



LETTER

Taiwan and the Chinese threat

In recent months, Chinese air force aircraft have been making increased intrusions into Taiwanese airspace. This has led to more media speculation that, in the near future, China may decide to invade the independent island, over which it has long held claims of sovereignty.

At the closest point, Taiwan is some 130km from the Chinese mainland. To assemble and mount an amphibious invasion force, and an airlift of troops across this sea and air gap, would require a massive operation, and would be extremely risky. In World War II, the Allied invasions of Italy's mainland at Salerno and Anzio were near disasters.

To gain air superiority in the Mediterranean in 1943 to support amphibious operations [first at Sicily, then at Salerno and Anzio], Allied air forces lost over 700 aircraft. The successful D-Day landings at Normandy only gained a beachhead in the first instance, even with established sea and air superiority, because espionage and deception misled the German defences to believe they would occur elsewhere.

With today's technologies, it seems impossible that such a large operation to invade Taiwan could be kept secret. Taiwan and its allies could inflict substantial damage on an invasion force, in the air/sea gap of the Taiwan Straits, if not repel them altogether. Although it is conceivable that China could absorb significant losses, and take over Taiwan through overwhelming firepower and sheer weight of numbers, it would be a Pyrrhic victory.

Besides the devastation it would cause in Taiwan, it would result in much of Asia and the democracies of the world breaking off trade with China. At best it would usher in a new Cold War, and a massive disruption to the Chinese economy – and this assumes that nuclear weapons would not be used in a worst-case scenario.

I would suggest that China would not seriously entertain a military invasion of Taiwan. It may continue to posture such a threat, but in practice employ 'grey zone' tactics, trade and other political pressures, to gain control over the long term.

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