report notes circumstances under which the PRC has claimed it would use force against Taiwan. Those are Taiwan declaring independence, foreign intervention in Taiwan, and Taiwan developing nuclear weapons. It does not note other circumstances in which the PRC might use force against Taiwan. On January 28, 1999, the leading PRC official in charge of policy toward Taiwan, Vice Premier Qian Qichen, said that if Taiwan were to hold a referendum on its future it would be "playing with fire" and would "bring disaster to Taiwan"--suggesting for the first time in authoritative PRC leadership statements that Taiwan holding a referendum might be grounds for a PRC use of force.¹⁹ Meanwhile, recent Chinese rhetoric against possible U.S. support for a missile defense system in Taiwan also suggest particular sensitivity that some analysts believe could result in PRC use of force.²⁰

¹⁸ DoD report, p 23.

¹⁹ "Qian Qichen on Reunification," *Xinhua*, January 28, 1999.

²⁰ *China and U.S. Missile Defense Proposals: Reactions and Implications.* By Robert Sutter, CRS Report RS20031, January 28, 1999.

EveryCRSReport.com

The Congressional Research Service (CRS) is a federal legislative branch agency, housed inside the Library of Congress, charged with providing the United States Congress non-partisan advice on issues that may come before Congress.

EveryCRSReport.com republishes CRS reports that are available to all Congressional staff. The reports are not classified, and Members of Congress routinely make individual reports available to the public.

Prior to our republication, we redacted names, phone numbers and email addresses of analysts who produced the reports. We also added this page to the report. We have not intentionally made any other changes to any report published on EveryCRSReport.com.

CRS reports, as a work of the United States government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.

Information in a CRS report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to members of Congress in connection with CRS' institutional role.

EveryCRSReport.com is not a government website and is not affiliated with CRS. We do not claim copyright on any CRS report we have republished.